

# Echoes of a Voice

*Rick Wade explores how we hear echoes of a supernatural voice calling us through justice, relationship, beauty and spirituality.*

## Is Anybody Listening?

We spend so much time defending our beliefs and making a case for the faith, and we wonder why people won't listen. We have great arguments and evidences, and it's all so obviously true to us, but they give it as much attention as we might if asked to consider some ancient Sumerian religion. Maybe they hear it filtered through preconceived negative ideas of Christianity. Think of the very vocal atheists who think that Christianity is not just old and useless; they think it's downright dangerous. Another problem is that people really don't know about Jesus and what He taught. We live in a society which has little understanding of Christianity outside the church and, unfortunately, inside it, too, in too many cases.

Maybe we should consider changing the order in which we make a case for Christ.

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century scientist and apologist, said that we should "make [Christianity] attractive, make good men wish it were true, and *then* show that it is."<sup>{1}</sup> Theologian John Stackhouse argues in his book *Humble Apologetics* that today we have to address the question of *plausibility* before that of *credibility*. "'Might it be true? Is Christian argument something I should seriously entertain even for a moment?'"<sup>{2}</sup>

Of course, Christianity has to be true to be worthwhile, but in some cases it could be better to postpone arguments for the truth of the faith in favor of simply putting it on display. If I tell someone I have a diamond in my pocket, before

arguing that it *is* a diamond and not some kind of fake, maybe I need to pull it out and show them to get their interest.

What are some important issues in most everyone's life that could pique people's interest? For his book *Simply Christian*, Anglican bishop and Bible scholar N. T. Wright chose justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty. I'll draw from that book in this article.

There's another important dimension, namely, living out the gospel. Are the things we talk about *real*? Do we live them out across the spectrum of our lives' activities?

In the discussion that follows, I'll talk first about the four subjects just mentioned. Then I'll highlight a very important theme in Wright's book, that of the meeting of heaven and earth. Finally, we'll turn to the matter of Christians as the living voices of God on earth, heralding the day of final redemption, and showing how Christianity applies in some important areas.

## **Justice and Spirituality**

N. T. Wright says we hear "echoes of a voice" calling to us from many directions. To hear these echoes correctly is to hear the voice of God. By encouraging people to pause and focus on these echoes, we can help prepare them to hear a case for the truth of Christianity, if a case needs to be made at all.

One of those echoes is justice. Everyone hears it, even children. Let one child get to stay up later at night than another, and you'll hear it: "That's not fair!"

We want things to be right, to be in proper order, but we live in a world so often out of order. Racism, religious oppression, laws which serve only the powerful: we can multiply examples. We try to bring about justice, but it slips

through our fingers.

Some say the echo we're hearing is just a dream, that there can be no justice. Others say there is such a thing as justice, but it's from another world and cannot be attained here. Still others say it's the voice of Someone speaking to us from elsewhere. God is calling to us, telling us what is right and wrong, and bidding us to pursue justice.

Spirituality is another echo. Wright tells a parable of a dictator who believes it isn't safe to have water coming from so many sources in his kingdom, so he decides to cover with concrete all the land that once was marked by springs and provide one water source for all the people. This is safer, he thought. It's controlled. In time, however, the waters of the springs begin to break through the concrete, and soon they erupt all over the place.

The water in this parable is spirituality, and the dictator is the philosophy that has shaped our culture for a few centuries, that of naturalism.

As much as the "dictator" of naturalism hates it, spirituality is breaking out all over these days. Many religions are now practiced in America. Spirituality and the supernatural are regular themes on TV and in the movies. Bookstores sell scads of books on the subject. It's cool to be spiritual.

Why has this happened? People are hearing something, although many aren't hearing it correctly. Wright says that the formerly "hidden spring" of spirituality "[points] away from the bleak landscape of modern secularism and toward the possibility that we humans are made for more than this."<sup>{3}</sup> There is more to us than what can be studied scientifically.

## **Relationships and Beauty**

After dealing with spirituality, Wright turns to

relationships. He wonders, "How is it that we ache for each other and yet find relationships so difficult?"[\[4\]](#)

It's obvious that we are made to live in relationships with other people. In the realm of relationships, we hear the echo of a voice telling us something very important about ourselves.

We find our meaning in the context of a society, small or large, including intimate relationships. Maybe especially so. Marriage is still popular even though so many marriages end in divorce. Many couples just live together in an attempt to avoid the messiness of divorce. We seek good relationships, but plan on failed ones.

And even good relationships including marriages have to end, because death, that great separator, comes to all. We fear it, but we can't do anything about it.

Not only marriages struggle, but so do larger societies, especially democratic ones. We want to trust people, indeed we have to. But we're let down and cynicism is bred. Wright says that in Britain, more people vote on reality TV shows than in elections.

What keeps driving us to be so closely involved with other people despite all the risks? Christians have an explanation. But now I'm getting ahead of myself. That's for later.

What about the echo of beauty? Is beauty important to people? Not everyone is a patron of the arts, to be sure. But people put time and money into making their homes attractive places to live. Even a person who doesn't care about such things will be found outside on Saturday washing his car.

Yet for all our love of beauty, we find it difficult to capture. Artists paint canvas after canvas trying to get it right. Beauty is transient and incomplete. My wife often draws my attention to the late afternoon Texas sky. The sun, partly

hidden behind clouds of white and grey shoots out a fiery glow of brilliant orange and red and yellow. And in a matter of seconds the colors change and then are gone.

The common belief about beauty is that it is in the eye of the beholder. But if that says it all, then nothing is beautiful in itself. Shared experiences of beauty with other people are just happenstance; their subjective response just happens to accord with ours at the moment.

But I don't think that idea exhausts the truth. We behave and talk as though some things are beautiful in themselves.

Through the transient beauty of our world, could we be hearing the echo of a real voice whispering to us of a beauty that will remain?

## **Jesus: Where Heaven and Earth Meet**

What explanation does Christianity offers for those "echoes of a voice" we've been discussing?

The bottom line is this: The death and resurrection of Christ provides a context within which these things come to fruition, where His creation will not be ultimately frustrated by the fallenness of the world.

One of the central motifs of Wright's book is the meeting of heaven and earth. When he speaks of heaven, Wright is speaking of the supernatural realm where God is; he has in mind more two different realms than two spatial locations.

Wright describes three views of the way God and the world relate. Option 1, he calls it, is the belief that God and the world are identical; what is called *pantheism*. Option 2 is the belief that there is a great gulf between God and the world, what has been called *deism*. Option 3 is the belief that, while God and the world are distinct, their realms meet and even

overlap at times.

In Christ, heaven and earth meet in their fullest, most profound way. Jesus, the full embodiment of God, became man; Emmanuel, God with us, is what Isaiah called Him. "In listening to Jesus," Wright says, "we discover whose voice it is that has echoed around the hearts and minds of the human race all along."[\[5\]](#)

In his ministry and his death, Jesus took on the powers of darkness. The victory He won didn't only serve to get us into heaven. In defeating evil he won a victory over injustice, spiritual deadness, broken relationships, and an ugly world among other things. His victory applies to us. Being a Christian isn't about leaving this fallen world behind to join God in a disembodied state way out there in heaven. Jesus has set us free and made us new creations, empowered by His Spirit to work at restoring creation in the here and now. We know that this work won't be completed until Jesus comes again and establishes a new heaven and new earth. However, we are to enter into His victory now. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," Jesus prayed (Matt. 6:10).

Jesus is the one who both makes sense of our longing for justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty, and who makes them possible.

## **Living in the Future Today**

So what do we do? What does this have to do with the matter of plausibility I discussed at the beginning of this article? I noted that people who won't hear a case made for the truth of Christianity might be open to hearing what it has to say about such significant matters as justice and relationships and others. I also noted, however, that people have to see them being worked out in our own lives individually and corporately.

In 1 Cor. 3:16 Paul tells us that we are individually temples of the Spirit. In Eph. 2:21 he says that the whole church forms a temple. The temple in the Old Testament was where God dwelled among His people. Now, we are God's temple, the place where God dwells. In us because of the Spirit within us, heaven and earth meet. And the Spirit, who is our constant companion, enables us to continue Jesus' work, to "begin the work of making God's future real in the present." {6}

We participate in the life of the church: we read and speak the Word; we engage in worship and prayer; and we partake of the Lord's Supper. In all these things, we declare that God is engaged in this world.

And as a result, God's Spirit is at work through us to set the world to rights. Justice should be demonstrated by the church, and it *will* be complete one day.

We discover true spirituality, that we can partake in both the earthly and heavenly realms, because we are body and spirit. Both parts of our nature find their fulfillment in a proper relationship with God.

We are given a new relationship with God, and the Spirit works in us to show the love of Christ to others and hence to establish and maintain good relationships with people.

And through the church, the Spirit works to restore beauty to this world and to free it from corruption. One day God will restore beauty completely in remaking creation to be what it is supposed to be.

John Stackhouse writes that "We live in a time-between-the-times,' in which people raised in a more or less Christian culture now are reacting against it. Christianity seems to receive greater disdain and resistance than other religions. {7} How can we get them to listen?

As Christians, Wright says, we are "workers for justice,

explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty.”{8} “We are called not only to listen to the echoes of the voice . . . but to be people through whom the rest of the world comes to hear and respond to that voice as well.”{9}

When people see us living this way, maybe they will stop long enough to listen to our reasons.

## Notes

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* 187.
2. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.
3. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 20.
4. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 29.
5. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 92.
6. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 124.
7. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 51-52.
8. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 189.
9. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 218.

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