

### 383 *Explaining God, explaining heaven*

This Trinity Sunday, in our more informal service, as the vicar was ‘explaining’ the Trinity, one of the children put her hand up and waited politely: ‘Is God a man or a woman; is he male or female?’ Ha! And you thought explaining the Trinity was difficult!

Having claimed that ‘going to heaven when we die’ isn’t a biblical concept,<sup>[382]</sup> I had some feedback – much appreciated, thanks – including on my use of ‘witness’.

On the latter, one friend agreed that it’s not our job to *persuade* people, but felt it better to avoid talking of ‘witnessing to’, as it carries a persuasive sense. My dictionary says not – a witness is simply someone who *reports* what they saw. I think our churches have tilted the meaning of ‘witness’ towards the idea of persuading – a minor point, but indicative.

The problem we have is that God is God and therefore intrinsically difficult to ‘explain’, but also the only tools we have are words. Oh, that’s OK: we have the Bible, the ultimate ‘explainer of everything’. But again, the Bible uses words, and in my case only *English* words. Like it or not, our understanding of God-and-heaven is very much in the hands of human translators.

To be fair to people like Tom Wright, they intensively study not just the biblical texts in their original languages, but also contemporary texts in those languages, to understand what those words meant *at the time*. Translators try to work out what those first hearers/readers understood by those words, then try to select English words to convey that same meaning – difficult. (Plus, many words have more than one meaning!)

Our other problem is that we do prefer nice simple explanations, and the idea that when you die, ‘your soul either goes up to heaven or down to hell’ fits easily into a tract that we can use to try to persuade people to believe in Jesus. (Too cynical?)

Tom Wright assures us that the idea of disembodied souls in heaven is not biblical – it relates more to Greek ideas, Plato and his mates.

Sure, the idea of heaven being up and hell being down does convey helpful ideas, and the Bible does say that Jesus ascended back to his Father in heaven, but viewing it too literally can bring misunderstanding. After all, didn’t Jesus talk about the kingdom of heaven being right here and now: ‘among you’?

What do I think? Heaven isn’t a ‘place’; God’s ‘domain’; it’s where (even on earth) ‘thy will be done’. Sadly, on earth God’s will is very often *not* done, so seeing heaven as a place of glorious escape is tempting – but wrong! Yes, at death we do, in some way, go to be with God, awaiting that Great Day; I can’t ‘explain’ that, maybe we ‘sleep’?<sup>[1 Cor 15.4]</sup>

If we believe in (what churches have claimed for centuries) ‘the resurrection of the body’, then that has implications for the here and now; escaping to heaven much less so.