

Covid Musing October 7, 2020 North Star Mennonite Church Dan Graber

I've always found that N.T. Wright has something to teach. So I pay attention. Hope you do also.

N. T. Wright: The Pandemic Should Make Us Humble—and Relentlessly Practical

We can't know for sure why it's happening or how to stop it. But Scripture calls us to grieve with God's Spirit and get to work serving others.

INTERVIEW BY ANDY BANNISTER AUGUST 3, 2020 CHRISTIANITY TODAY

*Between around-the-clock news reports, interviews with public health experts, and pundits hashing out the pros and cons of different disease-fighting strategies, we're hardly at a loss for information and perspectives on COVID-19. Yet there are still many questions we struggle to answer with complete confidence: Why has this happened? What should we do in response? And where is God in all of this? In *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath*, theologian & author N. T. Wright shows how Scripture speaks to our confusion and uncertainty. Andy Bannister, director of the *Solas Centre for Public Christianity* in Scotland, spoke with Wright about his book.*

Many Christians have already written books about the pandemic—everyone from John Lennox to John Piper, and even people with names other than John. What inspired you to contribute your own book?

Back in March, *Time* magazine asked me if I would do an article on the pandemic. It got a rather provocative headline: “Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To.” I wanted to say that this drives us toward the Romans 8 position, where the Spirit groans within us with groans beyond words (v. 26)—this is an extraordinary thing for Paul to say. And what it says to me is that we are supposed to be humble in the face of this, not to think we should know all the answers.

After the article appeared, I began to get feedback. People emailed me to ask, “How can you say that?” And I was informed about what people were saying on Twitter (I never look at Twitter myself). All the while, I kept hearing people use Scripture in a way that seemed less than fully adequate. The book is an attempt to explore how Scripture, in its entire narrative and flow, really speaks to the circumstances we're experiencing today.

When COVID-19 hit, it seemed many of us were taken by surprise. Do you think the Western church has been living with comfort and security for so long that we have forgotten how to deal with darkness, suffering, and crisis?

Absolutely! I was talking to a senior church leader a few weeks ago about this, and he remarked: “You know, Tom, we don't do lament very well. We're not used to it. But nor do we celebration terribly well either. What we mostly seem to do is *complacency*.” And I think he's right. I keep hearing Christians asking, “Could this be the end of the world?” And I want to remind them that things like this have happened again and again. For example, in 1917–18, there was the great Spanish flu pandemic, during which churches in some parts of the world were shut for a year. We forget we have been here before.

Furthermore, for my baby boomer generation, which grew up after World War II, we haven't had a war on our territory. We haven't had a pandemic. Sure, we've had a couple of economic crises, but

we've managed to weather those, more or less. So we've just muddled along and carried on as though nothing too bad is going to happen. We forget about history.

I was fascinated when I recently reread the letters of Martin Luther, one of which I quote in the book. Luther had to cope with this kind of stuff every few years, either for himself or for people in neighboring towns who cried out, "Help! We've got a great epidemic. People are dying. What do we do?" Luther talks about obeying the rules concerning taking medicine, helping practically where you can, and not getting in the way and giving the disease to others if you might be infectious. He was very pragmatic, effectively saying, *This is how we cope. Let's not make a big theological fuss about it.*

Your book draws on plenty of Old Testament themes, especially from the Psalms and Job. Concerning the latter, you argue that "part of the point of Job is precisely its unresolved character." Do you think Christians today seem to struggle with ambiguity because they lack a firmer grounding in the Old Testament?

I think the New Testament has a place for ambiguity as well. There are many places in the New Testament which end with a kind of *dot-dot-dot*, *question mark*, because that's called *living by faith*.

Overall, I think part of our problem is the rationalism of the last two or three hundred years in the Western world, which has soaked into the church because the rationalist critics of Christianity have said things like: "Aha, look, modern science shows us that Christianity is false!" In response, rationalist Christians have said, "No, let's show how it is all completely rational!" That can lead to us wanting to have the answer to everything, and so we want to say things like: "Because God is sovereign, he must either have done this deliberately or at least permitted it deliberately." We think that we should be able to see what he's up to. But I really don't think we are given that kind of access.

One of my favorite moments in the New Testament is in Paul's letter to Philemon about the slave Onesimus. He writes, "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever" (1:15). In other words, Paul thinks that *perhaps* he *might* be able to see what God was up to in this situation. But he's not going to say so definitively.

There's a humility here that we need. Now that could spill over backwards into an attitude of "We know nothing, so who cares?" That wouldn't be wise either, because we are given guidelines. But knowing all the details is, as the saying goes, above our pay grade. It's God's job. Our job, when God lets us know what we have to do in this particular situation, is to get on with it.

When you talk about the Gospels, you emphasize the example of Jesus standing at the tomb of Lazarus, weeping. What might you say to somebody who isn't a Christian, who is wrestling with the problem of suffering, and who asks: "What good is a weeping God? I can weep. *Anybody* can weep. What we need is *action*; we need something done! How does Jesus weeping help?"

There's plenty of action in the story, and the action grows out of the tears. As is often the case, in fact, tears in the Gospels sometimes are the crucial element. What they show is that the God who made the world, who became human as Jesus of Nazareth, is not sitting upstairs somewhere, looking down and saying, "Okay, I'll sort out your mess." Rather, he's the God who comes and gets his hands dirty and gets his hands pierced in order to be where we are and to rescue us from there. It's profoundly comforting to know that when I am grieving, as Paul says in Romans 8, Jesus is grieving with me, and the Holy Spirit is grieving within me. And this is one of the things that marks out the Christian faith as distinct from pretty well any other worldview that I know.

What does the rest of New Testament—and in particular the role of the Holy Spirit—have to teach us about our response to the pandemic?

Romans 8, which I just mentioned, is one of the greatest passages in the whole Bible. When I was working as a bishop, if I was interviewing people for parish jobs, I would sometimes ask: “What’s your desert-island Bible text?” And to make it harder, I would add, “You’ve already got John 20 and Romans 8, so don’t go there. Those are too obvious.”

Romans 8 is full of glory. It’s full of salvation. It’s full of the work of the Spirit. It’s easy to get carried away, however, and imagine that once we’re through the difficult parts of Romans 7, we’re just sailing on a high all the way to Paul’s affirmation that nothing can separate us from the love of God (8:38–39). But you still have to go through the dark tunnel of Romans 8:18–30, especially verses 26 and 27, which speak of the Spirit interceding for us in our weakness.

When the world is in a mess, as it is in general but particularly at times like now, it would be very easy to imagine the church standing back and saying, “What a pity the world is in such a mess. But we at least know the answers.” But no, Paul says that when the world is groaning in labor pains, then even we ourselves—who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, the stirring of God’s new creation within us—are groaning as we wait for our adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23).

You might say, okay, so the church shares the mess that the world is in, but surely God knows what he’s doing. Well, in a sense, yes, God knows what God is doing. But here we strike the mystery of the triune God, because Paul says that *at that very moment*, the Spirit groans within us with inarticulate groanings. Furthermore, alluding to Psalm 44, one of the great psalms of lament, Paul says that the God who searches the heart knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people according to God’s will (Rom. 8:27). In other words, God the Father knows the mind of the Spirit. But the mind of the Spirit is the mind that has no words to say for how terrible things are right now.

This is a very strange business. But what I think what it means is this: that in order to rescue the world, God comes in the person of his Son to take the weight of sin upon himself. And God comes in the person of the Spirit to be the one who groans in the church, at the place where the world is in pain. That is how God then moves by those labor pains from the present state of horror and shame in the world to salvation—the total new creation, which is what we’re promised.

The idea of the Spirit’s grieving and groaning takes me back to something you touched on earlier, namely *lament*. Throughout the book you say we need to “embrace lament.” Is this something we have forgotten a bit in the modern church? If so, how do we rediscover it?

Yes, I really think some of us have forgotten it. For those in a tradition where we use the Psalms all the time, it helps that we come through lament quite frequently. When I’m praying the Psalms, day by day, I will often hit one of the psalms of lament—and often this is what I need, because these bad things are going on in my life.

At other times I might come across psalms of lament when I am personally feeling quite cheerful. So then, as a spiritual exercise, I try to think my way into the situation of people that I know about around the world: either friends of mine or people I’ve seen on television or in the news who are in a terrible situation now—people in a horrible, squalid refugee camp, or whatever the case may be. And I pray the psalms of lament trying to embrace them in the love of God.

We need to remember that lament is not just for Lent. It's also built into Advent, as we prepare for Christmas. Those are seasons we can use to develop liturgies of lament that bring the pain of the world into the presence of God, using psalms of lament—like Psalms 22, 42, and 88—that prefigure what Jesus prayed on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Sometimes those prayers come out the other side into the light. And sometimes, like Psalm 88, they simply don't. They stay in the dark. And there's a sense that God is with us in that darkness.

Toward the end of the book, you talk about the church and its response to various lockdown orders. You argue that our willingness to suspend in-person gatherings and conduct services online may have accidentally reinforced the secular idea that faith is a private activity. How do we navigate the tension between the call to corporate worship and the importance of public health?

I begin with the point that Luther made that we must not spread infection. That's irresponsible. It's playing around with other people's lives. And if we love our church buildings more than we love our neighbors, then woe betide us. The fact is, most of the churches in the UK are old buildings, which makes it very difficult to deep-clean them. And I take that very seriously.

But on the other hand, I worry that online church can easily tempt us into saying, “Oh, we don't need to meet in person, because these are *spiritual* matters.”

So you can worship God in your bedroom, in you pajamas, as much as anywhere else? Well, in a sense you can. But Christianity is a team sport. It's something we do together. Think of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, graciousness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). All of those are things we do together. You can't be practicing them apart from one another. And so the sooner we can come back together wisely, the better.

As for receiving the Eucharist, yes, we can receive that on the screen, but there is also a sense of fasting, of deprivation, of exile, because the body of Christ—the larger family of the people of God—is not physically present with us.

I've long thought that the most important response to evil and suffering isn't words so much as *action*, even action that may be costly. Jesus modeled this for us. So, in light of the suffering caused by the pandemic: What should Christians be doing now? How then should we live?

There's a fascinating passage in Acts 11, where the disciples in Antioch hear from a prophet that there's going to be a famine (v. 28). They don't respond: *Oh dear, what can this mean? Is God angry with us? Does this mean the Lord is coming back?* No, they're very practical. They ask: *Who is going to be most at risk? What can we do to help? And who should we send?* The result is that Paul and Barnabas are sent off to Jerusalem with money for the poor church there (v. 29–30).

It's similar at the start of John 9, the story of the man born blind. Jesus is relentlessly practical and discourages his disciples from asking whose fault this was or whether some sin was to blame (v. 3). It wasn't actually anybody's fault. The important question is what God would have us do in response.

So for us, we should start with our neighbors, friends, and family, asking who we could help by bringing some food, tools, or medical supplies. Maybe our church could get involved with something like running a food bank. In short, we should ask: *What can we do?*

In his wonderful book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, the historian Tom Holland points out that many things the church and only the church used to do have now been taken on by the wider secular society. Thus many doctors and nurses who would not call themselves Christians have picked up this strong imperative to look after people, even at the potential cost of their own lives. That is a noble thing. But in the ancient world, it was only the Christians who did that. So in a sense, some of that Christian ideal has spread out into the world. And we should thank God for that. (Dan added the bold)

But in the church, we have been doing things like medicine, care of the poor, and education from day one. They are deep in the church's DNA. So Christians should be reclaiming that tradition and holding onto it—and not just when there's a pandemic going on.

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