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After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters



"Here is deep Christian wisdom for a bewildered age."
—JOHN PRITCHARD, Bishop of Oxford

AFTER YOU BELIEVE

Why Christian Character Matters

N. T. WRIGHT



Synopsis

From the author of the acclaimed *Simply Christian* and *Surprised by Hope* comes a book that addresses the question that has plagued humans for centuries—what is our purpose? As Christians, what are we to do with that ambiguous time between baptism and the funeral? It's easy to become preoccupied with who gets into heaven; the real challenge is how we are going to live in the here and now. Wright dispels the common misconception that Christian living is nothing more than a checklist of dos and don'ts. Nor is it a prescription to "follow your heart" wherever it may lead. Instead, *After You Believe* reveals the Bible's call for a revolution—a transformation of character that takes us beyond our earthly pursuit of money, sex, and power into a virtuous state of living that allows us to reflect God and live more worshipful, fulfilling lives. We are all spiritual seekers, intuitively knowing there is more to life than we suspect. This is a book for anyone who is hoping there is something more while we're here on Earth. There is. We are being called to join the revolution, and Wright insightfully encourages readers to find new purpose and clarity by taking us on an eye-opening journey through key biblical passages that promise to radically alter the work of the church and the direction of our lives.

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Customer Reviews

How do you develop a character suited for God's Kingdom? Practice, practice, practice. That, in a nutshell, is the message of this volume on building Christian character by Wright, a prodigiously prolific Bible scholar and Anglican bishop of Durham, England. In arguing for this new vision of virtue, which is a vision of Jesus Christ himself, Wright carefully explores such classical exponents

of character as Aristotle. He also acknowledges the existence of other notions of encouraging behavior-based rules, duty, or being true to oneself. Drawing on scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, Wright asserts that true transformation comes through the work of the Holy Spirit and through worship, mission, and following Jesus. As the habits of virtue grow, the church community will become the royal priesthood it is meant to be, anticipating (one of the author's favorite words) God's coming new world. A follow-up to Wright's *Simply Christian* and *Surprised by Hope*, this solid volume will appeal to Christians who appreciate biblical interpretation that hews to tradition but incorporates an emphasis on contemporary social justice as an element of Christian virtue. (Mar.)

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“Bishop Wright, with his usual wisdom and erudition, shows how an account of the virtues is not only compatible but required by the New Testament understanding of what it means to be a Christian. This important book hopefully will be read by theologian and non-theologian alike.” (Stanley Hauerwas, Duke Divinity School) “A follow-up to Wright’s *Simply Christian* and *Surprised by Hope*, this solid volume will appeal to Christians who appreciate biblical interpretation that hews to tradition but incorporates an emphasis on contemporary social justice as an element of Christian virtue.” (Publishers Weekly) “In his new book, Wright, one of the most prolific and influential theologians of the 20th Century, posits that the development of virtue -- by the church and in broader society -- could help lead the Western world out of the sea of despondency in which it currently finds itself languishing.” (Religion News Service) “[N.T. Wright is a] master at straight-forward, street-level writing about what makes our religious lives truly matter in the world.” (Wright’s...powerful new book... is a clarion call to mature Christians to take seriously some of Jesus’ messages we...ve long ignored.” (Read the Spirit) “A book that carefully examines Christian character, Christian virtues and the Christian life . . . needs serious attention.” (The Louisville Courier-Journal) “An excellent book . . . Wright’s fine theological reflections here shed much light.” (Englewood Review of Books) “For those who feel the church has lost its way, Wright offers a roadmap to help guide its followers home.” (U.S. Catholic) “Beautifully written, rich with insights and lined with thought-provoking material . . . Sometimes compared to a modern-day C.S. Lewis, N. T. Wright is an author not to be missed.... Highly recommended.” (Faithful Reader) “One of the world’s best published Scripture scholars and an Anglican bishop, N. T. Wright’s latest book blends biblical

competence and pastoral experience. This is a book for a general audience with evangelical leanings about how a Christian goes about developing virtue, character or habits of thinking, feeling and acting. (America • The National Catholic Weekly) "After You Believe by N. T. Wright offers yet another clarion call for believers and their communities to see that their actions in everyday life are evidence of the faith within. (Spirituality and Practice) "Often we get stuck between two extremes: an antinomian („against law“) spontaneity, and a rule-focused legalism. Instead, argues Wright we need to develop virtuous character. Just about everything in After You Believe [is] a fresh way of exploring many familiar truths. (Christianity Today) "One reason so many people read Tom Wright today is because he can write prose that is flat-out captivating. . . . Vintage Wright. (Christianity Today.com) "In his latest book, After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters, Wright challenges the church and broader society in general to return to virtue and the development of character. (Sojourners) "Making disciples is about the long-term development of Christian character. There is no quick fix discipleship. It is the development of Christlike behavior as second nature. This book spells out the New Testament basis and its application to Western culture. (Christianity Magazine) "Those who tend toward legalistic views will find little comfort. It is a book worth considering. (Renewed in Spirit) "As in all Wright books you need to build your virtue muscle, sit down, exercise your free will and make a decision to read the whole thing twice. (Worship Leader Magazine) "[A] very rich book.... Readers of After You Believe will admire Wright's close reading of Scripture, his clear prose, and his evident love for his Christian faith. (Commonweal)

Everyone should read this book! A very important redirection for Christians today. Though I wanted to address something I disagreed with Wright about, and that is COMMANDMENTS. I want to address the intriguing notion by Wright that the commands given by Paul and others in the NT are more or less guidelines to get them started on the right path of what Wright calls "habits of the heart" (198). Wright also sees the commands in the NT to be concerned with some imminent threat or immoral practice he sees about to happen in the church and puts rules in place (200). He would also say rules are more for the immature or newbies. I am intrigued by it because I have thought that this might be true of what Paul is trying to say as well. Though now I am not so sure. If one reads Psalm 119 one sees that one should seek for God's salvation and keep his commands. Verse 166 "fÃ¢â€šâ€œ

ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“I hope for your salvation, O LORD, and I fulfill your commandmentsÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å• (NRSV). 1 Corinthians 7:19 says that keeping the commandments of God is everything! But key to what is happening with Paul I believe is that 1 Cor. 7:19a says that circumcision is nothing! So obviously Paul is not here referring people back to the OT law. What is true of all believers is that we are ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“bought with a priceÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å•. Psalm 119:166 applies no matter what covenant we are under. It is the apostles who have authority and keys of the kingdom. Wright underplays the authority of the apostles in this instance. The commandments of God are now, apostolic teaching. We can find in many places where obedience is a theme. ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“Romans begins and ends with the theme of ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Ëœthe obedience of faithÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å„,ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å|PaulÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å„,ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Ås message has to do with obedience from the heart (Romans 6:17) to the truth (Rom 2:8, Gal 5:7), the gospel (Rom 10:16, 2 Thess. 1:8), or Christ (2 Cor 10:5,6)ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å• (Rosner 129). Wright does not need to talk about the idea of the commands in the NT being only guidelines, because for Paul if the ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“obedience under the old covenant was meant to lead to life, obedience under the new is the fruit of new life in ChristÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å• (Ibid 130). All Wright needed to say about the difference between the old and new was what he said earlier on pages 46 and 47. The OT law was ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“designed to be restrictiveÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å•. It is just the opposite for the NT law. It is designed to be freeing. Gal 5:1 ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã ÅœÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“For freedom Christ has set us freeÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å•. Paul says this because some in the church wanted to run back to being slaves under the OT law. In fact Paul uses ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“obedienceÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å• to describe what they were doing right. Gal 5:7 ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã ÅœÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth?ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å• (NRSV). The OT law is summed up by loving God and loving neighbor as well as the new, but the difference comes in the new maturity wrought by Christ. This new teaching has transformed the thinking. The Spirit is on all GodÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å„,ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Ås people. So it is not ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“guidelinesÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å• versus ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“rulesÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å•, it is ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“liberating rulesÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å• vs ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“restrictive rulesÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å•. Romans 14:17 ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã ÅœÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å“For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peaceÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å|ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¬Ã Å•(NRSV). Rosner, Brian S. Paul and the Law, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press 2013).

My take away from this book is . . . After you believe, after you join GOD's family, it becomes

necessary to practice being a family member. We love GOD, we love our neighbors in the same way we love ourselves, and we love GOD's family; and that takes practice. Paul then tells us to put off the old man and all the baggage that man carried, and the new man who walks in the Spirit will put on the various Christ-like virtues that every family member is asked to practice. Practice makes living for Christ not just second nature, but the most natural thing. Takes practice to live a virtuous godly life.

Early in the book, Wright retells the story of the pilot who successfully landed an airbus in the Hudson River in 2009, after both engines had become disastrously crippled by flying into a flock of geese shortly after takeoff. Capt. Chesley Sullenberger III and his copilot had, in the 2-3 airborne minutes they had remaining, made instant decisions that, against all odds, enabled them to land the plane safely in the river with no loss of lives. While Wright would agree, on one level, with those who called it a miracle, and acknowledges that it was also a matter of "right habits," the power of many years of training and experience, on another level, he uses it primarily as an illustration of "character" — right behavior that has been learned and practiced until it becomes "second nature." In this book Wright explores the process of getting from the stage of consciously making right choices in day-to-day life situations to that of appropriate behavior that has become second-nature, for which he uses the ancient term "virtue" more or less synonymously with "character

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