

Building for the Kingdom: *Our Work is not in Vain*¹

By N.T. Wright

Many people, faced with the challenge to work for God's kingdom in the present, will at once object, "Doesn't that sound," they will ask, "as though you're trying to build God's kingdom by your own efforts?" Well, if it does sound like that, I'm sorry it wasn't meant like that. Perhaps some further clarification is needed.

Let's be quite clear on two points. First, God builds God's kingdom. But God ordered His world in such a way that His own work in that world takes place through one of his creatures -- the human beings who reflect his image. That, I believe, is central to the notion of being made in God's image. God intends His wise, creative, loving presence and power to be reflected -- imaged, if you like -- into his world through His human creatures. He has enlisted us to act as his stewards in the project of creation. Following the disaster of rebellion and corruption, he has built into the gospel message the fact that through the work of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, He equips humans to help in the work of getting the project back on track. So the objection about us trying to build God's kingdom by our own efforts, though it seems humble and pious, can actually be a way of hiding from responsibility and keeping one's head down when the boss looking for volunteers.

Second, we need to distinguish between the final kingdom and the present anticipation of it. The final coming together of heaven and earth is, of course, God's supreme act of new creation for which the only real prototype--other than the first creation itself was the resurrection of Jesus. God alone will sum up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. He alone will make the "new" heavens and "new" earth. It would be the height of folly to think that we could assist in that great work.

But what we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus, and if we are indwelt, energized, and directed by the Spirit is to build for the kingdom.

Our Present Labors Are Not in Vain

A verse that has always struck me in this connection is 1 Corinthians 15:58. Paul has just written a lengthy discussion of the resurrection in great detail. How might we expect him to finish such a chapter? By saying, "Therefore, since you have such a great hope, sit back and relax because you know God's got a great future in store for you?" No. Instead he says, "Therefore, my beloved ones, be steadfast, immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

¹ From *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* by N.T. Wright, 2008. HarperCollins, New York, NY.

By this he means that what you do in the present -- by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself -- will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly or a little more bearable until the day when we leave it behind. They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom.

By such labors you are not oiling the wheels of a machine that's about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that's shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that's about to be dug up for a building site. You are -- strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself -- accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world. What you do in the Lord is not in vain.

Two Extremes: Triumphalism and Defeatism

There are two extremes toward which Christian people tend to slide. To begin with, there are those who declare that if Jesus is the true revolutionary then the single main Christian task is to build the kingdom here on earth through social, political, and cultural revolution. Alas, this social gospel (as it used to be called) has singularly failed to deliver the goods in the century or so since it was advocated in this modern form. An enormous amount of good has been done: social conditions have been improved vastly, though how much is due to Christian work and how much to other influences is hard to say. But we are still a fragmented, frightened, and battered world.

At the other end of the scale there are those who declare that nothing can be done until the Lord returns and everything is put to rights. The forces of evil are too entrenched, and save a great apocalyptic moment of divine power can address them or change the deep structures of the way things are. This kind of dualism breeds very effectively within societies where injustice can be seen and named, but it is politically inconvenient to do anything about it. Such a view says that we will get on with the real business of the gospel, which is saving souls for the future world. We will look after the people at the bottom of the pile, but we won't do anything about the structures that put them there and keep them there. This kind of dualism banishes the continuing healing activity of the Father from the world he made, of the Son from the world of which he is already the Lord, and of the Spirit from the world within which he groans in travail.

Neither of these views begins to do justice to Paul's injunction to be "steadfast and immovable" in doing the work of the Lord because in the Lord our labor "is not in vain." The universal early Christian belief was that Jesus had already demonstrated publicly to be Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord through his resurrection. That, as we've seen, is part of the whole point of the Christian story. If we believe it and pray, as he taught us, for

God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, there is no way we can rest content with major injustice in the world. We must recognize, as the second view does, that the final putting to rights of everything does indeed wait for the last day. We must therefore avoid the arrogance of triumphalism of the first view, imagining that we can build the kingdom by our own efforts without the need for a further great divine act of new creation. But we must also agree with the first view that doing justice in the world is part of the Christian task, and we must therefore reject the defeatism of the second view, which says there is no point in even trying.



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