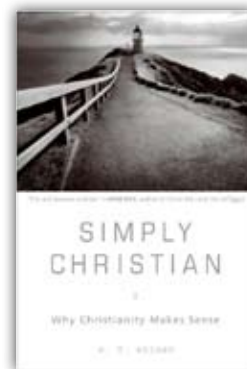


SIMPLY CHRISTIAN



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Acknowledgements

This course is based on the book *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* by N. T. Wright, published by HarperCollins in 2006.

The Participant's Guide was written by Craig C. Hill, a Protestant, with the assistance of Ann Schechter, a Roman Catholic.

The *Simply Christian* course was produced by Craig C. Hill.

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Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* © The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

With special thanks to Maggie, Judy, and Robin.

Most Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.



WELCOME

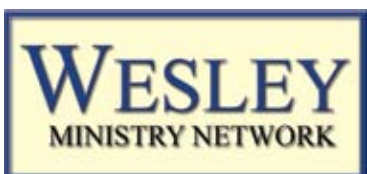
I first met N. T. Wright over twenty years ago, while he was a teacher and I a student at Oxford University. I was quickly impressed by his deep commitment to the church. In addition to his work as a University Lecturer in New Testament, Dr. Wright served as Chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford. In the positions he has held since that time, including Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and, currently, Bishop of Durham, he has continued along the same professional trajectory. Few scholars of Wright's caliber elect to spend their careers in service to the church. Bishop Wright could have chosen a comfortable life as a prominent academic but, to his credit, he has not. A large percentage of his time continues to be spent in day-to-day pastoral ministry and church oversight.

Given his priorities, Dr. Wright is a natural fit for Wesley Ministry Network, whose goal is to build bridges between the academy and the church, especially through the creation of high-quality adult education materials. Wright's recent book *Simply Christian* also aligns with our interest in providing an entry-level course on the basics of Christian faith.

We were fortunate that Richard B. Hays, the George Washington Ivey Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, happened to be visiting the Wrights when we came to England to film. Dr. Hays and Dr. Wright are close friends, and they graciously agreed to participate in a videotaped conversation on the subject of the book *Simply Christian*. Hays is similar enough in perspective to Wright that the meaning of every term does not have to be debated but different enough in outlook and, especially, in emphasis to be an interesting conversation partner. I hope you will have occasion to watch some or all of the bonus video containing their exchange. It is a rich resource.

No single statement of Christian faith, no matter how qualified its author(s), will satisfy everyone. This course does not aim to provide a definitive statement of Christian belief. Instead, its goal is to stimulate participants to consider and to commit to the Gospel in greater depth. Interacting with Bishop Wright's work, even at those points where we have disagreed, has always encouraged both responses from me. I hope you will find it equally thought and faith provoking.

In assessing churches' experiences with previous Wesley Ministry Network courses, we have been humbled—but not altogether surprised—to discover that the single most important variable determining the quality of a class is not the curriculum itself. Instead, it is the teacher. For that reason, let me thank all of the teachers who invest their time, talent, and energy in presenting these materials. Let me also thank all those participants whose active engagement contributes so much to each class session. We are grateful to be partners with all of you in the Gospel.



Craig C. Hill

Professor of New Testament & Director,
Wesley Ministry Network
Wesley Theological Seminary,
Washington, D.C.



YOUR TEACHER



N. T. (Tom) Wright is one of today's best known and most respected New Testament scholars and Christian speakers. Born in 1948, he studied for the ministry at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and was ordained as Junior Research Fellow and Junior Chaplain at Merton College, Oxford. From 1978 to 1981, he was Fellow and Chaplain at Downing College, Cambridge, and then moved to Montreal as Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies at McGill University. He returned in 1986 to Oxford as University Lecturer in New Testament, and Fellow and Chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford. He became Dean of Lichfield in 1994 and Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey in 2000. More recently, he was appointed Bishop of

Durham, England. Dr. Wright has written over thirty books, including the award-winning *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and, more recently, *Simply Christian*.



How to Use This Study Guide



Preparation

Each lesson in this Guide is divided into two parts. The first portion contains a short “Preparation” section which is meant to be completed during the week prior to that class session. It contains the following elements:

Reading Assignment

Details which chapter(s) of *Simply Christian* will be covered in each lesson.

Reflect

Questions based on the reading assignment that should be considered in preparation for the class session.

Background

Background information, such as definitions of technical terms used in the video segment, is provided in some lessons.

Weekly Class Session

Each class session will include the following elements. It is our goal to offer resources that will be flexible and useful in a variety of settings, including providing for classes of differing lengths and schedules. Given the amount of material, your facilitator will likely select only a portion of the discussion questions and activities for use.

Opening Prayer

A prayer has been provided to open each class session.

Focusing

A brief activity designed to focus attention on an issue that is central to that class session.

Video Segment

A video segment, each 15-20 minutes in length, provides participants with a summary of the class session’s concepts and topics. Because the lessons contain quite a bit of content, each



video segment includes a break about halfway through, at which point the class is encouraged to discuss what it has just seen. Of course, the entire video can be watched without a pause, should that be desired. (Alternatively, classes with limited time might watch each video session in two sittings, making two complete lessons.) You might wish to jot notes in this Participant's Guide as you view the video.

Points to Ponder

"Points to Ponder" are taken from the video lesson and from the *Simply Christian* text, and are reproduced in the Participant's Guide to serve as a basis for discussion. In many cases, quotations from the lecture have been edited (usually shortened) for this format. Points to Ponder are followed by related discussion questions. Of course, your class might choose to discuss other issues; these are only suggestions.

Activity

Each class session offers an optional activity related to the study topic. These activities vary and may involve individual work, small group discussion, or entire class participation.

For Further Discussion

These discussion questions are intended to help you delve deeper into your own beliefs, especially by considering the difference some idea or issue might make in your life.

Conclusion and Closing Prayer

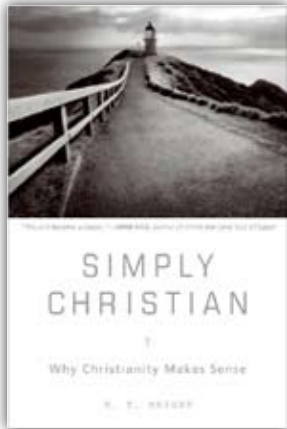
To close the class, we suggest that participants share their "joys and concerns," which can lead to a time of concluding prayer.

Supplemental Materials

Supplemental information about the topics covered in this course can be found at the course website, www.WesleyMinistryNetwork.com/sc. This website will be developed during the spring of 2007.



Simply Christian Introduction



Reading Assignment

The first lesson introduces the book *Simply Christian* and so does not require any advance reading. Participants who already have copies of the book might wish to review the Introduction on pp. ix-xii, then consider the following questions.

Reflect

❁ Do you usually think of the world as a basically good or evil place? Does good or evil seem to be “winning” today? Why?

❁ What is the purpose of religion?

❁ What beliefs do you regard as essential to Christian faith?

❁ Which of these beliefs do you find hardest to understand or to accept?

❁ What behaviors do you regard as essential to Christian life?



Session One

Opening Prayer

O God, we each come to the start of this course with our own particular mixture of opinion and doubt, awareness and ignorance. We present ourselves to you humbly, not sure of what we ought to learn, but also expectantly, trusting that you will teach us what we need to know. Amen.

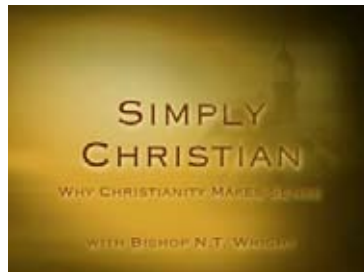
Before you begin the study, read the Opening Prayer aloud as a group.

During this first class session:

- ❁ Introduce yourself.
- ❁ Share with others what you hope to learn from this course.



Segment One



As a group, watch segment one from the Introduction. After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Quotations from the video are provided in the “Points to Ponder” sections below together with related quotations from the book Simply Christian. These are followed by discussion questions.

Bishop Wright speaks of four “echoes of a voice” common to human experience. These four points are previewed in this segment and will be considered in more depth in Lessons 2 & 3.

Points to Ponder

Echoes of Voice: Justice

“The four themes go like this. The first is what we can call justice. Basically, we know that there is such a thing as getting it right, as something being fair, or, on the other hand, as something being got wrong, as something being unjust, unfair. You don’t have to teach people that, and yet we’re not very good at it.”



Reflect

✿ Do people really want justice? Why or why not?

✿ Judaism and Christianity teach that religion and morality are inseparable, a connection not made by all religious systems. Are belief in God and the desire for justice related? What happens when they are unconnected?

Points to Ponder**Echoes of Voice: Spirituality**

👂 The last ten or fifteen years, spirituality has been making a comeback. If you put on a lecture course saying 'Introduction to Spirituality,' a lot of people will come, because people have started to realize that you can go as hard as you like in the pursuit of money, of sex, of fame, of happiness of all sorts, but there'll be an ache somewhere inside that says, 'There's another bit of you that isn't being refreshed. There's another bit that needs to grow and develop to balance all these other bits.' ”

Reflect

✿ What is “spirituality”? Is it different from religion?

✿ What are the benefits and perils of a personal spiritual quest?



Point to Ponder**Echoes of Voice: Relationships**

“We all know that we are made for one another, and yet we all know that relationships are remarkably difficult. Relationships aren’t just something that you can just say, ‘Oh, well, easy come easy go; I’ve been friends with this person and now I’m going to be friends with that person.’ We all know that there is such a thing as loyalty, as being true to a friendship, to a relationship, to a marriage. And yet it is difficult. It’s hard work. Many of the greatest novels and plays and poems end with relationships in tatters and in disaster. And even where a friendship or a marriage lasts a lifetime, it still has to face this puzzle: what happens when one of those partners, or both of them, die? Death hovers over the whole question. Is life just a sick joke? Is it all just a bit of meaningless nonsense?”

Reflect

✿ What do you think we are looking for when we yearn for relationship?

✿ Is God a “social being”? Does being “made in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26) include being hardwired for relationships? What does your answer imply about the purpose of religion?

Point to Ponder**Echoes of Voice: Beauty**

“This is perhaps the most evocative of all: beauty. We all know that some things just draw us out. We hear a tune, and we think, ‘Ah, that is amazing, I’d love to hear it again.’ Or we look at a sunset and it’s wonderful and beautiful. And then five, ten, fifteen minutes later, it’s dark. What’s happened to the beauty? It slipped through our fingers. And if we try to photograph it, what we get is a memory of the beauty, and often not the real experience itself. And yet, people inevitably paint pictures to try to capture the beauty, to try to point out that this is really a wonderful world we live in.”

Reflect

✿ Have encounters with beauty made you feel more fully alive? Closer to God?

✿ In what ways might our desire for beauty be an expression of our longing for God?

✿ Is beauty an ally of religion or a competitor? Why?



Segment Two



As a group, watch segment two from the Introduction. After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Point to Ponder

Knowing God

“The question ‘Who is God?’ is one which is actually both easier and harder to deal with than many people imagine. Many people in our culture think it’s just a total mystery, that you can’t possibly know anything really about God, and it’s your idea or my idea or somebody’s idea down the street, and we’ll never really know. The good news is there are ways with which you can get to grips with that question and can start really to know and to do business with the living God.”

Reflect

✿ Are knowing about God and knowing God different things? If so, which is easier?

✿ Many people today consider truth to be a relative category based on individual experience and perception. Do you think it is possible to arrive at absolute truth about anything? How are knowledge and faith related?



Point to Ponder**Heaven and Earth**

“The Old Testament stories aren’t about a distant, remote, detached God who only has a kind of a long—distance relationship with the world. But nor are they stories about a God who is all part of the world, so that you just look at the divine forces within creation and that’s all there is of God. They tell stories about a God who engages with the world, who interacts with the world, so that we find in the Old Testament what they call ‘heaven’ and what they called ‘earth’—God’s space, if you like, and our space—actually overlap and interlock.”

Reflect

❁ How would you characterize the relationship between God and creation?

❁ What biblical stories do you find most helpful in understanding God?

Optional Activity

Consider doing this activity during your time together.

❁ If time permits, this activity is best done in pairs or small groups with one or more persons acting as the inquirer and one or more persons speaking on behalf of Christianity.

Imagine that you have been asked to explain Christianity briefly to someone who knows almost nothing about it. For example, the conversation could start:

I understand that you’re a Christian. I really don’t understand Christianity and would like to know more about it. What does it mean to be a Christian?

What would you respond? In other words, what is your own account of “simple Christianity”?

How is your answer similar to and/or different from that of Bishop Wright as seen in today’s video?



Point to Ponder**Worship**

“There have been some times in my life when I’ve been to a wonderful concert, say, when the music has been so fantastic, so breathtaking, so energizing and exciting, that when it stops everyone just automatically jumps to their feet rapturously. Not one of those rather stale, tired standing ovations but an instant one, electrifying, because this has been so wonderful that’s the only possible response. That’s what Christian worship is supposed to be like.”

Reflect

✿ Have you ever experienced worship like that described above? If so, what made it possible? If not, what might make it possible for you?

✿ Wright suggests that life in Christ will be characterized by worship, prayer, Bible study, and social action. Would you add anything to this list?

Point to Ponder**Reflecting God**

“God wants his people to celebrate the beauty of creation and to do so by what the Bible calls ‘the beauty of holiness,’ which is the beauty of a human life lived to the full to the glory of God. We humans, you see, were called to bear God’s image. And that isn’t just reflecting God back to God, though it’s that, too. It is reflecting God out into God’s world.”



Reflect

❁ Can you think of someone who seems to live life “to the full to the glory of God”? What sets him or her apart from other people?

❁ What does it mean to “reflect God out into God’s world”?

For Further Discussion

1. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs says that we need to ask ourselves if we are going around in meaningless circles like a host of misguided ants. Do you find this a fair description of our society? Who are the lead “ants”? To whom do *you* look to for direction?

2. What is the difference between simple and simplistic Christianity?

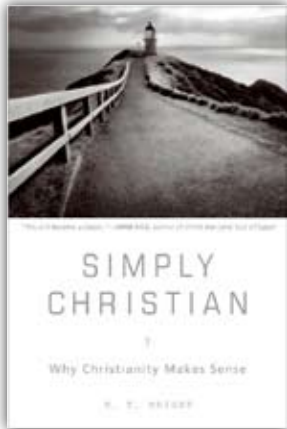
3. If you consider yourself a Christian, how would you complete the following statement?

“I would be a better Christian if...”

How might you make “if...” a reality?



Justice and Spirituality Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter One: Putting the World to Rights (pp. 3-15)

Chapter Two: The Hidden Spring (pp. 17-27)

Reflect

Chapter One: Putting the World to Rights

- ❁ Do you sometimes feel “like a moth trying to fly to the moon” (p. 4)? When in particular?

❁ Why is injustice so difficult to fix?

❁ How does acting justly make you feel? What does that tell you about yourself?



❁ How does Wright relate Jesus to the cause of justice (pp. 10-12)?

❁ Can you name other examples of faithful Christians who have stood up for social justice (pp. 13-15)?

Chapter Two: The Hidden Spring

❁ Where have you found access to the “hidden spring” of spirituality (pp. 17-19)?

❁ How “thirsty” are you (p. 24)? Why?

❁ Wright notes that “People who are starved for water for a long time will drink anything, even if it is polluted” (p. 25). What forms of “polluted” spirituality do you know?

❁ What are the tests of healthy spirituality?

Session Two

Opening Prayer

Source of all life and all hope,
You call us through Amos to
“let justice roll down like
waters and righteousness like
an ever-flowing stream.” May
our lives flow together in a
stream of justice that redeems
the world. With the Psalmist
we acknowledge that our
souls are thirsting for you,
O Lord. May we find in you
the living water that will
overflow our hearts to refresh
your people. Amen.

*Before you
begin the study,
read the Opening
Prayer aloud as
a group.*

Discuss the following in small groups:

Most of us have had the
experience of reading a book
or hearing a lecture and
thinking, “That’s what I’ve
always thought, but I never
put it into words.” Did this
week’s reading “put into
words” some insight that you
knew intuitively to be true?



Segment One: Justice



*As a group, watch segment
one from “Justice and Spirituality.”
After the clip is finished, discuss
the following questions together.*

Point to Ponder

A World Where Justice is Sought

“How do we explain this sense of justice? Wouldn’t it be easier if we all just shrugged our shoulders and said, ‘Oh, well, the world’s a wicked and cruel place. I’m just going to make sure that I’m all right, and if somebody gets in my way, I’ll push them out of the way.’ Wouldn’t that be simpler? Well, in some ways it would, but I wouldn’t like to live in that world, and I suspect that you wouldn’t either. I think we all want to live in a world where justice is sought and preferably where justice is done.”

Reflect

✿ How would you define “justice”? Is there anything distinctively Christian about your definition?



✿ What would it be like to live in a society “where justice is done” perfectly? What would have to change?

✿ What are the human consequences of injustice—both for its victims and for its perpetrators?

Points to Ponder

Justice or Just Us?

👉 But of course the trouble is that at the same time we discover that we're not very good at doing it in our own case. When somebody does something wrong to me, I naturally want that to be put to rights. But if I do something wrong to somebody else, I'd be quite happy actually if there was some means of my getting away with it. And that is a puzzle: that we all know that there is such a thing as justice and yet we all fail, actually, to grasp it and reach at it in our own case. ”

From *Simply Christian*:

👉 The line between justice and injustice, between things being right and things not being right, can't be drawn between 'us' and 'them.' It runs right down through the middle of each one of us. ” (p.6)

Reflect

✿ Are you better at recognizing injustice in others than in yourself? Why?

✿ Can you think of examples of people who behaved justly even when it was not in their interest to do so? What factors compelled them to act that way?

✿ How do we oppose injustice without being judgmental and self-righteous?



Points to Ponder**A Just God**

“One of the things which the Christian faith has always taught is that God, the God who made this world, has this passion for justice, and because we’re made in God’s image, that’s why we have it too.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Our passion for justice often seems like that. We dream the dream of justice...But what are we hearing when we’re dreaming that dream?” (p. 3)

“God’s passion for justice must become ours, too. When Christians use their belief in Jesus as a way of escaping from that demand and challenge, they are abandoning a central element in their own faith. That way danger lies.” (p. 13)

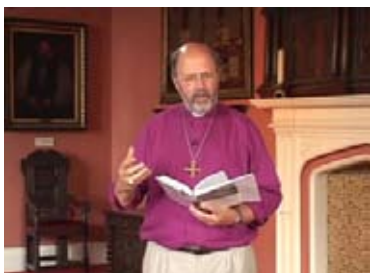
Reflect

- ✿ Do you think the desire for justice is an innate human characteristic or is it something that needs to be learned? (If both, what part comes from nature and what part from nurture?)

- ✿ Is a “passion for justice” integral to Christian life? Why or why not? How does it relate to the biblical commandment to forgive even one’s enemies?

- ✿ What should Christians do when they disagree about the meaning of justice in particular circumstances?

Segment Two: Spirituality



As a group, watch segment two from “Justice and Spirituality.” After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Point to Ponder

“The hidden spring is spirituality, the awareness that all humans have that they are made for a relationship with someone or something much bigger, much greater, than anything that we humans can know by our own will.”

Reflect

- ✿ How would you define “spirituality”?
- ✿ Are spirituality and religion the same thing? Why do so many people today insist that they are “spiritual” but not “religious”?
- ✿ What role should churches and other religious communities play (e.g., in supporting, directing, correcting, etc.) personal spirituality?

Points to Ponder

The Paved—Over World

“G. K. Chesterton said that ‘when people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing—they believe in *anything*.’ And there’s been a great deal of anything around for quite a long time now. You only have to read a book like *The Da Vinci Code* to see that. See the way people are hungry, thirsty, for anything that may give them a truth that will help them to make sense of their lives.”



From *Simply Christian*:

“Many people today hear the very word ‘spirituality’ like travelers in a desert hearing news of an oasis. This isn’t surprising. The skepticism that we’ve been taught for the last two hundred years has paved our world with concrete, making people ashamed to admit that they have had profound and powerful ‘religious’ experiences.” (p. 18)

Reflect

- ✿ Are there any forms of spirituality that you think ought to be discouraged? Why?

- ✿ Is the world around you “paved with concrete”? Are people “ashamed to admit that they have had powerful and profound ‘religious’ experiences”?

Point to Ponder**Heavenly Minded *and* of Earthly Use**

“I freely grant that there may be many kinds of spirituality which have been and are escapist. What is the test though for whether something is escapist in that negative sense or not? The test would be whether the person is actually better fitted to be a full human being, taking her or his part in the real world, and enabling other people to live a more fully human life as well. There are some kinds of spirituality which do make people useless in terms of the regular

Optional Activity

*Consider
doing this activity
during your time
together.*

✿ Bishop Wright argues that the expectation of justice is integral to the teaching of Jesus. Nevertheless, the precise role of churches in the political process remains highly controversial. Are there specific “justice issues” in your community and/or country that you think your church ought to address? [List these on a chalkboard or flipchart.] Looking at the list, what should your church be doing about each item?

Where ought the line to be drawn between the church’s advocacy of justice and the church’s interference in politics? For example, is it acceptable for a church to encourage its members to vote for a specific candidate? At what point does a church go too far? [Name specific examples; e.g., “I don’t think a church can deny someone membership because of that person’s political views.”]

run of human life. We have a phrase for it, a cliché: we talk about people being ‘so heavenly minded that they’re of no earthly use.’ But you know, a lot of the people that I know who are really and truly heavenly minded are remarkably useful in the world. ”

Reflect

✿ How can we keep spirituality from becoming just a selfish emotional indulgence?

✿ Can you name persons who are “truly heavenly minded” *and* “remarkably useful in the world.” How do they do it?

Points to Ponder

Why Do We Care?

“Does it make sense that people actually are in the image of this God, or is that just a pipe dream, another bit of wishful thinking? And again and again I find that there are things which resonate in people’s lives with the truth that we see in Jesus, the truth that we see in what the Bible says about God. ”

From *Simply Christian*:

“The Christian explanation of the renewed interest in spirituality is quite straightforward. If anything like the Christian story is in fact true...this interest is exactly what we should expect; because in Jesus we glimpse a God who loves people and wants them to know and respond to that love. In fact, this is what we should expect if any of the stories told by religious people—that is, the great majority of people who have ever lived—are true: if there is any kind of a divine force or being, it is at least thinkable that humans would find some kind of engagement with this being or power to be an attractive or at least interesting phenomenon. ” (p. 24)

Reflect

❁ What does the human desire for spiritual meaning say about us?

❁ What is it that humans need to feel whole? Why?

❁ Apart from religion, how do humans attempt to meet this need?

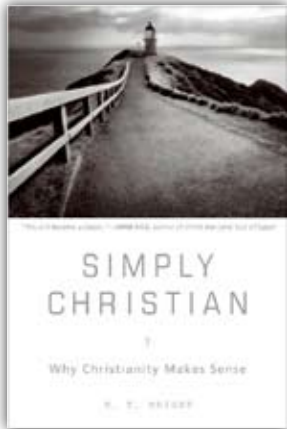
❁ What elements would you consider vital to a well-balanced life?

For Further Discussion

1. If you were creating a religion from scratch to meet the genuine human need for “spirituality,” what would you include?
2. If your object were simply to make as many converts (and, in the process, make as much money and gather as much fame) as possible, what sort of religion would you construct?
3. How does your answer to the second question differ from your answer to the first? In other words, are what people need and what people want the same thing?



Relationships and Beauty Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter Three: Made for Each Other (pp. 29-38)

Chapter Four: For the Beauty of the Earth (pp. 39-51)

Reflect

Chapter Three: Made for Each Other

- ✿ What relationships are essential to human life? Which are most important to you?

- ✿ Does the description of “an average African town” (p. 31) sound anything like your community? Does it sound like a community in which you would like to live?

- ✿ Why do comparatively few people actively participate in democratic elections (p. 32)? What does this tell you about human nature?

- ✿ How does being a man or a woman affect the way you view your world? What are the advantages of our being “gendered beings” (p. 35)? The disadvantages?

- ✿ Is there any sense in which relationships endure beyond death?

Chapter Four: For the Beauty of the Earth

❁ What is the most beautiful thing you have ever seen or heard? How did it affect you?

❁ How are God and beauty related (p. 43)? Could you say that God is beautiful?

❁ Do you agree that the world is “the good creation of a good God” (pp. 45, 47)? Why?

❁ Is “truth” something more than the sum of all “facts” (p. 50)?

Session Three

Opening Prayer

Source of all relationships and all beauty, You tell us in Scripture that it is not good for us to be alone and that you have created us for human companionship. In human fellowship, may we learn to see your face in others, so that in reaching out to them, we are also drawn closer to you. We declare with Scripture that the whole earth is full of your glory. May we be inspired by the beauty of creation to live creatively, contributing beauty to your world. Amen.

*Before you
begin the study,
read the Opening
Prayer aloud as
a group.*

In pairs, do the following for five minutes:

Describe a relationship from your childhood with someone outside of your immediate family that was helpful to your development. What do you suppose motivated the other person? Have you played a similar role in someone else's life?



Segment One: Relationships



As a group, watch segment one from "Relationships and Beauty." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

No One Is an Island

“In this section, I’m going to look at the two other echoes of a voice that I think all human beings are really aware of and have to come to terms with at some level throughout their lives. The first of these two is relationships. Put it simply, we all know we’re made for each other, but we all have quite a puzzle about how that really plays out.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“[S]ometimes when people are locked up by themselves they quite literally go mad. Without human society, they don’t know who they are anymore. It seems that we humans were designed to find our purpose and meaning



not simply in ourselves and our own inner lives, but in one another and in the shared meanings and purposes of a family, a street, a workplace, a community, a town, a nation. When we describe someone as a 'loner,' we're not necessarily saying the person is bad, simply that he or she is unusual. ” (p. 31)

Reflect

✿ Are we “made for each other”? What happens to people deprived of social contact with other humans?

✿ What is the longest you have ever been alone? What was it like?

✿ To what extent is the meaning of your life a function of your relationship to other people? Does that tell you anything about the nature of meaning? The nature of God?

Points to Ponder

It Seemed So Easy at First

👉 Consider the relationship of marriage. Often as a priest I have had couples come and sit in my office and say, 'Oh, it's so wonderful! We were just made for each other. This is the most perfect thing that could ever happen to us.' And one knows, of course, that that is wonderful and that it can and often does lead to a lifetime of happiness. But we also know that unless they learn how to work at that relationship, pretty soon it will end in a mess, and perhaps, even sadly, in a divorce, and in great acrimony and bitterness. ”

From *Simply Christian*:

👉 Isn't there something odd about this? How is it that we ache for each other and yet find relationships so difficult? ” (p. 29)



Reflect

✿ Why is marriage so difficult for so many people?

✿ What other human relationships are difficult to sustain?

✿ Why do such a high percentage of divorced persons remarry? Is the experience of marriage different the second time?

✿ Imagine that you could enact a law that all married persons would be required to follow. What would it be?

Points to Ponder

Diminishing Community

“We in the Western world have notoriously become more atomized. We live in smaller units. We live in little boxes. Often people don’t know who the people living next door to them actually are. They just come and go, maybe are vaguely aware of someone’s car or maybe a face on the street, but they don’t go into each other’s homes, they don’t get to know each other and form a community.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“One of the oddities about the modern Western world is the remolding (and shrinking) of relationships that we have come to take for granted. Anyone growing up in an average African town has dozens of friends up and down the street...Those who live in today’s Western world mostly don’t even realize what they’re missing. In fact, they might be alarmed at the thought of all that togetherness.” (p. 31)

Reflect

- ✿ Studies have shown that people in the U.S. are involved in fewer community organizations (including churches), have fewer close friends, vote less frequently, and move and change careers more frequently than they did a generation ago. What are the reasons for this increased disassociation? What are the costs? The benefits?
- ✿ How does the “shrinking of relationships” in the Western world affect its culture (e.g., the instability of families and the hunger for spirituality)?
- ✿ Is Christianity communal? How does your church help people to find and sustain community?
- ✿ How does your faith affect your relationships?

Points to Ponder

Death

“There are people in our society who rebel against [death]...and who try by various means to get in touch with people who’ve died, and to communicate with them...But actually most people, if they’re wise, come to terms through the grief process with the fact that, no, this relationship has ended, I can no longer talk to this person in the way that I did; they are no longer with me, no longer able to engage. And so, just as the sunset ends in darkness...so all relationships end with death. Or so it seems.”

From *Simply Christian*:

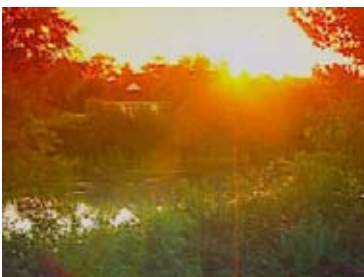
“One of the central elements of the Christian story is the claim that the paradox of laughter and tears, woven as it is deep into the heart of all human experience, is woven also deep into the heart of God.”
(p. 38)

Reflect

✿ Are relationships worth the risk of their loss? Are they ever lost completely?

✿ Have you experienced the presence of God in the midst of a serious loss? If so, how?

✿ What does it mean to claim that God knows or even shares our loss?

Segment Two: Beauty

As a group, watch segment two from "Relationships and Beauty." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder**Beauty is Partial**

👂 Imagine one day in an attic in, say, Austria, a collector comes across a manuscript of music. They look at it, and they take it to the piano, and they play it, and it's wonderful, and it reminds them of Mozart, and it actually seems to be by Mozart. And yet it seems to be incomplete. There are odd gaps; there are bits which don't quite make sense. And gradually the people who are trying out this piece of music come to the conclusion it really is by Mozart; it really is a new piece that we haven't heard before. But it's only one part of a larger piece. It is, perhaps, the piano part for a quintet or an octet or even something grander than that. My suggestion is that the beauty we are aware of in creation at the moment functions like that. It functions, hauntingly, as one line of music, but we are missing the other lines, and we have to go



looking for them. It's like the echo of a voice that we can hear beckoning us, calling us to a life of exploration, to discovering more about this strange world we live in. ”

Reflect

✿ How would you define beauty? Is beauty relative? Why do we seek it?

✿ Recall an experience in which you felt yourself in the presence of great beauty. Did your experience seem like that of the music collector described by Bishop Wright? Why or why not?

Points to Ponder

Beauty Points Beyond Itself

“The fact is that all human beings are aware that there are some things which carry that strange, evocative, beckoning, calling quality. And if you believe in a creator God who made the world and made it good and beautiful, then you can make sense of that. ”

From *Simply Christian*:

“This is the position we are in when confronted by beauty. The world is full of beauty, but the beauty is incomplete. Our puzzlement about what beauty is, what it means, and what (if anything) it is there *for* is the inevitable result of looking at one part of a larger whole. ”
(p. 40)

“[B]eauty is *both* something that calls us out of ourselves and something which appeals to feelings deep within us. ” (p. 44)

Reflect

✿ Why does beauty both thrill us and leave us unsatisfied, wanting more?

❁ Wright says that the experience of beauty and the experience of God are related but are not identical. How would you characterize their relationship? Is every experience of beauty an experience of God?

❁ What is the role of beauty in worship?

❁ What are the results of worshipping the beauty of creation instead of the Creator?

Points to Ponder

Is That All There Is?

🗨️ Human life is not just a simple matter of going to work, earning money, maybe raising a family and then, after a few years, dying and thinking, 'Well, what was all that about?' We humans are much more complex, much more interesting than that. We fall in love. We tell stories. We make worlds... We humans are wonderfully complex characters. And as we reflect on what it means to be truly human, so if we have any imagination at all, we are bound to ask, 'Is this all there is? Or are the puzzles and paradoxes of justice and spirituality and relationships and beauty actually signs that there is something more? Signs which invite us to set off on a journey; a voice which summons us to come round the corner and listen for more words, for more evocation of other dimensions.' ”

Optional Activity

*Consider
doing this activity
during your time
together*

❁ **Art and religion have been closely allied in most human cultures. The most elaborate and carefully crafted artistic works, be they representational, architectural, or musical in form, are often created to serve some religious purpose.**

List as many examples of such works as possible in five minutes, then answer the following questions:

- ❁ **To the best of your knowledge, why was each item on the list created?**
- ❁ **In your judgment, which works best continue to fulfill their intended purpose(s)? Why these?**
- ❁ **Why is the link between art and religion so widespread?**
- ❁ **How would you evaluate the presence of art in your own church? In your own life?**



From *Simply Christian*:

“I once heard a great contemporary scientist say that whether we are looking into a microscope at the smallest objects we can discern, or gazing through a telescope at the vast recesses of outer space, the most interesting thing in the world remains that which is two inches or so on the near side of the lens—in other words, the human brain, including mind, imagination, memory, will, personality, and the thousand other things which we think of as separate faculties but which all, in their different ways, interlock as functions of our complex personal identity. We should expect the world and our relation to it to be at least as complex as we are. If there is a God, we should expect such a being to be at least as complex again.” (pp. 48–49)

Reflect

- ✿ Might the complexity of human life tell us anything about God? About the nature of religious claims?
- ✿ Wright argues that there is both appropriate simplicity and appropriate complexity (p. 49). What is the proper place for simplicity?
- ✿ What would you say is the point of human life? Of creation itself? What is at stake in your answer?

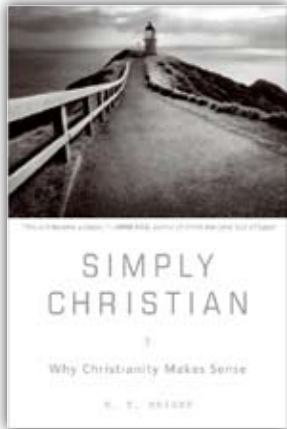
For Further Discussion

Bishop Wright considers four “echoes of a voice:” justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty.

1. How would you rank the relative importance of justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty? For example, if you could “buy” the world a hundred total “units” of added justice, spirituality, relationships and/or beauty, how would you divide the purchase (e.g., 50 units of beauty, 30 units of justice, etc.)?
2. What other experiences or attitudes do you think are common to most people? Might these tell us something about God?



God Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter Five: God (pp. 55-69)

Reflect

✿ Is there “proof” of God’s existence (p. 55)? Why or why not?

✿ Do you have a picture of God in your mind (p. 57)? What pictures do you explicitly reject?

✿ What do you think of when you hear the word “heaven”? How is that different from the description on pp. 58-60?

✿ What is Wright’s “Option One” (p. 60)? Why has this option attracted so many adherents?



❁ What is Wright's "Option Two" (pp. 61-62)? What are its plusses and minuses?

❁ Describe "Option Three" (pp. 63-66)? Why does Wright prefer it?

BACKGROUND TO THIS WEEK'S VIDEO PRESENTATION	
Deism	(From the Latin <i>deus</i> , "god.") Movement popular in the 18th century that believed that God is remote and detached from human affairs. According to deism, true religious knowledge is gained through human reason, not through divine revelation. Deism is similar to the ancient philosophy Epicureanism (pp. 61-62).
Dualism	The belief that the material and spiritual worlds are separate from each other. Often, material things are regarded as greatly inferior to spiritual things. In more radical dualistic religions, such as Gnosticism, the material world is the very problem from which we must be rescued.
Pantheism	(From the Greek <i>pan</i> , "all," and <i>theos</i> , "god.") The belief that God and the universe are essentially the same thing. According to Wright, in pantheism "the divine is a force which permeates everything. The main obligation on human beings is then to get in touch with, and in tune with, the divinity within themselves and within the world around them" (p. 61).
Panentheism	A variant of pantheism in which everything is said to exist "within" (Greek, <i>en</i>) God. The universe is still part of God, but God is greater than the material universe.
YHWH	The consonants used in Hebrew to spell the most holy name for God. It is thought that the name is pronounced "Yahweh," although many devout Jews will not speak the name, "sometimes substituting for it the word 'Adonai,' meaning "my Lord."



Session Four

Opening Prayer

Holy One, You are who you are and you will be who you will be. Teach us to relate our lives to you in humility, praise, and gratitude. Empower us to be who you created us to be and to do in this world what you have us to do. Amen.

Before you begin the study, read the Opening Prayer aloud as a group.

Do the following as a single group:

- ✿ Write a chalkboard or flipchart write “God is...” How many answers can you generate in five minutes?
- ✿ Looking at what you wrote, is there a pattern in your answers?



Segment One



As a group, watch segment one from “God.” After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder Prove It!

“Most people in the world who actually do believe in God, believe in God as something much greater—someone much greater—than anything than we could actually prove or demonstrate or even explore properly through our own rather puny human logic.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“A great many arguments about God—God’s existence, God’s nature, God’s actions in the world—run the risk of being like pointing a flashlight toward the sky to see if the sun is shining. It is all too easy to make the mistake of speaking and thinking as though God...might be a being...within our world, accessible to



our interested study in the same sort of way we might study music or mathematics, open to our investigation by the same sort of techniques we use for objects and entities within our world....It's easier, actually, to look away from the sun itself and to enjoy the fact that, once it's well and truly risen, you can see everything else clearly. ” (p. 56)

Reflect

✿ What counts as evidence for the existence of God? Is evidence the same thing as proof?

✿ What things might belief in God help you to “see clearly”?

✿ How might we know *what* or *who* God is?

✿ What difference does it make if we think of God more in terms of abstract qualities (power, love, etc.) or in more concrete terms (e.g., the biblical figure who is present with humanity)? Are these perspectives mutually exclusive?

Points to Ponder

Option One: Pantheism (God is One with Creation)

👉 Take Option One, commonly known as pantheism. Many people have imagined that heaven and earth really do belong together in a tight-knit reality so that when we look at the world and see that there are forces within it. They say this is because there is a divinity within the world which is shaping it and driving it and energizing it. And so they've said, 'If there is a heaven, it is a part of the life on earth—very

powerful, very dramatic—and we should be able to get in touch with it because it is part of us as well.’ And that has been making a comeback recently. ”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Since God, as seen in this option, doesn’t hide in a corner of his territory, but fills it all with his presence, God is everywhere, and—watch this carefully—everywhere is God. Or, if you like, God is everything, and everything is God. ” (p. 60)

“The problem with pantheism, and to a large extent with panentheism, is that it can’t cope with evil. ” (p. 61)

Reflect

✿ Pantheism is a way of thinking about God in which the divine permeates everything. What are the pluses and minuses of this way of understanding God and creation?

✿ Why has this way of thinking been making a comeback? What are some modern-day examples (e.g., the impersonal “Force” of *Star Wars*).

✿ With what groups might this way of thinking be especially popular? Unpopular?

Points to Ponder

Option Two: Dualism (God is Distant from Creation)

“Many people in our culture still cling to some form or another of dualism, of heaven and earth being a long way away from one another. In the ancient world, people who thought like that included the Epicureans, who thought that God or the gods lived a long way away from us....I suspect that if you were to walk out on the street and ask the first person that you



met, ‘What was your first idea of God?,’ they might come up with something rather like that: a distant, detached being living in a remote heaven not terribly concerned with what we’re up to except from time to time looking down and seeing that we’re doing something silly or naughty and telling us we shouldn’t—which the God in this picture tends to do.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“The real problem...is that it has to plug its ears to all those echoing voices we were talking about earlier in this book. Actually, that’s not so difficult in today’s busy and noisy world...But turn the machines off, read a different kind of book, wander out under the night sky, and see what happens. You might start wondering about Option Three.” (p. 63)

Reflect

- ✿ What is the attraction of dualism? What problems does it solve?
- ✿ Can you name any of history’s prominent Deists? Why might they in particular have been attracted to this position?
- ✿ What problems arise if we think of God as existing but also as being uninvolved with the ongoing struggles of human existence?
- ✿ Could you have a *relationship* with the God of pantheism or the God of dualism?
- ✿ If you could select only Option One (pantheism) or Option Two (dualism), which would you choose? Why?



Segment Two



As a group, watch segment two from “God.” After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

Option Three: Heaven and Earth Interlock

“When we find the story of Abraham in the Old Testament, we find that Abraham meets God—or actually meets angels or people who it turns out are God in person. Or think of Jacob, wrestling with the angel—or is it an angel? Is it not actually God himself who has been wrestling with Jacob? Moses in the wilderness finds a bush that’s burning and yet not being consumed, and he’s told, ‘Take your shoes off because you’re standing on holy ground.’”

“And in all these stories we see not a God who is remote and detached and barking orders from a great distance, nor a God who is simply one of the forces of nature or perhaps all the forces of nature rolled into one, but a God who is both *other than* these people, *other than* the world, and yet *present in* the world, *present to* and *with* the people whom this God has chosen and called.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“This sense of overlap between heaven and earth, and the sense of God thereby being present on earth without having to leave heaven, lies at the heart of Jewish and early Christian theology.” (p. 65)

Reflect

- ✿ What is at stake in Wright’s claim that heaven is God’s “space” rather than God’s location within *our* spacetime universe? Do you find this way of thinking about God to be helpful?



❁ What other biblical stories illustrate the idea that God is different from yet active in creation? Can you think of any exceptions?

❁ Why do you suppose the Israelites came to think this way?

❁ What are the implications of this way of thinking for our ideas about creation itself?

Points to Ponder

The Central Meeting Point

“The Temple stands as a symbol for the fact that the true and living God, the Creator, wants to be with his people, to live in their midst, to welcome them to himself, to forgive their sins, so that they are with him and for him and loved by him—but not reducing him to terms of a force of nature, nor banishing him off to some distant cloud upstairs.”

“That’s why the early Christians spoke about Jesus often with imagery borrowed from Jewish language about the Temple. Jesus of Nazareth appears in the New Testament almost as though he were the Temple in person, the place where heaven and earth actually did overlap and interlock.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“When pilgrims and worshippers went up to Jerusalem and into the Temple to worship and offer sacrifices, they wouldn’t have said that it was *as though* they were going to heaven. They would have said that they were going to the place where heaven and earth overlapped and interlocked.” (p. 65)



Reflect

- ❁ Does the idea that the Jerusalem Temple was the place where heaven and earth most fully interlocked appeal to you? What are the potential problems with such a view?
- ❁ What would it have meant for Jewish Christians to apply language about the Temple to Jesus? Why would they have done it?
- ❁ Are there special places where you think that God and creation “interlock”? What is it that makes a particular place “holy”?

Points to Ponder**Evil**

“The problem of evil is for the Christian, as for the Jew, deep and radical. But the picture of heaven and earth overlapping, and of God somehow being present, mysteriously and puzzlingly within the world, is the context in which the Old Testament Jews and the New Testament Christians grappled with that same problem of evil and came up with the solution which is more shocking and startling than anything else that we find in any other religious or philosophical systems known to the human race.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Many popular misconceptions of Christian faith make the mistake at this point of trying to fit Christian belief into a residual Deist framework. They depict a distant and austere God suddenly deciding to do something after all, and so sending his own Son to teach us how to escape our sphere and go and live in God’s instead, and then condemning his Son to a cruel fate to satisfy some obscure and rather arbitrary requirement.” (p. 665)



Reflect

❁ What is “evil”? What explanations have you heard for the existence of evil in the world? How persuasive do you find them?

❁ How might one think about evil from the perspective of each of the three options outlined by Bishop Wright? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each position?

❁ Does God tolerate evil?

Optional Activity

Consider doing this activity during your time together.

❁ The book and video presentation have spoken of the overlapping and interlocking of heaven and earth in fairly abstract terms. It is probably the case for most Christians, however, that God’s presence is known more by direct experience than by abstract thought.

Divide into three groups. Each group will consider one of the following points:

Where God is found.

When God is found.

How God is found.

Groups with sufficient time are encouraged to respond by creating drawings, collages, poems, or short stories. Those with less time can discuss where, when, or how they themselves have experienced God’s presence in their lives. When finished, share a summary of your findings with the whole class. (Large classes might need to limit reports to a single representative from each group.)



❁ What do you think Dr. Wright refers to when he speaks of a “solution” that is “more shocking and startling” than any other? How is it different from that described in the quotation above from *Simply Christian* (p. 66)?

❁ How did Jesus confront evil? What does that teach us about Jesus’ conception of God?

For Further Discussion

According to N. T. Wright:

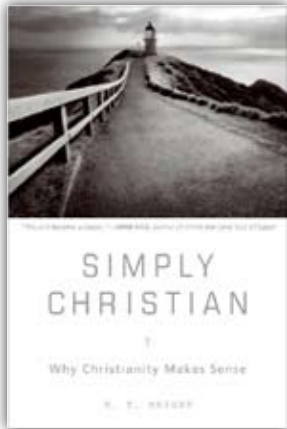
[F]or the ancient Israelite and the early Christian, the creation of the world was the free outpouring of God’s powerful love. The one true God made a world that was other than himself, because that is what love delights to do. And, having made such a world, he has remained in a close, dynamic, and intimate relationship with it, without in any way being contained within it or having it contained within himself. (Simply Christian, p. 65)

What does it mean to think of creation as an expression of God’s *love*? What are the implications of that belief for our view of ourselves? Each other? The Earth? How might it affect our own sense of purpose? Our attitude toward work?

How might this perspective on God move us beyond pantheism or deism in positive ways?



Israel Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter Six: Israel (pp. 71-89)

Reflect

✿ What were the key features of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah (pp. 73- 74)?

✿ What examples does Wright provide of the “key theme” of “going away and coming back home again” (p. 75; see pp. 76-78)? Can you think of others?

✿ Do you have your own story of “slavery and exodus, of exile and restoration” (p. 75)?

✿ What, if any, covenants have you made (p. 74)? Are they in any way similar to God's covenant with Israel?

✿ What do you make of the book of Daniel (pp. 78-80)? Does it provide a roadmap to the end of the world, as many have claimed? If not, what use is it?

❁ Why is each of the following important to the story of Israel (pp. 80-86)?

The King –

The Temple –

The Torah –

The New Creation –

❁ What is a “messiah” (pp. 81, 84)?

❁ How is the “Servant of YHWH [God]” described in the book of Isaiah (pp. 86-87)?

BACKGROUND TO THIS WEEK’S VIDEO PRESENTATION	
Covenant	A formal, solemn agreement, usually between two individuals. In Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and their descendents. Jeremiah 31 speaks of a “new covenant” in which a new relationship with God will be forged.
Marcion	A second-century Christian teacher who concluded that the God of the Jews was a weak and foolish god and therefore not the God of Jesus. Marcion therefore rejected the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. The term “Marcionism” is also used more broadly to describe attempts by Christians to “de-Judaize” Christianity.
Post-Exilic	Refers to something that occurred or someone who lived after the Jewish Exile in Babylon, which lasted from approximately 597-538 B.C.E.
Supersessionism	The belief that the church has superseded or taken over the place of Israel (see “Marcion” above).
Torah	A Hebrew word that means “teaching;” formally, the Old Testament Law (the first five books of the Old Testament) or the whole of Old Testament Scripture.



Session Five

Opening Prayer

God of Abraham, we are people with a story to tell to the nations. Help us to understand that it is only when we celebrate the Jewish heritage of that story that we tell it rightly. As we enter into that story ourselves, may we, like Abraham and Sarah, be willing to be led in new directions so that our lives might become a source of blessing for all humanity. Amen.

Before you begin the study, read the Opening Prayer aloud as a group.

In groups of 2 or 3, discuss the following question:

- ❁ What images, stories, or verses come to mind when you think of Israel? Why do these stand out?



Segment One



As a group, watch segment one from "Israel." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder **Jesus, the Jew**

“When we move from talking about God to talking about Jesus, many people, including many people in Christian churches, would imagine that you can merely take a flying leap from a general discussion of God and land in both feet in a discussion of Jesus of Nazareth and who he was and what he did. Well, you can always do that if you like. But you are almost bound if you do that to misunderstand Jesus.”

“Despite the attempts of many in our own day, echoing the attempts of many in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, to do without the Jewish context for Jesus, I want to say it can't be done.”



From *Simply Christian*:

“Trying to understand Jesus without understanding what that story [of Israel] was, how it worked, and what it means is like trying to understand why someone is hitting a ball with a stick without knowing what baseball, or indeed cricket, is all about.” (p. 71)

Reflect

✿ What is at stake in locating Jesus firmly in the context of first-century Judaism? Why have so many Christians, even in the present day, attempted to construct a Jesus who is largely or entirely non-Jewish in character? What is lost in such characterizations?

✿ How many things can you list that were Jewish about Jesus? Does his story make any sense if you take all of those things away? What is left?

✿ What might be the consequences of Christians ignoring or rejecting the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) as a source of spiritual instruction? What role does it play in your own life?

Points to Ponder**The Story's Climax**

“There are two different ways of telling the story. On the one hand, there are people who say, ‘We are not going to try to pretend that we have something which makes Jews inferior and so dispenses with them, so we’ll say that Christianity is totally different from Judaism.’ In fact, the people who’ve done that historically were seen by the earliest Christians as dangerously anti-Jewish because they were saying that Israel is different from us, and therefore Israel’s God maybe is different. By the second century, there were people who were saying exactly that: ‘The god of Israel is a secondary god who made the world (and that was a mistake) and called Israel (and that was certainly a mistake).’”



“The alternative is to take the way that the New Testament tells the story. Which is to say that what happened in Jesus and what happened through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, really was the climax of the long narrative which began when God called Abraham, continued when God worked through Moses and David and the prophets, and was actually the moment for which all Israel had been waiting.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“It is fundamental to the Christian worldview in its truest form that what happened in Jesus of Nazareth was the very climax of the long story of Israel.” (p. 71)

Reflect

✿ Are Christianity and Judaism separate religions? If so, *how separate* are they? How would you characterize their relationship?

✿ How ought Christians to regard the vast majority of Jews who do not consider themselves to be followers of Jesus?

✿ What do you think Dr. Wright means by saying that “what happened in Jesus of Nazareth was the very climax of the long story of Israel”? Is Israel “finished”?

✿ What are the consequences of believing that God has rejected Israel (an early heresy called “supersessionism,” the belief that the church has now superseded or taken over the place of Israel)? Do you know any modern-day Christian supersessionists?

Point to Ponder**A Jewish Claim**

“And then we have to notice something interesting: there were lots of other Jewish groups in the first century who believed that their great story had come to its fulfillment with them, with their leader, with their prophet, with their messiah, with their new way of reading Israel’s law. So the early Christian claim about Jesus in relation to Israel’s story is not anti-Jewish. It is, rather, typically Jewish.”

Reflect

- ✿ Does it reduce the claims of Christianity to know that some other ancient Jewish leaders claimed to be the messiah?
- ✿ What do you think early Christians might have had in common with other Jewish messianic groups? What might have been different about Christianity?
- ✿ This point touches on another biblical theme, that of “election,” which involves God choosing a specific person (such as Abraham or Jacob) or people (the Jews themselves) for a particular purpose. What do you make of the idea of election? Does God choose—and, much more problematically, choose *against*—certain people? How is being God’s chosen people both a gift and a burden?

Optional Activity

*Consider
doing this activity
during your time
together.*

✿ Those unfamiliar with the Old Testament might benefit from reading and discussing some or all of the following texts. (This can be done in three groups, if desired, with each group reporting on its findings.)

The Abrahamic Covenant:
Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6;
17:1-8

The Messiah: 2 Samuel
7:8-17; Isaiah 9:1-7;
11:1-12; Micah 5:2

The Suffering Servant:
Isaiah 42:1-9; 52:13-15;
53:1-12

What did you find that you did not expect?

Based upon your own reading, how might you expand, refine, or alter Wright’s interpretation of these key themes?



Segment Two



As a group, watch segment two from "Israel." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

The Covenant

“In chapter 12 of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, God calls Abraham and makes the most stunning promise to him. Up until then, the story of the Bible had been the story of a good creation spoiled by human rebellion. And God says to Abraham, ‘You’re going to be the one through whose family creation is going to get unspoiled, is going to get put to rights at last.’ God says, ‘In you and in your family, all the families of the earth will be blessed.’”

From *Simply Christian*:

“The point is that God’s covenant with Abraham is seen as a rock—solid commitment on the part of the world’s Creator that he will be the God of Abraham and his family. *Through* Abraham and his family, God will bless the whole world. Shimmering like a mirage in the deserts through which Abraham wandered was the vision of a new world, a rescued world, a world blessed by the Creator once more....” (p. 74)

Reflect

- ✿ What are contemporary examples of covenants? Are any of these especially helpful for understanding God’s covenants with humanity? How might these human examples be inadequate or even misleading?
- ✿ What was the purpose of the Abrahamic covenant? How might different people answer that question differently?

Points to Ponder**Exile and Homecoming**

“Then God does the most dramatic thing: he calls Moses and equips Moses to be somebody who will trust him and obey him and says, ‘You’re going to bring my people out of Egypt, and you’re going to take them back to the land that I promised to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob.’ And so this story of Israel, the character of the people of Israel, has etched into it very deeply that story of going away and coming back again, of exile and homecoming, of slavery and exodus, of feeling that it had all gone horribly wrong and then discovering that through a fresh act of God it was all going to go remarkably right after all.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“The main parts of the Hebrew Scriptures most likely reached their final form when the Jews were in exile in Babylon...The irony of Abraham’s family living in Babylon, the land of the Tower of Babel, was not lost on them. But they knew what to hope for. They had been in exile before. That was the central theme of all of their stories.” (p. 76)

Reflect

✿ Does this theme seem to you to reflect any basic rhythms of human life?

✿ Can you think of any other biblical examples of exile and homecoming? Can you think of examples from your own experience?

✿ If Israel’s story is one of going away and coming back, is it a story with a happy ending—or any real ending at all?



Points to Ponder**King, Temple, Law, and Land/New Creation**

“Many [Jews in the centuries before Christ] spoke of a coming king, an anointed one, a messiah, who would bring God’s justice to the world at last.”

“When they talked about the Temple in that period, they talked about it as the place where God and his people would finally get their act together at last. ‘The Lord whom we seek,’ said Malachi, ‘will suddenly come to his Temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, he is coming.’”

“The people were hoping as well that the Torah, the gift of God’s Law, God’s own presence with them, guiding them and leading them, would somehow be fulfilled in a new way—that it would bind Israel to Yahweh and Yahweh to Israel forever.”

“And then, finally, there was the promise that grew out of the promise of the land. God had promised Abraham this land, and now it would be a new creation. ‘New heavens and new earth,’ said the prophet Isaiah.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“There are four themes that swirl around the story of Israel as we find it both in the scriptural writings and in later Jewish books—four themes that give shape and body to the story as we have outlined it.” (p. 80, pp. 80–86)

✠ Another passage worthy of study is Paul’s reflection on the fate of Israel in Romans 11:25–36. This is one of the most remarkable—and too frequently neglected—passages in the entire New Testament. Paul believed that God’s calling of Israel cannot be overturned by present Jewish rejection of Jesus. For God to be true to God’s own character and promises, “all Israel” must finally be saved.

How do you respond to Paul’s argument?

What does Romans 11 tell us about Paul’s understanding of God?

How might this passage inform Christian understanding of Judaism today? What about Christian understanding of other religions?

Reflect

❁ What would you say was the original purpose of the king, the Temple, the Law, and the land? How were these original purposes transformed in the hopes of some Jews for a more glorious future?

❁ Which of these themes seems most relevant to your own faith? Irrelevant? Why?

❁ Should Christians continue to use these categories when thinking about God's relationship to humanity today? Do you think that followers of Jesus have a right to reinterpret Jewish categories?

❁ Is Wright's move from talking about the hope for the promised land to hope for new creation legitimate? Why might the issue of the promised land be particularly controversial today?

Points to Ponder**Israel's Messiah as Suffering Servant**

👉 And it is the Christian claim that it was this hope of Israel that was fulfilled when a young Jewish prophet called Jesus came into Galilee saying, 'The time has come. God is now going to be king.'👉



From *Simply Christian*:

“The Servant will be cast away, like Israel in exile, overwhelmed with shame, suffering, and death; and then brought through, and out the other side.”

“Thus Israel, gazing at the Servant, will say in wonderment, ‘He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed’ (Isaiah 53:5). At the heart of the political message that Israel’s God is king, and that Babylon’s gods are not, we find the story of exile and restoration turned into a personal prophecy, like a strange signpost standing in the mist, pointing ahead to the place where all the storylines of God, Israel, and the world converge.” (p. 87)

Reflect

✿ Jesus’ understanding of the messiah’s role appears have been quite different from that of most of his contemporaries. In particular, Jesus seems to have linked the figures of Israel’s messiah and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant.

✿ How does the messiah’s role change when it is associated with service? With suffering?



❁ Where in the Gospels do you see evidence that Jesus thought of himself as a suffering servant? Where are these ideas evident in his teaching about discipleship (e.g., in Mark 8:34-38 and 9:35)?

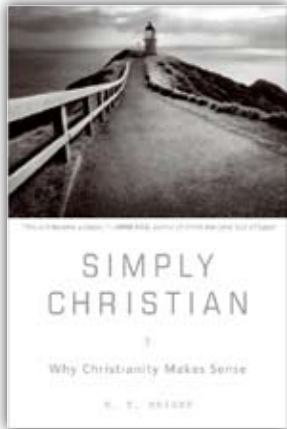
❁ How might the Suffering Servant serve as a model for Christian discipleship today? How might it be abused?

For Further Discussion

1. How would the world be different had there never been an Israel?
2. How frequently is the Old Testament studied or preached from in your church? Why? Which parts are most and which parts are least used? Does this hold true for your own study of the Bible?
3. In what sense if any is there continuity between biblical Israel and the modern state of Israel? Is the promise of land to Abraham and Sarah in any way relevant to the contemporary situation? Why or why not?



Jesus Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter Seven: Jesus and the Coming of God's Kingdom (pp. 91-103)

Chapter Eight: Jesus: Rescue and Renewal (pp. 105-119)

Reflect

Chapter Seven: Jesus and the Coming of God's Kingdom

✿ What ideas about Christianity does Wright oppose on pp. 91-92? Why these?

✿ How would you answer the question "What is Christianity about?" (p. 92)?

✿ What are some of today's alternative interpretations of Jesus (p. 93-95)? Do you find any of these attractive?

✿ What is the "Kingdom of God" (pp. 99-103)?



Chapter Eight: Jesus: Rescue and Renewal

✿ What did most first-century Jews expect the Messiah to do (p. 106)? How was Jesus' understanding different (p. 107-108)?

✿ What did Jesus think his death would mean (pp. 110-111)?

✿ What is the difference between “resuscitation” and “resurrection”? Why does this distinction matter in Jesus' case (pp. 111-114)?

✿ Who did Jesus think he was (pp. 116-119)?

BACKGROUND TO THIS WEEK'S VIDEO PRESENTATION	
Resurrection	The belief that some or all dead persons will one day be given new and more glorious bodies. Resurrection of the body should be distinguished from immortality of the soul, the belief that the soul lives perpetually, with or without a body. In pure form, the concept of resurrection assumes that humans are a psychosomatic whole; eternal life is a gift of God, not a given (Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”).
Resuscitation	The giving of life back to a corpse, as in the story of Lazarus in the Gospel of John. Resuscitation differs from resurrection in that (1) the person retains a normal “flesh and blood” body, and (2) he or she eventually dies.

Session Six

Opening Prayer

Messiah of Israel, be at the center of our lives, just as you are at the center of human history. Allow us to play a role in the drama of salvation, just as you are its central actor. Equip us to bear the Gospel to the world, just as you entered the world to bear witness to God's reign. Amen.

Before you begin the study, read the Opening Prayer aloud as a group.

In pairs, do the following for five minutes:

- ❁ What is your favorite story about Jesus? Why?



Segment One



As a group, watch segment one from "Jesus." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

What Jesus *Didn't* Come to Do

“Jesus didn't come to give us a good moral example, or fine teaching about true doctrine, or to tell us the secret way by which we could go to heaven after we die.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Christianity is *not* about a new moral teaching—as though we were morally clueless and in need of some fresh or clearer guidelines.... Christianity isn't about Jesus offering a wonderful moral example, as though our principal need was to see what a life of utter love and devotion to God and to other people would look like, so that we could try to copy it.” (p. 91)



Reflect

- ✿ The idea that Jesus came primarily to teach us to live morally has been enormously popular and persistent, especially during the past two centuries. Why?

- ✿ It has been said that most scholars “look down the well of history and see their own reflection.” Why do so many portrayals of Jesus look suspiciously like their modern authors? What might prevent us from creating a Jesus in our own image?

- ✿ What is wrong with claiming that Christianity is “about Jesus offering...a new route by which people can ‘go to heaven when they die’” (p. 92)?

Points to Ponder**A Jesus—Haunted Culture**

“Jesus of Nazareth remains the most enigmatic, powerful and attractive figure at the heart of world culture. I don’t think anybody who’s followed the stories of the last few years would deny that. Every time there’s a new claim about Jesus, it hits the headlines; certainly in America and quite often in other parts of the world as well. But are these really new stories about Jesus or are they simply ways of putting a wash on the old ones? What do we really know about Jesus?”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Writing about Jesus has been a growth industry for the last century or more. This is partly because he haunts the memory and imagination of Western culture like few (if any) other figures of either past or present.” (p. 93)



Reflect

✿ Why does Jesus continue to exercise so much influence on culture today? Where is that influence most felt?

✿ What are some of today's revisionist theories about Jesus? Why do these attract so much attention? What are people hoping to find?

✿ What parts of Jesus' teaching and story are most frequently ignored (or even actively rejected) today? Why these?

Points to Ponder**The Question of Sources**

“And the point is this: when we examine all the sources we can possibly find to understand how Jewish people in that period thought, what motivated them, what made them tick, and when we understand what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are actually saying (as opposed, please note, to what many subsequent centuries, including many Christian interpreters, have thought they were saying), then we find that again and again it fits [the first-century Jewish context] like a glove.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“The portrait of Jesus we find in the canonical gospels makes sense within the world of Palestine in the 20s and 30s of the first century. Above all, it makes coherent sense in itself. The Jesus who emerges is thoroughly believable as a figure of history, even though the more we look at him, the more we feel once more that we may be staring into the sun.” (p. 99)

Reflect

Those who advocate a view of Jesus radically different from Christian tradition often draw selectively on sources, such as the so-called “Gnostic gospels,” which are regarded by most scholars as coming from the second or third centuries.

✿ Why does the dating of such sources matter?

✿ What counts as evidence for the earliness or lateness of such a source (e.g., p. 97)? Why does Wright regard the New Testament Gospels as the most important sources for information about Jesus?

✿ The earliest Christian sources are almost certainly Paul’s letters (see, for example, 1 Cor. 11:23-26 and 15:1-11). Is Paul’s Jesus compatible with the Jesus of the Gospels?

Points to Ponder

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

“When we get Jesus preaching the kingdom, announcing that God was becoming king, what we find is that he was going around doing things. He was celebrating a party, often with all the wrong people, and he was healing people.”

Optional Activity

*Consider
doing this activity
during your time
together*

✿ Simply Christian began with a discussion of the human longing for justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty. Write these four words on a blackboard or flipchart. List Gospel stories or teachings of Jesus that we might associate with one of these four themes.

What do these stories tell you about Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of God?

Do the themes of justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty in some way converge in the person and teaching of Jesus?

What does this tell you about being a follower of Jesus today?



“Jesus was acting as if he had the authority to tell the Israel of his day what God wanted of them, and even to say on his own authority, ‘It used to be said like this, but I’m saying it to you like that.’ Jesus was behaving with a kind of a sovereign freedom within and through the traditions of Israel itself.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Instead of the usual military revolt, it was time to show the pagans what the true God was really like, not by fighting and violence but by loving one’s enemies, turning the other cheek, going the second mile. That is the challenge which Jesus issued in a series of teachings that we call the ‘sermon on the mount’ (Matthew 5:1–7:29).” (p. 101)

“The whole point of Jesus’ work was to bring heaven to earth and join them together forever, to bring God’s future into the present and make it stick there.” (p. 102)

Reflect

✿ What do you think Jesus meant by “the kingdom of God”? How was Jesus’ understanding of God’s reign different from that of many of his contemporaries (p. 106)?

✿ Why was the kingdom of God at the center of Jesus’ teaching? What did he say about it? How was it manifested in his actions?

✿ In what ways was God’s kingdom already present in Jesus? In what ways is it present in the world today? In what ways is it still a future reality?



Segment Two



As a group, watch segment two from “Jesus.” After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

Israel in Person

“Jesus spoke and acted as if he were somehow Israel in person, as if he would take upon himself the destiny and calling of Israel. And remember what that destiny was: to be the people, Abraham’s people, through whom God would put the world to rights. Israel as a whole couldn’t do it, because Israel, though the bearers of the solution, was also, in itself, part of the problem. Jesus would come and stand in for Israel as Israel stood in for the world. And what would that mean? He would take the force of evil upon himself so as to exhaust it, and then, in the vindication which he knew would come from the one he called ‘Abba, Father,’ he would inaugurate God’s new, sovereign reign, that would eventually put the world fully to rights at last.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“His task, he believed, was to bring the great story of Israel to its decisive climax...God’s plan to rescue the world from evil would be put into effect by evil doing its worst to the Servant—that is, to Jesus himself—and thereby exhausting its power.” (p. 108)

Reflect

✿ In what sense can it be thought that the power of evil was “exhausted” by the cross of Jesus? How can thinking of evil as having been defeated by the cross change the way we respond to evil in our world?



✿ Why was Jesus willing to go to his death? What did he think it would accomplish?

✿ Why is Jesus' location within the people of Israel decisive in understanding his own sense of purpose? Would the Jewishness of Jesus come as a surprise to members of your church?

Points to Ponder

The Meaning of the Resurrection

“They did their worst to Jesus. And Jesus took it all upon himself, and what came out was not that he was crushed and dismembered by it forever, but rather that God’s new life emerged the other side. And Jesus in his death and resurrection has thus bequeathed to the world the promise that it will finally be set free from evil, because evil played itself out in its last great battle with Jesus himself.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“[W]hen Jesus rose again, God’s whole new creation emerged from the tomb, introducing a world full of new potential and possibility...We find ourselves lifted up, set on our feet, given new breath in our lungs, and commissioned to go and make new creation happen in the world.” (p. 116)

“The music he wrote must now be performed. The early disciples saw this, and got on with it...Something has happened in and through Jesus as a result of which the world is a different place....” (p. 116)

Reflect

✿ What does Wright mean by saying that we are talking about “resurrection, not resuscitation” (p. 112; see also pp. 114-15)? What is the difference?



✿ Why does the resurrection of Jesus matter? How did early Christian claims about Jesus' resurrection differ from popular expectation (pp. 112-13)?

✿ What do you believe happens after death?

✿ What is the relationship between hope for the future and action in the present? What difference might it make to day-to-day life to believe in a future resurrection?

Points to Ponder

Jesus' Vocation and Divinity

“Jesus knew that it was his vocation to go to the place where evil was doing its worst and to take the full force of that evil on himself, so that dying under it without colluding with it by cursing his enemies, he would exhaust its force and thereby launch God's new creation.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Jesus was aware of a call, a vocation, to do and be what, according to the Scriptures, only Israel's God gets to do and be. That, I believe, is what it means to speak about Jesus being both truly divine and truly human. And we realize, once we remind ourselves that humans were made in God's image, that this is not a category mistake, but the ultimate fulfillment of the purpose of creation itself.” (p. 118)

“[S]uch an analysis best explains why Jesus did what he did, and why his followers, so soon after his death and resurrection, came to believe and do what they believed and did.” (p. 119)



Reflect

- ✿ Most Christian theologians have maintained that Jesus was both human and divine; nevertheless, portrayals of Jesus often veer to one side or the other. Is this true at your church or even in your own thinking? Why?

- ✿ How could Jesus have come to possess such a remarkable and unprecedented sense of vocation? Was it something he always had, or did it come gradually or crystallize at some particular moment?

- ✿ To what extent was the early church's view of Jesus in continuity with Jesus' own view of himself?

- ✿ What makes (or would make) Christian claims about Jesus believable today?

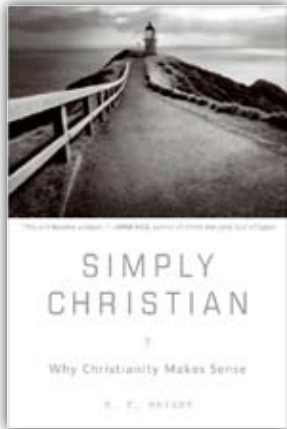


For Further Discussion

1. What one question about Jesus would you most like to have answered?
2. How does the story of Jesus continue the Old Testament theme of going away and coming back, of exile and restoration? Does it change anything about the way we understand that theme?
3. What does it mean to be “Christ-like”? Do you know anyone who seems worthy of that description?
4. How does (or how might) being a Christian shape your own sense of vocation?



The Holy Spirit Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter Nine: God's Breath of Life (pp. 121-29)

Chapter Ten: Living by the Spirit (pp. 131-40)

Reflect

Chapter Nine: God's Breath of Life

✿ What do you expect God's Spirit to do in your life (p. 122)?

✿ How does your church compare to the one described in the second full paragraph on p. 123?

✿ Where in your life can you sense a place "where heaven and earth meet" (p. 124)?

✿ Do you believe that God's Spirit leads you (p. 125)? How do you know?



Chapter Ten: Living by the Spirit

❁ In what sense might Christians still regard themselves as being under the Jewish Law (the Torah) (p. 132)?

❁ Have you had an experience in which you encountered the power of “the word” (p. 134)? What set that experience apart?

❁ Does the description of Christian spirituality at the top of page 137 (“First, Christian spirituality combines...”) match your own experience? Can you think of someone else for whom it seems an especially accurate description?

❁ Why is suffering a part of Christian spirituality? What is your own attitude toward suffering?



Session Seven

Opening Prayer

Spirit of God, breathe in our hearts so that we may know which of our yearnings are signs of your presence and summons to your service. Blow through our lives to cleanse us of sin and restore us to right relationship with you and with others. Burn in our souls and empower us to do your will. Amen.

*Before you
begin the study,
read the Opening
Prayer aloud as
a group.*

**In pairs, do the following
for five minutes:**

- ❁ Describe briefly an experience in which you felt the presence of God's Spirit..



Segment One



As a group, watch segment one from "The Holy Spirit." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

Empowered to Carry On the Ministry of Jesus

“The first Christians thought that, after Jesus had died and been raised there would be a national restoration for God’s people, for Israel. Maybe they would at last be able to drive the Romans out and be masters in their own land. But it wasn’t going to be like that. Jesus said, ‘You will receive power when the Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth,’ [Acts 1:8]. In other words, the Spirit is coming and when the Spirit comes, this is how God’s kingdom will be put into effect.”

Points to Ponder**The Point**

“The point is not that the Spirit comes to give us, as it were, a new spiritual high, the spiritual Christian equivalent of being on some drug or other. The point is rather that the Spirit comes in order to enable God’s people to be his people in and for the world. If you think you’re receiving the Spirit but don’t sense that there’s anything you ought to be doing out there in God’s world, then maybe it isn’t God’s Spirit that you’re actually receiving. And likewise, if you think you’re supposed to be engaging in some new task for God’s kingdom, but don’t think you need God’s Spirit to help you do it, then you are heading for disaster, and that fast.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“God doesn’t give people the Holy Spirit in order to let them enjoy the spiritual equivalent of a day at Disneyland. Of course, if you’re downcast and gloomy, the fresh wind of God’s Spirit can and often does give you a new perspective on everything, and above all grants a sense of God’s presence, love, comfort, and even joy. But the point of the Spirit is to enable those who follow Jesus to take into all the world the news that he is Lord, that he has won the victory over the forces of evil, that a new world has opened up, and that we are to help make it happen.” (p. 122)

Reflect

✿ How do you know if God’s Spirit is with you? How do you receive the Spirit?

✿ Do non-Christians “have” the Spirit?

✿ Have you ever experienced a spiritual “high”? What were its lasting effects?

✿ Is “having” the Spirit more about feeling or doing?

✿ If the true measure of personal spirituality is the degree to which it motivates us to do the work of the kingdom of God in this world, how do you measure up? How does your church measure up?

✿ What activities other than evangelism would qualify as work for God’s kingdom? Is the Spirit also needed for these endeavors?

✿ What might the consequences be of undertaking “some new task for God’s kingdom” without asking for God’s guidance and assistance?

Points to Ponder**Option Three**

“God’s Spirit has to be thought of in terms of what I’ve called Option Three: the strange overlap and interlocking of heaven and earth. God’s Spirit comes from the future and into the present, and God’s Spirit is the means of joining heaven and earth together within our own lives.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“[T]hose in whom the Spirit comes to live are God’s new Temple. They are, individually and corporately, places where heaven and earth meet.” (p. 129)

Reflect

✿ Pantheism is a popular way of understanding the world today. It is at the heart of all “New Age” religious movements. Why does this viewpoint tend to undermine the work of the Spirit (pp. 127-28)?

✿ Deism, the idea that God exists but is remote, also poses a problem with regard to understanding the work of the Holy Spirit. What is that problem (p. 128)?

✿ How is a Christian understanding of the way the Holy Spirit moves in our lives different from either pantheism or deism?



Segment Two



As a group, watch segment two from “The Holy Spirit.” After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

Holiness

“If we call the Spirit the *Holy Spirit*, we should expect that the Spirit will enable us to live the kind of lives that God wants us to live.”

“Holiness is not about renouncing all the things that might make life worth living. It’s about discovering all the things that *really* make life worth living, and reordering human priorities so we are enabled to put to one side the things which many people imagine would be the way to enjoy life, but which we know perfectly well do not, in fact, satisfy or give us that rich life to which we are called.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“If you are guided and energized by the Spirit, declares Paul, you will no longer do those things which the Law forbids— murder, adultery, and the rest.” (p. 132)

Reflect

✿ Holiness is a common biblical ideal, but it seems to have fallen out of favor in much of today’s church. Why is that the case? Does holiness still matter?

✿ Is God a killjoy? What other problems might be associated with the idea of holiness? How can these be avoided?



❁ How does the Spirit equip us to lead holy lives?

❁ Does God expect us to be perfect?

❁ How is personal holiness related to the quests for justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty?

Points to Ponder

Come, Holy Ghost

“Come, Holy Ghost, Our souls inspire and lighten with celestial fire. Thy blessed unction from above is comfort, life and fire of love. Anoint and cheer our soiled face with the abundance of thy grace. Keep far our foes. Give peace at home. Where thou art guide, no ill can come. Teach us to know the Father, Son and Thee, of both to be but one, that through the ages all along, this may be our endless song. Praise to thine eternal merit, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Bishop John Cosin (1594–1672)

“The Holy Spirit is one who delights to come when we ask. Jesus said, ‘If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask’ (Luke 11:13).”

Reflect

We suggest that you pray John Cosin’s prayer (above) aloud as a group.

❁ Which part of the prayer is most meaningful to you?



❁ Which part is most difficult for you to understand or appreciate?

❁ Have you prayed regularly for the Spirit to come into your life? If so, how? If not, why?

❁ Do you usually pray extemporaneously (that is, making up the prayer on the spot) or by using written prayers? What is the value of each type of prayer?

Points to Ponder

Two Characteristics of Christian Spirituality

From *Simply Christian*:

“First, Christian spirituality combines a sense of the awe and majesty of God with a sense of his intimate presence. This is hard to describe but easy to experience.... One of the characteristic signs of the Spirit’s work is precisely that sense of the intimate presence of God.” (p. 137)

“Second, Christian spirituality normally involves a measure of suffering.... Those who follow Jesus are called to live by the rules of the new world rather than the old one, and the old one won’t like it.” (p. 137)

Optional Activity

*Consider
doing this activity
during your time
together*

❁ Read aloud Acts 2:1–21 and 1 Cor. 12:4–13.

Note that the believers in Acts 2 “were all together in one place.” Is the Spirit given primarily to individuals or to groups?

In what groups have you experienced the Spirit’s presence? At what times? For what purpose?

Paul writes that the gifts of the Spirit are given for the building up of other people. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). What are some of these gifts? How are they manifested in your church?

How were spiritual gifts abused at Corinth (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:21; 14:12, 17–19, 40)? Where do similar problems occur today? How can they be prevented?

What spiritual gifts are most needed today?



“[I]t is precisely when we are suffering that we can most confidently expect the Spirit to be with us. We don’t seek, or court, suffering or martyrdom. But if and when it comes, in whatever guise, we know that, as Paul says toward the end of his great Spirit—chapter, ‘in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us’ (Romans 8:37).” (p. 138)

Reflect

✿ Do you tend to think of God more as majestic and distant or as loving and close? Why?

✿ Can you think of Christian groups that balance these ideas differently? What is the danger of going too far to either side?

✿ Why does Wright argue that life in the Spirit “normally involves a measure of suffering”? What can prevent us, if we suffer for our faith, from becoming dejected or self-righteous? What does healthy Christian suffering look like? Can you think of specific examples?

Points to Ponder

The Trinity

“The early Christians had to say, ‘This is the one true God at work. The God who made the world. The God who called Israel. The God we now know in and as, yes, Jesus and the Spirit.’ That invocation of the Trinity, therefore, lies at the very heart of all Christian faith and discipleship.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“The church’s official ‘doctrine of the Trinity’ wasn’t fully formulated until three or four centuries after the time of Paul. Yet, when the later theologians eventually worked it all through, it turned out to consist, in effect, of detailed footnotes to Paul, John, Hebrews, and the other New Testament books, with explanations designed to help later generations grasp what was already there in principle in the earliest writings.” (p. 139)

Reflect

✿ How do you understand the doctrine of the Trinity?

✿ Christians have often disagreed about how to formulate a precise description of the Trinity. Does agreement matter?

✿ Why did the early Christians, many of whom were Jews, come to such a complex and challenging view of God? (Note Wright’s argument in the top paragraph on p. 139.)

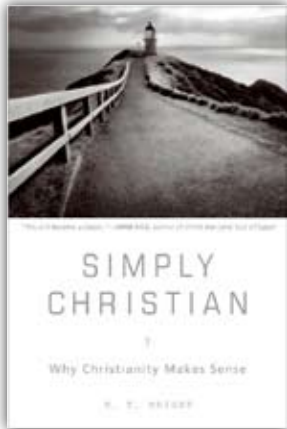
For Further Discussion

Pentecostalism, which strongly emphasizes the presence and work of the Spirit, is the fastest growing form of Christianity in the world today, crossing most national and denominational boundaries.

1. Do you have any direct experience of Pentecostalism or the closely related “Charismatic Movement”? How would you describe it? What are its more and less attractive features?
2. Why is Pentecostalism proving so successful in today’s world?
3. What lessons can Pentecostal churches teach non-Pentecostal churches, and vice versa?



Worship & Prayer Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter Eleven: Worship (pp. 143-57)

Chapter Twelve: Prayer (pp. 159-172)

Reflect

Chapter Eleven: Worship

❁ How would you define “worship”?

❁ What is notable about the worship described in Revelation 4-5 (pp. 144-47)?

❁ How are Wright’s “two golden rules at the heart of spirituality” (p. 148) true to your own experience?

❁ Do Scripture reading (pp. 149-53) and communion (153-57) occupy the place in your worship that Wright suggests? If not, why not?



Chapter Twelve: Prayer

❁ How and when do you pray the Lord's prayer? Which of Wright's suggestions (p. 161) might you try today?

❁ How might the discussion of Romans 8:26-27 (p. 162) affect the way you understand prayer?

❁ Do you ever use prayers written by other people (p. 164-65)? If so, which? If not, why not?

❁ Which of the prayers mentioned on pp. 166-70 might you try to use this week? Write it in the space below:



Session Eight

Opening Prayer

Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, Your will
be done, on earth as it is in
heaven. Give us this day our
daily bread. Forgive us our
debts, as we too have forgiven
our debtors. Do not bring us to
the time of trial, But rescue us
from the evil one. For the
kingdom, the power, and the
glory are yours, Now and
forever. Amen.

From Simply Christian, p. 159

*Before you
begin the study,
read the Opening
Prayer aloud as
a group.*

**In small groups, discuss
the following for five
minutes:**

- ❁ Describe an experience of worship that was especially meaningful for you.



Segment One



As a group, watch segment one from "Worship & Prayer." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

The Heart of Christian Living

“The heart of living as a Christian is worship: the adoration of the God in whose image we are made. People sometimes say, ‘Well, that sounds a bit selfish. You’re just going to stay in church all day and sing hymns. Surely you should be getting out in the world and doing things out there.’ Well, yes. Unless the getting out and doing things follows from worship, it can’t be true worship, because the God in whose image we’re made is precisely the God of generous, overflowing love. And the more that we worship him, the more we are to be people of generous, overflowing love ourselves.”



From *Simply Christian*:

“When we begin to glimpse the reality of God, the natural reaction is to worship him. Not to have that reaction is a fairly sure sign that we haven’t yet really understood who he is or what he’s done.” (p. 143)

Reflect

✿ Why does Dr. Wright believe that worship is at the heart of Christian life? Why not say that the heart of the faith is mission, good works, right behavior or right beliefs?

✿ How might a good marriage include worship at its center? How else might the analogy of marriage be useful for understanding our relationship with God?

✿ How are *being* and *doing* related?

✿ Can you worship at those times when you don’t seem to “glimpse the reality of God”?

Points to Ponder**Worship as Celebration**

“In the last book of the Bible, we are invited to be spectators on an astonishing scene. We come sneakily into the edge of a throne room. And there is one sitting on a throne who is in majesty and is surrounded by a very strange company of living creatures, and they’re all singing, ‘Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.’”

‘You are worthy our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power because you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.’ (Rev. 4:8, 11) ”

From *Simply Christian*:

“There is always a suspicion that...the call to worship God is rather like the order that goes out from a dictator whose subjects may not like him but have learned to fear him. ”

“If it has crossed your mind that worshipping the true God is like that, let me offer you a very different model....[O]nly two or three times in my life have I been in an audience which, the moment the conductor’s baton came down for the last time, leaped to its feet in electrified excitement, unable to contain its enthusiastic delight and wonder at what it had just experienced.... That sort of response is pretty close to genuine worship. Something like that, but more so, is the mood of Revelation 4 and 5. ” (p. 147)

Reflect

- ✿ What is your response to the discussion of the throne room scene in Revelation 4 & 5 (both in the video and in *Simply Christian* pp. 143-47)?
- ✿ Have you ever experienced the sort of worship described by Bishop Wright? How do we find that sort of experience? Is such experience necessary or typical?
- ✿ Why does the “God as dictator” model ring true to many people?
- ✿ What in your experience is the equivalent of the orchestral performance that causes you to respond to God with delight and wonder?

Points to Ponder

Two Spiritual Laws

“It’s one of the great spiritual laws that you become like what you worship. If somebody devotes themselves totally to the pursuit of money, they become avaricious; it starts to be reflected on their face. And it is part of the inner meaning of the Christian gospel that when we worship the true God, the God we see in Jesus, then we become more genuinely human.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“When you gaze in awe, admiration, and wonder at something or someone, you begin to take on something of the character of the object of your worship.”

“[B]ecause you were made in God’s image, *worship makes you more truly human*. ...Conversely, when you give that same total worship to anything or anyone else, you shrink as a human being.” (p. 148)

Reflect

- ✿ According to Wright, idolatry is worshipping “part of the creation as though it were the Creator himself” (p. 148). What dangers are inherent in idolatry? Why is it so attractive?
- ✿ Why do we become like the thing or person we worship?
- ✿ How do we know what we are truly worshipping? In what specific ways might worshipping God make us more human? Can you offer an example of worship calling a “better self” out of you?
- ✿ Some people have argued that worship is an affront to human dignity. Does worship humiliate or elevate us?



Segment Two



As a group, watch segment two from "Worship & Prayer." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

Scripture Reading and Holy Communion

“Reading the Bible publicly in worship is a way of telling the great story of the mighty acts of God. It’s a way of saying, bit by bit, day by day, ‘You are worthy, Lord our God. This is your world. These are your acts. These are your people. This Jesus is your son.’”

“The Israelites in the wilderness ate the fruit of the Promised Land. In other words, they tasted a little bit of the future in the present. That is one way of looking at what is going on when we take bread and we share the wine. Another way is to see this, again, as a point where heaven and earth overlap and interlock.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Reading Scripture in worship is, first and foremost, the central way of celebrating who God is and what he’s done.” (p. 150)

“Paul says that ‘as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you *proclaim* the Lord’s death until he comes’ (I Corinthians 11:26). He doesn’t mean that it’s a good opportunity for a sermon. Like a handshake or a kiss, *doing* it says it.” (p. 154)

Reflect

✿ What do we lose if we *don’t* read Scripture or take the Lord’s Supper together?

❁ What type of worship service makes Scripture reading and the celebration of the Lord's Supper most meaningful to you? What other parts of your church's weekly worship service do you find important?

❁ Does it matter how we do worship, or is it just a matter of personal preference?

❁ How do art and architecture contribute to worship?

❁ Dr. Wright argues that in worship we tell the story of creation and new creation, of rescue and renewal. In what other ways is this done in your church? Have you ever been rescued and renewed by worship?

Points to Ponder

Prayer from the Perspective of Option Three

“Many people think that prayer is simply a matter of getting in tune with the forces of nature, of being meditative and quiet and thinking on a different plane. Well, that may be a part of it. Other people taking the route of the dualist option think of prayer as sending a message to a distant God. Prayer really isn't like that either. Christian prayer is a matter of being in touch with the God who made us and loves us, the God who is much greater than anything we can imagine and yet is closer to us than breath itself. It always contains this mystery of awe and intimacy.”



From *Simply Christian*:

☞☞ Christian prayer is at its most characteristic when we find ourselves caught in the overlap of the ages, part of the creation that aches for new birth.... [B]y the Spirit, God *himself is groaning from within the heart of the world, because God himself, by the Spirit, dwells in our hearts as we resonate with the pain of the world.* ☞☞ (p. 162)

Reflect

☞ What is prayer? How does Christian prayer differ from prayer for the pantheist or the deist?

☞ Why do we pray? How is prayer related to worship?

☞ What is the personal cost of praying in the Spirit?

☞ Why and how did Jesus pray? Is your answer relevant to your own “prayer life”?

☞ How do we build prayer into our crowded lives?



Optional Activity

Consider
doing this activity
during your time
together

Review the following prayers from *Simply Christian*:

✠ An Anglican prayer (p. 166):

*Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord;
and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils
and dangers of this night;
for the love of thy only Son,
our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

✠ The “Jesus Prayer” (p. 168):

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of the Living God,
have mercy on me, a sinner.*

✠ Two prayers suggested by Bishop Wright
(pp. 168–69):

*Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
set up your kingdom in our midst.*

*Holy Spirit,
breath of the living God,
renew me and all the world.*

✠ 1 Corinthians 8:6 (pp. 169–70):

*There is one God, the Father,
from whom are all things, and we to him;
and one Lord, Jesus the Messiah,
through whom are all things, and we
through him.*

Divide the class into five groups, assigning each of the groups one of the above prayers to discuss and then to pray together. Each member of the group is then assigned to use the prayer each day for the coming week. At the beginning of next week’s class, class members can report about their experience.

Point to Ponder

God is Not a Vending Machine

“William Temple said, ‘People often say that answers to prayer are coincidence, but I’ve noticed that when I pray, coincidences happen, and when I stop praying, the coincidences stop happening.’ And that has been the experience of many Christian people. It isn’t like a machine where you can just put a coin in the slot and expect God automatically to answer it. That would make God our servant. Prayer is rather an attempt in the power of the Spirit to put ourselves as vehicles of the love of God at his service, only then to discover that God works through us, through our prayer, transforming us, but transforming also the world and the situations for which we pray.”

Reflect

✠ How does prayer change us? How does it change the world?

✠ How do you explain unanswered prayer?



❁ Can you give an example of the sort of coincidence mentioned by William Temple?

❁ How do we learn to pray together, not just as church groups, but as families, couples, etc.?

Points to Ponder

Getting Help

“We shouldn’t be worried about employing other people’s words as we learn to pray ourselves. In fact, I’ve been enormously grateful for the patterns of prayer which I’ve inherited. Sometimes I am able to pray coherently and clearly, to use words which actually make sense, [yet] often I stumble and can’t quite say what I want to say. If there are prayers there which other people have used before me, it is a relief to be able to say, ‘Yes, actually, that’s what I want to say!’ So why shouldn’t I make it my own?”

From *Simply Christian*:

“We are hamstrung by the long legacy of the Romantic movement on the one hand, and Existentialism on the other, producing the idea that things are authentic only if they come spontaneously, unbidden, from the depths of our hearts.” (p. 165)

Reflect

❁ Does your church or small group tend to emphasize written or spontaneous prayer? Why?



❁ What prayer resources are available to you? Which do you prefer?

❁ Can you give an example of a prayer written by someone else that you have found helpful?

❁ What can we do to keep congregational prayer alive and meaningful?

For Further Discussion

In the Psalms we find the full range of human emotions and experience and the full range of God's response to humanity.

1. Does your congregation use the Psalms on a regular basis? If so, how?
2. Have the Psalms played an important role in your own worship and study?

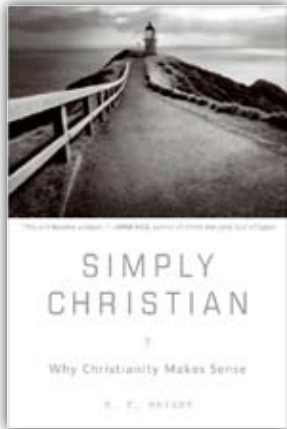
Romans 8:26-27 tells us that

[T]he Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with signs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

3. How might this passage from Romans be helpful to you in moments when you didn't know how or what to pray?
4. What does this passage teach us about the nature of prayer?



Scripture Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter Thirteen: The Book God Breathed (pp. 173-184)

Chapter Fourteen: The Story and the Task (pp. 185-197)

Reflect

Chapter Thirteen: The Book God Breathed

❁ Can you think of examples of the Bible's power to change lives (p. 173)?

❁ Why do Christians fight about the Bible? What ideas about the Bible do you reject (p. 174)?

❁ What information in the section titled "What is the Bible?" (pp. 175-180) is new to you?

❁ What does Wright mean when saying that the Bible is "inspired" (pp. 180-81)?
you agree?

Do



Chapter Fourteen: The Story and the Task

❁ In your opinion, what authority does the Bible possess (p. 185)?

❁ What are some of the dangers inherent in biblical interpretation (pp. 188-89)?

❁ Why should we study the Bible (p. 190)? What ways of studying Scripture have you found to be most helpful (p. 191)?

❁ What is the central point in Wright's argument about metaphorical vs. literal readings of Scripture (p. 191-97) Do you agree?



Session Nine

Opening Prayer

O God, we ask you to meet us in the pages of Scripture. Teach us how to understand and live by your word. Instruct us that we might act as vital participants in your ongoing story. Amen.

Before you begin the study, read the Opening Prayer aloud as a group.

In small groups, do the following for five minutes:

- ❁ Describe an occasion when a passage of Scripture made a profound difference in your life.



Segment One



As a group, watch segment one from "Scripture." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

What the Bible Does

“Unfortunately, battles over the Bible have gotten in the way of people *using* the Bible for all that it’s worth, and have kept people from really integrating their reading of the Bible with every other aspect of their Christian life.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“The Bible, in fact, is not simply an *authoritative description of a saving plan*, as though it were just an aerial photograph of a particular piece of landscape. It is *part of the saving plan itself*. It is more like the guide who takes you around the landscape and shows you how you can enjoy it to the full.” (p. 185–86)



“It’s about becoming agents of God’s new world—workers for justice, explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty. If God does indeed speak through Scripture, he speaks in order to commission us for tasks like these.” (p. 189)

Reflect

✿ What “battles over the Bible” are you aware of? Why do these occur? Do you agree with Wright that they can distract people from actually using the Bible?

✿ What do you think the Bible is meant to do? Is it succeeding?

✿ Can you describe an experience of being “commissioned” by the Bible?

Points to Ponder

The Biblical Text

“I’m convinced that, though there are some passages where it’s still quite difficult to figure out what the exact original reading was, there is massive evidence for the basic text itself. There is no doubt whatever that the books we call Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Acts, Romans, and so on, right the way through, were written substantially as we have them today, even though, as I say, there are words here and phrases there which may be difficult or dubious. And nothing that I have said so far or shall say in this course hinges on one particular reading which scholars might dispute.”



From *Simply Christian*:

“It needs to be stressed that our evidence for the text of the New Testament is in a completely different league than our evidence for every single other book from the ancient world.” (p. 178)

Reflect

✿ Is it necessary that we possess the biblical books exactly as they were first written? If not, how good is good enough?

✿ The problem of an imperfect text is greatest for those who claim that the Bible is “inerrant,” that is, entirely without errors. Do you hold to this view? If so, how do you account for the Bible’s many “textual variants,” however insignificant?

Points to Ponder**Inspired Human Writers**

“When we think about inspiration within Option 3, within the overlap of heaven and earth, we see that the personal characteristics of the individual writers and the inspiration, the breathing of God’s Holy Spirit, were designed not be an either/or, so that it’s *either* a human book *or* a divine book, but to be a both/and. The joy of biblical study for me is, not least, that when I’m in touch most with the individual ideas and character of particular authors, then I’m aware of the presence of God with that person and the presence of that same God with me.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Contexts, meanings within particular cultures, the overall place of a book, a theme, a line within that culture and time and within the scope and sweep of Scripture itself—all these things matter.” (p. 191)

Reflect

✿ Do you believe that the biblical authors were inspired by God? If so, what does that mean? For example, does it mean that they were incapable of making mistakes about history or science?

✿ Does God inspire people today in the same way, or was the experience of the biblical authors somehow unique?

✿ Christians often refer to the Bible as “the Word of God.” What is the range of meaning of that phrase?

✿ Is interpretation necessary, or can we simply read the Bible and take it at face value?

✿ What is a modern example of a statement that might easily be misunderstood if one did not know the original context? Can you think of a similar example from the Bible?



Segment Two



As a group, watch segment two from "Scripture." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

The Authoritative Story

“Supposing you went into the sports club, and what was pinned up on the wall was ‘Once upon a time...’ and then a long story, which you had to read and then figure out what it had to do with you. Or supposing that the commanding officer came into the barracks one morning and simply told a story. Well, that would be a different kind of authority. The Bible is much more like that, and that’s actually a much deeper and richer type of authority.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“[T]he authority of the Bible is the authority of a love story in which we are invited to take part.” (p. 186)

“Living with ‘the authority of Scripture,’ then, means living in the world of the story which Scripture tells. It means soaking ourselves in that story, as a community and as individuals.” (p. 187)

Reflect

✿ What is Bishop Wright reacting against in his description of biblical authority?

✿ What might be helpful about this view of biblical authority? What might be problematic?



✿ A set of rules can be easy to follow. What does Wright's view of biblical authority require of believers?

✿ What other images of the Bible do you find most helpful? For example, is the Bible a toolbox? A lamp? A pair of spectacles? A map? Something else? How does this image embody the idea of authority?

Points to Ponder

The Bible in Five Acts

“The Bible is like a great play with five acts. Act One is Creation; God made a good world. Act Two is the entry of evil into God's world, what we call the Fall or the rebellion of God's human creatures. Act Three is the story of Israel, of Abraham and his family. Act Four is the story of Jesus himself, as the climax of Act Three and as the moment when all those stories of creation and fall reach their peak in the death of Jesus and when the resurrection of Jesus re-launches God's project of creation. But then we have Act Five. Act Five is the one that takes us all the way through to the moment when God will renew heaven and earth. And that is where we live.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“This model of 'authority' helps us to understand how to read the Bible as Christian Scripture. The 'authority' of the Old Testament is precisely the 'authority' possessed by an earlier scene in the novel—when we are now living in a *later* scene. It matters that the earlier scene was what it was. But it has done its job and taken us to the later scene, where some things have changed quite radically. The plot has moved forward.”
(p. 186)



Reflect

- ✿ Does Bishop Wright's emphasis upon the Bible's story help you to understand its relevance to life today?
- ✿ How do you evaluate Dr. Wright's description of the Bible as "an unfinished novel beckoning us to become, in our own right, characters in its closing episodes" (p. 183)?
- ✿ What is the "plot" of God's work in the world today?
- ✿ How much continuity is there between being a Christian today and being one in the first century? Where is there discontinuity?

Points to Ponder

'Literal' vs. 'Metaphorical' Reading

“We have to learn to read intelligently and see which bits of the Bible are meant to be taken as accounts of something that actually happened, and which bits are wonderful picture stories, like the parables.”

Optional Activity

*Consider
doing this activity
during your time
together*

✿ **Using a chalkboard or flipchart, make two columns, headed "Literal" and "Metaphorical." Read aloud Genesis chapter one. (It would help to pass out Bibles or photo-copies of this chapter.) On the board or chart, list details of the story that you find either literally true or metaphorically true.**

Did members of the class disagree about placement of some items? Why?

What generalizations can you make based upon this exercise?

What is most important to affirm about Genesis 1?

How does your experience in this exercise align with your study of *Simply Christian* (for example, on the nature of biblical authority)?



From *Simply Christian*:

“In fact, every Bible reader I’ve ever met, from whatever background or culture, has known instinctively that at least some parts of the Bible are meant literally and other parts are meant metaphorically.” (p. 192)

Reflect

✿ Do you tend to read the Bible literally or metaphorically? Is that distinction even helpful to you?

✿ What rules of thumb might govern how you read a particular biblical passage?

✿ Does the story of Karl Barth saying, “It doesn’t matter whether the serpent spoke. What matters is what the serpent said” (p. 183), shed any light on interpreting Scripture? Is it adequate for Christian life to say that the only thing that really matters is the Bible’s spiritual meaning?

✿ Is biblical interpretation easy or hard? Why?



Points to Ponder**The Bible Energizes the Church**

“The Bible is there to energize the mission of the church. It isn’t as though the Bible simply exists off on the side somewhere, and we are doing whatever we’re doing for God’s kingdom, and then the Bible informs us in this way or that. It is rather that the Bible is with us, the book we read every day, the book we read prayerfully and thoughtfully, to listen for God’s word through it. Because the whole point of the story which the Bible tells is that this is the story which energizes us to be the people of God in and for God’s world.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“The only sure rule is to remember that the Bible is indeed God’s gift to the church, to equip the church for its work in the world, and that serious study of it can and should become one of the places where, and the means by which, heaven and earth interlock and God’s future purposes arrive in the present.” (p. 197)

Reflect

✿ What advice would you give to someone just beginning study of the Bible?

✿ What aids (such as a commentary or concordance) have you found most helpful in biblical study?

✿ What steps can you take to make your own Bible study more “energizing”?

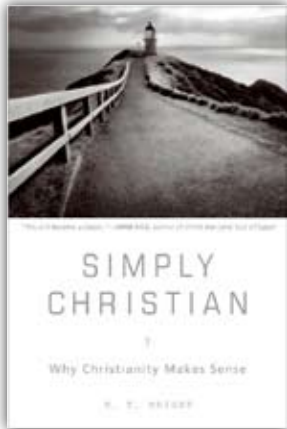
For Further Discussion

Differing approaches to the Bible can yield nearly opposite conclusions, especially concerning vexing moral issues.

1. What factors shape a person's understanding of the Bible?
2. Might two people of equal integrity come to very different conclusions about the application of the Bible to a particular issue? Why?
3. Is one interpretation of Scripture as good as another?
4. What controls ought to govern our interpretation of Scripture?
5. Does anything about Bishop Wright's approach help you to deal with the fact that Christians sometimes disagree about the Bible?



Church & New Creation Introduction



Reading Assignment

Chapter Fifteen: Believing and Belonging (pp. 199-215)

Chapter Sixteen: New Creation, Starting Now (pp. 217-237)

Reflect

Chapter Fifteen: Believing and Belonging

✿ Bishop Wright suggests a number of images for the church, including river, tree, family, and body (pp. 199-201). Which of these (or which other image) do you find most helpful? Why?

✿ What do you regard as the purpose of the church (p. 204)?

✿ What is “belief” (p. 207)?

✿ Why does baptism matter (pp. 212-215)?



Chapter Sixteen: New Creation, Starting Now

- ❁ What is the consequence of believing that “the point of Christianity isn’t ‘to go to heaven when you die’” (p. 217)? What is the point of Christianity?

- ❁ What is Wright’s understanding of the “Second Coming of Christ” (p. 219)? How is this perspective different from that of some other Christian writers?

- ❁ What would have to change for you to have a more “Jesus-shaped” life (p. 222)?

- ❁ Wright argues that a truly “spiritual” life, a life lived “between Heaven and Earth,” will have a new orientation toward justice, relationships, and beauty. List one or two practical ways that you could live more fully with respect to each of these categories.

Justice –

Relationships –

Beauty –



Session Ten

Opening Prayer

God of grace and God of glory, wash us with water and the Spirit so that we may be an assembly of believers united in unselfish faith. Guide us as we, the members of your body, serve you in diversity of personality and of tasks. Empower us so that our life together may truly echo your voice and call the world to redeeming justice, transforming spirituality, loving relationships, and inspiring beauty. Through Christ our Lord we ask this, Amen.

*Before you
begin the study,
read the Opening
Prayer aloud as
a group.*

**In pairs, do the following
for five minutes:**

- ❁ Describe briefly a moment in your life when the church seemed to fulfill its calling.



Segment One



As a group, watch segment one from "Church & New Creation." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

The Family of God

“I was in a church recently where I was confirming some young adults, and one of them was asked by the vicar of the parish to say why she had come into the church and what difference it had made to her life. She was a little bit flustered; she wasn’t used to speaking in public. But finally she blurted out that through becoming a Christian and through getting to know these people, she said, ‘It’s like having a great big second family.’”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Many people today find it difficult to grasp this sense of corporate Christian identity. We have been so soaked in the individualism of modern



Western culture that we feel threatened by the idea of our primary identity being that of the family we belong to—especially when the family in question is so large, stretching across space and time. The church isn't simply a collection of isolated individuals, all following their own pathways of spiritual growth without much reference to one another. ” (p. 203)

Reflect

✿ What are some examples of the individualism that characterizes many societies today? Why might individualism present a problem for the church?

✿ Is family a positive image for you? How applicable is it to your own church?

✿ What are the characteristics of a healthy church?

✿ Wright uses the images of a river, tree, and body to discuss the fact that the church is both a single thing and yet highly diverse. Would you say that the church today is more in need of unity or diversity? How much unity and how much diversity are desirable?



Points to Ponder**The Church's Calling**

“These very ordinary church people, as a result of their living together as the family of God, realized that it was their calling to go out there on the street and make it happen. They hadn't been to seminary. They didn't know about liberation theology. They hadn't studied all the large volumes that are written on being the church in the world. They said their prayers, and they just got on and 'gone and done it.'”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Private spiritual growth and ultimate salvation come rather as the byproducts of the main, central, overarching purpose for which God has called and is calling us.... The church exists, in other words, for what we sometimes call 'mission': to announce to the world that Jesus is its Lord.... Those who belong to Jesus are called, here and now, in the power of the Spirit, to be agents of that putting-to-rights purpose.” (p. 203–4)

“The church exists primarily for two closely correlated purposes: to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world.” (p. 211)

Reflect

✿ What is the mission of the church?

✿ Do you think your own congregation is doing a good job of identifying the mission(s) in which it should be involved? Is its work effective? Are you participating?

✿ Is there a relationship between a church's health and growth and its commitment to mission?

❁ Do all Christians share the same mission?

❁ What is the proper relationship between evangelism and social action?

Points to Ponder

Becoming a Christian

“Sometimes, the clock goes off, and it’s a rude shock. Some people become Christians like that.... But for some people it happens much more slowly, much more quietly. Over days and weeks and months and perhaps years or even decades, they gradually realize, ‘Hmm, God is calling me, and the more I think about Jesus and learn about him, the more I really believe he is speaking to me, the more he is calling me to make a commitment, to make myself his own, to give my life to him.’”

From *Simply Christian*:

“Waking up is, in fact, one of the regular early Christian images for what happens when the gospel of Jesus—the good news that the creator God has acted decisively to put the world to rights—impinges on someone’s consciousness.” (p. 205)

“Christian faith isn’t a general religious awareness.... It is the faith which hears the story of Jesus, including the announcement that he is the world’s true Lord, and responds from the heart with a surge of grateful love that says: ‘Yes. Jesus is Lord. He died for my sins. God raised him from the dead. This is the center of everything.’” (p. 211)



Reflect

❁ Were you ever “asleep” spiritually? If so, how did you awaken?

❁ Do you know anyone who has had an “alarm clock” conversion experience? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of coming to faith in this way?

❁ How does someone *become* a Christian? Is there some specific thing they must do?

❁ Would your own definition of Christian faith differ from that of Bishop Wright? If so, how?

❁ What is the role of baptism in Christian initiation? Why have Christian denominations often disagreed about the practice of baptism?



Segment Two



As a group, watch segment two from "Church & New Creation." After the clip is finished, discuss the following questions together.

Points to Ponder

New Creation

“When God finally does what God is going to do, we won’t be left in a disembodied heaven, having said ‘Goodbye’ to this wonderful, glorious, good creation. God is going to renew heaven and earth and bring them together into one at last. So that mysterious overlapping and interlocking, which we’ve been talking about all through, will finally result in the marriage of heaven and earth, and thereby, the renewal of both.”

From *Simply Christian*:

“God’s plan is not to abandon this world, the world which he said was ‘very good.’ Rather, he intends to remake it.” (p. 219)

Reflect

✿ Is this perspective new to you? Why is it less well known than the idea of “going to heaven when you die”?

✿ What is “resurrection”(p. 218)? Is it the same thing as immortality?



✿ How do you picture the “Second Coming” of Christ? Does the way in which Wright describes Jesus’ “appearing” (p. 219) appeal to you more than the idea of a “Rapture” that will sweep believers up into heaven? What are some of the practical effects of each belief?

✿ What is the relationship between what we hope for in the future and how we live our lives in the present?

Points to Ponder

Living in the Future Today

“You could put it like this: if somebody were to come to me and say, ‘I know I shouldn’t sin. I’m always being tempted to do this and that and I just find that I have no moral resistance; I just can’t help sinning all the time. But that’s alright because one day God will save me finally, so I don’t need to bother about sin at the moment,’ I would say, ‘Listen, God has already redeemed you in Christ. He’s given you his Holy Spirit. It’s time you realized that you have to anticipate the future in the present, and to live now in a way that genuinely looks forward to the way you will be then in the future.’”

From *Simply Christian*:

“[I]t is the new way of being human, the Jesus-shaped way of being human, the cross-and-resurrection way of life, the Spiritled pathway.” (p. 222)

Reflect

✿ Is sin “natural” for Christians? Are Christians “only human”? How do we overcome temptation?

❁ Does the attempt to follow Christ perfectly result in joy or frustration? How much sin should we tolerate in ourselves?

❁ What positive attributes ought to be present in one already experiencing new creation?

❁ Do you know someone who lives a “Jesus-shaped” life?

Points to Ponder

Justice, Spirituality, Relationships, & Beauty

“So we come back to the themes with which we began. The justice for which we have a passion is something we can work for in the power of God’s Spirit. The spirituality we all know we long for is something we are given as God’s Spirit enables heaven and earth to come together in our worship and in our mission and in our personal lives. The relationships which we know we long for but which are so difficult can be healed, can be mended, can be made to be a sign of that final coming together of heaven and earth at the end. And the beauty that we long for but which slips through our fingers, is something that we can actually work on ourselves as we work in the power of God’s Spirit for his new creation.”

Reflect

❁ How do we support justice without supporting the violence that Jesus rejected (p. 226)?



❁ Why is forgiveness so difficult? Why is it so necessary?

❁ Homosexuality is a highly controversial topic in many churches today. In his book, Wright argues that sexual activity should “be restricted to the marriage of a man and a woman” (p. 232). How is it that people of apparently equal integrity and sincerity disagree about this issue? How do we live and work together as the church while disagreeing about such matters?

❁ Wright writes that “the church should reawaken its hunger for beauty at every level. This is essential and urgent” (p. 235). Why is this task essential and urgent? How do we do it?

Points to Ponder

Where Are You in this Story?

“So the question comes at the end of this course: Where are you in the story at the moment? Where can you in the power of the Spirit be working for God’s new creation right here and now? What is it that you can do, through prayer, through hard work, through study, through getting together with other like-minded people to make a difference in God’s world? That is the calling; that’s what it means to be ‘simply Christian.’”

From *Simply Christian*:

“It is time, in the power of the Spirit, to take up our proper role, our fully human role, as agents, heralds, and stewards of the new day that is dawning. That, quite simply, is what it means to be Christian; to follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God’s new world, which he has thrown open before us.” (p. 237)



Reflect

✿ How would you answer each of Wright's questions (below)?

—*Where are you in the story at the moment?*

—*Where can you in the power of the Spirit be working for God's new creation right here and now?*

—*What is it that you can do, through prayer, through hard work, through study, through getting together with other like-minded people to make a difference in God's world?*

For Further Discussion

As a class, discuss the questions below. The facilitator or a class member should record your responses on a flipchart, whiteboard, or chalkboard.

1. What important facts and ideas have you learned through this study?
2. How has your faith been shaped?
3. What do you now want to learn and to do?

If possible, conclude the final session by singing the hymn "This Is My Father's World" (mentioned on pp. 217-18).

