

SIMPLY CHRISTIAN: WHY CHRISTIANITY MAKES SENSE BY N T (TOM) WRIGHT

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Notes will be on www.amhey.com/book

PROPOSED SCHEDULE

Date	Before The Meeting Read	Hardback Pages	Theme
May 3	Introduction, Ch 1	ix-xii, 3-15	Background to the book, Justice
May 10	Ch 2, 3, 4	16-51 39	Spirituality, Relationships, Beauty
May 17	Ch 5	55-69 15	God and Israel With Peter Llewellyn
May 24	Ch 6	71-89 19	Israel
May 31	NO BOOK GROUP		Bishop's Ranch Weekend
June 7	Ch 7, 8	92-119 27	Jesus 8:30 am
June 14	Ch 9, 10	121-140 20	Holy Spirit
June 21	Ch 11, 12, 13	143-184 42	Worship, Prayer, The Bible
June 28	Ch 14, 15,16, Afterword	185-240 56	The Story, Believing, Belonging, Living

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INTRODUCTION

AIM OF THE BOOK GROUP STUDY

- To share the experience of reading the same book
- To discuss the issues and questions raised by reading the book
- To explore the relevance of Christianity today
- To understand our belief systems better

AIM OF THE BOOK

To describe Christianity – "This is a massive task"

- "to commend it to those outside the faith"
- "to explain it to those inside"

SUMMARY

- Part 1. Echoes Of A Voice – Justice, Spirituality, Relationships, Beauty
- Part 2. Christian Beliefs – God, Israel, Jesus, the Holy Spirit
- Part 3. Christian Life – Worship, Prayers, Scriptures, Church
- Ecumenical, Personal, Contemporary
- What was the world like, what is it like, what do we do about it?

QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of religion?
2. What do you think of when you think of Christianity?
3. What do you think of when you hear "XXX is a Christian"?

4. Echoes of A Voice

Theme	If you have experienced "echoes of a voice" describe	Did the voice (or echo) lead to any feelings, beliefs or actions? If so what?
Justice		
Spirituality		
Relationships		
Beauty		

5. Christian Beliefs – Staring at The Sun

Theme	Statements in the Introduction	True	Not sure	False
God	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. One true God 2. Living God 3. God has a plan 4. God longs to put the world to rights 			
Israel	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God uses Jews in ancient Israel to carry out his plan 2. Old Testament stories tell of Israel's hopes 			
Jesus	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God revealed actions in Jesus 2. Jesus announced God's kingdom 3. Jesus died on a cross 4. Jesus rose again 			
Spirit	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Blows like a wind through the world 2. Blows in human lives 			

6. What is the church here for?

7. "We're called here and now to be instrument's of God's new creation" P xi. Do you feel this?

8. Christian Life

Theme	Describe each theme on the left?	What has changed in the last decade regarding the theme?
Worship		
Prayer		
Scriptures		
Church		

9. Is truth relative? Can we know the truth?

CHAPTER 1 - PUTTING THE WORLD TO RIGHTS – JUSTICE

CONCEPTS – MANY KINDS OF JUSTICE

Justice (source: Merriam Webster online dictionary)

1 a: the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments **b:** judge **c:** the administration of law ; *especially* : the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity

2 a: the quality of being just, impartial, or fair **b (1):** the principle or ideal of just dealing or right action (2): conformity to this principle or ideal : righteousness **c:** the quality of conforming to law

3: conformity to truth, fact, or reason : correctness

See also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice>

SUMMARY

Wright yearns for "a world put to rights" (P 3-4). Example of instinct for justice – a child says "that's not fair". Examples of injustice – greed, bribery, corruption, wrongful conviction, unjust compensation, predatory nations. There is hope – laws against apartheid, tyrants overthrown, criminals are convicted, compassion for the poor, good leaders. The line between justice and injustice is hard to draw.

How do we explain the echo of a voice: **a.** a dream; **b.** dream belongs to another world where we really belong; **c.** someone is caring for us and speaking to us. Religions of the book – Judaism, Christianity and Islam take option c.

Examples of how Jesus reacted to unjust situations. Christians haven't always been just. Examples of Christian justice – abolition of slavery, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King.

Passion for justice is a central feature of human life. It sometimes goes wrong. Christians may be muddled, fallible. Christians believe Jesus became human to give a voice crying for justice.

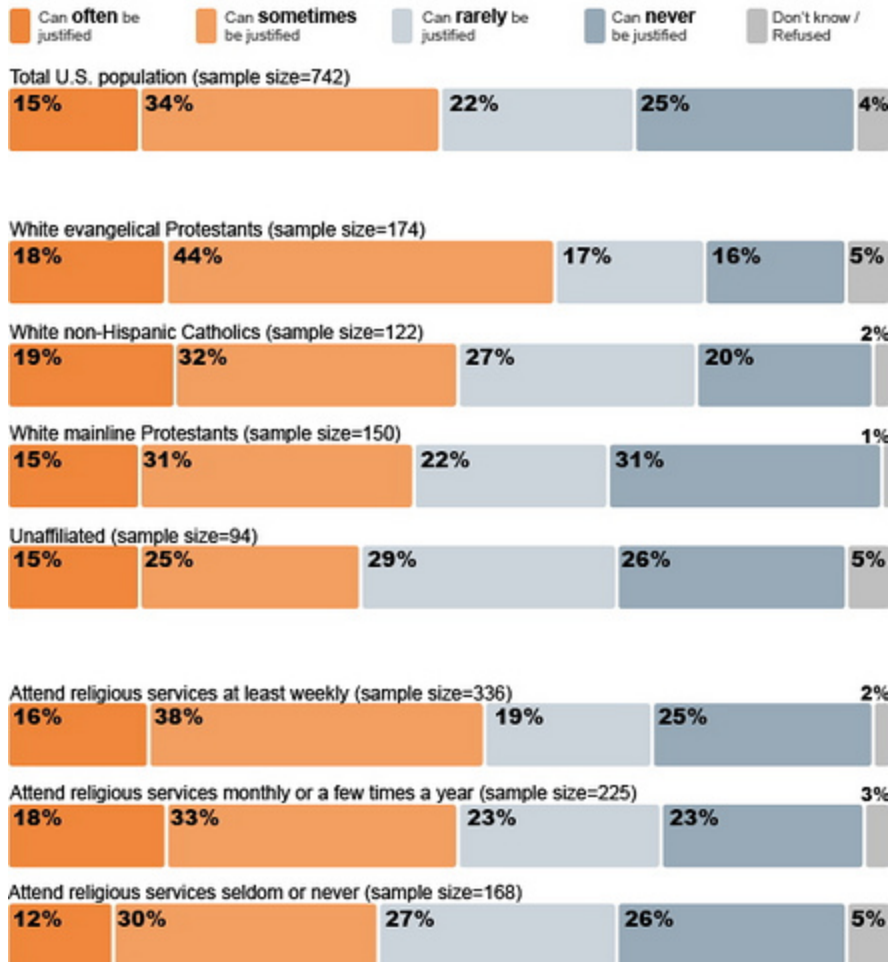
QUESTIONS

1. "A sense of justice comes with the kit of being human." P4 Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
2. Why, despite attempts at justice down the ages, has it been so difficult to put things right?
3. "Christians not only inherit the Jewish passion for justice but claim that Jesus embodied that passion." P10 – 12. What was Jesus' reaction to injustice?
4. What do you think "Jesus launched God's new creation" P12 means?
5. Historically, religions have been sometimes perceived as unjust. Are there situations where it makes sense for Christians to be unjust?
6. Why do you think Christianity is identified with "the West" when there are more Christians in other parts of the world and most people in "the West" are not Christians?

CURRENT ISSUES – CHRISTIANS DOING TERRIBLE THINGS, TORTURE

1. What do we say when someone despises Christianity because of the Crusades, Spanish Inquisition, etc.
2. Is torture justified?
3. How do we respond to the Pew survey (April)?

The use of torture against suspected terrorists...



REFERENCES

Encyclopedia Britannica doesn't have an entry for justice - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice>

FOR REFLECTION

Describe an unjust situation you discover during the week.

1. How do you feel about it?
2. What will you do about it?
3. What are others doing about it?
4. Who are the people trying to create justice in this situation?
5. How do your beliefs affect your response?

CHAPTER 2 – THE HIDDEN SPRING – SPIRITUALITY

SUMMARY

Materialism has shaped our culture for the past 2 centuries and spirituality springs up like water bursting through concrete. "The hidden spring" of spirituality functions as the **echo of a voice**. In many parts of the world people never lost their spirituality. Spiritual experiences include inner peace, happiness, emotions, sadness, suffering, joy, anguish, torment.

The skeptic might say "It's obviously true for you, but that doesn't mean it's true for anybody else." "It's true for you." is more or less equivalent to "It's not true for you." Several other pressures make the notion of truth highly problematic within our world. Spirituality is a signpost to something round the corner.

QUESTIONS

1. "Many people today heard the very word *spirituality* like travelers in a desert hearing news of an oasis." P18 – How true is this statement?
2. a) "Millions have enjoyed temporary separation from religious interference."
b) "Millions more ... have done their best to tap into spirituality."
c) Many more have been aware of an indefinable thirst, a longing for springs..."
P 20. Which of these categories have you belonged to?
3. What does "the hidden spring of spirituality" (P20) mean to you?
4. Why do you think many people in our culture are "quick to distance themselves from any suggestion of actually believing in the Christian message"? P21.
5. Where do spirituality and Christianity differ?

FOR REFLECTION

Observe when others around you seem spiritual. How do you feel? Do you share any spiritual feelings?

CHAPTER 3 - MADE FOR EACH OTHER – RELATIONSHIPS

SUMMARY

Making relationships work is difficult. Being solitary all the time is abnormal. We have more distant and online relationships than in early times. Marriages, democracies and personal friendships are complex. Relationships ending in death are sad. Relationships with partners, humankind and the Creator are described in the Old Testament. It says we are made in the Creator's image. There is a sad feeling when relationships fail, a voice calls us to relationship.

QUESTIONS

1. How do you feel about close relationships? Are they essential in today's society?
2. Do you have any hints for making close relationships thrive?
3. Wright discusses those who see relationships as "gender neutral" and at the other extreme those who "size up others as potential sexual partners". He has argued for more interchangeability of roles in his work (church). Do you think men and women should be treated differently by Christians?
4. How would you describe your own experience of a relationship with the Creator or with God or with Jesus?

FOR REFLECTION

Note in relationships with other people whether they are easy or complex. Do you feel "the echo of a voice" compelling to stay in a relationship or make it work better?



CHAPTER 4 – FOR THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH – BEAUTY

SUMMARY

Beauty, like justice, slips through our fingers. We take photos, buy recordings, read poetry and look at paintings. These rarely capture the real beauty. Beauty can fade quickly – the white snowy hillside becomes an avalanche, a lion becomes a predator, a wave can drown a person and a beautiful youth becomes older and uglier.

Beauty changes with the beholder. If, as Keats wrote, "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty" then again there is a problem with truth. The beauty is an "echo of a voice" not the voice itself. Beauty evokes strong feelings of awe, wonder and gratitude.

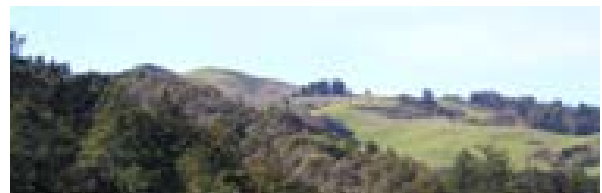
For Plato everything in the world is a reflection of the world of "The Forms", "Ideas", the ultimate reality. Christianity, Judaism and Islam point to a world created by a good God. Wright rejects Plato because we live in the real world. It is in bad shape, but we expect it to be repaired. God will create a beautiful world when this world is rescued, healed and restored.

QUESTIONS

1. Think of the most beautiful place, thing or person you can imagine. How does the memory make you feel compared with experiencing the real thing?
2. "As a matter of understanding beauty, we want to ask: Is the beauty we see at the moment complete, or is it incomplete, pointing to something in the future?" P46. What is beyond the beauty you see? Do you feel "the echoes of a voice"?
3. Some reduce truth to facts, others say truth is relative. "The sort of thing we could and should mean by "truth" will vary, according to what I am talking about." P 50 What types of truth does Wright write about? What does he say about knowing truth?

FOR REFLECTION

Notice when you see something beautiful.
How do you feel?
Do you feel spiritual?
Do you think about or communicate with God?



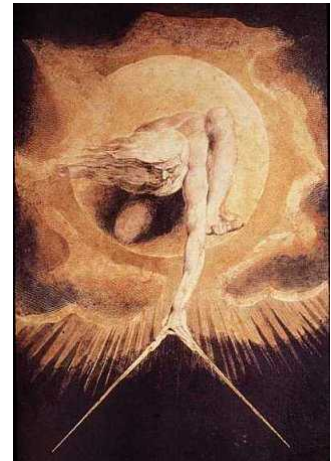
CHAPTER 5- GOD

SUMMARY

Heaven is God's dwelling place and earth is our space. Options: (a) heaven and earth are the same place – pantheism (b) heaven and earth are far apart – thoughts of Lucretius and Epicurus, as well Gnosticism and Deism now (c) heaven and earth interlock in many different ways – classic Judaeo-Christian thought. Examples of heaven and earth comingling: Jacob's ladder, Moses getting the 10 commandments on Mt Sinai and the Burning Bush, Israelites led by cloud and fire, God dwelling in the Tabernacle, the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus on earth, the Lord's Prayer. YHWH – Yahweh – LORD – ADONAI - God's unpronounceable name. Wright avoids describing God in detail. Picture: God by William Blake.

QUESTIONS

1. What characteristics of God govern your actions and beliefs?
2. Why does Wright call the next section of the book "Staring at the Sun"? P56
3. "In particular, this God appears to take very seriously the fact that his beloved creation has become corrupt, has rebelled and is suffering the consequences." P66 Do you think we suffer because of our rebellion against God?
4. "Many popular misconceptions of the Christian faith make the mistake of trying to fit Christian belief into a residual Deist framework". P66 What misconceptions in today's society keep heaven and earth separate, as in Deism?
5. The Israelites had a name too precious to say – YHWH? The name of God has become less precious in our time – what effect has this had on our speech and society?



FOR REFLECTION

When are you aware of God's influence on your life? When do you feel God is with you, if ever?

CHAPTER 6- ISRAEL

SUMMARY

Wright looks at the way Jews in Jesus day might have told the story of early Israel. Abraham was called to put things right with a covenant. The story of Israel is one of slavery, exodus, exile and restoration with Jews going back and forth again and again. Early Israelite poets declared their God would become king of the world. God would put things right. Early Israel revolves around the King, the Temple, the Torah (Law of Moses) and a New Creation. The Messiah is prophesied – he is expected to put things right. God's "word" will make all things new – another hint of something beyond the way of life in ancient Israel. The God of Israel is the creator and redeemer of not just Israel, but the whole world. The visions of the prophets point to Jesus.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Wright look at Israel from the perspective of Jews in Jesus' day? P72
2. What does Wright say the Tower of Babel represents? P73
3. How is Abraham's covenant with God described by Wright? P74
4. When God sees his people rebelling, how does he act? P75
5. What were the main comings and goings in ancient Israel? P76-86
6. Why does Wright describe the way that the Jews in Jesus' time thought "a wonderful dream"? P89 Is it more than a dream?

FOR REFLECTION

How have Christians influenced the creation of the State of Israel? How do Christians affect Middle East policy today? Does your understanding of Christianity affect your attitude to Jews and/or Israel? "We must speak, even though we tremble as we do so." P 72

CHAPTER 7 – JESUS AND THE COMING OF GOD'S KINGDOM

SUMMARY

Christianity is not about informing us, it is about rescuing us and giving us new life. It is not primarily about (a) new moral teaching (b) Jesus as a moral example to follow (c) Jesus providing a new route to heaven when you die (d) fresh teaching about God himself. We are offered freedom to explore and experience God's rescue. Jesus is the voice that has echoed around the human race so we can discover a new world of justice, spirituality, relationship and beauty.

Jesus was a first-century Jew and is now "in heaven", God's dimension of the cosmos, present, accessible and active in this world. Wright discusses the portrayal of Jesus in the canonical gospels and the Gospel of Thomas. Jesus fulfilled prophecies in the Old Testament. Jesus used dramatic actions and stories to get across his message about the "Kingdom of God".

QUESTIONS

1. What does Wright think about the relationship between morality and Christianity? How do you think morality and Christianity are related?
2. What does Wright mean by "God's rescue operation"? P 92-93
3. How do you think that Jesus has been reinterpreted in recent times? (P93)
4. Why doesn't Wright think the Gospel of Thomas is on a par with the Gospels we have in our Bible? (P96-98)
5. What does Wright say about Jesus healing the sick and telling stories? How did people react when he was alive and how do they react now? (P102-103)

FOR REFLECTION

Notice how Jesus is portrayed in popular media. Where is Christianity reinforced? Where is it in conflict with contemporary perceptions of Jesus?

CHAPTER 8 – JESUS: RESCUE AND RENEWAL

SUMMARY

Jesus, the Messiah, announces that God's kingdom is arriving. Jesus attacked the Jewish status quo, for example by overturning tables in the temple. The Last Supper is described in the context of the Jewish culture during Jesus' time. The rise of Christianity and the resurrection set Jesus apart from others who claimed to be the Messiah. Wright explores how Jesus is divine and human.

QUESTIONS

1. What did the disciples find difficult about what Jesus said? Why did they have difficulties? (P105,106)
2. "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 – thereby exhausting its power." How does this relate to the Jewish beliefs in Jesus' day? (P 108)
3. How did Jesus relate to Jewish tradition at the Last Supper? (P109-111)
4. What are the characteristics of Jesus' resurrection as described by Wright? (P112-116)
5. How does Wright explain that Jesus was "truly divine and truly human"? (P118)
6. What does it mean to say that Jesus is "personally present and active in the world"? (P119)

FOR REFLECTION

How does Jesus affect your actions and activities?

How do we make sense of Jesus being both divine and human?

CHAPTER 9 – GOD'S BREATH OF LIFE

SUMMARY

Early Christians described the Holy Spirit as a wind, tongues of fire, a bird brooding over waters of chaos. Disciples were puzzled. Not all the questions we ask God can be answered directly. The Spirit enables us and the church to share Jesus's life. The Spirit is the personal presence of God himself. The Spirit joins heaven and earth. We are the Temple of God – the Spirit can live there.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you ever feel the power of the Holy Spirit? If so when and what does it feel like?
2. What does Wright say the point of the Spirit is? (p122-4)
3. How does Wright describe Paul's interpretation of the Spirit? (p125-6)
4. Why does Wright say about the Spirit and supernatural events? (p128)
5. Why does unity of the church matter? (p129)

FOR REFLECTION

Take some time to be quiet and alone.

Think about the Holy Spirit and how it brings heaven and earth closer together both in the wide world and in your personal life.

CHAPTER 10 LIVING BY THE SPIRIT

SUMMARY

The Spirit fulfils the Temple, the Torah and aids God's work and God's. Wright discusses the difference between the Jewish and Christian views of God's Law. He relates the Holy Spirit to the echoes of a voice in Chapter 1. He describes Christian Spirituality and the Trinity.

QUESTIONS

1. What does Wright say about the Old Testament and New Testament views on God's Law? (P131-2)
2. In what context was the Spirit given to the disciples? (P133)
3. What does Wright say about "the word of God"? (p134)
4. What does Wright say about God's wisdom? (p134-5)
5. What does Wright write about Spirit-led people? (p135)
6. How does God's own Spirit relate to justice, spirituality, relationships and beauty? (P136)
7. What are the two things Wright emphasizes about Christian spirituality? (p137)
8. How does Wright explain the Trinity? (138-140)

FOR REFLECTION

Notice how the word Spirituality is used today. Notice when Christian Spirituality is mentioned in the popular media. Notice how you experience Spirituality – do you feel awe or do you suffer? Do you feel particularly Christian?