



## Let It Flow Out: An Interview with N. T. Wright

1.3.09 by **Mark D. Roberts**, Laity Lodge Senior Director and Scholar-in-Residence

### Article:

*Bishop N. T. Wright is arguably one of the most important theologians writing today. He's published everything from weighty theological tomes like [Christian Origins and the Question of God](#), to accessible commentaries like [Paul for Everyone: The Pastoral Letters](#), to inspirational books like [Simply Christian](#) and [Surprised by Hope](#). When N. T. Wright agreed to lead an intimate retreat at Laity Lodge, we took the opportunity to ask him about honoring God in everyday life and work.*

### What does it look like to be "Simply Christian" outside the professional church from 9 to 5?

It looks like a million different things. Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in eyes and lovely in limbs, not His." In a sense, when you become a Christian, you become your genuine self. You're called into that fresh selfhood. God made each of us to be really quite different and to reflect in a million little glittering diamonds that sense of the differentness of Jesus. Jesus looks like one way in this person and another way in that person. Ordinary people develop skills and talents which are peculiar to them. Then they bring those gifts to the church—gifts of art, gifts of leadership, gifts of craft, gifts of service of all sorts. You will see a rich variety develop.

Just as an interesting aside, our local culture in the north of England is a working-class culture. For generations and generations, everyone has lived in these little row houses like in the mining or steel communities. At the end of the village, there is one big house, which is where the owner lives. He tells everybody what to do, and they do it. He pays them, and they go and have a beer. That's it. They don't have any decisions to make except which pub to visit at the end of the day. That is still how a lot of people approach the church. We don't expect to think. We don't expect to make decisions. That's what the Vicar is for. We expect the clergy to tell us what to do, and we don't want to think for ourselves. I want to say, "No, you've all got to be individuals and do your own thing." Actually, I think that's part of the Gospel.

### How do Christians glorify God in their daily work or does our work have some other, more nuanced, purpose?

There are all sorts of different jobs. George Herbert's famous hymn, "Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine." It's a very important principle of Christian service. Now, it's much easier, no doubt, to think of yourself as doing important Christian work if you're preparing sermons or being chief in a music band in church or whatever. But actually, the guy who sweeps the step is doing just as much good as you are, maybe more. I am delighted when I go to a church and see people doing mundane things with a sense of pride, because they're doing them for the love of God and the body of Christ. I love those people. Nobody knows who they are; nobody knows their names. As a bishop, I try to go around and thank them because I can see they're doing a good job. Of course, we'd all like to be the architect who builds the cathedral or the composer who writes the symphony or whatever. But most of the time, we do what needs to be done. Christ shines out of the way we work, not so much what we do, but how we do it.

### How does one's work fit into the overlap of Heaven and earth?

If it is true that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, then each Christian is a place where Heaven and earth overlap. C. S. Lewis said, "Next to the blessed sacrament, your Christian neighbor is the holiest object ever presented to your senses." In Christians, the true Christ should be truly present. From that point of view, what you do as a Christian should embody that overlap of Heaven and earth. But we often think of Heaven in such grandiose terms, often platonic terms, and we just see that Heaven and earth are meant to go together. They were put together in the first place in Genesis 1 in the garden.

### The call to a new creation at the intersection of Heaven and earth seems to be a call for action.

Yes, it is. That's the short answer. But let's be absolutely clear what we're talking about here. Salvation and justification are not the same thing.

What you do in the present matters. It's hard for Protestants to hear that without thinking, "Oh, dear, this is good works again." That's a scare tactic. Sometimes, it's a political scare tactic—to stop Christians from actively working to change the way the world is, confronting justice, and building communities of peace and hope instead of ones of violence and hatred. The verse which says it all for me is the last verse in 1 Corinthians. Okay, you've got this great chapter on resurrection. What is Paul going to say after writing a whole chapter on resurrection? Is he going to say, "Since there is a resurrection, look up and wait for this glorious future?" No, he says, "Therefore my beloved ones be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." Your work is "not in vain." Why not? Because everything you do in the present, in the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, everything that flows out of love and hope and grace and goodness somehow will be part of God's eventual Kingdom. That is the

message of the resurrection. The resurrection is your new body in which you will be gloriously, truly wonderfully you. The resurrection means everything you've done in the present through your body—works of justice and mercy and love and hope—somehow in ways we don't understand will be part of God's new creation. We are not building the Kingdom of God in that old social Gospel sense. We are building for the Kingdom of God.

**Does this change how we think about creation as it is? How should Christians respond to issues like pollution?**

We are stewards of creation, as I stressed at Laity Lodge. That is our calling as human beings. If we are careless about creation or wantonly destructive of it, we are in radical denial of what it means to be human. God made this world beautiful. He made us stewards of creation under him and over the world. We don't always know how to do this, but we can be prayerful and wise and seeking to be good stewards. Then we will more likely be genuine humans and our world will more likely flourish. We can't just go on treating God's creation as a cross between a gold mine and an ash tray. We can't just get what we want, grab it, and run. We can't just dump our garbage and not worry about it.

**What does it look like if the Kingdom of God in the Church tries to put the world to rights?**

Salvation is not simply God's gift to the Church. It is God's gift through the Church.

The Church is supposed to be a lighthouse, a beacon of hope and warning and mercy and all the rest of it. The Church is not just supposed to tell people they are sinners and need Jesus so they can go to Heaven. No, the Kingdom of God is about God's Kingdom coming on earth as in Heaven. The Church is to be the agent in making that happen.

Now, here's the problem. Some churches concentrate on simply bringing people to faith and building them up in faith, with a little bit of missions spilling over if you're lucky. These actually tend to do rather well because they make people feel good. My Church is about me. Churches that are very active in getting out there and making things happen in the world are sometimes, sadly, not as good at attracting members.

You must always come back to prayer, worship, and Bible study. Make sure that Christians are not going hollow in the middle individually or corporately. But, then let it flow out. First, focus on mission. Second, grow leadership. Third, encourage discipleship. Then, act collaboratively. That means the church helps the local education authority, the local housing committee, the police force, whatever it may be. Let's work with everyone who we can.

Sometimes the Church fails to collaborate and compromises itself with the ways of the world. Other times it stands back and critiques, "We're in the right, and you're in the wrong." Here's what the Church partnerships look like when we grow the Kingdom.: Collaborate without compromise; critique without dualism.