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BOOK REVIEW

GOD AND THE PANDEMIC. A CHRISTIAN REFLECTION ON THE CORONAVIRUS AND ITS AFTERMATH

Wright, N.T. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020),
96 pp. Price: R220, ISBN: 978-0-310-12080-3

Thanks to *TIME Magazine*, because, were it not for their invitation “to write a short piece, early on in the COVID-19 pandemic”, “this little book would not have been written” (p. xi). It is a well-written text, very accessible to a wide audience because of its clear and stimulating argumentation, and importantly, with a critical reflection on how to read the current global pandemic that is seemingly far from over. As stated in the title, it is a clearly a “Christian reflection” on the crisis, but with that said, it is far from inwardly turned and closed off from the rest of the world, only limited and coded for (some) Christians to follow. In five short chapters, Wright takes us with intelligent theological language from “Where do we start?”, through “Reading the Old Testament”, “Jesus and the Gospels”, “Reading the New Testament”, to “Where do we go from here?”, in such a way that still speaks to both the readers of *TIME Magazine* and the one, holy, Christian church.

His argument is simple and clear. Although he repeats his point on numerous occasions throughout the text, there is a significant development and



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depth in the simplicity and clarity of the reflection. Already in the second paragraph (of the “Preface and Acknowledgements!”), we read what this little book is all about:

The aim of this book, then, is not to offer ‘solutions’ to questions raised by the pandemic, to give any sort of complete analysis of what we might learn from it, or what we ought now to do. My main argument is precisely that we need to resist the knee-jerk reactions that come so readily to mind. Before we can answer those questions in anything other than the broadest outline, we need a time of lament, of restraint, of precisely not jumping to ‘solutions’. These may come, God willing, but unless we retreat from our instant reactions, we may not be able to hear them. If we spend time in prayer of lament, new light may come, rather than simply the repetition of things we might have wanted to say anyway (p. xi).

With this emphasis on lament, Wright continues to gradually address questions concerning what a Christian response to the crisis could mean; how we think anew about God in the midst of all of this; how we actually live through the present situation; what is there to discover anew about ourselves, and what might we envision in terms of a recovery and life post-Covid-19.

Wright views the “embrace of lament as the vital initial Christian response to this pandemic” (p. 52). Inevitably, this implies a revisiting of some key passages in Scripture. In stating this, he wants, among others, to go against the grain of

the impression that the coronavirus is providing people with a megaphone with which to say, more loudly, what they were wanting to say anyway (p. 7).

Starting with the Old Testament and reflecting on various texts, it is especially his emphasis on the book of Job that reiterates this crisis as not simply a call to repentance, but a battle with any seemingly easy-going piety. “The book of Job doesn’t really have a ‘resolution’” (p. 12). “[T]he point of Job is precisely its unresolved character” (p. 13). The first and most significant response we as Christians could make to the current crisis is not to try and claim to understand the virus, but rather to pray, lament, complain, state the case, and leave it with God (p. 14). Instead of thinking that we know it all, have all the answers, and that we may play God, we are rather invited to be honest, vulnerable and tell God the truth of *living* the questions. Jesus and the Gospels embody this almost to the bone when we read “Jesus wept” at the grave of Lazarus. In fact, Wright states:

If there is a word for our present situation, facing not only a pandemic but all the consequent social and cultural upheaval, I think it might be right here (p. 28).

What is extremely significant and refreshing about Wright's argument is what this take on lament actually says about God. Instead of looking back, seeking some cause for the crisis in our past, the invitation to lament calls us to look forward and see "*what God is going to do about it*" (p. 17). Contemplating providence thus takes us into the heart of "Jesus Himself [who] is the Ultimate 'Sign'" (p. 17). Wright makes a number of important formulations in this regard:

Unless we are prepared to see these events – the Jesus-events, the messianic moment – as the ultimate call to penitence, because they are the ultimate announcement of the arrival of God's kingdom, we will be bound to over-interpret other events to compensate (p. 21).

Trying to jump from an earthquake, a tsunami, a pandemic or anything else to a conclusion about 'what God is saying here' without going through the Gospel story is to make the basic theological mistake of trying to deduce something about God while going behind Jesus' back (pp. 21-22).

From now on, the summons to repentance, and the announcement of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven, come not through wars, earthquakes, famines or plagues. (Or domestic accidents.) They come through Jesus (p. 23).

[H]e [Paul] is talking about the need for people to repent; but the argument hinges, not on any independent events, not on some big crisis that's just occurred, but on the facts concerning Jesus himself (p. 37)

Every attempt to add new 'signs' to this narrative diminishes it (p. 53).

From this chorus, it should be clear that Wright does not believe a doctrine of providence that is not thoroughly bathed in the doctrine of atonement.

The point is this. If you want to know what it means to talk about God being 'in charge of' the world, or being 'in control', or being 'sovereign', then Jesus himself instructs you to rethink the notion of 'kingdom', 'control' and 'sovereignty' themselves, around his death on the cross (p. 25).

Later on, Wright repeats this idea: "Providence is Jesus-shaped: it isn't an iron grip, relentlessly 'controlling' everything" (p. 56). Besides Jesus who

wept on numerous occasions in the gospels – and thus living through our questions – we also read of the Spirit of God that groans with and on our behalf. In the wordless lament of Romans 8:26, where the Father and the Spirit are working together, we also hear of “believers caught up by the Spirit within that strange but vital interchange” (p. 50). The call to lament is not only revealing our struggle, pain, and loss of words, but is also “*the very moment when we are caught up in the inner, Triune life of God*” (p. 44). Naming our disorientation and bewilderment is in itself the place where we may discover real presence, comfort, compassion, life, community, and hope. In our cry for words of meaning in the present, we are close to hearing the Word that is with us underway. In embracing the absence we fear, we discover a presence never to be feared.

Thus, pondering what lament reveals of God, it is no surprise that we are “called to be *people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain*” (p. 42). But, you might say, this is nothing new, extra, significant, and special in terms of a response to a severe crisis. We “knew” and “had” this long before the crisis; this is all but a new response. Exactly! That is precisely what Wright is arguing. Strangely enough, the exceptional times we are living do not ask for something unique and extraordinary, but rather take us deeper into the ABC of “Christian life 101”. “In this ‘Lord’s Prayer’ Jesus-followers pray, not just when a sudden global crisis occurs, but every single day” (p. 18). Living in and through any present age is nothing but being in-formed by praying the Lord’s Prayer. At the heart of becoming this pray-er, living altar-ed lives, we discover how “*God wants to work in his world through loyal human beings*” (p. 32). Besides everything that is activated in the grappling of the “why?” question, there is also the flipside that invokes the “what can we do?” question. As the prayer goes, it is not merely ethical, but deeply missional when we yearn daily for the coming of God’s kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

The point is that *God’s kingdom is being launched on earth as in heaven, and the way it will happen is by God working through people of this sort* (p. 34).

On the one hand, the Gospel “ends” with tears, locked doors, and doubt. On the other hand, precisely in expressing this “ending”, the church’s “sending” began (p. 59). In the naming of this ending, there is a significant sending. Prayer and lament, as the most basic but significant Christian responses to the pandemic, are thus no flight or escape from the world, but rather a case of the world coming to worship with those who gather.

In a time where most of the churches so easily adapted to the “new normal”, migrating effortlessly into an e-worship mode, the above nuance is extremely important. We should not only read Wright stating that

the danger with e-worship is that it can turn into P-worship – the Platonic vision of 'the flight of the alone to be alone' (p. 68),

but also remember that these temptations are part of what many of us experienced for a number of years to be the so-called "normality" in what is obviously indicative of another and perhaps even deeper crisis in our world. Cognisant of the many voices in academic literature who lamented for years the strange loss of lament in Christian worship, Wright's work does seem to be a very timely and timed contribution to address an even longer and number of crises that confront us. Again, thanks to *TIME Magazine's* initiative, and especially to Wright, for developing that article into such good news for our times. Highly recommended also for the times to come!