

Wright is Not Right: Implications on Losing the Gospel

Revered N.T. Wright in the *BioLogos* video “Adam, Eve, and the USA,” argues that the issue of myth versus historical reading of Genesis (in particular Ch. 1-3) has led to erroneous thinking about the text. He asserts that the focus on historical issues misses the more important theological point of the narrative. Although Wright is a respected New Testament scholar, what he manages to do in this video, rather than ‘save’ people from erroneous thinking, is to undermine Scripture in general and undercut the gospel in particular.

To argue his position, Wright first observes that the dialectical thinking of myth vs. history when it comes to reading Genesis is more of an American cultural issue (it’s simply not a question asked by Brits or other people in Europe). Next, he claims that this type of dualistic thinking comes with many problems. Thinking about Genesis in this dualistic manner causes, according to Wright, cultural wars (linked to political polemics), which in turn lead Americans to therefore “bundle-up” the issue with other issues. Wright observes that Americans have a great tendency to engage in this bundling on several fronts: gun laws, abortion, etc. So when Americans attempt to read Genesis as myth vs. historical, we do two things: flatten the text, and we pick one side over the other (myth vs. hist.). When this occurs, we are logically affirming, observes Wright, some things while denying others.

From this critique, Wright offers two solutions. First, he asserts that we (albeit Americans) should “lighten-up” with our way of thinking and wording. To accomplish this, Wright advises that we unmoor the issues and speak more in analogical language (i.e. Genesis is like a Shakespeare play or a Beethoven symphony). This style of thinking looks at the individual notes of the piece, but it doesn’t stop there. To look only at the individual notes, however, does not help to understand the piece as a whole. In the same way, Wright wants Americans to read and treat Genesis (particularly chapters 1-3) in the same manner, noting that the word ‘myth’ does not mean an untrue story, but a story full of “explosive power” and existential import: a story to help us better understand ourselves culturally. The ‘myth’ wording has gotten misunderstood to mean that it is in tension (dialectic) with the historicity of Genesis.

The second solution Wright suggests is for us to find new words, which will alleviate this dualistic and polemic thinking. For example, Wright asserts that the Genesis story is about how a ‘primal pair’ gets it wrong, but he is quick to add that he is also not affirming a positivist, literal, or ‘clunky’ history over and against myth. Genesis, according to Wright, is a *way* of saying or describing what happened, not the actual or literal ways of those events. Once again, Wright promotes here an analogical use of language. To approach the Genesis account, according to Wright, in any other way is to flatten and “perverse” the narrative.

Revered Wright in this clip is him being his usual articulate, intelligent, creative self. His arguments, just like the one presented, are often at best slippery and at worse dangerous. Wright believes that Americans often flatten and misread Genesis, and if he is correct we certainly need to listen. Yet if he’s wrong, then people (not just Americans) need to think clearly about why he is wrong and what’s at stake. And as with most of Wright’s thinking, what’s at stake is nothing less than the gospel. The caveat when dealing with Wright is how he frames an argument. He begins here by asserting that Americans have a Dualistic way of thinking (black and white), by using a dualistic mode of thinking (American thinking vs. Brit/European thinking) about Genesis. What’s implied is that American’s are being their

typical selves (wrong). Wright is right to say that we have dualistic modes of thinking about things that are politically driven, at times, and that we tend to flatten a story or two. Guilty. And he is correct in saying that we often lose sight of the coming Kingdom of God. We lose sight because we are secularists at heart, living for only the here and now with no thought about the Kingdom. There is truth in what Wright propagates, but that truth is always mixed with ambiguity. And Wright falls victim to his own critique, saying that this is the only way to think about how to think of the text.

Wright then turns to suggest that we need to change the wording and language of the conversation to help unmoor ourselves from other entangling issues when it comes to reading Genesis 1-3. If Wright is right, Genesis is not about an actual historical Adam and Eve created *Imago Dei* (the image of God). Instead, it would mean that Genesis contains an actual *description* of things or events, not a description of *actual* things or events. In other words, Genesis is “a way” of describing, according to Wright, how a ‘primal pair’ got it wrong. Once again, it is how Wright frames the argument. For him the analogy always works better. Yet as with analogy, the analogy always breaks down at some point because the comparison’s main content becomes ambiguous. When Wright makes use of the term “primal pair,” the issue that needs attention is not what he’s affirming but what he’s denying. He is affirming the narrative is about a pair but not a *real* historical, actual Adam and Eve.

To engage in this type of thinking has, as noted, gospel implications. Wright’s focus (in all the arguments I have read or listened to) is always upon Universal implications rather than particular or individual ones. For example, Wright believes that the gospel is not about how ‘one gets saved’ through the redemptive work of Christ, but how the gospel is God’s project of new creation, and how the gospel is more about our right actions in the world. The same type of thinking holds true here, as well. Genesis is a not particular story of particular and therefore universal implications (the fall, total depravity); rather Genesis must be read from a universal /generic and albeit cultural perspective (primal pair), not with historic individualistic lenses.

In all, no matter how brilliantly presented, Wright is not right. I began this summary/critique by noting that the video in question was sponsored by BioLogos. The main tenet of the BioLogos movement is a straight-forward attempt to persuade evangelical Christians to embrace some form of evolutionary theory. To do this, their goal is to discredit any evangelical beliefs that God created the notion of a historical Adam and Eve and in place of this special creative act to say that God used (and uses) the means of natural descent and Evolution as His primary means of creation and His sustaining work. BioLogos is very clear that the acceptance of evolution is necessary for evangelism. They want to save Evangelicalism from its embarrassing anti-intellectual notions about Scripture and evolution.

In doing so, Christians run into the conundrum of attempting to talk theology, while attempting to reject any theological terms. What BioLogos and the Revered Wright are after is a new reformation and to rescue Christians from themselves in the way they think. They argue Believers have it all wrong from the gospel all the way to Adam and Eve, or should I say from a primal pair to the gospel. The outcome is a theological disaster. If Wright and BioLogos are right, Christ-followers should be concerned about the here and now and their right actions in this world to see how God will work out His project, rather than hope for the one to come. At the start I summarized Wright’s thesis by noting how he asserts that the focus on historical issues misses the more important theological point of the narrative. In an ironic sense,

Wright is right. In his attempt to recast the wording for theological clarity, what has happened is greater theological confusion; thus, Christians miss the theological point.

But the question remains, why this confusion? Why believe in a 'primal pair' and not in a real historical Adam and Eve? Wright asserts it is a way of saying that when a good God created Heaven and Earth, He wanted to share the Earth with humanity. Furthermore, Wright believes that the literal interpretation overrides the significance of the story. But *how* does it override the story? Enter BioLogos. They claim that there is simply too much genetic diversity among human beings than would be possible with an original reproducing pair. So not only would *believing* in a real Adam and Eve override the story, but it would be academically silly to believe the pair actually existed. What's missing from Wright's argument (at least in the video) is how the Apostle Paul, for example, clearly understood Adam to be a fully historical human who was also the genetic father of the entire human race. The fall of the human race in Adam, according to Paul, sets the stage for the salvation of sinful humanity by Jesus Christ (the objective nature of the Gospel). What's being purported is a new rendering of the metanarrative of Scripture. If Christians have only analogical connections between a 'primal pair' to Christ, instead of a real, historic pair of Adam and Eve to Christ, what believers are left with is what Wright is after in the first place: an analogy. (Wright is right; you can't understand a Beethoven symphony as a whole by looking at the individual notes; however, you also can't understand the piece as a whole by ignoring the notes, either). In the end, this type of thinking leaves people with something far worse, however: it leaves them with no gospel at all.