

HOW TO TEACH YOUR CHURCH ABOUT THE CRUCIFIXION

Breaking Down N.T. Wright's 'The Day the Revolution Began' for Everyone

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About The Author

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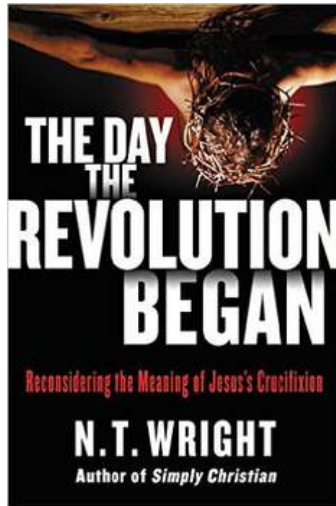
J.R. Briggs' passion is two-fold: to grow fruit on other people's trees – specifically the trees of hungry kingdom leaders – and to collaborate with others to create good mischief for the kingdom. He started Kairos Partnerships in 2011 to see these two passions meet the needs of kingdom leaders.

In addition to starting Kairos Partnerships, J.R. Briggs serves in ministry as founding pastor and Cultural Cultivator of The Renew Community, a Jesus-centered congregation for the hungry and the hurting in the Greater Philadelphia Area.

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Recently I finished reading N.T. Wright's newest book, *The Day the Revolution Began*, and my mind and heart continue to be stirred and challenged.

Like for many others, Professor Wright's works have formed me significantly, having read several of his books and taken a handful of his online learning modules. In many ways, the book is vintage Wright. And yet, he delves deeply into a topic that needed further exploration: the cross.

In typical Wright fashion he doesn't just talk about the cross and its implications on sin and forgiveness; he takes the next step, helping us understand how the cross informs and propels us farther and deeper into participants in God's mission.

As I continued reading I found additional concepts, insights, and thoughts from Professor Wright worthy of translation. This book is the result translation efforts in order to make Wright's book accessible to the "ordinary" people in my congregation – and hopefully in yours as well.

Chapter 1: Reading Wright through the Eyes of my Congregation

As a pastor rooted in a local context, I couldn't help but think about the lives of the people in my congregation as I read the book. I was reminded again of Eugene Peterson's jarringly honest words: "A local church is a congregation of embarrassingly ordinary people in and through whom God chooses to be present in the world."

While many pastors find deep theological study to be a great joy (some might even call it a hobby) that certainly isn't the case with most of the people in my church. Many of our hungry yet "ordinary" people – nurses, union electricians, stay-at-home moms, students, truck drivers, retirees, steel workers, IT specialists – have admitted to me throughout the years that they find the study of theology to be intimidating, cumbersome and even dry.

Most people in my congregation won't find a 90-minute conversation about atonement theory to be life giving and engaging. And the truth is, most people in our church won't read Wright's new book, no matter how great it is. This, of course, isn't wrong, but it is something I have to keep in mind.

And so, I am left with questions:

- How does N.T. Wright's book about the hope of Christ's life, death and resurrection intersect with the typical Tuesday afternoons of the "ordinary" people in our church?
- And how can I communicate its important message in a way that impacts these "ordinary" people entrusted to me?

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The challenge and the goal with deep theological books like Professor Wright's isn't to dilute or dumb down the message; instead, it is to break down these important insights into more accessible and tangible truths for their lives. This, of course, isn't to make the message simplistic, but to make it simple, clear and accessible. Wright states:

"Jesus died in order to make us not rescued nonentities, but restored human beings, with a vocation to play a vital part in God's purposes for the world."

For those in mission-oriented pastoral leadership, our task is to then ask: how, exactly, do these "embarrassingly ordinary people" among us (me included) play this vital part in God's purposes for the world?

Five Ways Pastors Help "Ordinary" People

Reflecting on these questions forced me to reflect upon the role pastors can play in the lives of our "ordinary" people in a handful of practical and pointed ways:

1 Helping people unlearn – and then relearn – the gospel

The scriptures, of course, were written in order to be understood as a communal story of God and His relationship with His people. In a sense, it is a book majoring on the community as a whole, while minoring in personal and individual implications. And yet, we swim in cultural waters that prioritize individualistic and consumeristic experience; this, of course, leaks into how we read and understand our Bibles.

Our work is cut out for us. It is important to frequently reflect upon not just the gospel message we are communicating, but to ask what gospel message our people are hearing. Much of the role of the pastor today is to assist others in unlearning the inaccurate and truncated versions of the good news – then helping our people to relearn God's Grand Story and the good news of Jesus that lies within in. Language, of course, creates culture.

Therefore, let us be particularly mindful of our pronouns in how we instruct and pray, preach and converse with others. Training our people to grasp "we" over "me" is a crucial part of our calling.

2

Preaching the resurrection throughout the year, not just during Holy Week

Churches acknowledge the importance of the resurrection of Jesus and the centrality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But the truth is, too many churches leave this message to unpack almost solely during Holy Week.

A few months ago I asked a few dozen pastors how often they preach on the cross and the resurrection, many told me sheepishly that it was almost entirely left to around Easter time. If the cross is as central and significant as we believe it is, shouldn't its message be something we proclaim more regularly?

Take inventory of the conversations you've had in the past month and ask yourself, how often have you talked about the cross?

Look back the preaching calendar from the past few months and ask, when was the last time my preaching focused primarily on the cross and the power of the resurrection outside of Lent and Holy Week?

These answers can be quite telling.

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3

Communicating the gospel that includes both what we are saved from and for

Churches can communicate (intentionally or unintentionally) a truncated and inaccurate gospel of a highly individualized theological fire insurance policy, overemphasizing a gospel of fear and individualism of what we are saved from. What's left out is the good news that God has a significant role for his people to join His mission.

As Wright reminds us,

"Once we replace the common vision of Christian hope ('going to heaven') with the biblical vision of 'new heavens and new earth,' there will be direct consequences for how we understand both the human problem and the divine solution" (68).

Does the gospel we are proclaiming possess the hope of what we are saved from and what we are saved for? I find that asking people in my church a simple and direct question can reveal a lot about what we are communicating when I ask them, "Why does the cross matter?" Do their answers reveal a mindset of a rescue plan from hell, or a grander vision of God's love and grace to join with Him in the renewal and reconciliation of all creation (2 Corinthians 5)?

4 Preaching from weakness and brokenness so people know that I need the cross, too

Preaching from our shortcomings can be one of the most important ways to show our humanity and our need for the cross. It can be easy (and safer) to share only "victory stories" from the pulpit or over coffee. But doing so on a regular basis can easily lead others to believe (or solidify their already held assumptions) that pastors are somehow more spiritual than others. By making ourselves the hero of the stories we tell, people often begin to believe that Jesus does not need to be the hero in their own stories.

Modeling vulnerability by sharing our pain and shortcomings in appropriately vulnerable and courageous ways greases the skids of people's gospel imaginations and reminds them that, yes, pastors desperately need grace, too.

5 Taking people on walking tours and helicopter flyovers

My family lives two hours south of New York City and we find as many excuses to visit as we can. Each time we visit, we see guides hosting walking tours with groups of curious tourists, pointing out specific points of interest – the intricacies of specific architecture, the historic landmarks, spots where movies have been filmed – and sharing particular stories of interest.

When we walk along the East River we hear the constant hum overhead of helicopters, giving aerial tours that provide panoramic perspectives, the topography of the five boroughs and the key landmarks, allowing riders to comprehend the vastness of the Big Apple.

In order to get a clear picture of the context, largeness and beauty of New York City, participating in both walking tours and helicopter rides are significant.

Within local congregations, translating theological concepts into the everyday language of their context – in the boardroom, the classroom, the living room and the playroom – is crucial. Walking tours. But if we only take people on walking tours by focusing solely on the intricacies and nuances of theology – people are unable to see its connection to the larger, wider and grader vision of God’s story and mission for all of creation. And when we spend our time solely on the big picture of God’s story (giving operating helicopter tours) we can easily romanticize God’s mission and the good news can feel theoretical and excarnated.

The Gift of The Day the Revolution Began

Professor Wright’s book is a gift. It is thorough, giving attention to specific portions of Scripture and their nuances. And yet, he wisely strikes the right balance by frequently reminding readers of the overall vision of God’s mission and His heart for the world. He walks us through the streets of God’s story, while also providing aerial coverage of the grand scope of His mission.

Wright’s writing reminds pastors and kingdom practitioners of our calling: to properly translate the insights of deep theological minds in order to make them accessible to “ordinary” people. Additionally, his book reminds us that our calling requires discernment to know when to take our people on a walking tour through God’s cosmic story and when to give a helicopter flyover tour that gives the entire perspective of God’s mission and our role in it. Both types of tours are crucial in helping people grasp the richness, vastness, depth and beauty of the cross and its central place in God’s good news to the world.

Chapter 2: 5 Tips for “Translating” N.T. Wright’s Book on the Cross {For Pastors}

1 Address—and contrast—the popular view of the cross with its original context.

Just as we need to help people unlearn—and then relearn—the gospel, we also need to help people unlearn—and relearn—what the meaning and weight of the cross actually is.

No doubt, the symbol of the cross is en vogue. In a postmodern everything-goes society, it’s somewhat ironic that the cross has somehow become cool. Look closely at the bulging shoulders of NBA athletes next time SportsCenter is on. Notice what’s dangling around the neck of a famous musical artist next time they are featured in a magazine at the checkout line at the grocery store or a BuzzFeed article online. Look above the mantle next time you pop in for a quick visit at your neighbor’s house. You’ll notice them everywhere—even in the places you’d least expect it.

The cultural attitude toward crosses, and its presence in fashion, sports, and interior decoration, has been widely unaddressed; and yet, it remains in many corners of our culture – hidden in plain sight. This is not inherently bad, but it does need to be further addressed. This can be a bridge to meaningful discussion.

Contrast the current cultural posture of the symbol of the cross with the gruesome reality of people in the first century. As Wright points out, it was so horrific and offensive that the cross and the act of crucifixion were hardly talked about in public in any capacity. To see a crucifixion in process could lead anyone with a weak stomach to throw up. Brutal. Barbaric. Inhumane.

“ Contrast the current cultural posture of the symbol of the cross with the gruesome reality of people in the first century. ”

So, how does this translate? On a practical level, help people understand the nature of the cross through this cultural contrast. Paint the fashionable treatment of the cross today in contrast to the first century reality.

It would be like an NBA power forward revealing a large tattoo of an electric chair on his forearm or a musician wearing a small diamond encrusted noose on a chain around her neck or a neighbor displaying a beautiful outline of a large syringe symbolizing lethal injection on the dining room wall flippantly stating, 'Yeah, I got that piece on sale last week'.

It would shock us, confuse us, disturb us, and possibly make us ponder the mental state of these athletes, musicians, and neighbors. And yet, that's the power and the horror of the cross in the first century.

Simply pointing these facts out to those in our congregation can healthily jolt us into the reality of the gruesome nature of crucifixion that God's son, Jesus, participated in voluntarily in the outlandishly loving act to rescue the entire human race. It's through this love demonstrated on the stomach-churning execution instrument that the revolution of Jesus actually began.

Communicate the radical nature of discipleship

A clear picture of the horrific and gruesome nature of the cross, then, leads us naturally to talk about the nature and the weightiness of the path of a Jesus follower.

The onus is on us as pastors to communicate to people that picking up one's cross, denying oneself, and following Jesus is not fun, appealing, or simply 'a plausible option'. It is much more radical, significant, and countercultural (even offensive) than we think. Wright states 'suffering and dying is the way by which the world is changed' (368).

This is not a message the world is used to hearing. In fact, in a culture drowning in convenience and consumerism, this message is bound to raise objection and receive pushback. Really? people might think. Are you sure? Is that how it works? Is it really supposed to be that radical and all encompassing?

In short: yes. Yes, it is.

To teach the radical, countercultural, and oftentimes unpopular journey of voluntarily picking up our execution device and denying ourselves is a non-negotiable element of worshiping and following King Jesus. We live in a culture that discourages any denial of ourselves. In fact, it encourages—demands, even—that we pursue what we believe as our own personal fulfillment and self satisfaction.

No wonder in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said this was the narrow path that few actually find. While not wildly popular, this is, in fact, the true message of Jesus to anyone who wishes to follow in his ways. To preach a gospel of personal fulfillment is to preach something other than the good news of Jesus.

“Following Jesus is not fun, appealing, or simply ‘a plausible option’.”

3

Rethink our understanding of sin

As pastors, we often assume people know what we mean when we talk about sin. These assumptions are terribly misguided. It's imperative that we are extremely clear with people when we talk about sin; we are in need not just of clarity, but also in rethinking the nature of sin itself.

Initially, this statement may lead some to believe a suggestion for a softer view of sin as a mere ‘shortcoming’ or ‘small mistake’. (This softening of sin's sharp edge and provokes devastating consequences in our relationship with God is also en vogue.) But this certainly isn't what Wright suggests in his book. In fact, Wright refocused sin in a way that helps us understand just how deeply damaging it is to God's desire for his people to participate in his mission.

Here are Wright's words, which are more articulate than my own: "The normal Greek word for 'sin' namely *hamartia*, means 'missing the mark': shooting at a target and failing to hit it. This is subtly but importantly different from being given a long and fussy list of things you must and mustn't do and failing to observe them all."

A bit farther down he continues:

"In this story the Bible is telling, humans were created for a purpose, and Israel was called for a purpose, and the purpose was not simply 'to keep the rules', 'to be with God', or 'to go to heaven', as you might suppose from innumerable books, sermons, hymns, and prayers. Humans were made to be 'image-bearers', to reflect the praises of creation back to the Creator and to reflect the Creator's wise and loving stewardship into the world. Israel was called to be the royal priesthood, to worship God, and to reflect his rescuing wisdom into the world."

Wright defines sin as a failure of worship. Scripture reveals that humans are created in order to live as worshipping stewards. 'When humans sin', he writes, 'they hand to non-divine forces a power and authority that those forces were never supposed to have'. This doesn't dilute or soften the nature of sin. In fact, quite the opposite; it makes sin even more consequential and damaging to God's ultimate desire for his people to participate in his mission. On a personal level, Wright's definition of sin put the wheels of my mind and my heart into motion for several days after reading it.

Our sacred calling is to lead people to embracing and participating in relationship with God and his mission as worshipers of the Creator. Part of that charge is helping people grasp, embrace and believe in their marrow that sin is the single greatest break of our worship of God.

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4 Preach to people's idols, which are almost entirely found in the forms of money, sex, and power.

If we teach sin as a failure of worship by human beings, then this has implications on how we preach about people's idols. Wright shares that our idols (anything that eclipses our participation as God-worshippers) are found in three primary areas: money, sex, and power.

Practically speaking, consider challenging people to drill down further into their personal idols. Challenge them to see if they can find an idol in their lives that cannot be tied directly back to one of these three areas. (They'd be hard pressed to find one). As people find clarity in their areas of idolatry, we challenge people to repentance. Repentance, of course, is the act of pulling a U-turn of our failed worship direction and pointing the vehicle of our hearts rightly in the direction of true worship of the King.

If we can help people understand the damaging effects of misdirected motivations of these three areas we will help people recognize the break in their worship, which naturally leads us to repentance. It certainly is important to help people realize that money, sex, and power can be stewarded appropriately and in ways that honor God. But equally important is to help people see that when handled inappropriately, it causes immense damage and desolation in the world – and in our own hearts.

'What is required', Wright explains, 'for God's new world and for renewed humans within it is for the power of the idols to be broken'. This is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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5 Preach and teach the Bible in such a way that people see the biblical story as their own

The stories that humans find most powerful, the ones that impact us most deeply, are the stories where we are invited to participate in them directly.

As pastors, our sacred calling involves helping 'ordinary' people realize that God's story is not simply an ethereal story 'out there in the heavens' for us to grasp solely on an intellectual level. God's story is the story not simply to be understood, but also to participate in directly. And God's story is not the story that is 'out there' or to participate in at a later point in time; it is open to participation by anyone in the here and now.

"The gospels invite us to make this story our own, to live within the narrative in all its twists and turns, to see ourselves among the crowds following Jesus and witness his kingdom-bringing work, to see ourselves also in the long-range continuation of that narrative that we call, in fear and trembling, the life of the church."

Our sacred calling as pastors also includes helping people grasp that the good news is not my story in which I invite God to participate; instead, it is God's story of which he lovingly, graciously, and redemptively invites us to participate in. This is not mere nuance; this has radical implications in how the good news of Jesus Christ is explained, embraced, and lived.

Our job is to passionately, clearly and compellingly tell of this wondrous God who throws his arms out wide and says, 'Join me!' For that is the nature of participation as worshiping stewards in his mission.

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