

THE
MISSIONAL
LEADER

N.T. Wright on Pentecostalism, Suffering, and Why Certainty Isn't Christian



FEATURING
N.T. Wright
&
Dr. Jesse Stone

Season 3 Episode 1 • TML Episode Guide

N.T. Wright – New Testament Scholar, Theologian, Author of God's Homecoming
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“The church somehow has to model a different way of being human, which would involve both suffering and patience.” — N.T. Wright

Overview

In this episode of *The Missional Leader*, Rob sits down in Oxford with renowned New Testament scholar Dr. N.T. Wright and theologian Dr. Jesse Stone, whose doctoral work under Wright explored the Holy Spirit in Paul's letters. Together, they examine the Holy Spirit, new creation, suffering, and the Church's witness in the world. They explore what it means to live faithfully in the tension of the “now and not yet,” where God's Kingdom has already broken in through Jesus, yet creation still groans. Their conversation offers a holistic vision of Christian mission, where Spirit-formed people embody God's coming renewal through hope, unity, service, and faithful presence today.

Core Insight:

Why Early Influence Requires Deep Formation

The Spirit Forms a People of New Creation

One of the defining insights from this conversation is this:

The Holy Spirit does not simply prepare us to leave the world someday. The Spirit forms us into people who embody God's new creation in the world today.

Tom and Jesse both challenge a reduced vision of salvation in which the goal of the Christian life becomes simply "saving souls" so that people can escape earth for heaven.

The biblical story is larger:

- God created the world good.
- Jesus entered that world in the flesh.
- Jesus was bodily raised from the dead.
- The Spirit has been given to the Church.
- And God has promised the renewal of creation.

Christian hope is therefore not abandonment, but renewal.

Heaven and Earth Are Coming Together

Tom points to Acts 1 and 2 as a picture of what is happening through Jesus and the Spirit.

Jesus ascends from earth to heaven. Then the Spirit descends from heaven to earth. The result is not separation, but overlap.

Tom describes human beings as standing at the "dangerous intersection between heaven and earth," called to live as image bearers who reveal God's life within His creation. Without the Spirit, we cannot fulfill that calling. The Spirit gives God's people the gifts, courage, wisdom, and power they need to become effective witnesses in the world.

The goal is not simply Spirit-empowered activity; it is Spirit-formed humanity. The same Spirit who empowers witness also conforms us to Jesus.

Core Insight:

Why Early Influence Requires Deep Formation

Salvation Is Bigger Than the Soul

Tom and Jesse challenge the idea that a human being is essentially a soul temporarily trapped inside a body.

Scripture offers a more holistic vision. Human beings are made from the dust of the earth and animated by the breath of God. We belong to creation, and God's plan is not to discard embodied human life but to renew it.

Jesse summarizes the logic of the incarnation this way:

- Jesus became truly human so that what is true of Him can ultimately become true of us.
- He lived in holiness.
- He suffered.
- He died.
- He was raised.
- And through the Spirit, God is drawing His people into that same pattern of life.

The Gospel is not just an invitation to go somewhere else after death. Instead, it is an invitation to become a new-creation person now.

The Framework:

How Missional Leaders Live in the Now and the Not Yet

1

Let the Spirit Empower Mission, Not Just Experience

Pentecostal and charismatic traditions have rightly emphasized the present activity of the Holy Spirit.

Tom affirms that God continues to give His people gifts, not to create a hierarchy of “special” Christians, but to make the Church more effective in its witness. The gifts are given for service.

They help the Church:

- Proclaim Jesus
- Teach
- Serve
- Build community
- Heal
- Discern
- Encourage
- Bear witness to God's Kingdom

Rob sees this as one of the strongest points of resonance between Pentecostal spirituality and Tom's theology of new creation.

Spirit-led leadership turns outward. It looks for where God is already at work and asks how our gifts, influence, resources, and leadership can participate. The evidence of the Spirit's work is not simply what happens within us, but what God is able to do through us for the sake of others.

The Framework:

How Missional Leaders Live in the Now and the Not Yet

2

Refuse an Escapist Gospel

Tom strongly challenges versions of Christian eschatology that imply:

Jesus is coming soon, so the condition of the world does not matter.

When Christian hope becomes an excuse to ignore injustice, creation, suffering, or the needs of others, it has departed from the biblical vision.

The resurrection tells us that God has not abandoned creation. He intends to renew it. This changes the mission of the Church. Evangelism cannot be reduced to asking whether someone will go to heaven when they die. Tom describes evangelism as announcing that God has launched His new-creation project through the resurrection of Jesus and is calling people to become part of it.

This still begins with repentance and faith, but it produces a much more holistic vision of salvation and mission.

For missional leaders, the question becomes: Does the mission we lead demonstrate the good news we proclaim?

We proclaim Jesus while also caring about the people, communities, and places He has called us to serve. We make disciples, build communities, respond to suffering, pursue reconciliation, care for creation, and work for human flourishing.

Missional leadership does not choose between proclaiming the Gospel and embodying its implications. It holds them together.

3

Learn to Recognize the Governance Problem

One of the most important tensions in the conversation is the relationship between the Spirit's power and suffering.

Jesse points out that Paul's understanding of divine power has been radically reshaped by Jesus.

Jesus reveals power through:

- Self-emptying
- Service
- Obedience
- Suffering
- The cross

That means Christian mission will not always look victorious from the outside. Sometimes the advancement of God's Kingdom looks like apparent loss. Paul says believers share in Christ's suffering before sharing in His glory. Creation groans. The Church groans. The Spirit meets us in that groaning.

For missional leaders, suffering is not always evidence that something has gone wrong. Sometimes it is precisely the place where hope is being formed.

Trade the Lust for Certainty for Trust in the Spirit

Rob observes that uncertainty itself can become a form of suffering, particularly within Western cultures that prize control.

We want to know. We want to predict. We want to manage outcomes.

Tom describes this impulse as a kind of “lust for truth,” where certainty becomes brittle, and truth becomes something we believe we can master. But Christian faith does not offer either absolute human control or chaos; it offers God’s Kingdom.

We are led by the Spirit into truth over the course of a life. We trust God even when we do not fully understand what He is doing.

Romans 8 gives leaders a different posture:

- Groaning without despair
- Truth without control
- Mystery without chaos
- Confidence without arrogance
- Suffering without hopelessness

The Church should model a different way of being human: patient, faithful, dependent, and led by the Spirit.

Let the Church Become the Evidence

The conversation repeatedly returns to ecclesiology: the Church itself as a sign of God’s future.

Rob points to Lesslie Newbigin’s conviction that one of the greatest demonstrations of the Gospel is a vibrant local Christian community.

Tom connects this to Paul, in Ephesians and Romans, where communities divided by ethnicity, status, culture, and history come together to worship with one heart and one voice. That unity becomes a witness.

Tom recalls churches in apartheid-era South Africa where Black and white Christians worshiped together in defiance of the divisions around them. The message was embodied before it was argued: There is another way to be human.

The Church becomes a foretaste of new creation when people who would otherwise remain divided are reconciled in Christ.

For missional leaders, this means collaboration and unity are not secondary leadership strategies. They are part of our witness.

The question is not simply, “How successful is my ministry?” but, “How is my leadership strengthening the whole Church?”

That may mean sharing resources, building across denominational or cultural lines, elevating voices different from our own, resisting competition, or choosing Kingdom impact over organizational credit. This is why Rob returns to John 17 and the vision of the “big C” Church.

The mission is not ultimately about building our church, our denomination, our movement, or our organization.

Formation:

Reflection and Next Steps

Reflection for Missional Leaders

Pause and reflect personally or with your team.

Spirit

- To what degree do I primarily think of the Holy Spirit as someone who gives experiences in contrast to the One who forms and sends me?
- Where do I need the Spirit's power to become a more faithful witness?
- How is the Spirit forming me to look more like Jesus?

Mission

- In what ways have I reduced evangelism to getting people somewhere after they die?
- How would my understanding of mission change if I saw salvation as participation in God's new creation?
- Where might God be inviting me to embody the good news, not simply proclaim it?

Suffering

- To what degree do I instinctively interpret hardship as evidence that something has gone wrong?
- Where might God be forming endurance, character, or hope through a season I would rather escape?
- How might I hold together the expectation for God's power and a willingness to follow the crucified Jesus into suffering?

Church

- In what ways does the community I lead visibly demonstrate reconciliation across differences?
- Where have I confused "my church" or "my ministry" with the whole Church?
- How could the unity of the Church become part of our witness to the world?

A Simple Next Step

Missional leadership is formed through faithfulness.

This month, take one intentional step:

- Identify one place in your life or leadership where you are struggling with uncertainty, suffering, or the desire to control the outcome.
- Ask the Holy Spirit what faithful presence looks like in that place.
- Then take one practical step to live as a sign of God's new creation.

That may mean choosing patience over control, pursuing reconciliation across a divide, remaining present in someone's suffering, serving your community, or trusting God with an outcome you cannot yet see.

We may not know how God will bring everything to completion. But through the Spirit, we can faithfully embody the hope of His coming Kingdom today.

Formation:

Reflection and Next Steps

Resources mentioned in this episode

- Hoskins School of Mission
 - Within Southeastern University, the Bob and Hazel Hoskins School of Mission provides students with interdisciplinary degree programs which combine ministry and marketplace skills for roles of Spirit-empowered leadership. This episode was recorded during a doctoral intensive hosted by the Hoskins School of Mission.
- God's Homecoming by N.T. Wright
 - Tom's newest book exploring God's promise to dwell with His people and renew creation.
- Surprised by Hope by N.T. Wright
 - Referenced as an important companion to *God's Homecoming* and its vision of resurrection, new creation, and Christian hope.
- The Gospel of the Kingdom by George Eldon Ladd
 - A formative influence on Rob's understanding of inaugurated eschatology.
- Ask N.T. Wright Anything
 - Tom's podcast exploring biblical, theological, and cultural questions.
- Admirato
 - A new platform featuring Tom's online courses, engaging community discussions, and resources.
- Lesslie Newbigin Resources
 - An extensive archive of Newbigin's writings, lectures, sermons, and resources on mission and the Church's public witness.

Connect with Rob

Missional leadership is formed in community, not isolation.

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