

How should we live?

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [February 22, 2011](#) issue

In Review



AFTER YOU BELIEVE



Why Christian Character Matters

N. T. WRIGHT

After You Believe

By N. T. Wright

HarperCollins

The Anglican theologian N. T. Wright once wrote a stirring introduction to the Christian faith called *Simply Christian*. Then, since he had stressed that Christianity

isn't about going to heaven, he needed to say what does happen when Christians die, which he did in *Surprised by Hope*. Now he's turned to the small matter of how Christians should live; hence the appropriately but nonetheless ambiguously titled *After You Believe*.

The book has two central lines of argument. The first is that a virtue ethic is the fitting model for the Christian life—a conviction that involves a good deal of ethical exploration and considerable New Testament exegesis. The second is that Christians and the church best understand themselves as a royal priesthood, a theme which brings together the two most pressing aspects of life under God—worship and mission.

Both theses are elegantly outlined and lucidly explained. In introducing the first thesis, Wright vividly describes what he takes to be the two prevalent modes of ethical thinking among lay Christians. One is "keep the rules"—more or less deontological ethics; the other is "be authentic and do what feels right"—a hybrid of romanticism, existentialism and emotivism. This leaves out consequentialism—surely the dominant strand of ethics in the world at large, certainly in the West. Consequentialism appears later in the book at various points, but it is never introduced and never located in relation to the twofold status quo.

As to the second thesis, the synthetic power of Wright's thought and its grounding in far-reaching summaries of scriptural material is characteristically compelling. Portraying the church as a royal priesthood is an attractive and exegetically engaging move. His account is confusing, however, in the way he suggests a weakness in the social imagination of those Christian virtue ethicists, myself included, who talk more about the church than they do about transforming the world. Yet Wright's account of the way in which Christians assume a kingly mantle (through humility and suffering, in the way Jesus did) seems very much in line with the views of those same Christian virtue ethicists. It's hard to tell where the quarrel is.

The strengths of the book are the same as those of all of Wright's work. Its synthetic quality, combining rewarding exegesis with light-touch illustration, engenders tremendous confidence that here is an author in full command of the field (whether or not that is invariably the case). The ecumenical spirit is highly engaging: Wright is well placed to set out a vision for all parts of the church (at least in the West), free from denominational assumptions. Indeed, the succinct and straightforward

concluding summary of the dimensions of the Christian life—scripture, stories, examples, communities, practices—is the most satisfying and adaptable part of the book.

Wright is eager to break down the barriers between "gospel" (incarnation and ministry) Christians and "epistle" (death, resurrection and atonement) Christians. The examples are contemporary, perfectly articulated and invariably apt: the identification of Chesley Sullenberger, the pilot who calmly landed his US Airways plane on the Hudson River in 2009, as the epitome of virtue ethics reflects Wright's typically sound and fruitful judgment. (Wright is never more persuasive than when he stops to comment, "Calling such events as the safe landing of Flight 1549 a 'miracle' may be a way in which our culture chooses to ignore the real challenge, the real moral message, of that remarkable sort of event.") The explanatory style of much of the material is the sign of an experienced and energetic teacher.

The book's weaknesses are the flipside of its strengths. Most significant, it is unclear whether this is an account of discipleship directed at literate laypeople, an introduction to virtue ethics for first-year undergraduates or a polemical discussion of New Testament ethics through the lens of the virtue tradition. Equivocation between the three approaches results in lengthy chapters that begin with simple, bold statements and magisterial theological and scriptural summaries but sometimes get weighed down in argumentative detail.

Wright has an animus against those who make judgments on the basis of nonrational feelings, and the need to set such people straight sends him on a number of detours. Similarly, he is eager to alert New Testament ethicists to virtue approaches and to emphasize how much of virtue ethics may be drawn straight from the New Testament without recourse to Aristotle or reliance on Thomas Aquinas—but why such advocacy belongs in a book about discipleship is not entirely clear. From time to time the energy of the expert exegete gives way to the exasperation of the weary bishop, and these are the moments in which, with a more assertive editor, less would have meant a good deal more.

No one has done more than Wright to make the broad sweep of the scriptural narrative speak to the layperson in vivid and forceful terms, while challenging the academy by pressing profound motifs as far as they can go. He is a rewarding writer and a breathless communicator. Few others could have attempted an account of Christian living that draws together scriptural, philosophical, pastoral and doctrinal perspectives in such a lucid way. He may never completely win over the academy

(who does?), but he is a peerless contemporary expositor of thrilling, humble, attractive Christian faith. And we always need more of that.