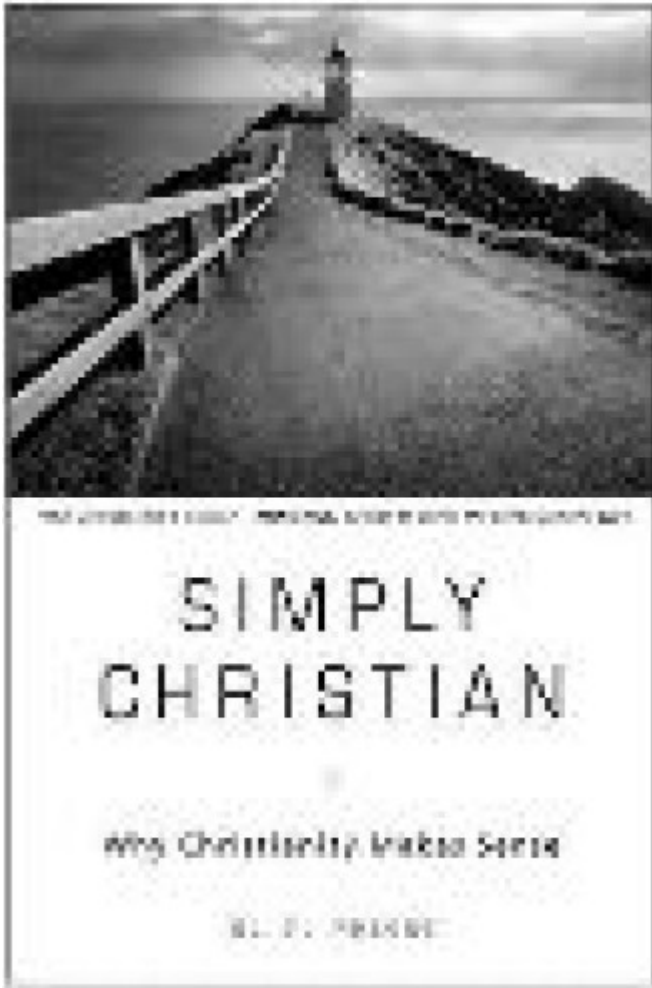


# Straight talk

By [Samuel Wells](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

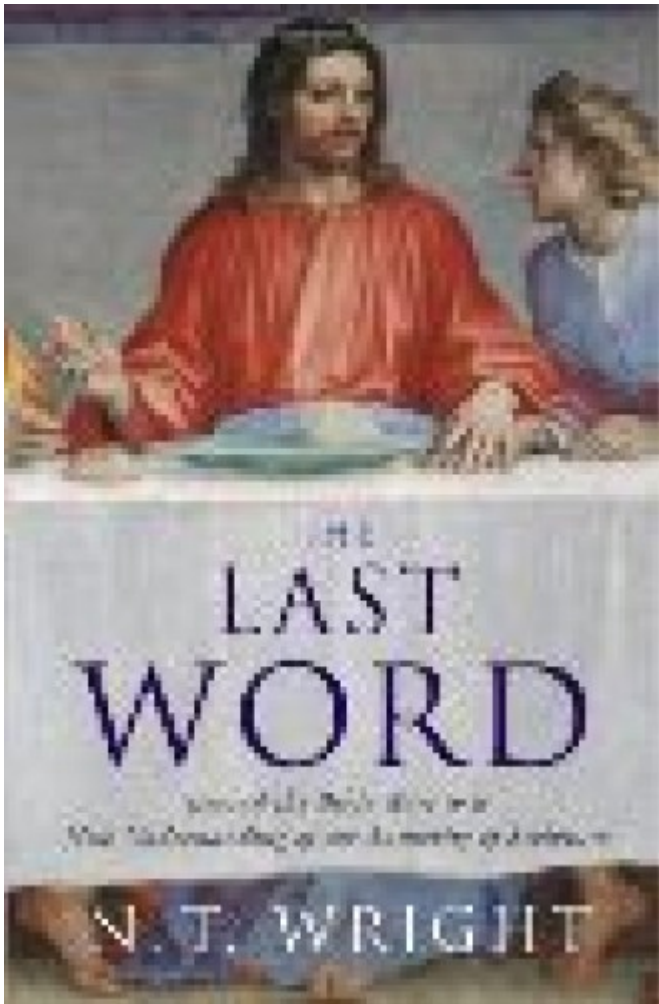
## In Review



### **Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense**

N. T. Wright

HarperSanFrancisco



## **The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture**

N. T. Wright

HarperSanFrancisco

I've never been a fan of C. S. Lewis. I know this makes me almost unemployable in America, but I can't see past the social snobbery of Narnia and the contrived logic of *Mere Christianity*. I've always felt that the memorable but manipulative climax of the latter—that Jesus must have been “mad, bad or God”—was just plain wrong.

Just this week a graduate student asked me what he and his girlfriend might do about reconciling their religious differences. Though prejudiced against the staple book in the genre, I might have had nothing but Lewis to recommend—if it weren't for Tom Wright. “Read *Simply Christian* and come and see me in a month,” I told my student. “Then your girlfriend will know whether the Christianity she has rejected is

the real thing.”

Wright is an Anglican New Testament scholar who in the past 20 years has held a series of roles that bridge church and academy. Now he is bishop of Durham, the fourth most senior appointment in the Church of England and traditionally the seat of the premier scholar-bishop. His epic series *Christian Origins and the Question of God* is among the most dynamic unfolding projects in contemporary theology. He has also cracked open the popular market: perhaps only Alister McGrath matches both his prodigious output and his ability to speak to both the seminary and the street. Wright is the perfect person to displace C. S. Lewis in the church’s abiding dialogue with skepticism.

*Simply Christian* has all the elegant simplicity one could hope for in a work of everyday apologetics. It communicates wonder without being pious or sentimental, it narrates a particular story without adopting Christian jargon, it accepts and addresses common criticisms without losing humility or becoming weary, and it is full of lively metaphors and analogies. The book begins with four “echoes” of God’s voice—the longing for justice, spirituality, relationship and beauty—then offers a lucid account of the Christian story (albeit one missing the last 19 centuries of church history, which Wright sees as an embarrassment) before moving to the essentials of Christian spirituality. Wright neatly concludes by pointing out that Christianity fulfills the longings he noted at the outset.

I’m generally wary of apologetics because it tends to portray a faith rather different from the life actually lived by Christians and often implies that one can have Jesus without church. I’m largely persuaded by Karl Barth’s claim that the best apologetics is good dogmatics. Wright, however, uses his opening themes as appetizers, rather than as interrogators whose demands must be met. He allows Christianity to speak for itself rather than forcing it to address issues that have a supposedly more significant or comprehensive origin, such as “the human condition.” This is stylistically impressive and disarmingly persuasive.

The book takes us to the heart of Wright’s theology. His work has widely been associated with two themes: his articulation of the Christian story as a five-act play (creation-fall-Israel-Jesus-church), and his emphasis on Jesus as the One who brings the exile to an end. In *Simply Christian* these two familiar concerns are subject to an overarching argument—namely, that incarnational Christianity constantly steers between paganism (which sees God in everything, particularly today in the self) and

dualism (which assumes that God is far away in heaven and thus renders the whole presence of God in the world problematic).

Wright sees dualism as an abiding temptation for Christians and thus repeatedly rejects widespread assumptions that have a dualistic flavor, especially the idea that Christianity is primarily about getting to heaven when you die. Instead he portrays a vision of the world infused by heaven—a vision embodied in the incarnation, ignited by the resurrection and still to be fully realized.

This enables Wright to do something that is extraordinary in a book of apologetics: he leaves out theodicy altogether. He does not even highlight the fact that he is doing so. But one can see that if God is not inherently distant, theodicy is not the millstone for apologetics it has long seemed to be. I applaud this subtle argument. I'd be interested to see how far Wright would be prepared to take it in a positive direction. For example, he doesn't constructively discuss where Christians *do* go when they die, and I can't be the only one who is more than a little curious about this, selfish as the interest may be. Furthermore, Wright's intriguing argument does not account for the absence of a proper consideration of other faiths, scientific challenges and the failures of the church, those other staples of post-Christian doubt. And surely there is something more positive to say about the church.

This strikes me as a rather British book—in a good way. For example, its assumed reader is an intelligent skeptic with relatively little Christian vocabulary: England has many of these. And Wright believes that it is possible to be “simply” Christian—without a qualifier drawn from historic divisions or contemporary quarrels. I share these starting points, but I find few people on the U.S. church scene who do. They are characteristic Church of England starting points.

*The Last Word*, by contrast, strikes me as a much more American book, written while Wright's life is becoming less and less simple as he is being drawn into church wranglings over unity and scriptural authority, many of them occasioned by the controversy over homosexuality. *The Last Word* is a work not of elegant simplicity but of compressed scholarship. The lyrical shape of *Simply Christian* is replaced by a ponderous litany of section headings that sound like theological proposals in themselves. The lightness of touch is replaced by a tone of increasing exasperation, culminating in lists of 12 errors on authority made by liberals and conservatives, respectively.

What makes *The Last Word* American is that it assumes a high level of scriptural literacy on the part of readers and a prior controversy about the place of the Bible in the church—a context largely unknown in Europe—and it portrays Christians as likely to see more of their enemies within the church than outside it. The result of these assumptions is that *The Last Word* has a weariness entirely absent from *Simply Christian*—the weariness of an irenic professor worn down by stupid questions from the audience.

That's not to say *The Last Word* is not an impressive achievement. The book is a kind of 140-page dictionary article on scriptural authority, and it includes an outstanding chapter on the history of interpretation (dauntingly titled "The First Sixteen Centuries"). It's a mark of Wright's stature that his own authority is taken for granted. Though this is certainly the best book of its kind available, I would have liked to see more examination of the nature of authority itself.

Wright ends *The Last Word* with a plea for the authoritative exegetical role of the bishop. But who besides him (and Rowan Williams) has such a remarkable ability to cross the scripture-dogmatics, church-academy, theological-secular divides with grace? Augustine managed it, of course. But Augustine didn't have e-mail.