

Learning to Live with Evil

N.T Wright's latest book, *Evil and the Justice of God*, is an invitation to the Christian community at large to revisit the problem of evil. As a response to his own theological journey as well as the relatively recent barrage of international examples of evil, Wright enters into an open-ended academic dialogue wherein he tables his own well-reasoned reflections on the topic. More importantly, though, the pastoral quality of his writing solicits various potentially broader audiences to consider, for themselves, whether evil is real and how scripture informs our understanding and response to the issue. He proposes both a renewed Christian rubric for understanding and talking about evil and teases out the implications for Christian action in three areas.

In the last twenty years, N.T. Wright has emerged as a leader within many Christian circles for his ability to offer fresh academic insight into biblical material. In particular, his use of exegesis and historical analysis has helped transform understandings of Paul's writings and has resurrected reasonable belief in Christ's historical credibility. By reminding modern audiences of the earliest church's understanding of the significance of Christ's life, death and resurrection, he has unveiled fresh new opportunities for experiencing and appreciating God's plan for humanity and his work in the world. Within the tapestry of this larger body of work, *Evil and the Justice of God* was a necessary outgrowth. Confronting evil was an unavoidable necessity as he turned his attention to the significance of the resurrection (Wright 9).

At the same time, global incidents of terrorism, organized crime, warfare as well as various natural disasters have generated considerable consternation. Politicians, pundits and observers at large increasingly return to the label "evil" to express otherwise unfathomable

horror and to justify their reactions to it. It appears to some, as Wright observes, that “everyone is talking about evil” (16), making the present re-consideration timely.

Building on a series of sermons delivered in 2003, Wright first turns his attention to understanding the problem of evil in contemporary culture. In particular, he reviews and challenges both modern and post-modern tendencies to dispense entirely with the notion of evil, either in the name of automatic progress – which sees evil as a crude ancient concept – or, in the name, of relativism and non-static personal identity – which eliminates the possibility of moral imperatives. The resulting contemporary discomfort with evil creates three problematic reactions. First, we tend to ignore evil when we see. Second, we are surprised by it when we can’t ignore it. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways with the rationale that “lashing out at something you simply know by intuition is wrong may be better than tolerating it” (27).

Wright also notes that a nuanced view of evil requires us to wrestle with three considerations. First, we must acknowledge the flawed belief that western democratic systems are the pinnacle of social evolution. Second, we must face head on the observation attributed to psychoanalyst Scott Peck that there is “such a thing as a force or forces of evil which are supra-personal, supra-human, which appear to take over humans as individuals or, in some cases, as entire societies” (37). Finally, we must acknowledge the oft-quoted Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wisdom that the line between evil and good lies within our own hearts. Out of these vantages, we can no longer ignore evil as real nor diminish its consequences. The challenge for Christians is instead, to face up to the seriousness of evil, while at the same time understanding and celebrating “the goodness and God-givenness of creation” (40).

Having established evil as not just a “philosophical problem but a practical one” (42), Wright then turns his attention to examining the Old Testament for patterns of God’s response to

evil. Taking us on a whirlwind tour of several key texts (the forbidden fruit, the flood, the Tower of Babel, Abraham, Moses, Judges, David, Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel and Job), Wright reminds us that the scriptures are frustratingly indirect and incomplete in answering questions of theodicy. Yet at the same time, they make it abundantly clear that God is indeed working in history (past, present and future) to deal with evil, not exclusively for its own sake but rather as part of his bigger redemptive plan for humanity. Wright keenly notes:

God's justice is a saving, healing, restorative justice because the God to whom justice belongs is the Creator God who has yet to complete his original plan for creation and whose justice is designed not simply to restore balance to a world out of kilter but to bring to glorious completion and fruition the creation, teeming with life and possibility, that he made in the first place. (64)

Seeing evil through the lens of God's promise of new creation leads the author to four conclusions. First, the personified force of evil is important but not paramount. Second, human responsibility for evil is clear throughout. Third, the evil that humans do is integrated with the enslavement of creation. Fourth, the Old Testament does not present tidy answers but rather repeatedly offers up God's commitment to bring about new creation, ending evil forever.

It is from within this promise of new creation that Wright turns his attention to the New Testament – aligning himself particularly with a Christus Victor theology of atonement. He keenly observes that there is little evidence of any particular view of atonement within the Gospels - which only begins to take shape in the Epistles. Rather, the Gospels are the story of how the Messiah deals with evil at its political, social, personal, moral and emotional height (79). Jesus tackles it directly with healing acts. He takes it on himself as he fellowships with sinners. He calls on Israel to fulfil its covenant and ultimately models for them how to do so. Atonement,

Wright observes, is not a theoretical concept. It is an ongoing reality that touches each person, transcending both personal salvation and the reordering of justice in the world. Ultimately, it is the catalyst in fulfilling the plan for humanity. As the author describes it, “It is the start of the process of redemption, in which suffering and martyrdom are the paradoxical means by which victory is won.” (99). The challenge for modern Christians becomes applying this ongoing paradox of love defeating evil in our current situation – marrying personal salvation with practical action.

In his final two chapters, Wright invites his readers to imagine a world without evil – the new creation promised by God. Further by accepting the “call of the Cross”, we are called to act right now as though this new creation has already arrived in the face of a world still riddled with evil and death. On particular note, Wright notes five intermediate tasks which Christians can achieve this. These include praying continuously, living a holiness guaranteed by the Spirit, working with worldly authorities to achieve justice and mercy (especially for the vulnerable), implementing restorative justice responses to crime and conflict, and, resolving international disputes cooperatively. Wright focuses on the issue of forgiveness as the central means by which evil has been and is being defeated.

Wright’s excellence as a theologian scholar is certainly maintained in this latest contribution. Overall, he provides an engaging and informative overview of a breadth of issues – part philosophical, part practical – that touch on an appropriate understanding and response to evil. Nonetheless, there are some concerns worth noting.

Most Christians will undoubtedly find a fresh perspective or idea that can shape, challenge or affirm their own thinking on the topic. Non-Christians may equally find the book compelling and, given its encouragement toward love and justice, will probably take heart in the

overall message. This text however is in no way a primer on Christianity and those unfamiliar or adverse to the Christian message will likely find themselves challenged to align with many of the arguments – which are based in the presumption of historicity, established in Wright’s earlier writings. In this way, the book might not be considered accessible for all readers.

In addition, the summary nature of the treatment leaves some corners of the theology not necessarily well covered. For example, Wright’s embrace of *Christus Victor* theology leaves alternative understanding of atonement largely unexplored. Proponents of satisfaction theory, moral influence and the modified narrative *Christus Victor* (also known as non-violent atonement) (Weaver 3- 20) will likely take issue with the absence of consideration of these viewpoints. A full exploration though would have required a different type of book and would have distracted substantially from Wright’s principle thesis. It would inevitably have taken an essentially personal and practical message into a corner of intellectual debate that can leave the most well-versed scholars disoriented and without particular clarity.

Regrettably, though, this intellectual debate about atonement has practical implications, which suggest alternative trajectories for Wright’s conclusions. As Boersma points out, adopting a penal substitution model would by necessity orient us toward a world action, particularly in the area of criminal justice and international disputes, in which punishment is a necessity (59). Similarly, exploring a moral influence atonement would support the course of action, suggested by social psychologist Philip Zimbardo, that goodness, like evil, can be deliberately shaped by social influences (448-451). Rather than the spontaneous transformation suggested by *Christus Victor*, this approach unfolds a “slow ascent into goodness” (449).

Wright’s treatment of forgiveness also has some problematic edges, particularly as read by those who consider themselves the victims of evil. While it would a gross misrepresentation

to suggest that Wright is not sensitive in his coverage of the issue, the overall impact of this particular chapter can be experienced principally as an exhortation to forgive, an obligation that seems insurmountable and inadequate to many (e.g. Derksen). In particular, by linking forgiveness with the fulfillment of God's plan for creation, in its absence, Wright reminds the reader that "we do not have the choice to sulk in such a way as to prevent God's party going ahead without us." (147). While true in the broadest sense, an alternative presentation suggest by others such as Wilma Derksen and Martin Luther King of "loving our enemies" might offer mildly less intimidating ground for exploration and allow for a broader range of responses.

These concerns notwithstanding, *Evil and the Justice of God* is an important modern contribution that not only illuminates a biblically grounded understanding of evil in the world but also points us toward specific action. People whose lives have been touched by evil and those helping them will without question find answers to difficult questions within its pages. Moreover, they will certainly find hope in Wright's presentation of new creation and the defeat of evil for us and through us. And, in the words of one Scottish philosopher, "He who has hope, has everything."

Works Cited

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