

Surprising Hope in United Methodist Funerals:

Answering the Challenge of N. T. Wright

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N.T. Wright believes that many Christians have it wrong about life after death. In his 2008 book, [*Surprised by Hope*](#), the Bishop of Durham (England) and noted Biblical scholar argued that many Christians have allowed a fuzzy mixture of more contemporary teachings about life after death, reincarnation, and Stoic and Gnostic ideas of body/mind dualism to weaken if not replace what he sees as the clear witness of scripture and the teaching of the church. So pervasive is a non-biblical vision, Wright asserts, that “most people have little or no idea what the word *resurrection* actually means or why Christians say they believe it.” (*Surprised*, p. 12)

Christians are partly to blame for this state of affairs, notes Wright. Too many Christian hymns, stories, and sermons perpetuate reassurances that death happens *only* to the body, not the “important” part of a person. Wright maintains that Christians are called to correct such views and confess a biblical understanding of resurrection.

Getting the Theology Right

A biblical, Christian understanding of resurrection begins by affirming *bodily* resurrection. The *body* of Jesus is raised from the dead, not just his soul. After the resurrection, his body has some unusual abilities to interact with his environment (appearing inside locked rooms or suddenly disappearing, for example), but he remains physically embodied in every way. Jesus eats, drinks, walks, talks, breathes, retains the scars from his crucifixion, and even cooks a breakfast for his disciples.

Wright confidently asserts that such a mysterious yet very much physical resurrection is at the core of the true hope awaiting Christians, as individuals, after death.

But not immediately *at* death. Rather than moving from this life to the resurrection, Wright asserts, “all the Christian departed are in substantially the same state, that of restful happiness... firmly held within the conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Christ,” awaiting resurrection (pp. 171-172).

We are resting in God’s keeping, but this “waiting state” is not “heaven,” nor is “heaven” the name of our final destiny. Rather, citing Revelation 21 and 22, Wright notes that ***earth is heaven’s destiny***. We do not go there. Heaven comes and dwells among us, raised and embodied, here, as part of the remaking of all things including a new heaven and a new earth.

And the new earth and new heavens are part of an entirely new cosmos. God’s intention in salvation from the beginning, says Wright, is nothing less than the rescue and recreation of all things, including but not limited to humans or earth. “The wrath to come,” to use John Wesley’s phrase, is not *primarily* about destroying sinful humans, but rather about a remaking of all things, restoring them, with the redeemed in Christ, to God’s purposes from the beginning.

This, then, says Wright, comprises a biblical, Christian vision of life, death, resurrection and the new creation. We die and are buried. We are held in God’s keeping. God renews and restores all things, the whole universe, wedding a new heaven with a new earth where all those raised with Christ dwell in resurrected bodies.

Getting the Ritual Right

Wright's argument and concern is not limited simply to what the churches teach about the meaning of death, life after death, resurrection and new creation. Ultimately, he hopes, "those who take seriously the argument of this present book will examine the current practice of the church, from its official liturgies to all the unofficial bits and pieces that surround them, and try to discover fresh ways of expressing, embodying, and teaching what the New Testament actually teaches rather than the mangled, half-understood, and vaguely held theories and opinions" of the current culture (p. 25). For Wright, it's not enough to focus just on what we say. It may be *even more important* to focus on how we put these ideas into action when we gather in *ritual*.

How are these biblical, Christian affirmations embodied in typical Christian funeral services? Not so well. Wright contends that if one can find biblical and Christian understandings at all in these rituals, they are most often buried and disfigured by incompatible teachings and practices. Sometimes, denominationally approved liturgies or resources are at fault. As often, however, the fault lies with improvised rites, impromptu statements made by pastors or funeral home directors, or the choice of music or poetry made by families or others planning the service.

How, then, might the United Methodist "Services of Death and Resurrection" in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (UMH) and *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (UMBOW) fare under Wright's scrutiny? Do United Methodists have the "[W]right stuff?"

Bodily Resurrection

When it comes to affirming the bodily resurrection as the core of Christian hope, the answer for our ritual is “Yes, mostly.” The given name of these services is a strong starting point: “Services of Death and Resurrection.” The words at the Gathering and the Word of Grace each cite the physical death and bodily resurrection of Jesus as the basis for Christian hope in bodily resurrection (UMBOW 141). All three of the suggested epistle readings (I Corinthians 15, Revelation 21, and Romans 8, UMBOW 145-147) explicitly locate Christian hope in the resurrection of the body and the new creation. The prayer of commendation likewise points not to “heaven” but to resurrection: “Raise *Name* up with all your people” (UMBOW, 150). And the Committal at the grave site reiterates the hope in resurrection with readings from Romans 8:11 and I Corinthians 15:53.

In addition to offering prayers and texts in support of faith in a bodily resurrection, the Services of Death and Resurrection refrain from including words which directly undermine such faith by suggesting that only the soul of a person is raised. On the contrary, the images of resurrection and life after death found in these services are boldly physical, from the slaked thirst of Revelation 21, to the fragrant oil of Psalm 23, to the bodily activity and strength of Isaiah 40.

Still, hope in the resurrection of the body is not the only possible way one may read these services, especially given that many of our clergy choose not to use all of the readings and may focus instead solely on Psalm 23 and John 14. Those who use only these two texts may seek to comfort those who find themselves in the valley of the shadow of death with the hope that “in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places” (John 14), and giving assurances that their loved ones are in those

dwelling places now and for all eternity.

Either of the options for the opening prayer (UMBOW 143) can also be used to underwrite such a view. The conclusion of the first prayer, “that nothing in life or death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus,” can be interpreted to support the immediate transit of the soul to God and heaven at death. So can “bring us at last with them into the joy of your home not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens” (UMBOW 143). The problematic words are “at last,” and “your home not made with hands.” These could make it appear that our final hope is in a disembodied state far from earth.

Still, the vast preponderance of prayer and biblical texts in the United Methodist ritual clearly affirms bodily resurrection as the core of Christian hope for the baptized. To use this ritual in a way that would affirm primarily a disembodied existence in heaven would require removing or ignoring most of what the ritual provides.

Waiting for the General Resurrection

The Services of Death and Resurrection appear to be either non-committal or inconsistent about the current state of the dead. Some elements may suggest the dead in Christ are “in God’s keeping” until a general resurrection at a later time. Others suggest they may have already reached “the other shore.” And still others are open to either interpretation.

The wording at the placing of the pall leaves open when the appearance of Christ may be: “Here and now, dear friends, we are God’s children. What we shall be has not yet been revealed; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him,

for we shall see him as he is” (UMBOW 141). When is Christ thought to appear? Will those praying this prayer imagine this appearance within the narratives of the biblical accounts of the second coming of Christ, or rather as a “less than Grim Reaper” who meets them at death? Likewise, in one of the prayers previously cited (UMBOW 143), we pray “bring us *at last* with them into the joy of your home...” (italics added). When is *at last*? Does it point to a period of waiting from now until the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead? Or might it instead be heard as pointing to the end of our own lives as individuals, after which we (as souls separated from dead bodies) may be immediately taken up to our final reward?

The way Psalm 130 appears in this ritual could point to two different outcomes as well. If the Psalm is interpreted as the prayer of the *deceased*, then “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word do I hope” (UMBOW 144) could be understood as a confession by the deceased that the promised resurrection is yet to come. However, if it is understood primarily as a prayer of the living acknowledging their grief, then the living may simply be confessing that they are waiting for the end of their present grief in this life. This reading, which seems more likely in the context of the ritual, simply does not address the current status of the dead in Christ.

As we have seen already, the Gospel lesson (John 14) may or may not place the resurrection after Jesus’ return. “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself” (UMBOW 148) could be understood to point to a time of waiting between our deaths and the return of Christ in glory. But for those who believe in the immediate translation of the soul to heaven, the “coming again” in this text may just as easily be understood to occur at each person’s death.

The Commendation grammatically separates death from resurrection in two

separate sentences placed on two different lines.

“Receive *Name* into the arms of your mercy.

Raise *Name* up with all your people” (UMBOW 150).

This grammar and formatting *could* imply a separation in time between these two things, but need not do so. Persons who may be unfamiliar with or unconvinced by the idea of waiting before resurrection may not hear any affirmation of such waiting in such subtle wording.

Several places in the services refer to a “state of peace.” But who is at peace? What that peace is for? How long does that peace last? Answers to each of these vary widely in these services. The post-Greeting prayers praise God for those who “now rest from their labor” and ask God to “grant... peace” to them (UMBOW 143). Here the dead are pictured in a state of rest for which we ask God’s peace. But is unclear in this prayer whether this state of restful peace is understood as transitional or final. In the confession of sin that follows, the living ask “that we may end our days in peace” (UMBOW 143). But what does this mean? Does it refer to the process of dying itself, or to a peaceful attitude as we face our own deaths, or perhaps to being at peace with God and others when we die? At the commendation, the pastor, with hands upon the coffin, prays “Receive *Name* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace...” (UMBOW 150). When does the “receiving” happen? Or perhaps more pointedly, are “the arms of your mercy” (which might point to a period of waiting prior to the resurrection and new creation) a state preceding “the blessed rest of everlasting peace,” or is the latter simply another name for the former? In this case, not only the intermediate state of waiting, but even resurrection and new creation as the ultimate state seem to be denied. Finally, at the

Committal, verses from Revelation promise that “the dead who die in the Lord... will rest from their labors” (UMBOW 156). The context of Revelation makes clear there is an intermediate state for the dead in Christ prior to the resurrection, but in the context of a confusing set of references to rest and peace in this liturgy, the scripture itself could be understood to say the final destiny is this very rest and that the dead in Christ immediately attain it.

Several places in the Services of Death and Resurrection seem more clearly to reject Wright’s description of a time of rest preceding resurrection. The petition that God would “enable us to die as those who go forth to live” following the Greeting (UMBOW 142), implies an active existence more in line with Wright’s conception of post-resurrection eternity than with the peaceful rest of an interim period. Similarly, the pastor’s prayer during the Committal asks “Receive into your arms your servant *Name*, and grant that increasing in knowledge and love of you, *he/she* may go from strength to strength in service to your heavenly kingdom...” (UMBOW 156). This petition also points to an immediately attained energetic and dynamic existence for the dead rather than the rest and peace of the deceased before resurrection.

On balance, the ambiguity of some prayers and readings combined with a few that more clearly suggest the immediate translation of the dead in Christ to their final reward tilt United Methodist ritual at least somewhat away from Wright’s interpretation and toward the more “popular” teachings he rejects.

The Location of Heaven

Where is heaven? Ultimately, Wright reminds, heaven is joined to a new earth in a new Jerusalem in the new creation. In this new creation, heaven *descends* to

earth, rather than humanity floating up to the clouds and abandoning the earth entirely. God's home comes fully among resurrected humans and other creatures dwelling in the new earth. New creation with heaven coming *down* into our midst is the ultimate fulfillment of the Incarnation. The Services of Death and Resurrection, however, include over 20 uses of "rise," "risen," "raise," and other "upward" verbs. There may be at least a subliminal clash between the direction of so many of these verbs and the affirmation that God chooses to dwell in the midst of the new creation "down here" on the new earth, especially for those whose paradigm of the afterlife is "going up yonder."

The images offered in the selected passages from the New Testament may also be confusing on this point. Revelation 21 is clear enough:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among [people]. He will dwell with them as their God" (UMBOW 146).

The gospel reading from John is far from clear. John seems to waver between assumptions that heaven is "up and away" and implications that it is "among people." "And if I go and prepare a place for you [up and away], I will come again [among people] and will take you to myself [up and away], so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going [up and away]. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you [among people]."

I Peter 1:3-9, including in the Committal (UMBOW 158), includes a line that is confusing enough that Wright gives it particular attention. What does "an inheritance... kept in heaven for you" mean? Wright notes that many believe that this phrase implies that our inheritance is being kept safe in a heaven above earth, so

that once we have died we may go to that lofty place to receive the “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” inheritance. But Wright suggests a different interpretation with a clever analogy. If Wright were to tell a friend he had invited over for a drink that he had kept some beverages in the refrigerator, he wouldn’t insist that his friend climb into the fridge and remain there while drinking them. Nor, likely, would he expect the friend to serve himself. The refrigerator is not the destination, but the storage facility. A good host keeps the beverages chilled, then goes and brings them to the guest. Likewise, he says, God will bring our inheritance kept in heaven for us *down to us*, resurrected and living in the new earth in the new creation.

How might typical attendees at a United Methodist funeral make sense of this? Where would they understand heaven to be? If Revelation 21 is included among the readings, they may well understand heaven, ultimately, to be among the dwellers of a new earth in a new creation. With that text omitted, however, popular assumptions of heaven being “up there” or “the place we go when we die” might easily trump the biblical proclamation of God making home among us.

New Creation and Renewal of All Things

Only two biblical texts scriptural included in the Services of Death and Resurrection point in any way to the new creation and the renewal of all things. The more explicit is Revelation 21:1-7, which clearly describes a new earth taking the place of the former one and records the words of the Enthroned One, who says “See, I am making all things new” (UMBOW 146). Isaiah 40 proclaims that even the features of the earth itself, valleys and mountains and uneven ground, will be remade as God’s glory is revealed (UMBOW 144). However, the use of Isaiah 40 in this

context seems to be primarily as a comfort and hope for the grieving, that they may be raised from their grief in this life, rather than a more concrete hope (as in Revelation) for a new creation.

On balance, then, the Services of Death and Resurrection seem to focus on resurrection as a hope for individual believers more than as part of a comprehensive vision of new creation and the renewal of all things. This is, perhaps, understandable: mourners come to a funeral or committal or memorial concerned over the fate of a particular friend or relative. While grieving, they may not consider the wider implications of Christ's resurrection and God's ultimate plans for all of creation.

Conclusion – Hope for Future and Present

We see that the Services of Death and Resurrection are better at cohering to some of N.T. Wright's points about resurrection than others. The official United Methodist liturgy firmly announces a bodily resurrection, may posit (but if so only tepidly) that the deceased are in an interim state of rest until the resurrection and new creation, remains relatively non-committal on the questions of the location of heaven, and says little about new creation as the ultimate and comprehensive purpose of God's salvation.

Does this mixed record matter? Why should pastors pay close attention to such theological and eschatological "technicalities" in the face of grief and loss? Wright maintains adamantly, and convincingly, that these are no technicalities, but bedrock of Christian teaching. What we believe and proclaim about the resurrection matters enormously, especially at times of death and grief:

The point... is that a proper grasp of the (surprising) *future* hope held out to us in Jesus Christ leads directly and, to many people, equally surprisingly, to a vision of the *present* hope that is the basis of all Christian mission. To hope for a better future in this world – for the poor, the sick, the lonely and depressed, for the slaves, the refugees, the hungry and homeless, for the abused, the paranoid, the downtrodden and despairing, and in fact for the whole wide, wonderful, and wounded world – is not something *else*, something extra, something tacked on to the gospel as an afterthought. And to work for that intermediate hope, the surprising hope that comes forward from God's ultimate future into God's urgent present, is not a *distraction from* the task of mission and evangelism in the present. It is a central, essential, vital, and life-giving part of it (pp. 191-2).

A robust proclamation of resurrection, in other words, can heal the church of false decisions between healing bodies and saving souls. It can help Christians see our calling to work for God's kingdom both in the here-and-now as well as in the age to come. And it gives a much-needed correction to our habit of seeing religion, faith, and death in terms of the individual rather than in terms of God's entire cosmos.

While Christians are to announce the fullness of the Bible's eschatological claims always and everywhere, there may be no better place or time to proclaim this surprising and challenging good news than at funerals, memorial services, and committals. If we can boldly and rightly affirm the goodness of God's creation, the truth of a bodily resurrection, and the comprehensiveness of God's redemption and renewal of the entire creation, we can help each other live as those aflame with hope for the future *and* with purpose in the present. We can get about the business of being the church: the witness to God's kingdom, begun through the death and resurrection of Christ and coming into being with our own participation. United Methodists, with our proud history of passion for social justice and activity in providing relief to those in need, ought especially to be able to hear and respond to Wright's call.

Postscript: Making Our Rite More [W]Right

We've noted in this review where United Methodist Services of Death and Resurrection embrace, remain non-committal, and sometimes even resist a full proclamation of all that the resurrection entails. It's time now to take the next steps. We have the opportunity to make our witness to this "surprising hope" substantially richer and more orthodox, especially within our ritual responses to death.

Theologians and liturgists, artists and musicians, preachers and poets, consider this your call! Summon the gifts of understanding and artistry the Spirit has given you, and begin crafting more biblically-informed responses to death for our churches and the wider church as well. We do have a surprising hope to proclaim in the face of death, and in the midst of this life. Help us sing, proclaim, pray, and reflect on the surprising hope of God's kingdom now and for the day of resurrection and new creation in which death shall be no more.

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