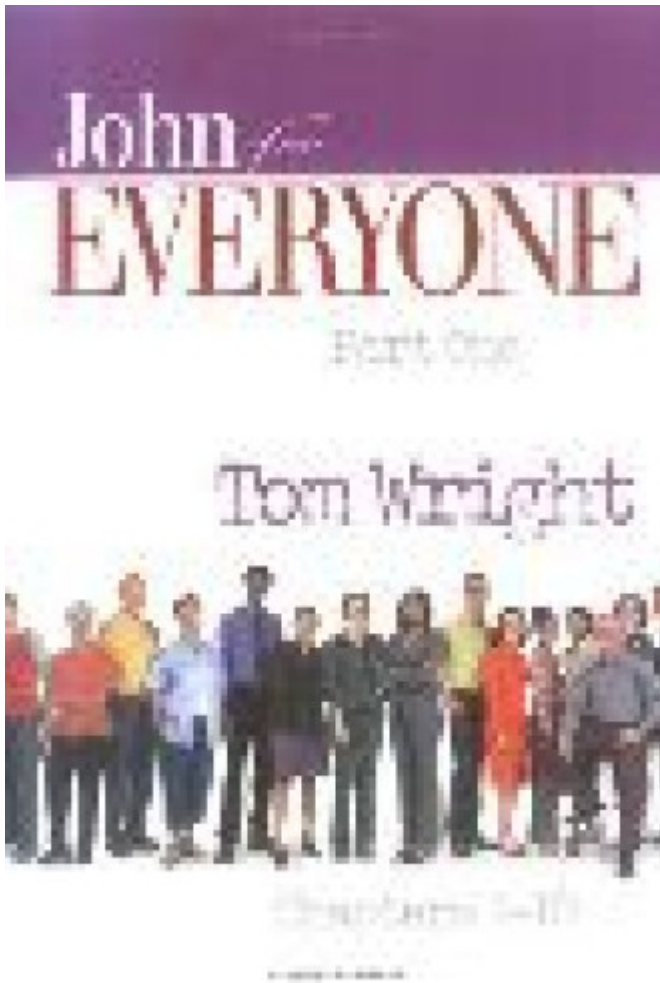


# Plain truths

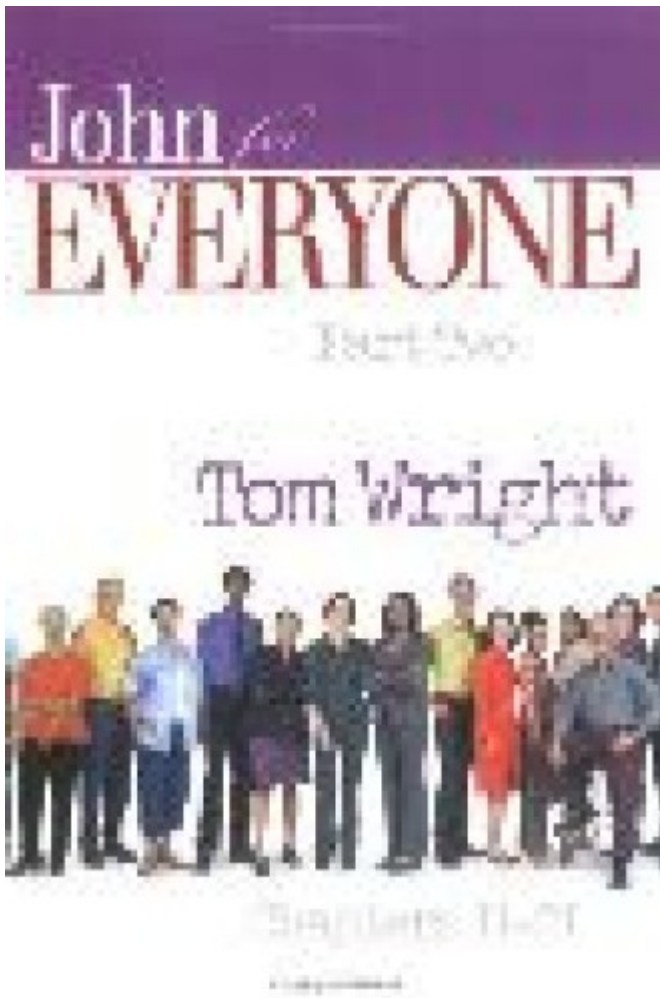
By [James C. Howell](#) in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

## In Review



### **John for Everyone, Chapters 1-10**

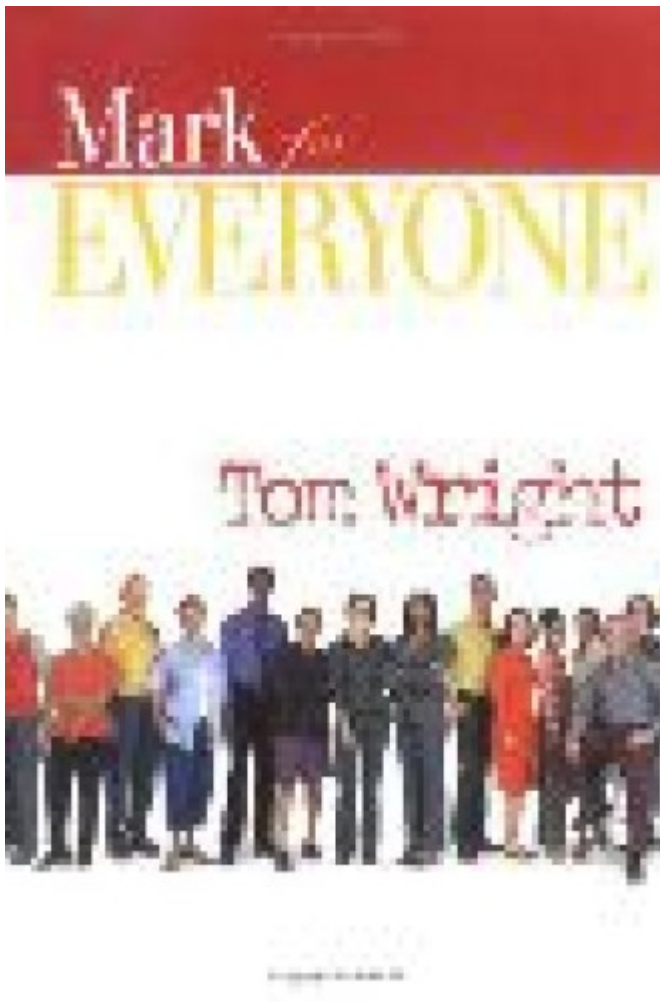
Tom Wright  
Westminster John Knox



## **John for Everyone: Chapters 11-21**

Tom Wright

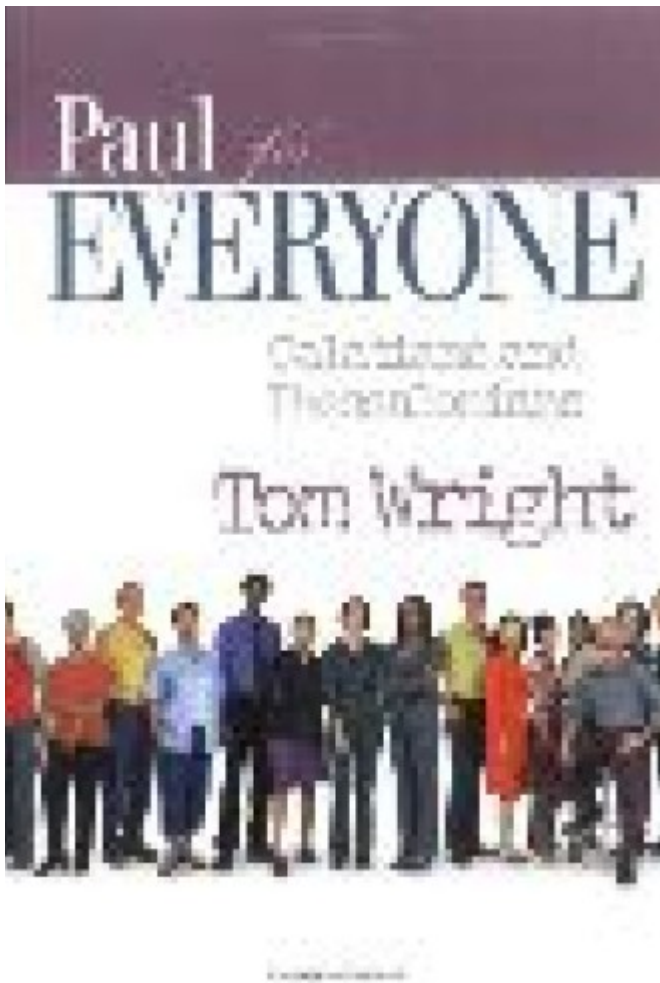
Westminster John Knox



## **Mark for Everyone**

Tom Wright

Westminster John Knox



## **Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians**

Tom Wright

Westminster John Knox

Known among scholars as a New Testament expert, and among Anglican clergy as a bishop, N. T. Wright has shed formality and ecclesiastical title to write popular commentaries simply as “Tom Wright.” Every line of his multivolume series creates the feeling that this prolific author of scholarly tomes, this churchman who oversees 290 parishes in the diocese of Durham (and who is also a superb musician in his spare time), has taken a leisurely afternoon stroll with the reader, stopping by the pub, lingering over dinner, all the while conversing casually about various passages of scripture—fielding questions, telling stories, rummaging through his stockpiled brain to retrieve a little gem that gets at the heart of some complex matter.

Echoing Richard Bauckham's argument that the Gospels were not written for a single, narrowly focused community, Wright declares that the New Testament books "were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone." He delivers these writings from the overstuffed files of the elite and presents them to regular people, like those in his parishes and mine, who have neither the patience nor the inclination to delve far into historical-critical matters.

Not that Wright pretends vexing critical questions don't exist, or shelters his readers from the revelations of scholarship. Yet he speaks in these commentaries as if the biblical stories really happened, and for Wright this is no dumbing-down for the laity. In his earlier work on Christian origins (three lengthy tomes, with more in the wings), he mounted a thorough argument, with shrewd procedural underpinnings, for a healthy appreciation of historicity. Daring to name the "pressure exerted within the guild to show how 'critical' one's scholarship really is . . . to show whether or not one really belongs to the post-Enlightenment club . . . by demonstrating one's willingness to jettison this or that saying or incident in the Gospels," Wright has presented weighty evidence for his position that "the evangelists were not trying to narrate 'bare facts' without interpretation. Their intention was to tell stories about events which really took place, and to invest those stories with the significance which they irreducibly possessed" (*The New Testament and the People of God*).

In the "for Everyone" series, Wright crisscrosses the Bible, explaining, for example, Mary's action in John 12 by referring to her behavior in Luke 10. Personalizing the story, he asks the reader, "Where are you in this picture? With the shameless Mary, worshipping Jesus with everything she's got? Or are you with the cautious, prudent Judas looking after the meager resources? Or are you back in the kitchen with Martha?" Wright isn't patronizing the reader. He believes that the stories cohere, and enters enthusiastically into the scriptures out of his own faith.

Wright praises John as a favorite, the simplest and most profound of the Gospels, "written by someone who was a very close friend of Jesus, who spent the rest of his life mulling over, more and more deeply, what Jesus had done, praying it through from every angle, and helping others to understand it. Countless people down the centuries have found that, through reading this Gospel, the figure of Jesus becomes real for them, full of warmth and light and promise." Galatians and Thessalonians "are the very earliest documents we possess . . . already full of life, bubbling with energy, with . . . a sense of the presence and power of the living God, who has

changed the world through Jesus, and is now at work in a new way by his Spirit.”

That the commentaries are broken down into small sections of five to a dozen verses (allowing for the short attention span of today’s reader) is sometimes troubling. When a long dramatic narrative like John 11 is chopped up into five sections for discussion, we lose the narrative thread. Each section begins with Wright’s colloquial translation, which may appeal to casual readers but may seem a bit folksy to others. Seeing Jesus at the Jordan, John the Baptist verges on slang: “I don’t deserve to squat down and undo his sandals. I’ve plunged you in the water; he’s going to plunge you in the Holy Spirit.” To the petrified disciples Jesus says, “Cheer up.” Wright reduces elevated, theological discourse to chattiness: “Don’t let your hearts be troubled; trust God—and trust me, too! There is plenty of room to live in my father’s house. If that wasn’t the case, I’d have told you, wouldn’t I?” (John 14).

Almost without exception, Wright begins his explication of each passage with an analogy. “A famous movie-maker had a huge legal wrangle . . .” “Not long ago there was a great disaster at sea . . .” “I lost my birth certificate . . .” This is no small feat. For the entire series, nearly 1,000 of these anecdotes are required, a number that would exhaust the most loquacious raconteur. Many of these analogies are surprisingly helpful, and provide easy access to the world of the text. The legal case involving the Pan American crash over Lockerbie, Scotland, provides the chance to distinguish between justice and vengeance, and to reflect on how Christ’s return is about justice, not revenge. A billboard advertising a newspaper called the *Independent* opens a clever exploration of Paul, who needed to declare his independence from Peter, James and John.

How deft is Wright’s use of this method at translating with clarity and consistency the thickness of scholarship for lay readership? In *The Climax of the Covenant*, Wright filled 38 small-font pages analyzing Galatians 3:10-20 in exacting detail; in *Paul for Everyone* he gets at the heart of the same text in just three breezy, large-font pages, explaining its complexities through the analogy of an overturned truck blocking traffic. But some of the analogies inevitably drift into silliness, as one might expect a conversation to do during an evening stroll and visit to the pub.

Visiting a nursing home, Margaret Thatcher asks a resident, “Do you know who I am?”—eliciting the punchline, “No dear, but ask the nurse; she usually knows.” This joke is a jumping-off point for a discussion of Christians beginning from scratch to figure out their true identity. A lake freezes over; when it thaws, a new way around

must be found—the old, cold way illustrates circumcision, now circumvented by grace. Tightrope walker Charles Blondin hauled a man over Niagara Falls; if the passenger had asked to be put down halfway across, his stupidity would have rivaled the stupidity of those who trusted in the works of the law.

The old saying “Every analogy limps” applies. Living by the law is far more alluring than being deserted on a thin wire over Niagara Falls. Walking around a lake is not at all like having faith. These kinds of analogies, all too popular in pulpits these days, also limp in another way. They may not only fail to draw us into the deep world of the text, they may actually keep us from getting in. The catchy story allows the listener to keep her distance. The life of faith is reduced to the level of pleasantries. Stories, humor and quirky news events do not burrow deep into the soul. How, then, can they usher us into the dangerous world of a text which dares to name the agonizing ache of the world? In scripture we encounter the living God, and this encounter is too direct, too raw, too personal for analogies. An analogy may trivialize that encounter and keep us at a comfortable distance from the powerful claim of the text.

Wright is aware of this, of course. Out of pastoral love for people who are not yet tiptoeing into the biblical waters, he invites them to draw near, risking a superficial misreading here and there, no doubt hoping that eventually they will get more involved and grasp the insight of his fellow bishop-theologian Rowan Williams: scriptural texts need to be read “in a way that brings out their strangeness, their nonobvious and noncontemporary qualities, in order that they may be read both freshly and truthfully. . . . They need to be made more difficult before we can accurately grasp their simplicities” (*Arius: Heresy and Tradition*).

How might Wright have kept to his task while bringing out the texts’ strange, noncontemporary quality? Perhaps by replacing some of the analogies with a more direct embodiment of the text. Treating persecution in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Wright tells of climbing a mountain and getting rained upon; but the meaning of the text might be conveyed more truly through a story of real religious persecution, historical or contemporary, or through one that causes us to reflect on how the absence of persecution may diminish the urgency of our discipleship. The fruit of the Spirit has been enfolded in real life stories, as have the Beatitudes. To hear about the kind of person who walks the streets of Durham acting in a patient or peacemaking manner could open a wider, clearer window for elementary readers.

But at other points analogy is the only proper approach. Wright tackles popular misconceptions about the Rapture by asking, “How do you describe the color blue to a blind person?”—a gateway to a superb explanation of apocalyptic language. Later, the “lawless one,” portrayed in modern political terms in the Left Behind series, is effectively explained by Caligula’s erection of a statue to himself in the Temple. Paul knew that sooner or later some other megalomaniac would do the same or worse.

The Caligula reference demonstrates how using more “historical evidence” could be helpful. Readers want to know what really happened; they are curious about the original meanings of words. Wright’s “everyone” surely includes cynical readers who might benefit from the kind of historical casework Wright flashes so cleverly in his scholarly writings. When Jesus walks on water or multiplies the loaves to feed 5,000, this series makes no attempt to counter the questioning skeptic who considers the miraculous as hocus-pocus.

Yet no other commentary series comes even close to Wright’s achievement. In these pages the guy on the street, the preacher and even the scholar can find an utterly clear and accurate explanation of the warring factions in Galatia, or of the meaning of “Abba.” The series throws down the gauntlet to all who read, teach and preach: it challenges us to read these strange texts freshly and with clarity and passion, for simplicity is indeed hidden in their difficulties.