

For All the Saints?

Remembering the Christian Departed

3. Rethinking the Tradition II

Sunday, April 17, 2005
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.
Everyone is welcome!

St. John in the Wilderness

**Glorious Lord of Life,
we praise you,
that by the mighty resurrection of your Son,
you have delivered us from sin and death
and made your whole creation new;
grant that we who celebrate with joy
Christ's rising from the dead,
may be raised from the death of sin
to the life of righteousness;
through him who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and for ever.**

A New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 592

FOR ALL THE SAINTS?

Remembering the Christian Departed



N. T. Wright



For All the Saints? Remembering the Christian Departed.

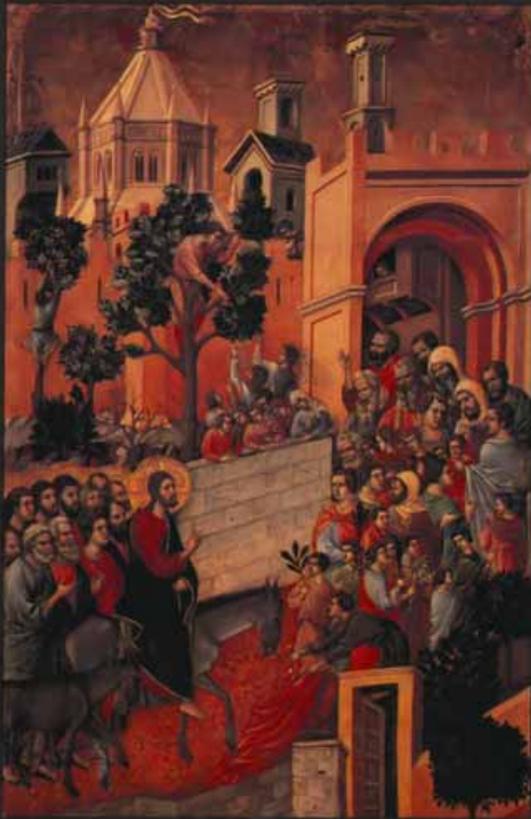
N.T. Wright,
Morehouse Publishing,
2003.

ISBN 0-8192-2133-3

Chapter 2, and Chapter
5

Following Jesus

*Biblical Reflections on
Discipleship*



N. T. WRIGHT

Following Jesus

N.T. Wright,

Eerdmans Publishing
Co, 1994.

ISBN 0-8028-4132-5

Chapter 10, “Hell”



- **N. T. Wright** taught New Testament studies at Oxford, Cambridge, and McGill Universities for 20 years.
- Recently Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey.
- Currently Bishop of Durham, England.
- Has written numerous academic and popular works, notably the three volumes (and still unfinished) series “Christian Origins and the Question of God.”



THE
FAITH
OF A
PHYSICIST

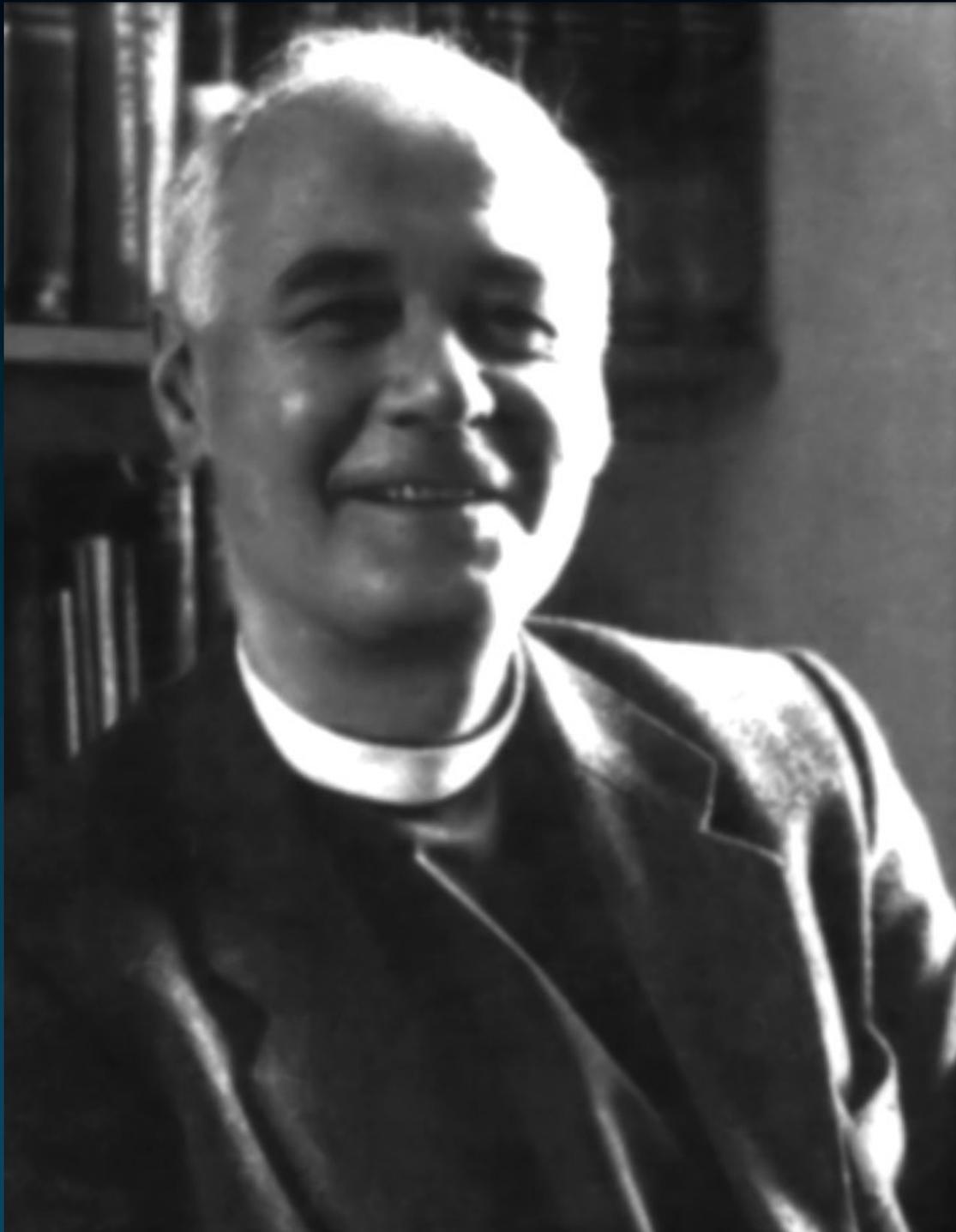
JOHN POLKINGHORNE

The Faith of A Physicist.

John Polkinghorne,
Fortress Press, 1996.

ISBN 0-8006-2970-1

Chapter 9,
“Eschatology”



- **John Polkinghorne** is an Anglican Priest in the Church of England
- Former Professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge University
- Fellow of the Royal Society
- Past President and Fellow of Queen's College Cambridge.
- Canon Theologian of Liverpool, England.
- He has written many academic and popular works on the interaction between science and theology

Rethinking the Tradition, Part 2: Introduction

Introduction

Questions

- What has happened to those whom we have loved, who are now dead? Where are they *now*?
- What will happen to us personally when each of us dies? What is it that we should look forward to? What is our ultimate hope as Christians?

Introduction

Questions

- Such questions can arise:
 - out of the wellsprings of human grief and love for another.
 - from our human need for solace and hope.
 - amid personal despair that can be assuaged only by knowing the purpose and goal of life's journey.
- They are not idle or selfish questions.

Introduction

Review of Session 1

- In session 1, we reviewed the traditional ideas in the Western Church about what happens after death.
 - Much of our liturgy, hymns, and popular thinking assume these traditional ideas.
- In a tradition formalized in medieval times, at death:
 - the “souls” of those who have lived extraordinarily holy lives go directly to heaven. They live within the bliss of the “beatific vision” of the glory of God.
 - We celebrate them on **All Saints Day** on November 1
 - We may pray *to* them to as our “friend in heaven” who can “put in a good word for us” to God.

Introduction

Review of Session 1

- In tradition formalized in medieval times, at death:
 - the “souls” of those who are relatively good but still sinful are akin to country bumpkins approaching the king’s castle. They wear shabby clothes and muddied boots and *want* to get cleaned up before they enter heaven, the court of the Kingdom of God.
 - The place where they get “cleaned-up” and “purged” is called **Purgatory**
 - We honor these “souls” on **All Souls Day**, November 2
 - We pray *for* them, as they are still waiting to enter heaven.

Introduction

Review of Session 1

- In tradition formalized in medieval times, at death:
 - The souls of those who have been evil go directly to hell.
 - A place of eternal torment, and from which there is no return.
- In this medieval tradition, our goal is to “**go to heaven**” when we die.
- The tradition also acknowledges that, at the end of time
 - there will be a general judgment
 - all souls will be re-united with their resurrected bodies –but if this is mentioned at all, it is in the manner of a footnote.

Introduction

Review of Session 2

- In session 2, we reviewed N. T. Wright's views on the problems with this tradition.
- *All* mainstream orthodox Christian churches affirm (as we confess in the Creed):
 - “Going to heaven” when we die is *not* our ultimate destiny.
 - Our destiny is to be “bodily raised into the transformed, glorious likeness of Jesus Christ” (p. 21) and live in a new or transformed Creation, the “New Jerusalem,” where God will reign.

Introduction

Review of Session 2

- *All* mainstream orthodox Christian churches affirm (as we confess in the Creed):
 - The final stage and the ultimate destiny, **bodily resurrection**, and **the life of the world to come** is still *in the future* for everyone, living and dead.
 - All those who have died are therefore still in an “intermediate state.”

Introduction

Review of Session 2

- Wright argues that there are *no* category distinctions between God's people in this "intermediate state."
 - There is no place or stage of "Purgatory" needed to purge us of the guilt of sin or the tendency to sin.
 - All of God's people who have died are in the same condition; and all are "saints."
 - This intermediate state is what we commonly called "heaven."

Introduction

Review of Session 2

- **“...all God’s people in Christ are assured of being with Christ himself, in a glorious restful existence, until the day when everything is renewed, when heaven and earth at last become one, and we are given new bodies to live and love and celebrate and rule in God’s new creation.” (Wright p. 71)**

Introduction

Review of Session 2

- We can and should pray *for* and *with* the dead
 - Not because they are suffering in “Purgatory” and are still awaiting entrance into heaven.

But because:

- They, like us, still await the ultimate fulfillment of God’s purpose, the resurrection of the body and life in the new creation to come.
- True prayer is an outflowing of love. We pray for them in order to share our love of them with God. Through prayer, we hold them up in our love before God’s presence.

Introduction

Topics This Week

- Human beings as “Body” and “Soul”
- Rethinking Hell

Body and Soul

Body and Soul

Platonism

- Early Christianity grew and expanded into a diverse Graco-Roman culture.
- For the educated, philosophy served as their “religion:”
 - Platonism
 - Stoicism
- Early Christianity was particularly influenced by Platonism.
 - The first serious Christian heresy was **Gnosticism**, which combined elements of Christianity and Platonism.
 - One of the most influential theologian in the Western Church was **St. Augustine** (354-430 AD), a Christian Platonist.

Body and Soul

Platonism

- Platonism taught that human beings are *dualistic* beings, having:
 - 1. A Material **Body**, which is mortal.
 - 2. A **Soul**, which is immortal, part of the true, transcendental, divine world.

Body and Soul

Platonism

- The natural world in which we live is but a *shadow* of true reality.
- True reality is a “divine” transcendental world where “Forms” or Universals exist.
 - Examples of “Forms” or “Universals”: Beauty, Justice, Goodness, “Tree-ness,” “Mountain-ness,” “Horse-ness”
 - The “Forms” illuminate the matter of this world to produce the “shadowy” examples of beauty, justice, goodness, trees, mountains, horses that we see in this world.
 - Matter itself, un-illuminated by the Forms, is darkness and non-being; hence *evil*.

Body and Soul

Platonism

- The problem of our life on earth:
 - Our immortal souls have descended from the divine realm and have become trapped in our mortal bodies.
 - We can but vaguely perceive true reality (the Forms).
 - The Forms are nevertheless still “intelligible” to us in matter because our souls belong to the same transcendental, divine world as do the Forms, and they long to return to that divine world.

Body and Soul

Platonism

- The Four-fold Hierarchy of Being in Platonism:*
- 1. The “One” (God)
- 2. The Divine Mind
- 3. The Soul
- 4. The Visible World

* As developed in Neo-Platonism

The Soul

The Divine Mind

The One

The Visible World

Body and Soul

Platonism

- The Four-fold Hierarchy of Being in Platonism:
 - 1. The “One” (God)
 - Incomprehensible, beyond all Being, all Mind, all Forms.
 - The *source* from which Being derives, the *goal* that all Being strives to return to.
 - All Being emanates from the “One” like light from the Sun.
 - recall in the Creed, “light from light”

Body and Soul

Platonism

- The Four-fold Hierarchy of Being in Platonism:
 - 2. **The Divine “Mind”**
 - An emanation of the **“One.”**
 - Eternally contemplates the “Forms” which are contained within itself.
 - The Platonic Forms are thus “Ideas” in the **Divine Mind** (the mind of the **“One”** = “God.”)
 - Incapable of change.

Body and Soul

Platonism

- The Four-fold Hierarchy of Being in Platonism:
 - 3. **The Soul**
 - An emanation of the **Divine Mind**, but capable of change and entering into matter.
 - All our individual “souls” are but particles of **The One Soul**.
 - The Fall: Our individual souls became separated from **the Soul** when out of curiosity and arrogance they descended into bodies.

Body and Soul

Platonism

- The Four-fold Hierarchy of Being in Platonism:
 - 4. **The Visible World**
 - The first three levels of Being – **The One, The Divine Mind, The Soul** – were divine and hence immortal.
 - The bottom level of Being – the visible world – is a mortal (corruptible) world of bodies, change, growth, decay.
 - Inert matter is darkness and non-being, and hence evil.

Body and Soul

Platonism

- Notes:
 - All that exists is an “overflow” of the “**One**”
 - The other levels of reality exist not because the “**One**” chose to create them, but are rather the inevitable result of the abundance of the emanations of the “**One**.”
 - In each level there is an *ardent longing* (“Heavenly Eros”) for union with what is higher.
 - In Plato’s *Symposium*: the stages for the ascent of the individual soul include:
 - 1. Purification, freeing oneself from bodily lusts and the beguilements of the senses
 - 2. Looking towards the **Divine Mind** by occupying oneself with philosophy and science.
 - 3. Mystical union with the **One**, mediated by ecstasy.

Body and Soul

Platonism and Christianity

- Early Christianity incorporated much of **Platonism** in its theology, including:
 - Idea of human beings as **dualistic** beings having:
 - A mortal body.
 - An immortal soul.
 - The idea of the immortal soul ascending to a divine realm (“heaven”) after death.
 - The tendency to downplay or distrust the goodness of physical and sensuous pleasures.

Body and Soul

Platonism and Christianity

- Early Christianity rejected one of the most radical syntheses of Platonism and Christianity: **Gnosticism**, which taught that:
 - Creation is evil, a product of an evil “Old Testament” creator god.
 - The body and physical and sensual pleasures are evil, and that our ultimate goal is to be freed of our bodies and ascend as pure spirits to a divine realm through the “secret knowledge” afforded only to the members of Gnostic cults.

Body and Soul

Attractions of Having “Immortal Soul”

- The idea we have an “immortal soul” is attractive:
 - The immortal soul becomes the “carrier” of our identity as a unique self or entity,
 - both in this life, as our bodies change and age,
 - and in the next life.
- This idea of human beings as *dualistic* beings (an immortal soul in a mortal body) has a long tradition in Christianity.
 - A modern Christian need not reject this view.

Body and Soul

Problems with an “Immortal Soul”

- However, the Hebrew Scriptures for the most part speak of human beings as psychosomatic unities, “animated bodies” rather than “incarnated souls.”
 - Men and women are treated as *unified* beings, not *dualistic* “spiritual beings housed in fleshy bodies.”
- Most modern theological thinking has tended to the view that:
 - The idea of human beings as *unified* beings is truer to the Scriptures; and
 - The idea of human beings as *dualistic* beings (a soul in a body) is an unnecessary accretion from Greco-Roman Platonism.

Body and Soul

Soul as Defining “Pattern” of Self

- Rejecting the idea of an “immortal soul” does not mean that we must give up on the idea that there is a “real me,” some “essence” or “pattern” that contains my unique self.
- We might redefine “soul” to refer to that information-bearing “essence” or “pattern” of our unique self:
 - A quote from Anglican Theologian and Priest John Polkinghorne from *The Faith of a Physicist*, p. 163:

- The Christian hope is ... not the hope of *survival* of death, the persistence *post mortem* of a spiritual component which possesses, or has been granted, an intrinsic immortality.
- Rather, the Christian hope is of death and *resurrection*.
- My understanding of the soul is that it is the almost infinitely complex, dynamic, information-bearing pattern, carried at any instant by the matter of my animated body and continuously developing throughout all the constituent changes of my bodily make-up during the course of my earthly life.

- **That psychosomatic unity is dissolved at death by the decay of my body, but I believe it is a perfectly coherent hope that the pattern that is me will be remembered by God and its instantiation will be recreated by him when he reconstitutes me in a new environment of his choosing.**
- **That will be his eschatological act of resurrection. Thus, death is a real end but not the final end, for only God himself is ultimate.**

Body and Soul

Human Beings as Embodied Beings

- If we are indeed psychosomatic unities, “animated bodies,” then it is *intrinsic* to our true selves, our true nature, our true humanity that we be *embodied beings*.
 - **“We are not apprentice angels, awaiting to be disencumbered of our fleshly habitation. Our hope is of resurrection of the *body*.”** (Polkinghorne, p. 164)

Body and Soul

Human Beings as Embodied Beings

- Resurrection does not mean a “resuscitation” or “reassembling” of our present structure.
- **“In a very crude and inadequate analogy, the software running on our present hardware will be transferred to the hardware of the world to come.”**
(Polkinghorne, p. 164)

Body and Soul

Human Beings as Embodied Beings

- N. T. Wright (commenting on Polkinghorne's crude analogy): **I'm comfortable with that image. It leaves vague what the New Testament leaves vague, the question of what precisely someone 'is' between bodily death and bodily resurrection. You could simply say, if you like, following Polkinghorne's image, that those who have died as part of God's people are sustained in life by God. (Wright p. 73)**

Body and Soul

Cosmic Redemption

- Where will the “material” of the new hardware come from?
- **Surely the ‘matter’ of the world to come must be the transformed matter of this world. God will no more abandon the universe than he will abandon us.**
(Polkinghorne p. 164).

Body and Soul

Cosmic Redemption

...the destiny of humanity and the destiny of the universe are together to find their fulfillment in a liberation from decay and futility... The picture of such a cosmic redemption, in which a resurrected humanity will participate, is both immensely thrilling and deeply mysterious.”

- Polkinghorne, p. 164

Hell

Hell

Tradition

- In tradition, hell is a final destination, a place of eternal suffering for those who have lived evil lives.

Hell

The Danger of Believing in Hell

- 1. Wright suggests that if we *want* to believe in hell, we are in danger.
 - The desire to see others in torment has no place in Christianity.

Hell

New Testament Says Little About “Hell”

- 2. Many New Testament passages that the Church has thought refer to eternal punishment in fact do not.
 - Many are references to what would happen to the nation of Israel (God’s people) in *this* world if they persist in their sins.
 - Many are referring back to language and ideas in the Old Testament.

Hell

New Testament Says Little About “Hell”

- For example, Mark 13, where Jesus says **“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, ...”** (Mark 13:24-25)
 - Jesus is recalling the language of Isaiah 13, predicting the cataclysmic fall of Babylon.
 - Refers not to the end of Spacetime, but to the suffering that will ensue with the fall of Jerusalem, if Israel continues its present path.

Hell

New Testament Says Little About “Hell”

- *Another example:* when Jesus spoke of **Gehenna**, he was referring to name given by first century Jews to the foul, smoldering rubbish heap in Jerusalem.
 - Those who longed for a violent nationalistic rebellion against Rome would turn Jerusalem into an extension of its rubbish heap.

Hell

Rethinking Hell

- So given:
 - 1. the danger of wanting to believe in a place of eternal torment,
 - 2. the fact that the many “warnings” in the New Testament do not refer to such a place,

Some serious rethinking about “hell” is in order.

Hell

Rethinking Hell

- Wright suggest we approach the concept of “hell” by first recalling that we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28).
- This gift however should not be considered an indelible mark, but rather be thought of as both:
 - An innate, inborn characteristic
 - A *vocation*
- If we do not practice and develop the image of God within us by worship, love and service to others, *that image may atrophy.*

Hell

Rethinking Hell

- It is conceivable that if human beings persist in worshipping the things of creation (that is, become idolaters), that they could cease to bear the image God, even lose permanently the ability to bear the image of God, and become “ex-human.”
 - Human being = a creature who bears the image of God.

Hell

Rethinking Hell

- **“I don’t believe, myself, that any living human being ever quite loses the divine image. But that some seem to work towards it as though (so to speak) hell-bent on it seems to me beyond a shadow of doubt.”**
(Wright, *Following Jesus*, p. 95)
- We cannot reject the possibility some will choose to dehumanize themselves completely, and that God, despite a deep sorrow and sense of loss, will honor that choice.
 - If God does “honor” the choice of completely dehumanizing ourselves, we have no way of knowing what the consequences would be.

Hell

Rethinking Hell

- In the end, it is not for us to say who is in and who is out.
- We cannot simply presume that all will be saved (universalism). To do so potentially downplays:
 - The reality of evil.
 - The radical nature of the gift of free will that God has given human beings.
- On the other hand, we should not underestimate the power of God's love and the sweep of God's mercy.
 - Romans 5 and Romans 8 in particular describes the great sweep of God's mercy and the future reconciliation and freeing of the entire cosmos.
 - We should recall also the grand vision of the New Jerusalem, a New Heaven and a New Earth in Revelation 21, 22.

Hell

Rethinking Hell

- The grand vision of the New Heaven and New Earth in Revelation however also contains mysteries we cannot not reduce to simple formulas:
 - Outside the gates of the New Jerusalem, **“are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehoods.”** (Rev. 22:15 NRSV)
 - And in Rev. 21:8, a similar group is thrown into a lake of fire, described as a “second death.”
 - And yet, from the New Jerusalem, there flows the waters of the river of life, with banks on which grow trees, the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.