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4/3/2011  
N.T Wright and the Trinity

New ideas and commentaries on biblical, Christian doctrines have always caused quite a stir, often simultaneously inciting hatred and affection, and termed as either heresy or ‘revolutionary.’ N.T Wright and his role in the ‘New Perspectives on Paul’ are no exception. His shocking ideas on Justification and his line-blurring markers he wields over Justification and Sanctification have gotten a lot of attention, if only because the better parts of his theology have lured in unsuspecting young ‘Calvinists.’ But perhaps a lesser known facet of the tainted diamond of his theology is his Christology.

The Westminster Confession declares that “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.” This simply reinstates the benedictions of New Testament epistles, as well as well-known passages like John 1 and John 15, and the ancient creeds of the apostles and Nicaea that refuted ancient heresies. These truths are clearly expressed in Scripture, and though many have questioned both the humanity and deity of Christ, orthodoxy has ultimately prevailed.

N.T Wright, it seems, quietly undermines the union between Father and Son. His error appears to lie in a misunderstanding of Old Testament and Covenant theology; and he looks at Christ through a lens at least partially tainted by a Jewish school of thought. The result is a Jesus who is purely a Jewish Messiah, simply a glorified Judas Maccabeus or an über-Gideon. Because, he postulates, Jews would have had a purely singular view of God, the phrase ‘Son of God’ would not have meant, in their eyes, an equality with God, since angels and even David were called sons of God. Rather, Jesus has a very certain union with God, but he is still somehow very much distinct from the Father. Jesus of Nazareth was a man, an ultimate man, sent by God to fulfill a mission. He says ‘As in the Exodus, the true God reveals himself as who he is, putting the idols to shame (4:8-11). But the God who has now revealed himself in this way is the God who “sends the son” (4:4) and then “sends the Spirit of the Son” (4:6)… it is precisely in terms of Torah and Temple that the earthly Jesus acted symbolically and spoke cryptically to define his mission and hint at his own self understanding.’ This seems to put too great a divide between Christ and the Father, who are both simultaneously and singularly referred to as the creator and upholder of the world.

To be sure, Wright does not come right out and say that Jesus is not God, though he never precisely states his meaning. He hints at Christ’s view of himself in stressing his humanity: “At the human level, Jesus is like us precisely in this: he did not exist or think or feel or pray in a vacuum, but rather within a continuum, a web of socio-cultural symbolic resonances, a universe of discourse within which deeds, thoughts, and words carried layers of meaning.” Orthodox and reformed Christianity, of course, leave room for this type of thinking: Christ most certainly was 100% human as well as 100% God, and he thought and acted precisely as we would, yet without sin. Christ as a human was indeed ignorant of things, and yet he most definitely knew who he was and what his mission was. However, anything beyond acknowledging the paradox of his humanity and deity becomes pure speculation, an activity Wright dangerously recommends: “ I do not think we will find that the true Jesus is significantly different from the Jesus of the Gospels (as has now become literally a dogma in many critical circles), *nor do I believe that we will know who the Jesus of the text of the Gospels actually was and is unless we go* ***behind*** *the text and find out what it actually means.”* He quickly adds a hermeneutical and linguistic qualification to this statement, but it’s ultimately empty: how much more about Christ can be known simply because of a Greek idiom? The gospels are plain in the speaking and don’t try to use cultural idiosyncrasies to prove a point about Jesus.

But Wright again turns a corner and firmly states: “Did [Jesus] think he was going to die for the sins of the world? Did he think he was in any sense the embodiment of Israel’s God? I cannot myself see that an orthodox christology or atonement theology can give a negative answer to either of those questions without running into serious difficulties. Can you really be God incarnate and have no idea of it? But equally I cannot think that an orthodox christology, which takes Jesus’ humanity at least as seriously as Chalcedon did, can avoid asking how Jesus could think thoughts like that precisely as a second-Temple Jew?”   
So far, so good, but he gets fuzzy again:   
“Jesus believed he was Israel’s Messiah, the one in whom Israel’s history was to be summed up. Jesus believed he would win the messianic victory over the real enemy and would build the true messianic temple through taking Israel’s fate upon himself and going to the cross. Jesus believed that in doing so he was not just pointing to or talking about, but was actually embodying, the return of YHWH to Zion.”  
Why would Wright use hazy terms like “embodying?” Why not simply state that Jesus Christ *was* Yahweh, returning to Zion not only for simply the sins of his own geographical nation, but his spiritual nation of Israel? Too much of Wright’s theology seems wrapped up in a purely physical Israel, instead of speaking of the greater Israel of the elect (Galatians 6:16).

Wright also seems to place too high a regard on human reason. He says “The question of “Jesus and God” is a huge and difficult matter.” But if we really read the Scripture, it’s not. It’s obvious and it’s clear (Jn. 5:18). From a purely philosophical standpoint it is very difficult, indeed impossible to comprehend. But God has given his people the Scripture; it is useless and ungrateful to debate points of theology with a logos-based or philosophically oriented point of view.

Wright ultimately is simply beating around the bush. He never once in 12,000 words simply says “Jesus is God.” But that (as well as “Jesus is a man”) are the only two declarative, simple, obvious, and thoroughly biblical statements we ever need to make about Jesus.

Wright says, ,Let me be clear, also, what I am not saying. I do not think Jesus “knew he was God” in the same sense that one knows one is tired or happy, male or female. He did not sit back and say to himself “Well I never! I’m the second person of the Trinity!” Rather, “as part of his human vocation grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, he believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be.”[39] I commend to you this category of “vocation” as the appropriate way forward for talking about what Jesus knew and believed about himself. This Jesus is both thoroughly credible as a first century Jew and thoroughly comprehensible as the one to whom early, high, Jewish christology looked back.’ Why Wright says Jesus did not ‘know he was God’ just as we know some fact is rather obscure. It almost seems that Wright is afraid to come out and say Jesus is God, but he believes it anyways. His statements don’t really say definitively whether Wright believes Jesus is a super-human embodiment of Yahweh that stepped on the scene in 3 B.C, a docetic savior that took the form of various Israelite saviors, or really and fully the second person of the Godhead.

Whatever the case may be, Wright’s confusing and neither wholly orthodox nor fully heretical statements warn us of similar obscurity. Whether his theology is essentially Arian or Eutychian, Wright’s misleading statements can corrupt pure doctrine and must be taken with a large grain of salt.

# Works Cited

Wright, N.T. "Jesus and the Identity of God." 1998. N.T Wright Page. <http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\_JIG.htm>.