

"Paul: Fresh Perspectives" - N T Wright

<http://davidpfield.blogspot.com/2005/10/paul-fresh-perspectives-n-t-wright.html>

October 25th 2005

I have indulged myself today with a first read of Tom Wright's recently published *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*. What a delight this is. Although it neither covers quite the same ground nor proceeds in quite the same way as *What St Paul Really Said*, it does, like that earlier book, provide a readable yet profound one-sitting overview of Paul's thought. It does so with astonishing clarity, ease of expression and freshness. Even though I have read a pretty large proportion of Wright books and articles, I still find new pleasure in his ability to give his readers, (excuse me) fresh perspectives on what one thought to be the most familiar topics. And this is particularly true because so much of his work consists of careful but brief and in-context explanations of passage after passage from Paul's writing which form the building blocks of the particular case Wright is at that moment arguing. So that I feel that after one read I have gained new and helpful insights into parts or the whole of Romans 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, I Cor 15, II Cor 3, 4, 5, Gal 2, 3, 4, 6, Phil 2, 3, Col 2. And much more besides.

I have extracted and reproduced below some representative, some summary, and some especially creative and insightful sentences from the book. However, it must be stressed that the book constitutes a clearly developed **argument** about the structure and content of Paul's thought which is fascinating and compelling and can be followed properly only by reading the book as a whole and not by flicking through somebody else's favourite sentences.

The contents page runs as follows

Part I – Themes

1. Paul's World, Paul's Legacy

1. The Three Worlds of Paul
2. Fighting over Paul's Legacy: Perspectives Old, New and Different

2. Creation and Covenant

1. Creation and Covenant in the Old Testament
2. Paul: Three Central Passages
 - (i) Colossians 1.15-20
 - (ii) I Corinthians 15
 - (iii) Romans 1-11
3. Evil and Grace, Plight and Solution
4. Conclusion: Jesus within Creation and Covenant

3. Messiah and Apocalyptic

1. Introduction
2. Jesus as Messiah in Paul
3. Apocalyptic in Paul

4. Gospel and Empire

1. Introduction
2. Caesar's Empire and Its Ideology
3. Jewish Critique of Pagan Empire
4. Paul's Counter-Imperial Theology
5. Conclusion

Part II – Structures

5. Rethinking God

1. Introduction
2. Monotheism: The Jewish Roots
3. Monotheism and Christology
4. Monotheism and the Spirit
5. Scriptural Roots, Pagan Targets, Practical Work
6. Conclusion

6. Reworking God's People

1. Introduction

2. Election: Jewish Views of God's People
3. Election Reshaped around Jesus
4. Election Reworked around the Spirit
5. Redefinition of Election Rooted in Scripture
6. Conclusion

7. Reimagining God's Future

1. Introduction
2. Jewish Eschatology in the First Century
3. Eschatology Reimagined around the Messiah
4. Eschatology Reimagined around the Spirit
5. Eschatology in Context
6. Conclusion

8. Jesus, Paul and the Task of the Church

1. Introduction
2. Jesus and Paul
3. The Work of an Apostle
 - a. Servant, apostle, set apart
 - b. Redefinitions in practice
4. Conclusion: Paul and the Task of the Church

- how being “in the Messiah” was itself a fourth world distinguishable from the three worlds of Judaism, Hellenism and Roman Empire: “The church, the assembly of Jesus the Messiah, formed (in Paul’s view) a world of its own, standing in a unique relation to the other three worlds ... For Paul, to be ‘in the Messiah’, to belong to the Messiah’s body, meant embracing an identity rooted in Judaism, lived out in the Hellenistic world, and placing a counter-claim against Caesar’s aspiration to world domination ...” – p.6
- pp.7-13 – narrative understandings of Paul; remembering that “a small allusion could and did summon up an entire implicit narrative, including narratives within which speaker and hearer believed themselves to be living, is a vital tool” - how they work, what they do and don’t mean about Paul’s “doctrine”, allusions and implicit narratives – pp.7-13
- “We could also note the way in which the events of AD 70 and 135 had the effect precisely of bringing to a full and grinding stop the implicit narrative which second-Temple Jews has been living in, thereby generating a new form of normative Judaism which would find its primary expression in terms not of story but of de-historicized law-exposition” – p.12
- ironic that neither Sanders nor Dunn have “developed to any extent the narrative understanding of Paul” – p.12
- Paul’s view of salvation “not as an *ahistorical* rescue *from* the world but as the *transhistorical* redemption *of* the world” – p.12
- no such thing as neutrality, presuppositionless exegesis, objectivity in doing Pauline theology but that’s not the end of the world – pp.13-18
- Sanders’ work: “It was no accident that this view should have taken off like a rocket in America and many parts of Britain, and spluttered like a damp squib in Germany; nor that others in America should then pass laws forbidding all contemporary fireworks and restricting entertainment to old movies of exegetical pyrotechnics from the sixteenth century. Neo-Puritanism is itself, of course, a thoroughly inculturated phenomenon.” p.16
- Pauline authorship of Ephesians and Colossians and usability of Acts’ material on Paul – pp.18-19
- false either/or of occasional theology and abstract or general theology – pp.19-20
- on Ps 19 – “Torah does in human life what the sun does in creation” – p.21
- relationship between creation and covenant: “First, the covenant is there to solve the problems within creation. God called Abraham to solve the problem of evil, the problem of Adam, the problem of the world. ... But, second, creation is invoked to solve the problems within the covenant. When Israel is in trouble, and the covenant promises themselves seem to have come crashing to the ground, the people cry to the covenant God precisely as the creator. ... Something is deeply amiss with creation, and within that with humankind itself, something to which the covenant with Israel is the answer. Something is deeply amiss with the covenant, whether Israel’s sins on the one hand or Gentile oppression on the other, or perhaps both – and the answer to this is a re-invoking of creation, or rather of God as creator.” – p.24

- righteousness of God – p.25-6: “the creator and covenant God can be relied upon to act in accordance with his creating power and his covenant fidelity, to put the world to rights.” – p.25
- Sanders “argues that the covenant is the hidden presupposition of Jewish literature even when the word hardly occurs. Exegesis needs the concordance, but it cannot be ruled by it.” – p.26
- “God’s fulfillment of the covenant promises has established creation’s renewal” – p.29
- Romans 1-11 summarized under the headings of creation and covenant – pp.29-33
- “... Paul’s account of what is wrong within the covenant. Put simply, his point, repeated from several angles and in varying degrees of intensity, is that Israel too is in Adam ...” – p.36
- must not put some great divide between salvation/forgiveness of the human sinner and God’s Israel-centred story: “If there is one major result of this chapter in terms of current debates, it is that the ‘new perspective’ on the one hand, and its critics on the other, both need to come to terms with the integrated vision of human sin and redemption and Israel’s fall and restoration which characterizes Paul through and through, precisely because his controlling categories are creation and covenant.” – p.37
- misconceptions, false dichotomies, imprecision in relation to “Messiah” and “apocalyptic” – pp.40-42
- Six things about Messiah in second Temple literature (p.43): 1) *royal* Messiahship. The Messiah is Israel’s true king; 2) the Messiah will successfully fight Israel’s great and ultimate battle against the forces of evil and paganism; 3) the Messiah will build the Temple, the house to which Israel’s God will at last return and live; 4) the Messiah will thus bring Israel’s history to its climax; 5) the Messiah will act in all this as Israel’s representative, like David fighting Goliath on Israel’s behalf; 6) the Messiah will act as God’s representative or agent to Israel and hence to the world
- Messiah as incorporative king – p.46-7
- *pistis Christou* – p.47
- “Israel ... had been unfaithful What then is God to do? ... God must stick to the plan. But that means that sooner or later he will require a representative Israelite who *will* be faithful, who will be obedient to God’s purpose not only for Israel but *through* Israel for the world.” p.47
- “But when the moment of unveiling arrives (Rom 3.21-22), what we see is God’s covenant faithfulness operating ... *through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah*. Precisely as Messiah, he offers God that representative faithfulness to the plan of salvation through which the plan can go ahead at last, Abraham can have a worldwide family (chapter 4), and the long entail of Adam’s sin and death can be undone (5.12-21) through his *obedience* which as we know from 1.5 is for Paul very closely aligned with faith, faithfulness or fidelity.” p.47
- son of God – p.48
- apocalyptic and covenant / prophecy : “The old contrast between ‘prophecy’ and ‘apocalyptic’, in which the former is about God’s action within the present world and the latter is about the demolition of this world and the establishment of something totally different, never represented more than a glimmer of the truth. It might be truer to say that ‘apocalyptic’ (within the second-Temple Jewish tradition) represents what happens to prophecy under certain historical and theological circumstances, notably continued oppression and the puzzle of what God is going to do about it and how. In addition, of course, it represents a particular literary genre” p.50
- can’t put apocalyptic and covenant against each other – the gospel is the climactic unveiling, revealing of what had been hidden – that God’s covenant promises and purposes have been fulfilled in crucified Messiah, Jesus. pp.50-54 Although just a ‘lexical coincidence’ note that the righteousness of God (“God’s faithfulness to the covenant plan through which the whole creation would be liberated from corruption, evil and death.” (p.53) is *revealed* in the gospel.
- notes on things sometimes thought of as apocalyptic in the hackneyed sense – pp.54-57
- “The word *parousia* itself, and the language of ‘meeting’ which Paul uses in I Thessalonians 4.17, is not, like so many of his key terms, familiar from the Septuagint. It evokes the scene, familiar from much Hellenistic and Roman writing, of a king or emperor paying a state visit to a city or province. As he approaches, the citizens come out to meet him at some distance from the city, not in order then to hold a meeting out in the countryside but to escort him back into the city. ‘Meeting the Lord in the air’ is not a way of saying ‘in order then to stay safely away from the wicked world’. It is the prelude to the implied triumphant return to earth where the Messiah will reign and his people with him as (56 starts) Lord, saviour and judge.” – pp.55-56
- “Paul, then, held what we might call a covenantal and apocalyptic theology in which, in surprising fulfillment of the covenant, God had unveiled his plan, his character, and not least his saving, restorative

justice through the events concerning Jesus the Messiah, and would complete this revelation once for all at Jesus' final appearing, his eventual royal presence. And this means, as is well known, that his theology has the character of *inaugurated eschatology*, that is, of a sense that God's ultimate future has come forwards into the middle of history, so that the church is living within – indeed is constituted precisely by living simultaneously within! – God's new world and the present one. The age to come has already arrived with Jesus; but it will be consummated in the future. The church must order its life and witness, its holiness and love, along that axis." p.57

- justification, of course, therefore also has two poles – present and future – p.58
- Hays' criteria for identifying allusion summarized – pp.61-2
- freedom ... justice ... peace ... Saviour ... gospel ... son of God – all VERY Roman imperial ideology words – p.63
- “According to Paul's view of creation, the one God was responsible for the whole world and would one day put it to rights. According to his covenant theology, this God would rescue his people from pagan oppression. His messianic theology hailed Jesus as King, Lord and Saviour, the one at whose name every knee would bow. His apocalyptic theology saw God unveiling his own saving justice in the death and resurrection of the Messiah. At every point therefore we should expect what we in fact find: that, for Paul, Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.” – p.69
- “resurrection is ... the inauguration of God's new world, the new creation which has already begun to take over the present creation with the unstoppable power of the creator God.” – p.70
- Phil 3.20-21 – “what God did for Jesus in his resurrection, transforming his humiliated body into a glorious one, now incapable of suffering and death, God will do for all his people when he returns to reign on the transformed earth.” – p.71
- Phil 3 – the call to the Philippians to imitate Christ is in considering their privileges (as Romans citizens) in the way that he considered his (as a benjaminite, pharisee etc). “Philippians 3, though important in its own right as a statement of how Paul understood his own pilgrimage, constitutes an example which Paul is holding out to them, an example of how they, too, must hear the call of God in Jesus to sit light to their civic status and be prepared to hail Jesus, not Caesar, as Lord.” – p.72
- the cross – “It took genius to see that the symbol which had spoken of Caesar's naked might now spoke of God's naked love.” – p.73
- I Thess 4 – “peace and security is in fact almost a definition of the Romans' soteria, salvation” – p.74
- “the ‘gospel’, a word which, as is now more widely recognized, contains the inescapable overtones *both* of the message announced by Isaiah's herald, the message of return from exile and the return of YHWH to Zion, *and* of the ‘good news’ heralded around the Roman world every time the anniversary of the emperor's accession, or his birthday, came round again.” – p.77
- how Romans is a challenge to Roman imperial ideology – pp.76-78
- organizing systematic theology – not by reformation soteriology but by structures of Jewish thought: monotheism (God), election (God's people), eschatology (the future). “Paul's thought can best be understood, not as an abandonment of this framework, but as his redefinition of it around the Messiah and the Spirit” – p.84
- each of these in Paul must be understood from three angles – a) as a re-reading of the Scriptures b) as having paganism as its main polemical target and c) as coming to expression in Paul's practical ministry
- exile theme as way of describing evil – pp.88-9 – Adam and Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Joshua, David, Babylon – “And it is *within* these great themes, not as a separate or detached theological reflection, that we find the sudden bright, yet still mysterious flashes of a redemption which speaks of much more than the to-and-fro of ethnic migrations: of God ransoming his worshippers from Sheol, breathing his Spirit into lifeless skeletons, revealing his powerful Arm in the form of a Servant who is stricken for the people's transgressions.” – p.88
- monotheism and Christology – Romans 10.5-13 – Paul is reading Deuteronomy, as other writers in his period had done (Baruch on the one hand, 4QMMT on the other), as laying out a historical programme which Israel was going to follow. If they obeyed Torah, then blessings would result; if they disobeyed, curses (92 starts) would be meted out, the ultimate curse being exile itself. But then, if they turned back to YHWH with a whole heart and mind, he would restore their fortunes and bring them back from exile – an event which, for Baruch, MMT and many other second Temple writers, has clearly not yet happened. That will be the time of covenant renewal and redemption. In particular, it will be characterized by God bringing Torah near to Israel so that, instead of seeming high up in heaven or way beyond the sea in its unfulfillability, it will be written on their hearts. What has this got to do with Christology and monotheism? Everything, it

seems. Paul reads this passage, a prediction of the ultimate return from exile, as a passage about what God has now done, not through Torah but through the Messiah.” see esp v.9 – p.92

- “We should not miss either the strong point that verse 13 is thus answering the question of verse 1: how are Paul’s fellow Jews to be saved? Why, by believing in the kyrios through whom the one God has fulfilled his promises in Deuteronomy 30.” – p.92
- Phil 2 – “a very early, very Jewish and very high Christology, in which Paul understands the human being Jesus to be identical with one who from all eternity was equal with the creator God” – p.93
- I Cor 8.6 – “explosive redefinition of the Shema” – p.94
- “What has happened in, to and through Jesus has convinced Paul that hidden within the divinely intended meaning of Messiahship was God’s determination not just *to send someone else* to do what had to be done but to come himself to do it in person. ... Jesus [is] the very embodiment of the one God ... God’s son with the meaning, not just of God’s messianic agent for Israel and the world, but of God’s second self, God’s ultimate self-expression as a human being.” – p.95
- Gal 4 – “Paul has described the Exodus-God as the son-sending, Spirit-sending God. It is as though he is saying, you either have this God, known this way, or you have paganism. From here on – and I believe Galatians is one of the earliest Christian documents we possess – one might conclude that if the doctrine of the Trinity had not come into existence it would be necessary to invent it.” – p.98
- Romans 8.3-4 – “Here we are close to that simultaneous affirmation of Torah and bypassing of Torah which has for so long kept Pauline scholars awake at nights.” – p.99
- Spirit as the power of gospel proclamation – making it “work” – p.100
- “Paul has a clear and positive view of Torah. Even when it is performing a negative task, it remains God’s Law, holy and just and good. What it cannot do – and, in the mysterious purposes of God, what it was never actually intended to do – was to give the life it had promised.” – p.103
- Acts 17 – “And with an irony not always noted, he can robustly call the highest court in the land to a higher justice yet, the justice of the one true God who will bring just judgment to the world through ... Jesus” – p.105
- Carson et al – “Recent attempts to suggest a more variegated attitude to the Law than was allowed for in ... Sanders ... are undoubtedly right to stress variety, and undoubtedly wrong to try to use that as a way of smuggling back an anachronistic vision of a Pelagian (or semi-Pelagian) or medieval works-righteousness.” pp.108-9
- Israel – “The bearers of God’s solution are themselves, declare the prophets, part of the problem; and as the Old Testament writers address this problem they find ways of declaring that YHWH will nevertheless fulfil both the original purpose *through* Israel and the contingent purpose *for* Israel.” – p.110
- “... when God did for Israel what God was going to do for Israel – however that was conceived – then the Gentiles would be brought into the picture, whether in judgment or blessing or (somehow) both.” – p.110
- Gal 2.1-11 – how do uncircumcised gentiles relate to Israel ... “There then follow the first ever statement of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith, and, despite the shrill chorus of detractors, it here obviously refers to *the way in which God’s people have been redefined.*” p .111
- justification – pp.111-114
- “the meaning of ‘justified’, not as a statement about how someone becomes a Christian, but as a statement about *who belongs to the people of God, and how you can tell that in the present.*” – p.112
- “The Messiah represents his people so that what is true of him is true of them.” – p.113
- “God has one family, not two, and ... this family consists of all those who believe in the gospel. Faith, not the possession and/or the practice of Torah, is the badge which marks out this family.” – p.113
- Gal 6, Rom 8, 2 Cor 5 – “Paul is not just speaking of the individual as a new creation, though of course that is true as well, but of the entire renewal of the cosmos in which the Christian is invited to be a participant, in the sense both of beneficiary and of agent.” – p.114
- Gal 6 – “the Israel of God” – “It is special pleading, based shakily on a misreading of Romans 9-11, to suggest that ‘God’s Israel’ here is anything other than the renewed family, the Messiah and his people.” – p.114
- Phil – where election is redefined – “Israel is redefined, the covenant people have been radically redrawn around the Messiah himself ... ‘The circumcision? That’s us!’ ... and the ‘us’ is defined as ‘those who worship God in Spirit, who boast in the Messiah, Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.’” – p.115

- I Cor 10.1 – “Paul addresses a largely Gentile church with the statement that ‘our fathers’ were all under the cloud and went through the sea. He doesn’t need to explain; he can take it for granted that the family of God in Christ in Corinth simply is the family rescued by God from Egypt, now transformed and expanded, but still the same people.” - p.116
- Col 2 – pun on “lead away captive” and synagogue! – p.117
- the people of God redefined around Jesus in Romans – pp.117-22
- “the only badge of membership in God’s people is the badge of faith ... The point of justification *by faith* is that, as he insists in 3.26, it takes place *in the present time* as opposed to on the last day. It has to do with the questions, ‘Who now belongs to God’s people?’, and ‘How can you tell?’ The answer is: all who believe in the gospel belong and that is the only way you can tell. *Justification, for Paul, is a subset of election*, that is, it belongs as part of his doctrine of the people of God.” – p.121
- “the *word* ‘justification’ does not itself *denote* the process whereby, or the event in which, a person is brought by grace from unbelief, idolatry and sin into faith, true worship and renewal of life. Paul, clearly and unambiguously, uses a different word for that, the word ‘call’. The word ‘justification’ despite (122 starts) centuries of Christian misuse, is used by Paul to denote that which happens immediately after the ‘call’: ‘those God called, he also justified’. In other words, those who hear the gospel and respond to it in faith are *then* declared by God to be his people, his elect, the ‘circumcision’, ‘the Jews’, ‘the Israel of God’. They are given the status *dikaios*, ‘righteous’, ‘within the covenant’.” - pp.121-122
- “the aim is not simply that they should themselves be rescued from disaster but that through them God would rule his new creation” – Rom 5.17 – p.122
- 2 Cor 3 – “the contrast at its heart is not between the Law and the gospel, not between Moses and Jesus, but between the *hearers* of Moses and those who believe in Jesus.” – p.123
- Rom 11 – “when Paul says ‘all Israel shall be saved’ in 11.26 he is consciously echoing ‘all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved’ in 10.13 ... As he says in 11.23, they can be grafted in *if they do not remain in unbelief*.” pp.126-7
- Themes in 2TJ eschatology: “Day of YHWH, Kingdom of God, victory over evil and pagan rulers, rescue of Israel, end of exile, the coming of the Messiah, the new Exodus, and the return of YHWH himself; and, in and through all of this, the resurrection of the dead. This is the combination of themes which characterizes the first century Jewish expectation of the future.” – p.135
- “That all this has now come to pass in Jesus the Messiah is a central plank in the theology of St. Paul. ... Through his high Christology, it is indeed *God’s own* future that has burst into the present. Through his incorporative Christology, summing up his redefined doctrine of election, it is *Israel’s* future that has at last come to pass.” – p.132
- “the main thrust of his redefinition of eschatology through the Messiah is of course that what Israel expected God to do for *all* his people at the *end* of time, God has done for the Messiah in the middle of time.” – p.133
- Paul’s “large-scale exposition in Romans 6-8 of the entire Exodus theme as applied to the people of God in Christ. To recapitulate the point: in Romans 6 God’s people come through the waters which mean that they are delivered from slavery into freedom; in Romans 7.1 – 8.11 they come to Sinai only to discover that, though the Torah cannot give the life it promised, God has done it; with the promise of resurrection before them they are launched onto the journey of present Christian life, being led by the Spirit through the wilderness and home to the promised land which is the renewal of all creation (8.12-30)” – p.138
- still future? – pp.141-145 – Day of the Lord (largely about AD 70); *parousia*; judgment; renewal of creation
- “Now at last, with the full vision of Paul’s rethinking of his Jewish tradition opening up before us, we are able to see more fully why it was that Paul held and developed his critique of Israel – the point at which so much debate about the so-called ‘new perspective’ has simply got stuck. The point was neither simply that Paul saw Judaism as a religion of legalism and Christianity as a religion of grace (the old perspective); nor simply that Paul found salvation in Christ and therefore deduced that it wasn’t available in Judaism after all (Sanders’ own version of the new perspective). It was, first and foremost, a matter of *eschatology*: God had acted in Jesus the Messiah to usher in the new age, to inaugurate the new covenant, to plant the seeds of new creation. The preaching of the gospel was the means whereby the Spirit worked in the hearts and minds of both Jews and Gentiles not just to give them a new religious experience, not even just to bring them salvation, but to make them the people in whom the new age, the Age to Come of Jewish eschatological expectation, had come to birth. The work of the gospel, by the Spirit, in the individual Christian is the putting-to-rights in advance of men, women and children, against the day when God puts the whole world to rights; what is more, that initial putting-to-rights by the power of the gospel is simultaneously, and necessarily, a vocation to each person thus ‘justified’ to enlist in the ongoing work, by the Spirit, of making

God's saving, restorative justice as much of a reality as possible in the present age, in advance of the final putting-to-rights of the whole creation." – p.147

- "The Spirit is then the one who conforms the Messiah's people to his suffering and glory, so that the Jewish expectation of the coming Messiah is fulfilled not just in the Messiah himself, but, extraordinarily, in his people as well." – p.149
- "To put it another way, the ethical struggles of the Christian are the beginning of that sovereign rule over the created order which will be fulfilled in the new world. One's own body is, so to speak, the small part of the created world over which one is given advance responsibility ..." – p.149
- "We are called to produce, in a thousand different ways, signs of God's new world within the apparently unpromising landscape of the old one." – p.150
- "Paganism worships some parts of the created order and, paradoxically, connives thereby at the decay and corruption of creation itself. Judaism worships the creator, celebrates the goodness of creation, and looks for its rescue from decay. Paul declares that this rescue has already been accomplished through the Messiah, that it is being accomplished by the Spirit who puts the Messiah's work into operation in the present, and that it will be accomplished in the fresh act whereby God will be all in all." – p.152
- Jesus and Paul – pp.154-160 – relation between the two – why the question is often so wrongly framed, further thoughts on kingdom of God and justification by faith.
- "I have proposed that [Jesus] believed himself to be embodying *both* the vocation of faithful Israel *and* the return of YHWH to Zion, drawing onto himself not only the destiny of God's true Servant but, if we can put it like this, the destiny of God himself." – p.156
- "The Enlightenment, in fact, offered an *alternative eschatology* to that of Jesus and Paul: world history didn't after all reach its climax with the death and resurrection of the Messiah, but with Voltaire, Rousseau and Thomas Jefferson. The guillotine, not the cross, provided the redemptive violence around which the world turned." – p.157
- Paul's understanding of his own ministry in the light of his 'theology' – pp.161-70
- "Within the pagan world there were many clubs, associations, various guilds and (168 starts) groupings of this and that kind. But there were no other groups living as though they were the new version of the human race. Most societies, our own included, dislike (to put it mildly) the apparent arrogance of a claim like that." – pp.167-8
- AD 70 – pp.169-70
- "A way of understanding how the Bible is authoritative. It involves understanding the great story, the metanarrative, of the Bible itself, as a five-act play, still unfinished. We do not live in the first act, God's good and unspoiled creation. To think we do would lead to an uncritical acceptance of everything within the world as it is, and hence to a viewpoint shared by virtually no theologian in any tradition. Nevertheless, we do live within the play of which that is indeed the first and irreplaceable act. Nor do we live in the second act, the Fall; to think we do would be to plunge into a dualism, a rejection of the whole created world, which would lead perhaps to some form of Buddhism or Manicheism. Nevertheless, we do live within the play of which that is the second act; certainly Paul would have insisted on this, though many today have wanted to question him, and the larger tradition at this point. Nor do we live in the third act, the story of Israel BC; to think we do would lead to some kind of odd dispensationalism or 'Jewish Christianity' which would have to ignore, for instance, the letter to the Hebrews, not to mention other large sections of the New Testament. Nevertheless, we do live with the play of which the story of Israel BC is the third act, and to imagine that we don't – as much western Christianity has imagined – is to court theological and practical disasters of which Marcionism and Hitler are simply two of the most obvious examples. Nor do we live in the fourth act: we are not walking around Palestine in the shadow of Jesus of Nazareth as he tells subversive stories, heals cripples, feasts with outcasts, and plans a last dangerous trip to Jerusalem. To suppose that we did – for all that the gospel story possesses a right and proper immediacy and excitement for us – would be to get into several obvious muddles. Nevertheless, the church is constituted precisely as the people for whom the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus are the fourth and decisive act of the play in which we are called to act. But we do live in the fifth act. This act begins at Easter; its opening scenes include Pentecost; part of its early task was so to tell and write the story of Jesus, so to guide and direct the tiny church by the written as well as the spoken word, as to form basic and non-negotiable parameters for how we today, the church still in the fifth act, albeit several scenes later, are to improvise our way from where this act began to where it is supposed to end. This fifth act, in which the church is called to live and work, is therefore characterized by two things. First, it has firm and fixed foundations, including a definite closing scene which is already sketched in Romans 8, I Corinthians 15, Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, and Revelation 21 and 22. Second, it has the command, under the Spirit, *to improvise a way through the unscripted period between the opening scenes and the closing one*. Note: no musician would ever suppose that improvising means playing out of tune or time. On the contrary, it means knowing extremely well where one is in the implicit structure and

listening intently to the other players so that what we all do together, however, spontaneously, makes sense as a whole.” pp.170-172

- modernity is guilty as charged; postmodernity won't provide a resting place; Christian gospel/community involved in and challenged to a) the reconstruction of the self – “a new way of being human ... ‘Amor, ergo sum’: I am loved, therefore I am” b) the reconstruction of knowing – “In love, the person who is loving is simultaneously affirming the Otherness of the that which is loved and their own deep involvement with that Other. This takes us way beyond the objective/subjective divide ...” c) the reconstruction of the great story.
– p.173