

# ... AND DEATH

JAMES CATFORD



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**AS A DEPARTURE FROM HIS USUAL UPDATE ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AT BIBLE SOCIETY, JAMES CATFORD, REFLECTS ON THE DEATH OF HIS FATHER.** Death

fascinates us. The *Times* newspaper now offers an online map of where skeletons are buried under the streets of London. Coldplay's number one album this year is called *Viva La Vida* or 'Death And All His Friends' with three tracks explicitly exploring the theme for all who have ears to hear. Don't be fooled by the fact that death has replaced sex as the taboo of public discourse. It haunts us.

I've experienced serial bereavement over the last three years with the death of three very close relatives. Twice I have stood at the front of Chichester Cathedral and once in Birmingham Cathedral, with handkerchief at the ready, singing one of my favourite hymn writers best lines 'Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven to earth come down'. I dare to hope it will be sung at my own funeral.

You are never going to stop existing and there's nothing you can do about it. That's the stark, if too little stressed, understanding of reality according to the Christian tradition. It's on these words of Jesus in John 8.51 that I have gained a huge amount of reassurance and comfort following the recent death of my father: 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death'.

I wonder if you remember going to sleep last night. No, nor do I. That moment where we stepped from being awake to being asleep is something that we did not taste. This, I wonder, is the same for death. We will simply walk right through it and, as it were, only notice it as we glance backwards. It is a bold and confident claim right at the heart of the gospel that through Christ, death has been abolished: 'it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Tim 1.10). For me, I'm counting on it.

My father was born between the wars and died at home in his own bed aged eighty five. His last breath was taken in the company of my sister early one Tuesday morning in May. There he slipped quietly into the next life. The American evangelist Dwight Moody remarked later in his own life that 'one day soon you will hear that I am dead. Do not believe it. I will be more alive than ever before'. As the great book of Ecclesiastes says, 'a good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth' (7.1).

Though not without controversy, I do recommend a careful reading of *Surprised by Hope* by the honorary

President of Bible Society, NT Wright.<sup>1</sup> I am drawn to the concreteness of the way he articulates a vivid understanding of 'life after life after death'. This is his way of saying that at death we step into what Jesus on the cross called 'paradise' (life after death) before Christ renews a very physical new heaven and a new earth (life after life after death).

In *A Brief History of Death* Douglas Davies echoes from a secular point of view what Tom Wright observes as a revision of the historic understanding of the life hereafter: 'Though earliest Christianity may have conceived of the eternal future in terms of restored earth, a second Eden, over the following centuries the Christian afterlife was, largely, interpreted in terms of a heavenly domain.'<sup>2</sup> No longer were we being offered the same kind of 'this worldly' body that Jesus had after his resurrection, but some vague disembodied spirit 'meeting Christ in the air'.

As I walked down the nave at my father's funeral in Chichester Cathedral carrying his much used RSV Bible and placed it at the foot of the cross, the verses sung at every Christian funeral rang out: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another' (Job 19.25–27 KJV). Our faith is incredibly physical and 'this worldly'.

'Sin is slop', as Dallas Willard says. The way that we preach and teach about it should underline and major on the inferiority of sin as opposed to goodness. In the same way, the cost of discipleship should be set against the cost of non-discipleship, so should the attraction of sin be compared to the attraction of righteousness. We should ravish people with the wonder and goodness of God. Every time I preach, this is what I try to do.

The best thing we can do with our lives is to invest them in God. It's the safest, happiest, most certain and most realistic thing we can do on this earth. The task of preaching is to demonstrate the 'attractiveness of Jesus', as David Day puts it. Why? Because of the truth that Tom Wright (again) puts before us 'we become what we worship'.

Worship wood and you become wooden. It is for this reason that we 'lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely' (Heb 12.1 ESV). In this sense we get in the next life what we want in this one. Heaven, as it has been said, will take everyone who can stand it. God is, we



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## NOTES

1. NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007).
2. D Davies, *A Brief History of Death* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
3. CS Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

► might say, trying to get as many people into heaven as he can; not keep as many as possible out.

My father was a great walker and the muddy image of sin clinging so closely to our boots is vivid in my mind. Any hiker will tell you that to attempt to function or walk through life with all that cloying muck around our feet is debilitating and counter-productive. Take youth work, for example. You don't have to engage with young people for very long to realise that to crush them with the threat of hell is a poor contraceptive. Whereas the vision of life with God made tangible has a remarkably transformative effect on behaviour. Eat the flesh, drink the blood, have life. Try it.

This vision of life with God is compelling. While it has been said that, for those of us who remain, death is an outrage, it is also a revelation. CS Lewis wrote, 'Grief is like a long valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.'<sup>3</sup> I miss my father dreadfully, but it is in his passing that I have, in many ways, experienced new life myself. New insight into the man who shaped my life, new understanding of myself and what makes me tick, and new revelation of the God of all comfort.

Charles Wesley charts the journey we are all invited to participate in:

'Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast out crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love and praise!'

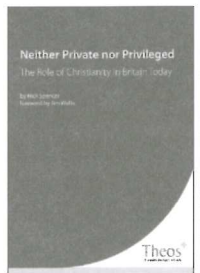
(from 'Love divine, all loves excelling', Charles Wesley, 1747) ■

## NEW FROM THEOS

### Neither Private nor Privileged: The Role of Christianity in Britain Today

By Nick Spencer;  
Foreword by Jim Wallis

A new report by public theology think tank Theos argues that the Church must think carefully before partnering with government.



It is the first Theos report published in 2006, it was argued that religious faith would play an increasingly significant role in the public square in twenty-first century Britain.

*Neither Private nor Privileged* moves the debate on and explores, with specific reference to Christianity, what that role should be. It states that, despite Christianity's historic 'theocratic temptation', today's mainstream Christian traditions advocate a far more nuanced approach to 'public witness'.

The report examines what this 'witness' should look like in practice: should it occur within, without or even against the governing authorities? The answer to this question, it suggests, will differ according to the 'moral orientations' of the state in which the Church operates. The role of Christianity should be adjudicated on a case-by-case basis.

Underpinning this approach, the report argues that the role of Christianity in the public square should depend on the extent to which, by doing what it must do, it can persuade the public that it is 'doing good'.

In his foreword to the publication, author and social activist Jim Wallis writes, 'A commitment to the kingdom mandates that we seek the "common good" of the societies in which we live. Catholic social teaching is rich with the idea of the common good, as are Protestant traditions with their idea of the "public good". Black church history is filled with a faith that cared for the whole community when nobody else did. Evangelical revivals led to social reforms and transformed both American and British society.'

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