

# Tom Wright : Simply Christian

SPCK 2006  
Alison Morgan Jan 07

Aim to describe what Christianity is all about, to commend it to those outside the faith and explain it to those inside. It's a postmodern apologetic, essentially.



## 1. Echoes of a voice

### 1. Putting the world to rights

The postmodern, postChristian and increasingly post-secular world cannot escape certain questions, strange signposts pointing beyond the landscape of our contemporary culture and out into the unknown. We hear a voice, and lose it as a dream; but it echoes in our subconscious. It's a dream of justice. *It's not fair* echoes in the playground. Law courts get it wrong. Countries invade others. Tsunamis. Decline in public morality. Gas chambers. Global evils of materialism and fundamentalism. Family breakdown (cp Dr Johnson, who said the aim and goal of all human endeavour was 'to be happy at home'). The art of being gentle has gone out of fashion, and everyone wants their 'rights'. People ask, why is it like this? Because we have a dream of a different world.

The reason for the dream is that this echo of a voice is real; there is someone whispering to us, someone who talks about rescue. Christians believe Jesus took the tears of the world and made them his own; took the joy of the world and brought it to new birth. Often Christians have got it wrong; but Tutu in S Africa didn't; Wilberforce didn't; Martin Luther King didn't.

### 2. The Hidden spring

Story of a dictator who replaced unreliable spring sources of water with concrete and pipes. People adapted, all went well, until one year water burst through the ground and wrecked whole cities. It's been like that with spirituality, the hidden spring that bubbles up within human hearts and human societies. We have a W philosophy which offers concrete roads and shopping malls and houses, church life compartmentalised and seen as 'an up-market version of daydreaming for those who like that kind of thing'. Many people have done their best to tap into the hidden springs, aware there is more available than the official churches have let on. Others have been aware of an indefinable thirst. The official guardians of the water system have been horrified to see the eruption of spirituality in recent years. 9/11 shows what happens when you try to organize a world on the assumption that spirituality is a private matter, and what really matters is politics and economics. In many parts of the world the attempt to pave everything with concrete hasn't taken hold – Africa, Asia, S America. Religious Experience Research Unit, [www.archiveshub.ac.uk/news/ahrerca.html - running since 1969](http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk/news/ahrerca.html-running%20since%201969).

If there is a God who we can know in Jesus, this upsurge of spirituality is what we would expect. So is the unguided experimentation; people starved of water will drink anything, even polluted.

### 3. Made for each other

The whole area of human relationships forms another echo of a voice. Desire for lifelong love marriage is undimmed. We want relationships. One of the odd things in the W is the way we have remoulded and shrunken them; we have lost our community, but don't realise it. The echo is the echo of relationship with God, which alone is permanent.

### 4. For the beauty of the earth

The world is full of beauty; but always incomplete. It slips through our fingers; the music, the mountain, the sunset – we cannot take them home, own them. They always seem unfinished. The beauty of the natural world is the echo of a voice, a signpost pointing beyond itself. Beauty is sometimes so powerful that it evokes our deepest feelings of awe, wonder, gratitude, reverence. But it can't be codified, or even agreed about; and concepts of what is beautiful change. Plato said what we see here is just a shadow of something in another world, a world of ultimate reality; and yet that suggests this reality is *gad, sick*, which is not what Christians believe. We believe the glory we see around us belongs to

God the creator; this world is the real one, waiting to be repaired. The masterpiece already exists in the mind of the composer; one day we will be ready to perform it.

Take away any of these things and human life is impoverished. We are made for relationship with another Being who can only be known in a spiritual way. What we mean by 'know' will be much more like knowing a person, and less like knowing which is the right bus into town; a kind of knowing which involves trust, trial and error, time. One food word for this deeper and richer kind of knowing is love.

## 2. Staring at the sun

### 5. God

The Christian story claims to be the true story about God and the world. The reflections so far appear to lead us towards the centre of a maze; but leave us tantalizingly short of the goal. No path can lead the unaided human mind from reflective atheism to Christian faith. Imagine looking in the dark with candle or torch; but when the sun rises there is no need. Lots of arguments about God are like someone waving a torch into the sky to see if the sun is shining. He can't be studied like maths.

Eccl 5.2, 'God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few'. Heaven was conceived not as a place up there; nor as a destination for the souls of the blessed - but as a space opposed to our space; God's space. We can imagine the relation between God's space and our space in 3 ways: co-terminous (ie pantheism); overlapping (Judaism/Christianity); separate (ie deism or gnosticism). Christians believe the 2 spheres do overlap, and that God makes his presence felt in the sphere of Earth. In the OT this happened in the temple.

### 6. Israel

The story as Jews of Jesus' day might have told it...

Babel; the covenant with Abraham; the leitmotif of going away and coming home again, slavery and exodus, exile and restoration. 4 themes give shape to the story: king, temple, Torah, new creation. New creation will come about only through one final exile and restoration; restoration through a suffering servant.

### 7. Jesus – the coming of God's kingdom

Christianity is about something that happened. Not about a new moral teaching (though we got some), or about Jesus offering a new route to heaven after death (the right side of the LJ fresco), or about fresh teaching on God (though we do learn lots). *Christianity is all about the belief that the living God, in fulfilment of his promises and as the climax of the story of Israel, has accomplished all this – the finding, the saving, the giving of new life – in Jesus. He has done it. with Jesus, God's rescue operation has been put into effect once for all. A great door has swung open in the cosmos which can never again be shut. It is the door to the prison where we have been kept chained up. We are offered freedom: freedom to experience God's rescue for ourselves, to go through the open door and explore the new world to which we now have access. In particular, we are all invited – summoned, actually – to discover, through following Jesus, that this new world is indeed a place of justice, spirituality, relationship and beauty, and that we are not only to enjoy it as such but to work at bringing it to birth on earth as in heaven. In listening to Jesus, we discover whose voice it is that has echoed around the hearts and minds of the human race all along.*

The two spheres now interlock in the person of Jesus himself.

The reliability of the gospels. The kingdom message.

### 8. Jesus: rescue and renewal

His hearers will have recognised what he was saying, from OT prophecies, in familiar riddle and parable form – but they couldn't work out exactly what he meant. They recognised him as Messiah; but no one thought the Messiah would have to suffer or die. He arrived Jerusalem and directed his attack not against the Romans but against the Temple. He intended to fight the messianic battle by losing it; for the real enemy was not Rome but the powers of evil with which Israel's leaders had colluded.

Resurrection. 'Nothing in Jewish literature or imagination had prepared people for something like this'. They couldn't have made it up. Interestingly, none of the NT accounts talks about the resurrection as proof of an afterlife; they all say instead that it means God's kingdom has indeed arrived. E Orthodox churches have always emphasized that when

Jesus rose again God's whole creation emerged from the tomb, introducing a world full of new potential and possibility.

Those who followed Jesus had never imagined that a Messiah would be divine. But the earliest Christians believed just that.

## 9. God's breath of life

The early Christians spoke of new life, a fresh breeze, a spring morning, the burning of winter rubbish; they picked up the image of a bird brooding over the waters of chaos to bring order and life to birth. We cannot separate the Holy Spirit and the task of the church. *despite what you might think from some excitement in the last generation about new spiritual experiences, God doesn't give people the Holy Spirit in order to let them enjoy the spiritual equivalent of a day at Disneyland... the point of the Spirit is to enable those who follow Jesus to take into all the world the news that he is Lord, that he has won the victory over the forces of evil, that a new world has opened up and that we are to help make it happen.* Nor can the task of church be attempted without the Spirit; it isn't a matter of accepting what Jesus has done and getting on with it; without God's Spirit there is nothing we can do that will count for God's kingdom.

But often we've done just that. We need to rehabilitate the word church by learning to rely again on the Holy Spirit, so that we can be God's people, part of God's future arriving in the present – just as Jesus was. The Spirit is given to begin the work of making God's future real in the present.

At the moment the world appears a place of suffering and sorrow as well as of power and beauty. But God is reclaiming it. Our own self, personality, body is being reclaimed; we are both part of the old creation and part of the new creation and someone through whom it begins to happen.

Those who see God's space and our space as separate tend towards dualism, and value spectacular supernatural events such as healings over quieter ones of service. These do happen; but the dualist framework excludes the sense of God's presence and power already existing in the natural world.

## 10. Living by the Spirit

The Law is one of the places where heaven and earth meet; and the Spirit enables us to keep it. This is one of the main points of Pentecost.

Word. When you announce the good news that the risen Jesus is Lord, that very word is the Word of God, a carrier or agent of God's Spirit, a means by which new life from God's dimension comes to bring new creation within ours.

God's Spirit offers the answer to the 4 questions with which we began.

- Creation will be remade to become all that it strains and yearns to be; the greater beauty for which the one we already know is a signpost will appear
- God offers a fresh kind of relationship with himself, others, creation
- God offers us a new spirituality, the gift of living in both dimensions of his created order
- God wants us to anticipate a world put to rights.

Christian spirituality combines awe with intimacy. And it normally involves suffering.

## 3. Reflecting the image

### 11. Worship

When you begin to glimpse the reality of God, the natural reaction is to worship him. If not, you haven't really understood who he is or what he's done. Revelation- John says a door opens in heaven. God's sphere and ours are not far apart; at certain places/moments they interlock, and the boundary seems just a thin partition in which a door is opened, a curtain pulled back, so that people in our dimension can see what's going on in God's dimension. John sees the worship that is going on all the time in heaven.

Golden rules of spirituality:

1. you become like what you worship
2. worship makes you more truly human

Christian worship is the celebratory praise and adoration of God the creator. Reading scripture in worship is the main way of celebrating who God is and what he has done. Communion is taken in memory of Jesus – it explains the meaning of his death. He died to rescue us; not give us new ideas.

## 12. Prayer

The LP is a way of saying to the Father, Jesus has caught me in the net of his good news; I want to be part of this kingdom movement. For a pantheist, prayer is just getting in touch with the deepest realities of the world and of oneself. For the deist, it's calling across the void to a distant deity. For the Christian it's about standing at the fault lines, being shaped by Jesus who held heaven and earth together as he sweated in Gethsemane.

## 13. The book God breathed

*The history of Christianity is littered with ways of reading the Bible which have, in effect, muzzled it. A computer will do a thousand things, and we just use it for writing and email. So with the Bible; we use it just for the things we already do. OT and NT ('testament' means covenant; it is a central Christian claim that the events concerning Jesus were the means of renewing the covenant).*

It's inspired (not just inspiring, as the pantheist might have it). Its inspiration is not just supernatural (as the dualist might have it); it doesn't bypass the minds of the writers. It's one of the places where heaven and earth overlap and interlock. Its writers were caught up in the strange purposes of God; but remained themselves. It's not just a work of reference for making sure we are right about things. It's there to equip us to carry forward God's purposes of new covenant and new creation.

## 14. The story and the task

Living within the authority of scripture doesn't mean keeping its rules, like the golf club. It means living in the world of the story which it tells, under the authority of God and as part of his saving plan. It's not just a repository of true information, but part of the means by which, in the power of the Spirit, the living God rescues his people and his world, and takes the forwards on the journey towards his new creation, and makes us agents of it.

Parables and metaphor.

## 15. Believing and belonging

The church is like a river and like a tree – a river of a thousand historic tributaries, a tree made up of millions of contemporary communities and individuals.

Becoming a Christian can be like waking to the alarm, suddenly; or waking quietly, slowly.

The gospel is first and foremost news about something that has happened. The best response is to believe it. By believing we mean trusting.

The church is a community, existing for 3 main purposes: to worship God, to work for his kingdom in the world, and to encourage one another.

## 16. New creation, starting now

The point is not to go to heaven when you die. Christian living means dying with Christ and rising again. The rules are not arbitrary restraints, but signposts to a way of life in which heaven and earth overlap. Working for justice. Building relationships of love. Discovering beauty as part of a larger whole, seeing the world as a violin still waiting to be played.

Cp NT Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, SPCK 2000