

Simply Christian
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Course outline, book and other materials

[Simply Christian](#) by N. T. Wright
Also recommend [Simply Jesus](#).

Gathering, Prayer

Introduction

As people gather, ask them to read Rev 4 and 5.

Review:

- Four echoes of a voice: justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty.
- God: Where is he? God's space is not the same as our space. How do they overlap: Pantheism, deism, and Christian view.
- The story of Israel: Exile and restoration. Four themes in the OT: King, Temple, Torah, and new creation.
- Isaiah (in line with some Psalms and other passages, spoke of God's kingdom as the time when:
 - a) God's promises and purposes would be fulfilled.
 - b) Israel would be rescued from pagan oppression.
 - c) Evil would be judged, especially the evil regimes.
 - d) God would bring about a new reign of justice and peace.
- What did Jews expect from their Messiah?
 - He would fight the battle against Israel's enemies, specifically the Romans.
 - He would rebuild, or at least cleanse and restore, the Temple.
 - He would reestablish the monarchy as in the days of David and Solomon.
 - He would be God's representative to Israel, and Israel's representative to God.
- Jesus not the expected Messiah.
- IN spite of that, the Christian message had surprising power and grew.
- The Holy Spirit. If we have the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, that is the place where heaven and earth meet—God's new Temple.

Part 3: Reflecting the Image. <Show slide> Part three of the book deals with what it looks like in practice to follow Jesus and advance the plan of our creator God. It is divided into 6 chapters:

1. Worship
2. Prayer
3. The Book God Breathed
4. The Story and the Task
5. Believing and Belonging
6. New Creation, Starting Now

We will explore why the church exists—what is it there for? For many of us part 3 is where we began in our Christian journey. We have been practicing Christians for years. Speaking for myself, I have never had a good sense of what it is all about and for me, this book and this last section helped clarify that for me.

Chapter 11: Worship

Our natural inclination when we begin to glimpse the reality of God is to worship him. If that is not a person's reaction, it pretty certain that don't really understand who God is and what he has done.

But, that begs the question: What is worship? What is the point of it all. "Var står det skrivet? Where is it written? Chapters 4 and 5 in Revelation let us be a fly on the wall to the worship that goes on in the throne room of God.

Before we look at Rev 4 and 5 in some detail, it is important to note that this is not something that John observed in the far future. When he does describe the ultimate future in the last part of Revelation, it doesn't look like what we read in chapters 4 and 5 at all. Nor does John imply that he has seen this in some distant location.

<Rev4:1-2> He says "a door stood open in heaven" meaning that God's space and our space are not far apart and that in this case he was privileged to peer from our space into God's space. And, what he sees is the regular life of heaven, the worship of God which, in that space, is continuous.

What he sees is astonishing. <Rev. 4:3-8>. John describes God's throne. It is an awesome sight. Thunder, lightning, rainbows, 24 thrones with elders, lampstands burning with fire. The animals are singing the familiar Holy, Holy, Holy, words that will be familiar to anyone who has been in a liturgical church. In the Lutheran liturgy, a version of the Holy, Holy, Holy is sung just before communion is served. <Show images>

We begin to see the logic of worship. It literally means acknowledging the worth of something or someone. It means saying that something is worth of praise. This singing of praise is only the beginning. The animals praise God

unceasingly. Now the humans join in. <Rev 4:9-11> The 24 elders cast their crowns in front of the throne and express why it is right to give God praise. "You are worthy to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things.

A natural response is fine and good, but the world is mess. God's creation is not in a great state. What is God going to do about it? Well, this theme is played out in heaven before the court it self. <Rev. 5:1-4.> There is a scroll which can not be opened. It is, we come to realize, the scroll with God's future purposes. John breaks down when he realizes that. None of God's creatures that God is committed to work through can make it happen.

Listen to what happens next: <Rev. 5:5-10.> John is consoled by an elder who shows him the lion from the root of David who opens the scroll. But what John saw was a lamb, standing as though it had been slaughtered. When the lamb takes the scroll, the 24 elders fall down in front of him and sing a new song. And John watches as an incredible host sings this song. If you take John literally, there are more than 100,000,000 voices singing praises to God.

Play Handel's Messiah. As you listen to Handel's version of Worthy is the Lamb, think about an uncountable number singing that in heaven. This is what worship is all about.

The Results of Worship. God does not require our worship to make him feel better. Worship is not like a dictator telling everyone to show up for his parade or else. This is not our motivation for worship. It is more like the response of a crowd at the end of a moving performance rising as one in tumultuous applause. That kind of response is close to genuine worship.

Two golden rules of worship.

1. Everybody worships something. And, importantly, you become like what you worship. Bob Dylan captured this well—You gotta serve somebody.
2. Because we are made in God's image, worship makes us more truly human. When you gaze at God in whose image we were created with love and gratitude, we grow. We discover more of what it means to be fully alive.

So, how do we worship him?

Celebrating God—Through Scripture. One of the key tasks of Christian worship is to tell the story of creation and new creation over and over in a thousand different ways. Telling the story, rehearsing the mighty acts of God,

if you will is near to the heart of Christian worship. And where do we find these mighty acts. The answer is of course the Scripture. We'll talk more about the Bible next week, but the point for worship is "reading the Bible is always central to Christian worship. Cutting back on this for whatever reason—trimming readings so that the service doesn't go on too long, changing scripture passages so that they become merely part of a musical performance, or reading only the few verses the preacher intends to preach about—misses the point. ... Reading scripture in worship is, first and foremost, the central way of celebrating who God is and what he's done." The Psalms in particular are of great use. "...no Christian congregation ought to deny itself regular and thorough use of the Psalms. One of the great tragedies in much contemporary free-church worship is the great void at this point." <Reaction?> <use of the scripture in liturgical churches>

Celebrating God—Through the Breaking of Bread. It doesn't matter what you call it—Lord's supper, Holy Communion, Eucharist, Mass. It used to matter, but the distinctions have largely disappeared. And it certainly doesn't matter for our purposes.

1. Jesus knew that this simple set of actions would explain the meaning of his death in a way that nothing else could.
2. Communion is not sympathetic magic (as we suspicious Protestants have worried that it might be in some churches. This is a place where heaven and earth meet—Paul says we proclaim God's death until he comes. Doing it says it.
3. It is alone not a mere occasion of remembering something that happened a long time ago. Certainly that is part of, but not all of it.

Communion is used as an identifier. There are churches where to take communion you have to be a member of that church. Story about the LCMS.

There is feeling in some Protestant bodies that celebrating communion is a "good work" that we do in order gain God's favor. This is a danger that any ritual faces—it can become and end unto itself. This danger isn't limited to communion. It might be insisting on crossing one's self at just the right moment, or insisting on not crossing one's self. Or, it might be raising hands in worship, or any other action. "I have on occasion been wryly amused when a church has abandoned its robed choir and organist because they seem "too professional" and have then employed half dozen people to spend the whole service twiddling knobs and pushing sliders to control the sound, the lights, and the overhead projector." That strikes pretty close to home for me. Wright continues, "Anything that needs to be done during worship can become a ritual performed for its own sake. Likewise, anything that needs to be done during worship can be done as an act of pure gratitude, a glad response to free grace."

The church gets hung up on issues that are really just tradition and minor points of theology, even individual dislikes and likes (which is what I call them when they are mine) and irrational prejudices (which is what I call them when they are yours). The 2 greatest commands (love God and love you neighbor) should be a simple guide as to what to do. Remember Jesus as he instructs us to should not be a cause for internal strife.

Worshipping Together. One last thought. From the beginning it was clear that Christianity is something people do together. It was also clear from the beginning that each member of the body of Christ was to have an active personal faith. It flows that every Christian should worship along and in groups. What matters is not so much how we go about it, but that we do go about it.

Chapter 12: Prayer

<Show cartoon>

In Rev. 4 and 5, we got a glimpse of what worship is like in its purest form. For prayer, we have even more direct evidence about how to pray—Jesus himself gave a model to his disciples. <Show 3 versions of the prayer> The precise wording doesn't matter. As Wright puts it, "Don't allow the surface noise to put you off." This prayer grows directly out of what Jesus was doing in his earthly life, and looks forward to what he achieved in this death and resurrection. When we pray it is effectively saying I want to be part of Jesus' work.

People use the prayer in many different ways. Some pray it with pauses after each phrase to think about the implications and meaning. Some use it at the end or beginning of a longer session of prayer. Some people repeat multiple times as they move deeply into the presence of God. No matter how you want to use it, use it. <How do you use it? Do you pray it routinely?>

Prayer Between Heaven and Earth. Christian prayer is simple at one level—a young child can pray the Lord's prayer. But, it is hard as we attempt to enter into a deep life of prayer. Life was not easy for the psalmists or God for that matter. God prays the first line of Psalm 22 on the cross. "My God, why did you abandon me?" One has to assume that when Jesus commands us to take up his cross and follow him he expected we would have some moments like that in our lives. We do after live in the place where two tectonic plates are scrunching together—heaven and earth, future and present. We should expect earthquakes.

But, and this is great news, we have help. <Romans 8:26-27 from slide> Paul in his chapter about the Holy Spirit points out that we might not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit—God’s very own Spirit—intercedes for us according to God’s will. How incredible is that. God himself is groaning about the state of the world, and because God himself, via the Spirit, dwells with us and resonates with us as we groan for the pain of the world.

Discovering Help in

Prayer. <How many of you are happy with your prayer life? Put it another way, is there anyone here who isn’t trying to be a better prayerer?> There is help at hand. As modern people, we think we should do it our way, and are concerned that if we get help from the outside, our prayers won’t be authentic. We are suspicious about using other people’s prayers.

Picture this scene. Jesus wants to teach his disciples how to pray. So, he divides them into 3 groups and assigns Peter, James, and John to be group facilitators. They are instructed to pick a recorder for their group. Then they are given a question like, “What does au-

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.
Might be a rock'n' roll addict prancing on the stage
Might have money and drugs at your commands, women in cage
You may be a business man or some high degree thief
They may call you Doctor or they may call you Chief.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.
You may be a state trooper, you might be an young turk
You may be the head of some big TV network
You may be rich or poor, you may be blind or lame
You may be living in another country under another name.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.
You may be a construction worker working on a home
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome
You might own guns and you might even own tanks
You might be somebody's landlord you might even own banks.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.
You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side
You may be working in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.
Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk
Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk
You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread
You may be sleeping on the floor sleeping in a king-sized

thentic prayer look like?” and 15 minutes to answer it in their group. After 15 minutes the groups all report and they discuss the various answers. Then they break back up into groups (after a coffee break) and write a prayer that is in their view authentic. The report and discuss process is repeated. No, that is probably NOT what happened. Jesus gave them what they needed (and wanted)—a set of words which they could learn and use.

It is easy to forget that this prayer uses words that are not our own. There is nothing wrong with that. It is not sub-Christian, nor has anything to do with works-righteousness to use set forms and prayers written by other people. In fact, to insist that you have to do it from scratch by yourself all the time smacks of human pride, even works-righteousness. Of course, set prayers can be deadweight and not meaningful. Sometimes we need to clear out the deadwood so the forest can grow.

Show the PowerPoint slides of prayers. <Ask for more input.>

There is tons more that could be said. But, as with worship, the important thing is to, as Nike says, “Just do it.”

<show slide and books> There are many guides available. Wright likes the use of a spiritual director to help. The ACTS framework can be valuable—structure your prayer around Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

Preview: Next week Chapter 13 *The Book God Breathed* and Chapter 14 *The Story and the Task*.

End in prayer.