

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

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.
- What does this all mean to a Christian? How do we respond?
 - Worship
 - Prayer

Today we finish part 3 of the book and the book overall. <show slide>

15. Believing and Belonging

A river and a tree appear to opposites. A river begin in lots of places—a spring, a trickle of snow melt in the high Rockies, a lake, small streams. But, gradually, they join and make a river, in the case of the Mississippi, a mighty river. Out of many emerges one. <Show image of the Mississippi river drainage.>

A tree is in a way the inverse. It begins with a single seed. It starts small, just a shoot, and over times grows bigger and bigger, spreading out into a large shade providing tree, generating seeds that propagate into other trees. From one, the tree grows into many.

It had never occurred to me until I was preparing for this lesson that a river drainage and a tree look very similar in 2d. There is a branch of mathematics called fractals that study this kind of phenomenon. And, if you Google tree fractal or river fractal you'll find lots of images of either that are generated mathematically. There is a very close connection between the real world and the world of mathematics that is beautiful to a mathematician. And, I do believe that mathematics is beautiful. But, that is a another discussion.

Back to the point. We need both images (a river and a tree) if we are to understand the church. The church is like a river. John's vision in Revelation of the end of time sees a huge throng of people from every race, nation, tribe, and language coming together in great chorus of praise. Like the river, they all started in different places, but merged into a single outpouring of praise. The image of a river reinforces the point that the church consists by definition of people from all possible backgrounds. Diversity gives way to unity.

Yet, the church is like a tree. Jesus, the single seed, was sown in the dark earth and has produced a glorious tree. Branches have gone everywhere. Looking at the variety of the branches, you might wonder if they are from the same trunk. Unity generates diversity. <Show image of the tree. Find out what branches people came from.>

Clearly you don't want to push these metaphors too far. Still, they are useful to help us understand something about what we as Christians mean about the church. Today, we will talk about what the church is, who belongs to it, and most importantly perhaps, what is the church for.

Wright defines the church as, "The church is the single, multiethnic family promised by the creator God to Abraham. It was brought into being through Israel's Messiah, Jesus; it was energized by God's Spirit; and it was call to

bring the transformative news of God's rescuing justice to the whole creation." Let's unpack it a bit.

First, the church is a single great river formed from tens of thousands of scattered tributaries. Even when it was single family, there was plenty of room for outsiders (Ruth for example) to come into the family of Israel. And, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus opened up the flood gates for a much broader community.

Second, the church is the many branched tree planted by God, Abraham as the first shoot, Jesus the trunk, growing into the world wide church with its incredible diversity. There is another appropriate Biblical image—Jesus as the true vine with God's people as the many branches.

The idea of family is never far away. The early church was very much like an extended family; they cared for each other in ways that are similar to families. And that the church is called to be family in a way. The idea of family can be misleading as well. As it has been said (attributed to Billy Graham) "God has no grandchildren." You are not a true member of God's people, the church, because your parents were. You cannot be Christian like you can be Jewish.

We have a bit of trouble in our Western mindset of individualism of grasping the community and family nature of the church. We are not simply a collection of isolated individuals on our own path to spiritual maturity. We are of course called to respond to God on a personal level. It is your decision, not your family's or your spouses' or your parents' to become a Christian. But, as Paul repeatedly points out, we are only a part of a bigger body. If we were to try to separate ourselves from the church, it would deny the very purpose for which the church was called into being. According to the early Christians, the church does not exist in order to provide a place where people can pursue their private spiritual agendas and develop their own spiritual potential. Nor does it exist in order to provide a safe haven for people to escape the wicked world and socialize with like minded people. Individual spiritual growth comes as a byproduct of the central purpose for which God calls us. This is important. The church does not exist for your or my benefit. Repeatedly in the NT we are told that the church exists for its mission—to announce to the world that Jesus is its Lord. This is the good news. It is clear from Jesus' teaching that we are both called to be agents of God's healing love, putting the world to rights AND are also called to be people whose own lives are put to rights by that same healing love.

So, what exactly does this all mean.

<How do you wake up in the morning?> We all wake up differently. Some of us take a long time to slowly come to our senses. Other wake up violently to an alarm clock. Others us push the snooze button multiple times. <singing chicken alarm clock story>

Coming to belief in God is a bit like that. For some it is a an emotional, gut wrenching experience. For others it is more gradual, almost like osmosis. For others it is a very rational decision, pondered for a long period of time. Why are we believers? What is that we believe if we are to be a part of God's people?

First and most important, the good news about what God has done in Jesus is news about something that has happened. And our response is to believe it. This is so unlikely and unbelievable that you can't expect people to jump on the bandwagon just because you tell them. It is not like telling someone it is raining outside. In the end, believing that God raised Jesus from the dead is a matter of believing and trusting in the God who would, and did, do such a thing. Believing encompasses both the fact that God did certain things, and that it was God who did them.

Secondly it is about forgiveness. Our slate is wiped clean, every single day. Just getting some hint of this should motivate us to praise God for his generosity. But, even though we can't earn God's favor by our own effort doesn't mean that the call to faith is not also a call to obedience. Jesus is indeed the world's Lord and Master and we are called to obey him and his commandments.

<Show slide> "To believe, to love, to obey (and to repent of our failure to do those things): Faith of this kind is the mark of the Christian, the one and only badge we wear." The ancient creeds are used precisely to publicly declare our faith. They are a stamp of we are. By declaring our faith, we say yes to God and to his purposes.

Belonging to the Family

John Calvin said, "If God is our father, the church is our mother." "...it is impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself." The church is above all, a community that has formed because they belong to God and to Jesus. It is not the building. It is the people. It exists for two closely coupled purposes—to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world. It also exists to encourage one another, to pray with and for one another, to learn and teach one another, and to set examples to follow. Our fellowship is more about coffee and pastries, what the Swedes call fika. It is WAY more than that. It is within

the church, even when the church doesn't get it all right, that our faith is nourished and grows. It is important to be in relationship with one another. Large churches must intentionally provide opportunities and encourage members to be involved in smaller groups.

Membership begins with baptism. Baptism with water evokes several images.

- **Through the water to freedom.** Remember the story of the exodus and the Red Sea. Moses, at the beginning of that story is rescued from the edge of the Nile. At the end of the story, Joshua leads the people through the Jordan into the promised land.
- **Through the water to new life.** Creation started with God's Spirit brooding over the waters.
- **Through the waters into God's new covenant.** John the Baptist used baptism to call people to get ready for the time when God would fulfill his ancient promises. This baptism was a means of purifying them.
- **Through the water into God's new world.** Jesus' own baptism and the Last Supper made it clear that to achieve renewal we would have to go through the water just like in the exodus, but in a deeper and symbolic way.
- **Through the water into the new life of belonging to Jesus.**
- **Through the water to become part of God's purpose for the world.**

16. New Creation, Starting Now.

Despite what many people think, and what many of were probably implicitly taught, the point of Christianity isn't "to go to heaven when you die." The NT echoes the OT themes that God intends, in the end, to put the whole creation to right. "The earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea." This is promise that resonates in the Bible story. That great story will end, not with "saved souls" being snatched up into heaven away from the wicked world and our mortal, sinful bodies, but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth so that "the dwelling of God is with humans." Rev 21:3-4. "3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."

<Show slide> The old hymn, "This Is My Father's World" has a stanza that goes like this:

"This is my father's world; O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seem oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world; the battle is not done;
Jesus, who died, shall be satisfied,
And earth and heaven be one."

"Earth and heaven be one—that is a theme that should resonate through all our living, a people with a future, called to live in the present in light of that future.

All the early Christians stressed their belief in resurrection. After we die, we go to be "with Christ", but your body remains dead (life-after-death). This is hard to describe, and the NT writers for the most part don't try. What is promised after that interim period is a new bodily life within God's new world. Hence, what Wright calls life after life-after-death. God does not plan to abandon the world, a world that he called "very good" His plan is to remake it and raise all his people to a new **bodily life** to live in this remade world. This is the promise of the Christian gospel. Live in it, and rule over it. This is too staggering to ponder, ruling over the world. Living in this world is about practicing, in the present, the tunes that we shall sing in God's new world.

Some thoughts about Christian living.

Christian living means dying with Christ and rising again. We begin with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our goal is the renewal of the presently corrupt creation. This pilgrimage we are will involve both renunciation and rediscovery.

- **Renunciation.** The world is out of tune, and there will be many things, some of them deeply embedded in our psyches, to which the only Christian response is "no". Jesus said we had to take up our cross and follow him. The only way to find yourself is to lose yourself. There are some things we just must say no to.
- **Rediscovery.** Being a Christian in a new creation is not to deny our humanness. It reaffirms it. As a result, there will be many things, some of them counterintuitive and even perplexing, to which the Christian response is "yes". It is not intuitive to give generously for example. Yet, we are commanded to do that.

The problem is that it is not at all clear what to renounce and what to rediscover. It takes nerves of steel, and persistent searching after wisdom. "We

are to be informed by the leading of the Spirit; by the wisdom we find in scripture; by the fact of our baptism and all that it means; by the sense of God's presence and guidance through prayer; and by the fellowship of other Christian, both our contemporaries and those of other ages..."

Only when we have this firmly in our minds can we dare to speak of rules. And there are rules. The NT has plenty of them. <What are some rules in the NT? Discuss and then show slide.>

- Give alms in secret.
- Never sue a fellow Christian.
- Never take private vengeance.
- Be kind.
- Always show hospitality.
- Give away money cheerfully.
- Don't be anxious.
- Don't judge another Christian over a matter of conscience.
- Always forgive.

These rules are not hoops to jump through, or ways for God to stop us from having fun. Rather they are more like signposts to a way of life where heaven and earth overlap.

So, let's end by looking at those 4 echoes we started with. We spent much of our time talking about spirituality. The other three are justice, relationships and beauty.

1. **Justice Revisited.** Our frustration when we are wronged, or when we see other wronged is our response to the living God who demands his world be fair honest, truthful, and upright. To get there we have to take a different route than the world takes. It isn't a violent route—violence rarely changes anything. Jesus took all that violence on himself on the cross and through his resurrection a new type of justice is possible. We could spend lots of time talking about this. Suffice it say, "Every Christian is called to work, at every level of life, for a world in which reconciliation and restoration are put into practice, and so to anticipate that day when God will indeed put everything to rights.
2. **Relationships Rediscovered.** The NT calls us, over and over, to model new ways of human relating with new standards of how to treat one another. The key word is, of course love. Something that gets overlooked is that we should be positively kind to one another. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. ^{1:} Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ^{2:} and live in love,

as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

3. **Beauty Reborn.** Beauty is a tricky thing. The closer we come to it, the more it baffles us. Wright calls the church to reawaken its hunger for beauty at every level. He calls it essential and urgent. "The point is this. The arts are not the pretty but irrelevant bits around the border of reality. They are highways into the center of a reality which cannot be glimpsed, let alone grasped, any other way.

Close with Wright's closing paragraph.

Thanks to all.

End in prayer.

Prayer for the week: "Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scripture to be written for our learning. Grant me so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that I may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever Amen.