

Simply Christian

Small Group Study Guide



Church of St Bride, Clarkson

Winter 2007

Building Up the Body of Christ

Reaching Out With the Love of Christ

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Introduction

This book, by Tom Wright, is written primarily for individuals who are seeking faith and understanding in the Christian tradition. However, it is also a helpful book for Christians who want a refresher course in the basics of the gospel, particularly in light of current challenges to religious faith today.

While there is more material in *Simply Christian* than can be completely covered in six weeks, it is still possible to catch the gist of Wright's argument and have a profitable group discussion. Don't be discouraged; don't get bogged down! The study assumes participants have read the relevant chapters; the questions are intended to encourage discussion. It is better to move through all the sections, rather than deal with each and every question in depth.

Simply Christian is written in three parts; Part One is called "Echoes of a Voice". In it Wright declares that God has spoken or acted. However we don't hear God's voice directly; instead we can pick up the echoes of that Voice and from the echoes begin to imagine who and what God is like.

The way in which God has spoken is to have created us so that we possess certain inbred, instinctive desires or hopes or longings. While these longings don't prove the existence of God, they do strengthen the possibility or even probability that Someone put the longings there in the first place.

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Session #1: "Echoes of a Voice":

This session covers the first four chapters of the book. It is therefore unlikely that you will get through all of it in any depth. However Wright's strategy is the same for each chapter. So concentrate on one or two chapters in your group and look at the others in your spare time.

Wright identifies four such longings or echoes of God's Voice:

- 1. Longing for Justice*
- 2. Desire for Spirituality*
- 3. Hunger for Relationships*
- 4. Delight in Beauty*

1. Longing for Justice

Q.1 Do people instinctively know right from wrong?

Q.2 What are 2-3 of the worst human injustices in history?

Q.3 Can you name 2-3 current local injustices?

Q.4 How do you feel about such injustices?

Read Simply Christian – Page 9 – Paragraph 3

Q. 5 Is a longing for justice an echo of God's voice for you?

2. Desire for Spirituality

Q.1 In our materialistic world, what is "spirituality"?

Q.2 Share one experience you have had which you would describe as spiritual. What made it spiritual for you?

Read Page 24, middle paragraph

Q.3 Wright argues that our thirst for God (i.e. a spiritual experience) is a hint or clue that there is a God; is this a convincing argument for you?

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3. Hunger for Relationships

Read Page 30, middle paragraph

- Q.1 What do we mean by saying – we're made for each other?
- Q.2 In what ways are we made for God?

Two Quotations

"There is a God-shaped vacuum in every human heart."

"Our hearts are not at rest until they rest in Thee."

- Q.3 How does this hunger or longing for God indicate His existence? What sort of God might He be?

4. A Delight in Beauty

- Q.1 Name or describe something beautiful. What makes it beautiful? Where did it come from?
- Q.2 What is the opposite of beauty? Does it have a destructive element?
- Q.3 Does our desire for beauty lead us to its creator?

Closing Scripture reading: Psalm 8; Psalm 19:1-4

Next Week: Read Chapters 5 and 6

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Session #2: "Staring At The Sun"

Part 1 - (Chapter 5 – God – Pages 55 – 69)

(Note: you may wish to spend more time on Part 2 than on Part 1)

In this chapter Tom Wright explores the various meanings of the word "God". Sometimes it is used in an abstract sense; at other times it is used as a proper name.

Q 1. How would you define the word "God"?

Later in the chapter Wright talks about heaven, and after offering several inadequate definitions, suggests that heaven is God's Space and earth is our Space. The big question is – How are the two connected?

He provides three alternatives:

- 1. Pantheism or panentheism:** *God is in all things*
- 2. Deism:** *God created everything and then left all creation to its own devices, never again intervening or interacting with His creation.*
- 3. Theism:** *i.e. heaven and earth interlock or overlap.*

Q. 2. What do you think of these three options?
Which one is closest to your own beliefs...or to the faith of the Christian Church?

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Part 2 (Chapter 6 – Israel – Pages 71 – 89)

Going back to #3 above viz. that theism is about heaven and earth overlapping, Christians are agreed that this takes place supremely in Jesus of Nazareth. Wright, however, insists that we cannot really understand Jesus unless and until we understand the story of Israel. Read p.71, paragraphs 1-2.

- Q. 1. Around your circle briefly tell from memory the history of Israel, using the following names:
Adam and Eve, Noah
Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
Moses, Joshua
Gideon, Samson, assorted Judges
Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon
Assorted Kings
Nebuchadnezzar
Ezra, Nehemiah
Isaiah, Assorted prophets
- Q. 2. Wright identifies four themes in this story:
1. The Kings
 2. The Temples
 3. The Law
 4. The New Creation

How did each of these themes both satisfy and frustrate the people of Israel?

- Q. 3. Wright also sees the underlying theme of leaving home and returning home running all through the Old Testament. What is your experience of leaving home and returning?

Conclude by reading from Page 85 (And the key theme...) to the top of Page 87, and from the bottom of Page 88 to 89. Do you see why Wright insists we need to understand Israel in order to understand Jesus?

Next Week: Read Chapters 7 and 8

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Session #3: "Staring At The Sun"

Part 1 - (Chapter 7: Jesus and the Coming of God's Kingdom – Pages 91-103)

Review:

- Q. 1 What were the key themes or roles played by Israel, in God's purposes? *Note: In N.T. Wright's understanding, everything significant about Israel is fulfilled or completed in Jesus.*
- Q. 2 Wright begins with some popular misconceptions about Christianity: what is Christianity not about?
- Q. 3 It is tempting to dismiss the reliability of the Bible. Why would Wright – (and you?) think we can trust the bible's record about Jesus?
- Q. 4 What is the Kingdom of God, and how does Jesus connect to it? Remember that John the Baptist said – The Kingdom of God is coming soon; Jesus said – the Kingdom of God is at hand (here now).

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Part 2 (Chapter 8 Jesus: Rescue and renewal – Pages 105-119)

The four gospels are roughly composed in three parts: an introduction about Jesus' birth or origins; a middle section describing his public ministry – teaching, healing, etc., and a final section outlining his last trip to Jerusalem (Palm Sunday) and the subsequent events of his last few days – capture, trial, death, and resurrection. Surprisingly all of the gospel writers dedicated most of their material to this third section. In other words they believed the most important facts about Jesus were about his death and resurrection.

Q. 1 Describe what you believe Jesus came to do. What was his mission?

Q. 2 Remembering from last week that Wright identified four themes in the story of Israel the Kings

The Temple

The Law

The New Creation

How does Jesus fulfill each of these?

Q. 3 What do the following texts tell us about Jesus' resurrection?

Romans 1:1-4 (his identity)

Romans 4:24-25 (his action for us)

2 Corinthians 4:13-14 (our destiny)

Next Week: Read Chapters 9 and 10

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Session #4: "Staring At The Sun"

Part 1 - (Chapter 9 – God's Breath of Life – Pages 121 – 129)

- Q. 1 In the most general terms, and before referring to Wright, what does the word 'spirit' mean to you?
- Q. 2 Now look at Wright's definition of the Spirit (near the bottom of page 126) "The Spirit is the strange, personal presence of the living God himself, leading, guiding, warning, rebuking, grieving over our failings, and celebrating our small steps toward the true inheritance."
Is this a good definition? Why?
- Q.3 What is your definition of the Holy Spirit?
- Q.4 Look at the following texts... (words of Jesus at the Last Supper)

What do each of them tell us about the Holy Spirit?

John 14:23-26; John 15:26-27; John 16:12-15

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Part 2 (Chapter 10 – Living by the Spirit – Pages 131 – 140)

A difficult chapter!! (Let's concentrate on pages 136ff)

Read together all of page 136:

- Q.1 What are the four deep longings that the Holy Spirit finally meets for us? How is this working out in your life??
- Q.2 God is both TRANSCENDENT (awesome, majestic, distant) and IMMANENT (close, intimate, approachable). Which of these states is most real for you?
- Q.3 The Spirit is present in human suffering. How can the following text be a source of comfort or encouragement to you? Romans 8:10-39. Read this slowly...you may not have time to discuss it in detail; take it home with you for further reflection.

Next Week: Read Chapters 11 to 14

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Session #5: "Reflecting the Image"

Part 1 (Chapter 11 & 12 – Worship / Prayer – Pages 143 – 172)

Q. 1 According to Wright Scripture reading and bread-breaking are two fundamental parts of Christian worship. Why do you think each is important? Are both at the heart of your own worship? Why or why not?

Q.2 Tom Wright suggests that it is healthy for Christians "to get help in prayer", by saying prayers written by others (page 164). Do you agree? Do you feel this makes prayer less sincere?

Reflect on what Wright says considering also Jesus' warning about "vain repetition" in prayer (see Matthew 6:7).

Do you find liturgical prayer (prayers read together in public worship) meaningful in your own worship of God?

Do you find extemporaneous prayer (prayer created "on the spot") meaningful in your worship of God?

Q.3 Read Romans 8:26-27, and reflect on Wright's words on page 162-164 about the distinctiveness of truly Christian prayer. Are you ever conscious of "Standing at the fault line" (page 164) as you pray?

Q.4 "There is (of course) much more that could be said about prayer, but, as with worship, the important thing is to get on with it." (page 170). What prevents you from "getting on with it" if anything? Do you pray regularly? Are you comfortable praying with others in a group—in this group? Why or why not?

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Part 2 (Chapter 13 & 14 – The Book God Breathed / The Story and the Task – Pages 173 – 197)

- Q.1 In what way is the Bible “authoritative” in your life? Turn to page 187 and discuss Wright’s statement: “Living with ‘the authority of Scripture’ then, means living in the world of the story...It means soaking ourselves in that story as a community and as individuals...” Do you intentionally place yourself in God’s story as you make important life decisions?
- Q.2 Reflect on Wright’s comments about the “literal” and “metaphorical” interpretation of Scripture (page 191-197). Note especially his concluding remarks on page 197: “We should take particular care to avoid one subtle but powerful line of thought...” How is the authority of the Bible lessened if a metaphorical interpretation of Scripture is wrongly applied? How is the authority of the Bible lessened if a literal interpretation is wrongly applied? How can we know when to use which interpretation? (see page 197 final paragraph). Are only biblical scholars/clergy able to interpret Scripture?

Next Week: Read Chapters 15 and 16

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Session #6: "Reflecting the Image"

Part 1 (Chapter 15 – Believing and Belonging Pages 199 – 215)

- Q.1 Tom Wright says on page 203: "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 the family we belong to..." Discuss this in light of the often heard: "X is a good Christian but doesn't go to church..." Is it possible to be a Christian without belonging?
- Q.2 Do you agree with Wright's claim on page 212: "Every Christian should belong to a group that is small enough for individuals to get to know and care for each other and particularly to pray in meaningful depth for one another, and also to a fellowship large enough to contain a wide variety in its membership, styles of worship, and kingdom - activity"? Why or why not? What can we do to encourage the continual formation of new small groups at St. Bride's?

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Part 2 (Chapter 16 – New Creation Starting Now – Pages 217 – 237)

- Q. 1 Share how you came to faith in Christ. Was it sudden, gradual, both?
- Q.2 Turn to page 222 and reflect on Wright's words about the Christian journey being about both renunciation and rediscovery. Is saying "no" truly counter-cultural? How easy is it for you to say "yes" to God's new creation?
- Q.3 Re-read the final paragraph of the book on page 237. It seems our refusal to say "no" and our reluctance to say "yes" means we settle for a cheap substitute for true human existence. Do you see yourself settling for less than the life God invites us into? Take a minute to reflect quietly on your own as to what God might want to change in you to bring your life more fully in harmony with his new creation?

Only share your thoughts if you would like to... but take time at the end of this session to offer your thoughts to God, and to pray for each other as together we seek to be God's kingdom people.

- Q.4 Look at the picture on the cover of the book. Why do you think Wright chose this image? What does it say to you based on what Wright is trying to say and based on what we have discussed during these past six weeks?