



## "Surprised by hope" by Tom Wright - a review

Barry Seagren

### Surprised by hope

By Tom Wright

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### The world has a future

This is an outstanding and important book. It is an exposition and defence of the Christian hope, drawing heavily on Wright's more scholarly works, especially *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (which is a boon for those of us who are never going to make it through massive tomes).

Most of all it is an attempt to make the connection between future hope and present living; to show the logic of the church's present mission in light of its future destiny.

### Platonised Christianity

Wright begins with the observation that most people, Christian and non-Christian, have a highly Platonised understanding of Christianity. They think that the Christian hope is simply that we will go to heaven when we die, leaving this poor world behind forever. His problem with that is not just that it misunderstands the Bible, but that it completely undercuts the present mission of the church. If it is all about 'getting saved' and 'going to heaven', what point is there in getting involved in this world now through working for social justice, concern for the environment, interest in the creative arts, etc.? It would make no more sense than planting roses in a garden that's about to be dug up for a building site, to use one of his

illustrations. In such a Platonised view, the only thing that matters is evangelism.

### Resurrection

In the core sections of the book, Wright shows that the overall plan and purpose of God is not just to snatch a few up to some ethereal heaven, but to redeem and restore and renew his creation and to reign over it as king. At the end of the Book, we don't go up; the new Jerusalem comes down. There will be a new heaven and new earth over which Jesus reigns, in person, and in which we will live as whole people in resurrected bodies. The good news is that this has already begun. The death and physical resurrection of Jesus (which Wright defends robustly) was the decisive event where evil was defeated and new creation was launched. Jesus's resurrection was the prototype and foundational event of the final resurrection — and therefore of our resurrection.

### Launched kingdom

What then is the mission of the church? Wright describes it as 'building for the kingdom' (not building the kingdom, which he repeatedly insists is God's work). The key is the understanding that we now live in a world where God's kingdom has already been launched. 'Every act of love, every deed done in Christ and by the Spirit ... takes its place within a long history of things which implement Jesus's own resurrection and anticipate the final new creation.' The gospel invitation is not simply 'tick this box and one day you will go to heaven', but 'follow this Man and you will find forgiveness for the past, hope for the future and purpose for the present'. We all believe that future hope has implications for present living. Tom Wright's book has worked out the logic of that more thoroughly than anything I had seen before.

### Problems with the cross

So what not to like? A few things. He states that his authority is 'Scripture, tradition and reason, taken together in their proper blend', but happily he bases his arguments squarely upon Scripture. Parts of the book are hard going. His discussion of eternal torment versus annihilation offers a third alternative which few will like. Some of his exegesis is too subtle for my liking. Some of his application relates too much to the Anglican

Church. My one major reservation is that he seems to regard the defeat of evil as the heart of what was achieved on the Cross, whereas I feel John Stott and others have shown convincingly that substitutionary sacrifice lies at the very heart of the Cross. While this is a serious matter, I don't feel it negates his overall argument. *Surprised by Hope* is a superb book, first for its profound biblical and theological exposition of the hope we have, but most of all for the way it shows the active connection between that hope and our lives and work today.

**Barry Seagren**  
**Liss**

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