

**N.T. WRIGHT. *Evil and the Justice of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006. 176 pp. \$18.00.**

We expect a volume bearing this title to be a philosophical defense of the justice of God in the face of evil. But this is decidedly *not* what Wright writes about in these brief, five chapters. Wright is concerned that philosophical approaches to the “problem of evil,” in contrast to the Bible itself, often fail to confront the more important issue of what is to be done about it. Solving the problem of evil is not a matter of trying to figure out where it came from in the first place, but seeking ways to bring the healing justice of God’s kingdom even into our present evil world.

The volume's first chapter addresses what Wright calls the “new problem of evil.” He notes that evil—in light of events such as September 11 and Hurricane Katrina—has become a hot topic in today’s society, but points to how many people, such as politicians and media pundits, seem surprised by it and don’t have a clue what to do about it. The immature responses of our culture to evil are seen in the extreme tendencies either to blame everyone else or to blame oneself for everything. Wright indicts both modernism and postmodernism for their inadequate responses to evil. Modernism has failed to take evil seriously enough, often ignoring it and preferring instead to believe in a doctrine of “progress” which still inclines people to believe that humankind is basically “all right.”

Postmodernism, while rightly recognizing the flawed condition of humanity, fails to provide any solutions and actually robs people of moral dignity because, within the flux of postmodernism, there is nobody to take responsibility for evil. Wright argues that what is needed, and what neither modernism nor postmodernism can provide, is a more mature worldview which includes a serious recognition that evil is real, that it is deep, and that the line between good and evil runs through us all.

The heart of Wright’s text is his overview of the biblical material. He surveys the OT in chapter two, calling attention to the events of Genesis 1–11, events which provide the narrative framework for the long story of how God sets about to redeem his creation. He focuses on the role of Israel, a people chosen to be the vehicle of blessing who are nevertheless flawed themselves and thus also part of the “problem,” and ends the chapter with specific comments on Isaiah 40–55 (especially the servant of Yahweh), Daniel, and Job. The emphasis throughout is that the OT is less interested in answering the question of what God has to *say* about evil than in telling what the God of justice and faithfulness “has done, is doing and will do about evil” (45).

Chapter three deals with the NT, especially the Gospels and the cross and resurrection. Wright says “atonement theology” needs to be linked to the larger problem of evil. He sees the motif of God’s victory over evil as the most satisfactory way of understanding the atonement, while not denying other perspectives. The Gospel writers tell their story so as to portray how all the forces of evil come together to do their worst, and how God defeats them through Jesus’ death and resurrection. In this way evil is taken seriously, and at the same time God’s long-term plan reaches its decisive climax. Calvary is an *event* where we see what God *does* to deal with evil.

The last two chapters flesh out some of the implications of this victory. Recognizing that we live between the accomplishment of the cross and the future new world, Wright challenges Christians to bring the future into the present (working backwards from the scriptural vision of where Christians are headed) by living out our deliverance from evil. Beyond personal concerns such as prayer and holiness, he points to the implications of the cross for large-scale issues such as politics and empire, penal codes, and international disputes. In a pastoral-type way, he discusses the power of forgiveness to release people from the grip of evil, including the importance of people forgiving themselves. Forgiveness is often misunderstood, but it is not the same thing as tolerance (pretending that evil doesn’t exist or that it’s really okay). Christians must put this vital element of the Gospel into practice, not only on a personal and church level, but also on a national and global level.

Wright takes a complex subject and in his usual delightful way provides a readable, stimulating, and profound account. His double emphasis on “implementing the achievement of the cross and anticipating God’s promised future world” (102-103) is on target. It locates the ultimate answer in God’s new creation (future and cosmic), while avoiding an “other-worldly” emphasis that robs people of motivation to do anything about evil in the present. Wright’s concern that people must not fail to take account of the practical ways evil affects them (personally, corporately, politically, internationally) is welcomed.

A few items may raise some eyebrows. Wright rules out “any immediate prospect of finding an answer to the question of where evil came from in the first place and what it’s doing in God’s good creation” (136). While limiting discussion about the origin of evil is understandable, perhaps something could be said, especially in

terms of human culpability, which Wright clearly affirms. Wright both affirms that death is an intruder, “the final satanic weapon” (116) that corrupts creation, and paints death “as a natural and harmless feature of the original landscape” (52). He seems to say that death assumed another role after humankind sinned.

This volume would be a helpful supplemental text for courses that deal with the problem of evil, not least because it is a healthy reminder not to forget the Bible in this discussion! But for that very reason, its greatest use may be in the local church. It will give preachers and Bible teachers a needed perspective from which to tackle this subject, and in an age of widespread biblical illiteracy, it will help equip believers with a biblical worldview on a matter which directly concerns us all.

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