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Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church

N. T. Wright

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N. T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church.*

New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008

Reviewed by Noel B. Reynolds

Many Latter-day Saints are showing an increased sympathy for the writings of Anglican bishop N. T. Wright of Durham, England, and others in the Emerging Church tradition. Such LDS interest derives from the movement's emphasis on returning to basic Christian living modeled in the New Testament and adherents' willingness to back away from those churches that have systematic theologies and a seeming addiction to the discourse of power while pursuing their agendas. The Emerging Church is more of a conversation than an organization, and it crosses denominational boundaries around the world. It is characterized by a deep interest in interpreting the New Testament as narrative, in Christian living and service as the keys to spreading the gospel, and in Christ's invitation to all converts to join with him in building the kingdom of God here—in this life and on this earth.

Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church provides Bishop Wright an opportunity to bring together his scholarly work on these New Testament themes with his personal insights on Christianity for a general readership. He can look back on a remarkable career as a scholar and cleric. He is one of the most respected New Testament scholars worldwide and currently serves as Bishop of Durham, the number four authority in the Church of England. As an Oxford graduate in classical studies and PhD recipient in theology, Wright has produced a remarkably fresh analysis of the New Testament in which he finds the traditional Luther-based theology of the evangelical tradition to be inadequate and argues for the superiority of a Calvinist approach. He has written dozens of books and is currently halfway through an ambitious six-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. His most recent volume in that series, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*,¹ provides much of the scholarly basis for *Surprised by Hope*, which is written to a broader audience. He has argued that church leaders should be

Bible scholars and teachers, and he has written commentaries on almost all the New Testament books in his For Everyone series published by SPCK, which he says is aimed at twelve-year-olds or seventy-year-olds who have never read a Bible commentary.

In *Surprised by Hope*, Wright makes a number of interesting points about the resurrection that would require a general revision of what most Christians commonly expect. Most obviously, he rejects the notion popularized in much evangelical writing that the elect will be snatched to heaven in a rapture that will deliver them from the evils and sufferings of this material world. He finds this antipathy for the material world to be one more unfortunate influence of Platonist thinking in the Christian tradition that cannot be supported with scripture. While in the long range he does see a heaven in which almost all humans will find a place, he claims it will be on this earth. And the kingdom of God that Christ brought to the world is the project by which this earth will be transformed into heaven. The bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ was the event that launched the earth's transformation. Every converted and baptized Christian has the responsibility to devote his life to continuing the work and should not sit idly by, waiting for the day of deliverance to come.

Not even death will bring us directly to heaven. Rather, as LDS readers will further appreciate, Wright finds in the New Testament clear evidence that there will be a resting time and place for the dead that will not end until the time of their resurrection arrives. He does not try to describe what happens in the interim, but it seems to be a time when all men are in a suspended state, without significant activity, waiting for their return to a physical body. When the dead awake and are embodied, they will join with Christ in the renewal of this earth.

Almost as interesting as his treatment of resurrection are his side observations about the state of current Christianity. Perhaps because of his clear perception of errors and weaknesses in every form of Christianity today, Wright has proved exceptionally able to reach out to people of other faiths and Christians with significantly different theological and pastoral approaches, both among evangelicals and fellow Anglicans. He is widely appreciated as a man of ecumenical spirit, who through his official and unofficial work has come to believe that bringing unity to today's fragmented Christianity will be better accomplished by sharing deepest beliefs and understandings than by delicate negotiations. But his forthrightness has also generated controversy, both on the left and right. On the right, he dismisses evangelical literature on "the rapture" and related topics as a serious misunderstanding of scripture. In fact, it seems that Wright would agree with the leading American evangelical theologian Ben Witherington III

that most of the distinctive evangelical teachings are based on misreadings of the New Testament.² And on the left, Wright's clearly stated opposition to the ordination of homosexual priests has proved effective in holding the worldwide Anglican communion to its traditional policy. (Wright was the only British representative on the commission who addressed the issue of those American ordinations.)

Yet Wright never betrays any sense that Christianity might be in decline. His faith in the future of the kingdom of God is so firm that he sees all things leading to an eventual triumph of the kingdom over all its foes. He believes the triumph will occur through the gradual spread of genuine Christian living as people observe what it means to believe and live as Christians. In spite of his repeated examples of Platonistic beliefs that need to be rejected and replaced with true scriptural understanding, he is clearly part of the movement that has decided to hold firm to Trinitarianism and the other rulings of early church councils.

Regarding the nature and implications of resurrection, Wright finds early Christian belief to be unanimous in its endorsement of no less than seven significant and surprising mutations of the Jewish understandings that preceded it (40–48).

1. Unlike the range of views about life after death that characterized Jewish belief, Christians always held to the single view that there would be a bodily resurrection.
2. Further, this belief in a physical resurrection was moved to the center of Christian teachings.
3. Christians expected to receive a new physical body—not a return of the old one. And it would be *transformed*—composed of material that would not be corruptible or incompatible with the new heavenly *glory*, a term referring to a “status within God’s world” (44).
4. Christian resurrection was also surprising in that it was not conceived as one great event, but was divided into two—beginning with the Resurrection of a single person “in the middle of history in advance of its great, final occurrence” at the end (45).
5. What seems completely unique in the Christian teaching is that the Resurrection of Christ launched the beginning of the end, a long process in which his followers would be engaged in the work of transforming the world and preparing it for the final resurrection—what Dominic Crossan has called “collaborative eschatology” (46).

6. Long Jewish use of “resurrection” as a metaphor for the restoration of God’s Israel was replaced by a new Christian metaphor—that through Christ’s Atonement all human beings could be renewed first spiritually and eventually physically.
7. In a similar vein, Christians transformed the Jewish expectation of a Messiah who would lead Israel to victory over the pagans into a Messiah whose death was one key element of his messianic victory.

Wright argues persuasively that this first-century shift in the prevailing understanding of death and life after death can only be reasonably explained by an actual experience of resurrection, the one to which the New Testament points repeatedly.

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1 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

2. Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2005).