

Christians Wrong About Heaven, Says Bishop

N.T. “Tom” Wright is one of the most formidable figures in the world of Christian thought. As Bishop of Durham, he is the fourth most senior cleric in the Church of England and a major player in the strife-riven global Anglican Communion; as a much-read theologian and Biblical scholar he has taught at Cambridge and is a hero to conservative Christians worldwide for his 2003 book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, which argued forcefully for a literal interpretation of that event.

It therefore comes as a something of a shock that Wright doesn’t believe in heaven – at least, not in the way that millions of Christians understand the term. In his new book, *Surprised by Hope* (HarperOne), Wright quotes a children’s book by California first lady Maria Shriver called *What’s Heaven*, which describes it as “a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk... If you’re good throughout your life, then you get to go [there]... When your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels down to take you heaven to be with him.” That, says Wright is a good example of “what not to say.” The Biblical truth, he continues, “is very, very different.”

Wright, 58, talked by phone with TIME’s David Van Biema.

TIME: At one point you call the common view of heaven a “distortion and serious diminution of Christian hope.”

Wright: It really is. I’ve often heard people say, “I’m going to heaven soon, and I won’t need this stupid body there, thank goodness.’ That’s a very damaging distortion, all the more so for being unintentional.

TIME: How so? It seems like a typical sentiment.

Wright: There are several important respects in which it’s unsupported by the New Testament. First, the timing. In the Bible we are told that you die, and enter an intermediate state. St. Paul is very clear that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead already, but that nobody else has yet. Secondly, our physical state. The New Testament says that when Christ does return, the dead will experience a whole new life: not just our soul, but our bodies. And finally, the location. At no point do the resurrection narratives in the four Gospels say, “Jesus has been raised, therefore we are all going to heaven.” It says that Christ is coming here, to join together the heavens and the Earth in an act of new creation.

TIME: Is there anything more in the Bible about the period between death and the resurrection of the dead?

Wright: We know that we will be with God and with Christ, resting and being refreshed. Paul writes that it will be conscious, but compared with being bodily alive, it will be like being asleep. The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish text from about the same time as Jesus, says “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,” and that seems like a poetic way to put the Christian understanding, as well.

TIME: But it's not where the real action is, so to speak?

Wright: No. Our culture is very interested in life after death, but the New Testament is much more interested in what I've called the life after life after death — in the ultimate resurrection into the new heavens and the new Earth. Jesus' resurrection marks the beginning of a restoration that he will complete upon his return. Part of this will be the resurrection of all the dead, who will "awake," be embodied and participate in the renewal. John Polkinghorne, a physicist and a priest, has put it this way: "God will download our software onto his hardware until the time he gives us new hardware to run the software again for ourselves." That gets to two things nicely: that the period after death is a period when we are in God's presence but not active in our own bodies, and also that the more important transformation will be when we are again embodied and administering Christ's kingdom.

TIME: That is rather different from the common understanding. Did some Biblical verse contribute to our confusion?

Wright: There is Luke 23, where Jesus says to the good thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." But in Luke, we know first of all that Christ himself will not be resurrected for three days, so "paradise" cannot be a resurrection. It has to be an intermediate state. And chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, where there is a vision of worship in heaven that people imagine describes our worship at the end of time. In fact it's describing the worship that's going on right now. If you read the book through, you see that at the end we don't have a description of heaven, but, as I said, of the new heavens and the new earth joined together.

TIME: Why, then, have we misread those verses?

Wright: It has, originally, to do with the translation of Jewish ideas into Greek. The New Testament is deeply, deeply Jewish, and the Jews had for some time been intuiting a final, physical resurrection. They believed that the world of space and time and matter is messed up, but remains basically good, and God will eventually sort it out and put it right again. Belief in that goodness is absolutely essential to Christianity, both theologically and morally. But Greek-speaking Christians influenced by Plato saw our cosmos as shabby and misshapen and full of lies, and the idea was not to make it right, but to escape it and leave behind our material bodies. The church at its best has always come back toward the Hebrew view, but there have been times when the Greek view was very influential.

TIME: Can you give some historical examples?

Wright: Two obvious ones are Dante's great poetry, which sets up a Heaven, Purgatory and Hell immediately after death, and Michelangelo's Last Judgment in the Sistine chapel, which portrays heaven and hell as equal and opposite last destinations. Both had enormous influence on Western culture, so much so that many Christians think that is Christianity.

TIME: But it's not.

Wright: Never at any point do the Gospels or Paul say Jesus has been raised, therefore we are we are all going to heaven. They all say, Jesus is raised, therefore the new creation has begun, and we have a job to do.

TIME: That sounds a lot like... work.

Wright: It's more exciting than hanging around listening to nice music. In Revelation and Paul's letters we are told that God's people will actually be running the new world on God's behalf. The idea of our participation in the new creation goes back to Genesis, when humans are supposed to be running the Garden and looking after the animals. If you transpose that all the way through, it's a picture like the one that you get at the end of Revelation.

TIME: And it ties in to what you've written about this all having a moral dimension.

Wright: Both that, and the idea of bodily resurrection that people deny when they talk about their "souls going to Heaven." If people think "my physical body doesn't matter very much," then who cares what I do with it? And if people think that our world, our cosmos, doesn't matter much, who cares what we do with that? Much of "traditional" Christianity gives the impression that God has these rather arbitrary rules about how you have to behave, and if you disobey them you go to hell, rather than to heaven. What the New Testament really says is God wants you to be a renewed human being helping him to renew his creation, and his resurrection was the opening bell. And when he returns to fulfil the plan, you won't be going up there to him, he'll be coming down here.

TIME: That's very different from, say, the vision put out in the Left Behind books.

Wright: Yes. If there's going to be an Armageddon, and we'll all be in heaven already or raptured up just in time, it really doesn't matter if you have acid rain or greenhouse gases prior to that. Or, for that matter, whether you bombed civilians in Iraq. All that really matters is saving souls for that disembodied heaven.

TIME: Has anyone you've talked to expressed disappointment at the loss of the old view?

Wright: Yes, you might get disappointment in the case where somebody has recently gone through the death of somebody they love and they are wanting simply to be with them. And I'd say that's understandable. But the end of Revelation describes a marvelous human participation in God's plan. And in almost all cases, when I've explained this to people, there's a sense of excitement and a sense of, "Why haven't we been told this before?"