

83 A paradigm shift

It's virtually three months since my last main article ([81] Christianity and Islam, 24/7), and that's after writing almost 100,000 words in 12 months. (I say 'main article' because Article [82] (16/8) was little more than a quote from Tom Wright.)

After a second read-through of *Surprised by Hope* (but I'm still only 2/3 through his *The Day the Revolution Began*) I can see that my title 'A totally different view' [82] was apt; indeed, it now feels more like a paradigm shift.

In the past couple of days, I've looked back through those 100,000 words to see how my thinking has changed.

At first, I was full of excitement that I had (re-)discovered the Trinity – God **is** relationship. I had spent years – decades – trying to find out what was 'right', and then persuading others of 'the truth'. But that ended in spiritual bankruptcy after pulling out of the sect I somehow fell into.

Everything for me then became about relationship, and it was glorious. Here now was the 'answer': I really can have a relationship with the Living God. So that relationship was now what I had to 'sell' to other people (see: leopard, spots).

All good and true, and I flourished as I sought to develop that relationship, but the more I read, both of the Bible and of other people's views about the Bible, the more uneasy I became. Yes, the Trinity is there in and through Old and New Testaments, but 'having a personal relationship' simply wasn't what Jesus preached about; nor was it what the early church taught, as they 'turned the world upside down'.

I became more and more convinced that 'the kingdom' (whatever that means) was at the heart of Jesus' teaching and preaching, and the early church followed his lead.

I challenged you folks (assuming that anyone was actually reading what I wrote) to tell me where in the New Testament we learn about 'going to heaven' (and thus avoid 'going to hell'). No-one responded, despite the fact that this way of seeing our faith is so **totally** ingrained in us – it's 'what we've always been taught'.

'The gospel' to us is about how Jesus died on the cross to take our personal sins upon himself, so that we can have new life and can, finally, go to heaven. Am I right, or do you see your faith in a different way? When did you last hear a sermon about the kingdom of God?!

The heaven/hell dichotomy is the core of our belief, is it not? That's how we think, so when we (well, the theologians among us) translate the Bible, we do so 'knowing' that this is what the Bible teaches, so our translations confirm our belief.

So now, the reason for my three-month gap is that I've been trying to follow Tom Wright as he explains the culture and the expectations and the understanding of the first century Jewish people, the culture within which Jesus came to explain that 'the kingdom of God is here'.

I'm not going to try to sum it all up in my few words, but let me try to at least share some of the various strands of what I think are involved in 'the kingdom'.

- the resurrection and ascension are key to understanding the NT church's revolutionary ideas
- the resurrection isn't just 'proof that Jesus' death on the cross really does bring forgiveness'
- in Jesus' resurrection, evil is defeated and the kingdom has come (begun?)
- when we die, we go to 'be with Christ', prior to returning to earth at 'the resurrection'
- Jesus' resurrection body was the first fruits, the forerunner, of what we will be
- our ultimate future is a restored, renewed, recreated world, where we will walk with God
- heaven will come to earth (Rev 20, 21), and we'll work together here with one another
- because the earth will be made perfect, we should be committed to doing what we can **now**
- feeding the hungry, releasing the captives, etc., is part of 'thy kingdom come'
- evil will not be allowed to continue, and there will be some sort of judgement
- God's concern is judgement as restoration (but I can't go with universalism)

These are only some of the many aspects of 'the kingdom' that are developing in my mind.

But as I see it, the unbiblical idea of 'going to heaven' when we die makes us think in terms of escaping from this awful evil-filled, hell-filled place to a glorious place of joy and happiness. In which case, there's little or no motivation to fight injustice (the biggest of which, Wright suggests, is the intolerable global debt that is keeping the poor countries poor).

Penal substitution has been my whipping boy, but I now feel that it is just the outward manifestation of a deeper misunderstanding of what Jesus taught. I certainly don't have 'the answer', but reading the Bible through the lens of 'the kingdom' seems to make much more sense of many of the difficult passages – though the difficulties don't vanish, of course!

Even Tom Wright's *Surprised by Hope* isn't an easy read; you'll need your Bible alongside you all the time, if you're to really do justice to his ideas and check them out, but if any of you do read it, please let me know what you think.

Blessings,

Paul Bev. 19.10.19