

# **That all shall be saved: (re?)discovering and sharing apokatastasis as the “gospel sung in eschatological key” in the Dutch Reformed Church<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Central to the question of evangelism in the Southern African context is to “begin again at the beginning” of what exactly the gospel is and what it entails. This article contends that any formulation of the gospel of “the living Lord Jesus Christ ...” that envisions even the possibility of the notion of hell as eternal separation from God, annihilation, or punishment for anyone is not “good” news at all, but is in fact, as one writer in the South African context puts it: “the bad news of the Gospel.” Moreover, holistic, or missional conceptions of eschatology, such as that of the influential New Testament Scholar N.T. Wright, inasmuch as they reject or do not explicitly accept universal salvation, lack theological coherence, and cannot be inculcated and shared as good news in the Southern African context. The Dutch Reformed Church and the ecumenical church urgently need to (re)discover the doctrine of Ἀποκατάστασις πάντων for its rediscovery of evangelism not to be in vain.

## **“So, it is on and on and on ...” (*Heaven and Hell – Black Sabbath*)**

The then newly appointed editor Norris (1978:48) of *Themelios: An International Journal for Pastors and Students of Theological and Religious Studies*, where luminaries such as Richard Bauckham and N.T. Wright made contributions, was compelled to denounce universalists and universalism in the strongest of terms:

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... the presupposition held by many teachers and pastors that in the final analysis, “everything and everybody will be all right” colours the thought and understanding of everything that they teach and preach ... It is difficult to ... over-stress the urgency of the need to present a clear, biblical alternative ... for, in essence, it involves the uniqueness of Christianity and the very integrity of the Gospel.

My argument in this article is that, contrary to Norris (1978), the very integrity of the Gospel is at stake, but that the rediscovery of evangelism “as an invitation to missional discipleship in the kingdom of God” (Coetzee, Nel, & Knoetze 2023) in the Dutch Reformed Church will be futile if the Gospel of Ἀποκατάστασις πάντων – the restoration of all things – or, as Norris (1978:48) puts it “everything and everybody will be all right” is not embraced and embodied.

This article endeavours to show with the help of the four meditations on universal salvation advanced by Hart (2019) that, if the Gospel is conceptualised within the register of the Kingdom of God, or as Wright frames it, *How God became King*, (2012) and McKnight (2016) has it, *The King Jesus Gospel*, that *contra* Mcknight (2010) and Wright (1978; 2003; 2008) for the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to be celebrated and proclaimed as *Good News*, the complete restoration of everything and everyone must be embraced without reserve, because of the

1. The nature of the King’s justice being done in the Kingdom.
2. The nature of the freedom of the King’s subjects in the Kingdom.
3. The nature of the persons in the Kingdom
4. And the nature of the King.

Or, to put it in a polemical, and by way of a ham-fisted play on words, as far as McKnight and Wright’s explicit rejection of the doctrine of Apokatastasis is concerned, it is clear as day that they are entirely wrong because they assume that the King’s justice must be punitive, they misunderstand what freedom entails, do not have a proper understanding of what a person is, and besmirch the good name of the King.

To be even more to the point, this paper will argue that for evangelism in the Dutch Reformed to be revived, the doctrine of an *eternal* hell must

be rejected. Before delving into the arguments, a word or two is in order on why the topic of an eternal hell has to be addressed within the context of a conversation on Evangelism in the Dutch Reformed Church and also why one would engage specifically with these two specific New Testament Scholars within the context of the Dutch Reformed Church's conversation on Evangelism.

### ***(What the hell – Avril Lavigne) – Or why we need to speak about it***

One may ask what the doctrine of apokatastasis has to do with evangelism in the Dutch Reformed Church. Alternatively, if you were less polite: “What the hell?”

Precisely. What about hell? We need to speak about it. Even though I know doing so is not polite or *de rigueur*. It is, I should think, one of the elephants in the room when speaking about evangelism and probably part of the reason the “E-word” (Stone 2007:Introduction; Coetzee, Nel & Knoetze 2023:2) got such a bad rap and fell into disrepute.

There are, to quote David Bentley Hart (2022:438): “... a set of unwritten rules one is supposed to observe when speaking about hell to Christians in a public setting.” And according to Hart (2022:438), those rules have become more restrictive as the ages have progressed. In the Middle Ages, it was common to have preachers harangue their parishioners with the exquisite horrors of hell. Today, however, teachers in the main would frown on such a practice. When I grew up, however, it was spoken about often; I had a visceral fear of hell, and at Camp and “CSV” meetings, I would heed countless “altar calls” to escape its clutches. I fretted not a little with fitful efforts to save others from the fiery furnace. I suspect that this may be the experience of others who have been dissuaded from the practice and theology of evangelism.

## ***You may be (W)right (Billy Joel) – Or why I am crazy enough to disagree with N.T. Wright and Scott McKnight specifically***

Notwithstanding the fact that scholars like Bates & McKnight (2023:foreword) urge us to move away from a reductionistic “Soterian” gospel where the gospel and evangelism are all about being saved from my sin to a more holistic gospel that is “greater, more cosmic, transformative and revolutionary in its scope than the individualised and privatised reduction thereof,” (Coetzee et al. 2023:3) a gospel message of the Kingdom of God, or as two influential New Testament Scholars frame it in their books, *The King Jesus Gospel* (2016) and *How God became King* (2012) both Wright (Wright 1978; Wright 2003; Wright 2008) and McKnight (2010) in their broader scope of work, (admittedly not as the centre of their eschatology) reserve a very definite place for a version of hell in the Kingdom over which “King Jesus” presides in eternity.

Again, I think Hart puts his finger on the nub when he compares our relationship with hell today to the Mad Uncle in the attic, or perhaps we can translate it in South African parlance as “die broer in die tronk” (incarcerated brother) which should not be mentioned, and for most part, Van Rensburg & van Eck (2008:1499), would concur “... (H)ell is being written out of theology and banned from serious conversation”.

And yet, as Hart would have it:

... curiously enough, worse than calling the whole dreadful matter to mind is calling it into doubt. While it may be an indiscretion to talk about that poor mad uncle gibbering away in the shadows of the attic, many see it as something close to an abomination to suggest that maybe he is not really there at all ... “ (Kimmel & Hart 2022:438).

Both Professors McKnight and Wright would not necessarily appreciate the metaphor, but that is precisely what they refuse to do (namely, to deny the reality of an eternal hell). For them, out of necessity, there has to be an attic, so to speak, of people who are either experiencing “death after death” (McKnight 2010:162–165) or an ex-human existence for all eternity (2008:Beyond Hope, Beyond Pity section).

To be sure, neither Wright nor McKnight make their understanding of hell the focus of their eschatology, nor do they harbour the Dantesque view of hell as the eternal torture chamber of conscious creatures. They do, however, reject the doctrine of apokatastasis, and if evangelism is “sharing the good news of the kingdom” (Coetzee et al. 2023:4), the Kingdom should and can have no “attic or basement”. And if the King of this Kingdom is to be good, or more appropriately, Goodness as such, then the story of the Gospel of the Kingdom as understood with the help of scholars like Scot McKnight and N.T. Wright, their (and others’) rejection of apokatastasis should be rejected.

I focus on these two scholars specifically because they have had a significant influence on the missional discourse in South Africa (Niemandt 2010; Niemandt 2012; Niemandt 2019; Niemandt & Niemandt 2021) as well as the burgeoning conversation about Evangelism in the Dutch Reformed Church (Coetzee et al. 2023; Westhof & Bosman 2023).

***“We’ll make heaven a place on earth” (Belinda Carlisle) –  
Or on the shared understanding of the “Missional” gospel  
of the Kingdom of God***

There is no need to delineate in detail the recovery of the “original” Gospel of “King Jesus” or of “How God Became King”, as espoused by McKnight (2016) and Wright (2012). For the sake of argument, it can be taken as read and agreed upon that the gospel cannot be reduced to “sin management” and how to escape the fires of hell to go to “heaven when you die” (McKnight 2016: loc. 318).

Furthermore, we can accept that a correction is needed from a gospel that focuses almost exclusively on Jesus as Saviour to a gospel that proclaims Jesus as Lord, whilst not excluding the Gospel of Jesus as Saviour (Coetzee et al. 2023:3).

We can assume further a working definition of evangelism as a sharing of good news of the Kingdom or “... telling the story of how God became king in and through this story of Jesus of Nazareth” (Wright 2012:11. How to Celebrate God’s Story section).

As a summary of what this Gospel of the King would entail, I find the summation of Bates (2023:7. Allegiance for Glory’s Restoration section) quite helpful:

Because of his love for all creation, God is rescuing it through the gracious gift of a King. Allegiance to King Jesus results in life now and forevermore. When transformed humans forever reign gloriously with the King, then creation, humans, and above all, God is appropriately honoured as God intended.

Although I will pit Hart remorselessly against Wright later in this contribution, I have to note that on one level, they agree fundamentally on eschatological matters. Wright or McKnight would scarcely find fault with Hart’s (2019:111–112) declaration that:

The language of Scripture speaks of a restored creation, of a new Age of the world yet to dawn, and of a New Jerusalem established upon the earth; it makes no promises whatsoever about a heaven of redeemed souls.

There is, however, a part of the story that Scot McKnight and NT Wright say that Hart would sharply disagree with. To wit: Wright and McKnight feel confident to pronounce on the “fate of the derelict”, but for Hart “, the actual text of the New Testament could scarcely be more evocatively vague ...” on that matter (Hart 2019:112).

### ***“What’re you going to do on judgement day?” (Judgement Day – Eric Clapton) – Or on the nature of God’s justice***

Wright cannot accept that in this Kingdom or New Creation, the whole created order and everyone in it will finally be renewed, healed and free co-rulers. He cannot, in a word, embrace apokatastasis, or universal restoration and reconciliation of all. He (Wright 2008: 11. Purgatory, paradise, hell section) foresees a consummation of everything where there will be,

ex-human creatures that once bore the image of God but does so no longer and can never do so again.”

These creatures are, according to Wright, “beyond hope and beyond pity.” He is compelled to reach this conclusion, which he calls a “dark theological

mystery,” by his reading of the New Testament and what he calls the sober realities of this world. He assumes that rejecting the notion that there can be a final loss or final condemnation results from Western liberalism that whistles about God’s mercy in the “darkness of Hiroshima.”

He (Wright 2008:11. Purgatory, paradise, hell section) contends that for God to take people’s inhuman and destructive behaviour seriously, there must be judgment:

And that setting right must necessarily involve the elimination of all that distorts God’s good and lovely creation, and in particular of all that defaces his image-bearing human creatures. Not to put too fine a point upon it, there will be no barbed wire in the Kingdom of God. And those whose whole being has become dependent upon barbed wire will have no place there either ...

Similarly, Scott McKnight’s “Gospel of King Jesus” (2016) precludes all “creatures of our God and King” from worshipping him in perpetuity. Like Wright, he believes that the New Testament compels us to believe in hell. Mcknight (2010:159–165) believes in hell because Jesus believed in hell. After citing a plethora of verses that purportedly demonstrate Jesus’s belief in hell, he comes to the following conclusion: “Jesus believed that our Maker would assign us to one of two places: the living place or the death place. I believe in “death after death” because Jesus taught it” (2010:162).

Furthermore, along with this transatlantic New Testament colleague, McKnight (2010:162) believes that, somehow, justice and the establishment of the Kingdom of God demand that a form of “death after death” should befall some creatures (presumably those who did not follow Jesus, who were guilty of oppressing others, who were foolish and without love and instead made war rather than peace) the state of which entails, after much thought from McKnight :

A person’s awareness of being utterly absent, which is what “death after death” means, but yet in the presence of God, like C. S. Lewis’ wraiths yearning to be observed and present but deeply aware that they have declined both options (165).

It is not clear, however, how it should be that for God to take the evil in the world seriously and for judgement to take place that “sets the world

to the right”, it would necessitate that image-bearing human creatures (that have to a lesser or perhaps to an atrociously greater degree defaced other creatures) must “be eliminated” which is the assertion that Wright (2008:11. Purgatory, paradise, hell section) defends.

The above contention of Wright does not make any theological or logical sense. The reasons should be obvious. Firstly, it grants evil substantiality that can attach itself to the creation and human creatures, rendering therewith human creatures as *substantially* evil and violates the Augustinian and Thomist principle of *privatio boni* (cf. Grant 2019), also held on to by Gregory of Nyssa, who believed in the “definition of evil as a purely privative reality, with no substance or nature of its own, since God alone is the source of all being and “in him there is no darkness at all”” (Hart 2019:165).

To use a medical analogy – this kind of theology by Wright assumes that God as Healer is, in the end, unwilling or unable to destroy the evil of, say, cancer within the body without destroying the body itself. Furthermore, it violates the principle of God’s love, or more specifically, it assumes that God’s justice must be punitive and cannot finally be restorative. As John Milbank simply, and to my mind incontrovertibly, puts it: “The God of love cannot be a punitive deity.” (Kimel & Hart 2022:1). That does not mean that evil and good will not be distinguished or that evil will not be dealt with decisively. To remain within the medical analogy: If the treatment does not destroy the patient, it is in no way an indication that the illness was not identified or dealt with; to the contrary – that which was foreign to the well-being of the patient can be precisely and even ruthlessly identified and dealt with appropriately.

Thirdly, I wholeheartedly agree with Milbank (2022) that envisioning a final state of reality where there is final loss and final condemnation violates the principle of God’s simplicity and omnipotence. It entails, according to Milbank, a kind of Zoroastrian position where evil (even as privation) is granted a “co-eternity” with God, standing over and against God, thus reducing God to an ontic being in opposition with other beings or forces, and that, of course, cannot be the case, because God is being *as such*.

Wright (2008:11. Purgatory, paradise, hell section) expresses the hope that he is proved wrong in his assertion that some people will lose their



humanity to exist in an ex-human state for eternity. He cannot, however, accept being wrong if it is not upheld that the one true God will bring about a judgement for his creation in which it can rejoice.

This begs the question: if Hart (2017:351) is correct that the assertion in 1 Corinthians 15:28 that God will “be all in all” is Paul’s most definitive eschatological statement that signifies the completion of a three-stage process whereby all creation will be reconciled to God, starting with the resurrection of Christ, the reconciliation of people who believe in Christ at his Parousia, and then eventually, after possible purification, all of God’s creatures to himself – would God’s judgement not have set the world right in such a scenario? Would all of God’s creatures not rejoice in such a scenario?

It would seem much more likely that, firstly, all of God’s creation would rejoice because all of God’s creation is indeed restored to participate in the rejoicing. This is in contradistinction with Wright’s proposal that some of God’s creatures would be lost to such rejoicing because of their pitiless ex-human status. Secondly, would it not be likely that all of God’s creation would rejoice if *everyone’s* brother, sister, mother, friend, son, or relative would be part of this rejoicing and not condemned to being reduced to beings that are supposedly beyond hope or pity?

***“When I die, I don’t want any part of heaven.” (Youngstown – Bruce Springsteen) – Or on the nature of human freedom***

Wright proceeds with the assumption that you become like what you worship and reflect what you worship. When one worships something that is not God, it can become completely and utterly dehumanized: If creatures refuse all invitations to turn away from the destructive path they are on, it becomes possible for them to reach a point of no return. According to Wright, if one has reached that point at the point of death, it becomes a final and irreversible state. For Wright, one reaches this state because one has progressively *chosen* to do so. One *chooses* to: “... refuse all whisperings of good news, all glimmers of the true light, all promptings to turn and go the other way, all signposts to the love of God ...”. After death, however, according to Wright, no such whisperings of love and glimmers of light

will be offered to the creature, or at least the creature will not be able to receive and respond to them.

Again, to relate his position to our healing metaphor, if a patient decides to engage in unhealthy behaviour, there comes a point where the patient is responsible for her own health outcomes. The patient will be able to refuse to be treated by the physician. After a certain point, this refusal will be acquiesced to by the physician and will remain unalterable forever. The (ethical?) consideration for this position is that God must ineluctably respect human “freedom” if some choose to reject him, even if that would lead to their demise or loss of humanity. As Hart (2019:171–179) convincingly shows, this argument fails on multiple fronts.

Firstly, it operates under the conception of freedom as the brute and bare spontaneous exercise of the will for its own sake – with no regard for the end to which the will is employed. This conception differs sharply from the classical conception of freedom as a freedom for reaching worthwhile ends:

Freedom is not simply a negative freedom from, but a freedom for, a capacity to achieve specific worthwhile goals. Those goals are taken up in the one telos of human life. The return to God in freedom is thus fully a function of God’s grace working within us. Freedom is being wrapped up in the will of God, who is the condition of human freedom. Being is not autonomous; all being participates in God, the source of being. To be fully free is to be joined to that end for which our natures were originally framed, and for which, in the deepest reaches of our souls, we ceaselessly yearn (Cavanaugh 2008:7).

To argue along Lewisian lines that God must respect creatures’ freedom by saying to them, “Thy will be done” in their choice of self-destruction, is not a matter of God respecting someone’s “free” choice at all. The analogy again used by Hart (2019:80) is so powerful that it is worth quoting in full:

... to say that God allows creatures to damn themselves out of his love for them or out of his respect for their freedom than to say a father might reasonably allow his deranged child to thrust her face into a fire out of a tender regard for her moral autonomy. Moreover, as absurd as is the idea of someone “in a right mind” choosing eternal loneliness and torment rather than eternal love and bliss,

the argument becomes all the more insufferably ludicrous when one considers the personal conditions – ignorance, mortality, defectibility of intellect and will – under which each soul enters the world, and the circumstances – the suffering of all creatures, even the most innocent and delightful of them – with which that world confronts the soul.

***“You know I’d rather be damned with you” (Bat Out Hell – Meatloaf) – Or on the nature of human persons.***

Furthermore, this assumption labours under a reductionistic view of what a person is. If it were the case that the Gospel of the Kingdom entails a new creation, with the new heavens and the new earth with the well-being of the King’s co-rulers paramount, the final loss of the Creator’s creatures would definitely be precluded. The reason should be experientially self-evident, and it hangs on the nature of the human person. De la Noval’s (2016:318) gloss of Hart’s treatment of what a human person is sounds remarkably similar to the African Concept of Ubuntu” ‘umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (Kruidenier 2015:3):

What is a person? Is she a solitary unit whose ultimate fulfilment in God could be accomplished apart from the network of creaturely relations within which she came into being and within which she received new birth through the community of the church?

As Hart (2015:9) emphatically states:

Who are we, other than all the others who have made us who we are, and to whom we belong as much as they to us? *We are* those others (original emphasis).

The implication is simple and stark: if persons *qua* persons are to be saved at all, *all* are saved, or no one is saved.

## **(“You give love a bad name” – Bon Jovi) – Or on the nature of the Go(o)d**

Again, one might ask why it is essential to focus on the distasteful “dark theological mysteries” if it distracts us from participating in God’s mission, celebrating the Kingship of Christ, and inviting people into discipleship. Is it not to fall into the trap of the “soterian” focusing on who is proverbially “in” and “out” – focusing on who is “saved” and not “saved?” Whilst these questions are by no means existentially unimportant, and even if the focus were to remain not on who is saved and who is not saved, but rather on the God who became King in Jesus, focusing on nature and specifically the scope of the salvation of God’s creation and creatures is no less critical, precisely because it impacts the character, or, to use the parlance of Bates (Bates & McKnight 2023) – the *honour* of the King.

For if God is indeed the Creator *ex nihilo*, with no need or compulsion to have created in the first place, to have created a world with even the *possibility* of final loss or destruction would be no good God at all but manifestly evil. The reasoning of Hart (2019:68) on this point is entirely cogent:

In the end of all things is their beginning, and only from the perspective of the end can one know what they are, why they have been made, and who the God is who has called them forth from nothingness. Anything willingly done is done toward an end; and anything done toward an end is defined by that end.

To again, perhaps return to our medical analogy: If a medical doctor subjects a patient to a, for whatever reason, *wholly unnecessary* procedure (say for research purposes) that might result in the patient’s death, that action would be evil and reveal the character of the surgeon questionable. That would be the case even if the patient incidentally suffers no harm. It is precisely because if “God having become King, or “King Jesus” would allow even one of its subjects to (even potentially) be condemned to a shadowy existence – some netherworld of bare existence or death – He and his Kingdom would not be worth celebrating at all or becoming missional disciples in its service. The story of such a King would be no good story, no evangel, but rather, as Hart (2019:167) calls it, a “dysangel”: the direst

tidings ever visited on a world already too much burdened by unmerited suffering.” As Hart (2019:165) says, if the story ends with most, many, or even any beings being condemned to eternal suffering, or one might add complete or partial annihilation, we will have no good news to share. Therefore, evangelism would be a non-starter.

The good news is, however, that there is good news to share, as it is told by, for example, Gregory of Nysa (Hart 2019:165); it is also a story of “King Jesus” and the “Kingdom of God” and not that different from the story (referenced above) that Bates and McKnight tell (2023:foreword):

The narrative of salvation in the New Testament was an epic tale of rescue and conquest, the overthrow of all evil – natural evil, moral evil, the evil we bring upon ourselves – and the invasion of death’s Kingdom by the shattering divinity of Christ.

The crucial difference with the tale that Wight and McKnight tell is that the tale that Hart and Nysa, and other universalists tell is “a tale that can end only in perfect victory and perfect peace” (Hart 2019:165).

### ***“I will sing, sing a new song” 40 – U2) – Or on further possible implications of the doctrine of the Universal Restoration of all***

The other reason to focus on the question of soteriology and universal salvation in the context of evangelism in a missional context is that the doctrine has very concrete implications for our present reality. I mention three flagged by Milbank (2022) to invite reflection and a final reason by Alvin Kimel (Kimel & Hart 2022) to end this article.

The first important aspect was already alluded to earlier, but it bears repeating: The fact that the doctrine of apokatastasis was rejected could have contributed to the failure of the gospel to convince or to put it in the parlance of Coetzee et al. (2023) and Osmer (2021) why the “invitation” was not accepted. I agree with Milbank’s endorsement in Kimel & Hart (2022:1) that “no other apologetic can now convince anyone in the future.”

Secondly, suppose the pressure is finally removed from insisting that one religion or one way of life has the monopoly on “saving” people or

contributing to the restoration of the world. In that case, it can open new and much less restrained ecumenical discussions between different faiths and traditions. As Milbank (2022) puts it, we can appreciate Christianity's differences and affinities with charity and appreciation, as David Hart (2013) has done, for example, with Hinduism. It is also not a case of facile syncretism that would come into play, but rather paradoxically, as Milbank indicates, that understanding our history and doctrines like The Trinity and incarnation opens up possibilities for deep conversation with other faiths.

Thirdly, and this could be paramount for the missional discourse, is the impact that the doctrine of apokatastasis can have on our ecological concerns. If everything and everyone will be restored, it confirms the fact that everything and everyone is, in fact, a theophany and that if any part of God's creation, which would, of course, include humans, is left behind, God's creation will not, in fact, be restored and renewed. I believe only the doctrine of apokatastasis can, in the final instance, be the metaphysical and theological grounding of the United Nations' "central, transformative promise" that "no one is left behind."

Lastly, the reason the scope of salvation cannot be ignored or downplayed, even in a missional context where the main concern is not a "soterian" or the "me and my salvation" gospel, is the *pastoral* evangelical import of sharing and proclaiming "Apokatastasis as the gospel sung in Eschatological key."

The title of this article is derived from Father Adian Kimel (2022:17), which is already referenced in this essay. This doctrine is for him no academic discussion on soteriology, etc. His son committed suicide in 2012, and as Kimel professes his memory pervades every page and every word of his foray into the theology of the Church Fathers, Biblical Theology and modern theologians. Kimel himself conducted the memorial service, and it is at this service that he "came out", as it were, as a now "committed" and no longer – along the lines of Hans Urs von Balthasar's (2014) – a "hopeful" universalist (2021).

On that occasion, Kimel (2021) knew that he had to speak a word of "absolute hope, confident hope." Not because he "believed God rejected him (his son) or that he had damned himself, but simply because (he) needed to speak the Gospel as clearly as I could at that moment." This moment, this Kairos,

if you will, of the rediscovery of evangelism calls for the gospel to be lived and proclaimed clearly and confidently. That Gospel *is* the consolation of Dame Julian of Norwich with which Fr Aidan (2022:456) closed the homily of his son’s memorial service:

*All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. Amen.*

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