

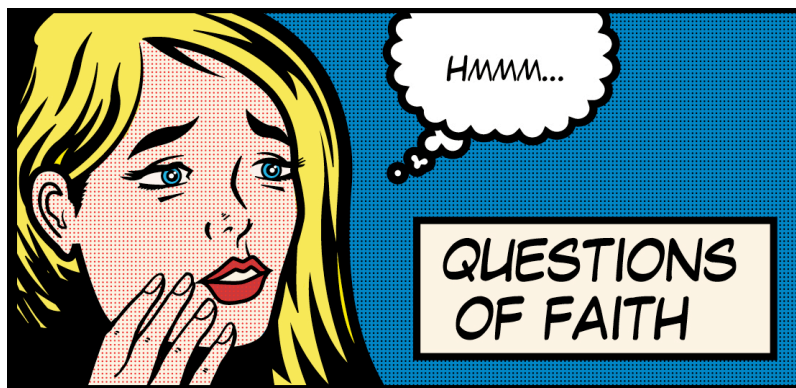
Small Group Study

OUR VISION

To know God and enjoy Him forever.

OUR MISSION

To build a Christian community by making fully devoted disciples of non-religious and nominally religious people



DISCUSSION

Questions of Faith: Millennial Views and the End Times

NOTE TO SMALL GROUP LEADER

(You might have your small group members read the article at the end of this study prior to your group meeting. It will help promote a rich discussion. Also read last week's study which explains the four millennial views.)

SCRIPTURE

Have volunteers read the following scripture:

Matthew 24 and 25

INTRODUCTION

The first words that Jesus preached were, "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

(Mt.4:17). After the resurrection and at the end of Jesus' ministry on earth, he ascended up to heaven. As he did, two angels appeared and boldly proclaimed, "Why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go! (Acts 1:10-11)." The last recorded words of the ascended Jesus are in the book of Revelation. They were to the church and he said, "Yes, I am coming soon! (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20)"

Ever since that time people have looked for and anticipated the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world. This began with the New Testament believers and has continued right through history up to today. The topic of the 'end of the world' has been one of interest to humans since time began but it has intensified

ICE BREAKER

Use ONE of the questions to help people open up and to focus your meeting. It is very helpful to go around in a circle with the leader going first. (Remember if you have new members or guests you should take time to introduce everyone.)

1. What is the sickest you've ever been? Tell us about it.
2. Imagine you somehow found out Jesus was coming back in one year (and you knew for sure). What kinds of things would you do in that next year?
3. What are your three favorite books? If you're not a reader, then what are your three favorite movies?

in recent years. It is important that each one of us as Christians has a clear understanding of the end times so that we are not swayed by various trends or world events.

Observations about the Second Coming:

1. Jesus *will* come again

The early church held strongly to the belief that Jesus would come again as he said he would. A common phrase among them was “Maranatha”, which means, “Come, O Lord! (1 Cor. 16:22)” The second coming of Jesus Christ is mentioned 318 times in the 216 chapters of the NT. That’s 1 in every 25 verses. Some entire chapters are given to it and three New Testament writers wrote entire books about it (Mt.24. Mk.13. Lk.21. 1 Cor.15. 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Jude. Revelation). Jesus said he would come again. Peter, Paul, John, James and Jude all speak of his coming. Not one NT writer fails to mention it. Every time we take communion or the “Lord’s supper” we proclaim the Lord’s death “until he comes” (1 Cor.11:26). There are more references to this subject than any other NT teaching.

Jesus will return to the earth literally, visibly (“every eye will see him”), physically and personally just like he came. It will be the “same Jesus” not another. He will come personally to receive us to himself (Jn.14:3). Unlike his first coming, which was in great humility and lowliness, his second coming will be in great glory with his angelic hosts accompanying him (Mt.16:27; 19:28; 25:31).

2. No one knows exactly *when*.

Jesus will return in the Father’s appointed time. No one knows the exact day or hour (Mt.24:36. Mk.13:32. Acts 1:7. 1 Thess.5:2. 2 Pet.3:10. Acts 3:19-21). People who try to set dates or times bring discredit to the Christian faith and cause people to mock (2 Pet.3:4). We can, however, know the “times and seasons”. If we study God’s Word and listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, we can be aware and ready for his coming. We don’t have to be caught “off guard” like the religious leaders were at Christ’s coming. Dogmatism and intolerance on exact details is not wise. The Scribes and Pharisees missed the first coming of Christ because it did not happen just the way they thought it would.

For those who are unprepared, his coming will be like a “thief in the night” – suddenly (Mk.13:36) and unexpectedly (Mt.24:36-51; 25:1-3. Mk.13:32-37. Rev.3:3; 16:15. 2 Pet.3:10. 1 Thess.5:1-11). Therefore, we need to be spiritually “awake” and watching, ready for his coming.

3. The second coming *completes* what Jesus began at his first coming

At the cross Jesus conquered Satan, sin, sickness and death. He said, “It is finished!” However, we live in the time of the end, which involves a tension between the “now and the not yet.”

- “Already” *Satan* is conquered (a defeated foe), but “not yet” has his final judgement taken place. In between, he continues to try to deceive the nations and must be resisted.
- “Already” *sin* has been atoned for and forgiveness is freely available, but “not yet” do we see sin totally eradicated. Sin has to be fought like a deadly virus and repentance is the vaccine that releases forgiveness and freedom.
- “Already” *sickness* has been defeated but “not yet” do we see sickness and disease totally removed from the earth.
- “Already” *death* is defeated but “not yet” do we see death destroyed. Our bodies are all aging and unless Jesus returns beforehand, we will all die.

The contract has been signed and paid in full but we are living in this “in-between time” before what has been legally accomplished becomes a complete reality.

- There is coming a day when Satan and his hoards of demons will be judged and cast into a lake of fire for eternity. Even now, his time is short!
- There is coming a day when sin will be cleansed from the earth and from our lives.
- There is coming a day where sickness and pain will be no more, where suffering ceases.
- There is coming a day when death, our last enemy, will finally be destroyed.

That “day” is the second coming of Jesus Christ! So the kingdom is both present (“already”) and future (“not yet”). Until then, we stand firm and we fight against all that the devil seeks to bring against us. That’s why we continue to pray, “Your kingdom come! Your will be done!” This prayer is a request for God to reign and to manifest his sovereign power by putting to flight every enemy of righteousness. Our hope is rooted in Christ’s work of redemption that began on the cross and will be completed by the second coming of Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS

1. What evidences do you see of 'end time fever' today? And if you were to survey your friends, work associates, neighbors, etc. how do you think they'd answer this question, "How do you think the world will end?" Do you think even the Christians you know have an accurate idea of what will happen when Jesus returns?
2. Have you ever read the book of Revelation? What did you think of it?
3. When do you think Jesus will return? Soon? In our lifetime? In another generation?
4. What are some things happening today that may indicate that Jesus is coming soon?
5. Do you ever think about the second coming of Jesus? What do you think that day will be like?
6. Do you think the church, in general, focuses too much on 'end times' or not enough?

God bless,
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Christians Wrong About Heaven, Says Bishop

By David Van Biema
Thursday, Feb. 07, 2008

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 fulfill 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?"

(*Surprised by Hope*, by N.T. Wright, can be purchased in the Vineyard bookstore during the weekend services.)