

In conversation: Paul Williams and Tom Wright

Prof Paul Williams interviewed Rt Revd Prof NT Wright as part of Bible Society's Re-Imagining Mission webinar following the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast. This is an edited transcript of their conversation.

Paul Williams:

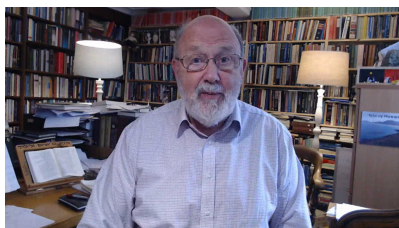


Tom, we so appreciated your address earlier today in the Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast. You've done so much for biblical scholarship, but also for helping the Church more broadly recover its confidence in the Bible. So it's really exciting that we can talk a bit more now about this question of how the Bible might actually help us re-imagine mission and find a new

language to express faith in this new landscape.

In your address you talked about the seismic shifts in the political landscape. It's always been fascinating to me that when Jesus came alongside those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they were reeling from another set of seismic shifts in their political landscape. The thing Jesus focused on was to take them back into the story of Scripture. So how can the story of the Bible give us a fuller and richer vision of God's purposes in the world today?

Tom Wright:



I'm tempted to say, 'How long have we got?' because one could easily talk for hours and hours in answer to that. I think that Western culture as a whole has tried to imagine the story of the Bible in terms of a kind of picture language, which is really all about how we humans, or our souls, find their way into God's world, into heaven – whereas in fact, the Bible story is about

God, the creator, making a world that he wants to come and live in with us, his human creatures. When you tell the Bible story that way round, you see that it makes so much sense – that God finally comes in the person of Jesus to dwell in our midst and then sends his Spirit, which is his own strange, mysterious presence, to dwell in us and through us and in his world. The point of all of that is that when God comes to dwell in the midst, then things change. And you can see in the Old Testament and you can see in the New Testament things changing when God comes to dwell in the midst.

I think as Western Christians, we've often imagined that the only point that we have really is to try to persuade people of some spiritual truths so that they can be spiritual people and end up going to a spiritual heaven – instead of which, the Bible is about real life, and it's about God coming into the midst of real life in and through Jesus and the Spirit.

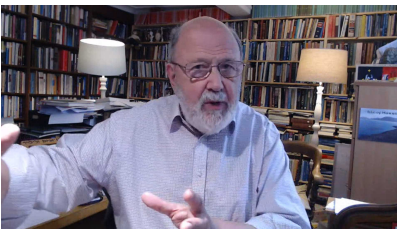
And of course, we see in the early Church that they are putting into practice many of the things which are set out in the Old Testament, particularly that agenda of care for the poor and the needy and the widow and the orphan. That's been the top of the Church's agenda from the beginning, along with medicine, along with education. And when you understand how the story of the Bible works, that it ends not with saved souls going up to heaven, but with 'the dwelling of God is with humans' – that's what Revelation 21 says – then suddenly all this has a major narrative which, if you like, floats it and enables us to see where we might find our vocations within that.

Paul Williams:



Tom, that's so helpful. But there has been, hasn't there, this tension within the wider Church between expressing the gospel through social action and our activity in society, or, on the other hand, through words and evangelism. How do we think about that relationship? How do we get that sort of balance right?

Tom Wright:



I think we are at a moment in our culture when we're revisiting all the substructures, the assumed bases of the way we think, the way we live. In the eighteenth century in Europe, in America, there was this intellectual cultural revolution, which we loosely call the Enlightenment, which basically banished God upstairs like ancient Epicureanism did – 'Well, if you want to go and visit him, good luck to you. But we're going to run the world down

here.' For the last two and a half centuries also in Western culture, that's been the assumption. But once you start shaking the foundations of that, which is postmodernism has tried to do, then you realise that that split of 'God upstairs and we down here' has then shaped the way we either say, 'Oh, we're doing evangelism to get souls to heaven' or 'We're doing social work to make life better on this earth.' That was not how the early Christians saw the world at all. It wasn't how St Paul saw the world. It certainly wasn't how Jesus saw the world. You need both.

And to get both, you have to have a larger frame of reference. Interestingly, Jesus provided precisely that in the Lord's Prayer, where we pray every day, 'Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven', not 'in heaven as in heaven', but 'on earth as in heaven'. So as Christians have always known, then helping the poor and bringing help to those in need is part of demonstrating that the God who made the world is in the business of doing new creation. That's the theme – creation and new creation. God is doing new things and that's always true. But through Jesus, having broken the power of death and evil through his crucifixion, having launched new creation in his resurrection, he then says, 'Here is my spirit. So you have to be people of new creation, both in yourselves and through yourselves, out into the world.'

That's the narrative we need. And then it'll take all the words and actions that we can do to put all that into practice and to communicate the reality of it to people.

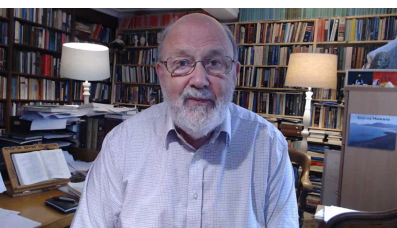
Paul Williams:



So that turning round of the narrative, not about escaping from the earth to heaven, but God's purpose being to dwell with us, helps us bring together this sense that we have, that both evangelism and social action are so important. There's another way that we struggle, though, and I wonder if you could speak into this lastly, which is the balance between, 'Do we speak out and speak up?' – and sometimes that can lead us into quite an argumentative posture in society;

or are we silent, and bow to the pressure not to speak? Does the story help us with that?

Tom Wright:



We constantly have to pray for wisdom as to which arguments to have when and when to be silent. Knowing which is the right time for which is very difficult. And you see this going on in, for instance, the trial of Jesus, both before the high priest and

before the Roman governor. There were times when he said nothing and there were times when he engaged with Pontius Pilate and argued with him about, guess what, kingdom and truth and power. Are those relevant today? You bet they are. Jesus had something to say about those. Pilate didn't understand – and finally, Pilate seems to have had the last word by sending Jesus to his death.

And the Church has always had to discern the moment. There are so many issues going on at any one moment, and it's easy for the Church simply to parrot in a vaguely religious fashion the things which are coming up in the favourite newspaper of whoever's preaching at the time. We've got to do better than that. We've got to dig down under the issues and not just play into the current culture wars, but actually to speak a truth, which is different, which is slant to the way that our culture tends to see things.

That's really difficult. That's why in my talk earlier, I hinted at Jesus' language about being wise as serpents and innocent as doves. That is a time to be wise as serpents, to discern and to say, actually, something's going on here and we need to name it and shame it. And then innocent as doves – there is a time either to be silent or simply to say, 'Well, let's wait and see and pray and so on.' From issue to issue that will change. And from month to month and even day to day, that will change.

I found in my own work both when I was a bishop and as a professor and trying to speak into the public sphere from time to time, there are times when one has a strong sense that 'Something has to be done here; I seem to be holding the microphone, let's get on with it.' And other times when actually the path of wisdom is to stay silent, to pray and then to team up with others and maybe address it from a different angle. So it's going to vary from case to case and time to time.

Paul Williams:



Tom, thank you. It's been incredibly stimulating. We so appreciate what you've brought to us. And I think that central to the message that you brought is this notion of not thinking that salvation is about us leaving as disembodied souls somehow to get to some other place, but it's actually about God's desire to bring heaven to us, to earth, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. And that is what really changes things. So thank you so much for

what you shared with us.