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#59 Evangelism and sharing the gospel

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

How do you explain the gospel to someone who thinks they haven't done anything needing forgiveness? How do we answer those who say Christianity is irrelevant? How do we help those who believe but don't live out their faith? · Book for the Unbelievable? & Ask NT Wright Anything conference on Sat 15 May · Support the show and receive a free book – give from the USA or Rest of the world · For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com · Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online · Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

the hello and very warm welcome to today's edition of the podcast the show brought to you by premiere SBCK and NT Right online and bringing you the thought and theology of Tom Wright renowned Bible scholar former Bishop of Durham senior research fellow at Whitcliffe Hall Oxford and today taking your questions on evangelism and explaining the relevance of Christianity to others you can find out more about the show as ever from ask NT Right dot com support the show from there as well and sign up for our newsletter and by the way we've also got a link there to our upcoming 2021 unbelievable conference Tom Wright our special guest and he's going to be sitting down with Tom Holland as well historian as part of that for a fantastic conversation and a live edition of the ask NT Right anything show so make sure you're part of that by registering over at the website again you can find the link from the show page ask NT Right dot com or go straight to the conference page unbelievable dot live and what lovely message I've had from Doug in Kentucky who's a listener who says I've got questions but I'm gonna submit them later right now I want to take a couple of minutes to add my voice to the many others thanking Justin and Tom for this podcast my father was a pastor of a small southern Baptist church and I grew up going to church every Sunday morning Sunday evening and many Wednesday evenings as was the custom I learned much from my pastor and the other pastors who were in a circle I attended Bible studies read on my

own thought I had a pretty good understanding of the word my father was a fire and brimstone preacher who was very good at that style of preaching he passed away in 2006 I never doubted my faith although for a period in my life I straight away from the church and seeking God through daily prayer I always thought there was something missing not putting my upbringing down by any means it put me on a path of learning and understanding about the Bible God and what it means to be a follower of Christ it I always thought there was something more to it I thought I didn't quite belong where I was and about a year and a half ago I began to get serious about seeking God again began to read the Bible daily fast and pray not in vain repetitions but pouring my heart out my concerns and my questions in all my unworthiness God began to answer a year into my new found devotion and God allowed me to discover Tom Wright Wow Wow Wow I've listened to all the shows watch the videos on YouTube began to read his book simply can't get enough of the wisdom and knowledge this this is what had been missing this was the something more I needed thank you thank you thank you and I thank God for you as well God bless you Mr. Wright and Justin God bless your families and loved ones and all involved in the podcast in your ministries I finally feel like I belong Wow Doug what a what an extraordinary message to receive thank you so much it's it's absolutely humbling to both Tom and myself to get this kind of feedback to the show and to know that it's it's impacting people in that kind of way so thank you so much for being part of the show well let's get into some of your questions on evangelism on today's edition of the show so Tom on the show today we're talking about evangelism which which I think we all struggle with at one level or another because well I don't know about you I'm very British when it comes to talking about my faith openly and it can seem rather you know rather intrusive to bring up the topic sometimes but then there are opportunities that present themselves and of course there are good and bad ways of doing evangelism a really simple question from David in Seattle to start us off with here and this is I suppose if if someone gave you the perfect in the perfect opportunity to talk about your faith and simply ask how do I become a Christian what would you say and I'm going to ask you Tom you know to really imagine this is an ordinary person on the street this isn't someone who has any particular theological knowledge and and this isn't being asked by a student at Oxford what's what's your sort of one minute answer to to to someone asking that question I know people love to ask for one minute answers the trouble is of course it does depend who the person is and what they know is this a person in a hospital bed who is worried that they're going to die is it a ten-year-old who has bumped into somebody at school who says they're a Christian and comes home and says how do I become a Christian rather like how do I become a boy scout or something like that so anything in between so I if if there was a chance I would want to spend a few minutes at least just just probing a little what's behind this question has somebody told them that if they're not a Christian they're going to hell and are they frightened or has somebody just told them the story of Jesus and said wouldn't it be wonderful if you could be part of that because that is where I'd want to bring them to to become part of the story of Jesus in the sense of meeting Jesus for themselves and that feels different to different people it

takes different people in different ways but it's introducing them like a friend introducing you to their best friend I would love you to meet my friend Jesus and here's how it goes because becoming a Christian isn't just a little lifestyle choice it isn't just learning about some facts about somebody who lived a long time ago it is a transforming relationship with this person so how do we introduce them to Jesus and the answer is to walk them through the basics of Jesus story that he came to say this is the time for God to run the world the way he wants and the way he does this is by dying on the cross and rising again to open up God's new creation and you can be part of that new creation right now because if you believe in Jesus if you trust in him then you can be part of his new creation project which is going to go on not only now but in the forever time when God makes new heavens and new earth that's what I want to get across and how do they do that clearly it's by belief but then it is also through baptism and through joining the family because there's lots of us out there who are part of Jesus family we're a bit of a funny old crowd but being a Christian means being part of that family and so the personal faith the joining the family those are the two things and as I said I would say differently whether it was an old lady in a hospital bed or a bright ten-year-old in school or a rather skeptical student or whoever those are the places that I want to bring into it and and just just at that level if someone kind of got to that point to say okay well what do I do now what would be your advice to someone who's literally has that immense privilege of potentially bringing someone to that point of a confession do is it would you say just pray with them and is there a prayer that you would suggest to for that person to pray at that point? I remember when I was first ordained the the man who was my immediate boss who was the chaplain of the college where I was the assistant chaplain he said when it comes to that point actually you can't do better than pray the Lord's prayer and that may seem counterintuitive to some in some traditions for whom it seems a bit remote and they want to say I want to ask Jesus into my life whatever well that's fine too you can pray Revelation 3:20 if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with them and they with me that's fine you could use that as a way of praying but actually to say Jesus gave us this prayer which is a prayer for God's kingdom to come a prayer for us to be part of that of him to provide for us to keep us from evil and harm and temptation and Jesus gave us that prayer so that we could be part of his family so as we pray that prayer we are getting to know Jesus who gave it to us and then it provides a framework in which people can then go on and live and grow so either that or something based on Revelation 3 of course Jesus coming in and eating with us leads you straight into the idea of the present Christian family as a family that does that every week or every day or every six months or whatever because the breaking of bread with Jesus is one of the ways that the family is most distinctively recognized anyway those are ways I'd want to go here great great ways in I think it's his job or it could be just be Job who's asking but they ask how do you explain the gospel to someone who thinks that they're basically good and haven't really done anything wrong they think that well even if they have done wrong things they were just small things and they can pay for those themselves they don't need someone else to pay for their sins how do you start this one

Tom I think there's a slight problem here in that and Jeb or Jeb seems to think that the gospel is you need your sins forgiven and Jesus can do that and I want to say the forgiveness of sins is really important it's there in the Lord's prayer it's there right the way through but the gospel is the good news that in Jesus the God who made the world has rescued and is remaking the world and it isn't just that I am sinful and oh dear what's going to happen to me the bad news is the world is still in a mess and if anyone doesn't think the world is in a mess let them have a look back at the last two centuries of world history and at what's going on right now around the world say is this world in a mess or isn't it and then to say now the good news the gospel is that in Jesus God has launched the project of putting the world right and what he's doing for us personally is he wants to put us right ourselves so that we can be part of his putting right project for the world that's how we get integrated into the gospel are putting right which does include the forgiveness of our sins is part of the much larger divine project which is there in Isaiah it's there in the Psalms it's what Romans is all about it's what John's gospel when you learn to read it is all about new creation bursting in in Jesus and saying now you get to be part of it and that means your very specific life I mean think of John's gospel Nicodemus or the woman from from of Samaria and all these other different people who somehow become part of this story of new creation which is launched through Jesus death and resurrection so if you truncate the gospel and make it just you've been very naughty and God's gonna punish you unless you believe then don't be surprised if that runs into problems at certain points but when you sketch out this larger picture of what the New Testament gospel actually is and then say now where do you belong in that framework then well yes I can be part of that and if they don't think they've done too much wrong well maybe they haven't done any of the wicked heena sins but as they see and join in with God's project going forwards they will pretty soon realize there are things in themselves that need sorting out and that's the point at which the personal message will come through here's another interesting question perhaps coming from a similar sort of person who says Ronnie in London asking this one how would you answer someone who simply claims that Christianity is irrelevant and there's no use in or point going to church well the question of whether Christianity is relevant to the question of whether you've got to go to church are strictly separable but obviously they they do overlap a bit of course over the last 200 or 300 years many people in Western culture have said Christianity is either irrelevant or worse it's part of the problem rather than part of the solution and often that goes with a rather touching and naive faith in the enlightenment and modern science and technology and we now can solve all the world's problems and we really don't need Christianity and I would say really are you so sure just look around doesn't look to me as though we're actually making too good a fist of it and maybe it's because Christianity has been shoved back and been privatized and turned simply into a form of spiritual escapism that now it appears irrelevant but actually there's many parts of the world where the Christian gospel is still extremely relevant I once had a student who worked for a summer in sub-Saharan Africa and he came back fired up with the fact that the gospel works not just to transform

individual lives but actually it transforms whole communities and even secular commentators like Matthew Paris in the Times have pointed out that as you go around Africa the places where communities have thrived and grown and been enterprising have again and again been places where the church has enabled people to be like that and and this this is so on on any number of fronts so we want to look at some history here but also we want to look at the deeply personal thing are you actually happy with the way the world is being run right now if you read the gospels and look at Jesus agenda for how the world ought to be don't you think it would be good if we went that route now maybe the churches aren't doing a good job of that right now that's a problem we have let's face that but certainly not irrelevant I think there's almost that that danger isn't there because if we do present Christianity's essentially a this is the way to get to heaven or a personal sanctification or personal improvement project then it's perfectly possible for people to turn around say well I'm quite happy with with my person the way I'm getting on with doing that myself I don't particularly feel like I need God's help and and and to and that but but if you present it more in terms of look at this bigger picture do you want to be part of a much bigger story than yourself and your personal improvement this is actually about reshaping the world I think that gives people a much bigger sense of that they're not simply joining yet another self help movement it's it's some much bigger quite and of course this is this is really difficult there are some churches that really do this spectacularly well and are active in the wider community and in ecological issues and and drug rehab schemes or whatever it is and others that that shrink away from that and still want to make it a privatized thing so we in the church have got a lot of work to do to get this message out and to do so in a coherent and attractive way one final question and and this is really from someone David in California who is concerned about those who maybe have a nominal faith but but really don't seem to live it or embody it it says my question is how can I help someone turn to Jesus or if they already believe how can I help them grow in their faith I have loved ones that believe in God and Jesus but don't really live out their faith I know that ultimately a person's salvation is up to them and neither I nor God can force it on them but what's the most I can do to help it's a great question and I suspect that most of us practicing Christians and Christian leaders have plenty of friends and family members who are in exactly the position that David describes and people who don't seem to us really to be firing on all cylinders even when if you put the direct question they probably do believe in God they probably do believe in Jesus it's just that they don't seem to express it the way that we do I want to be a bit reticent here because over my now rather long lifetime I've known many people who at one stage I would have said well they're kind of on the edge of church but they're not really involved but gradually I've seen that there was a profundity and a depth to that person and that I've come to respect them their personality is very different from mine they wouldn't be drawn to the kind of worship styles that I've been drawn to but actually as I found out more about them I think oh my goodness this is a person of prayer a person of faith and humility and wisdom and service and I want to honor that even if at the time it didn't seem like they were the kind

of Christian I recognize at the same time there are others who are on the edge and actually would almost on the way out and so it's not up to us to judge whether the glass is half full or half empty what's up to us to do is first and foremost to pray for them and to make that a matter of if it's somebody close to you daily prayer holding them in the presence of God asking that God will do a fresh work whatever he needs to do in their hearts and lives and then in the light of that prayer whenever we're with them not wanting to force the issue but being ready if the topic comes up in conversation to say a wise word but actually the things that will make much much more of a difference are how we are with them the generosity of spirit that we display the kindness the going the second mile the taking thought for what's actually going on spending time with them having genuine questions about how they are so easy especially as an extrovert to ask a little question about how they are but then quickly pass on to all the things that we want to talk about etc people notice that and I'm not terribly good at this myself but I'm aware that that's how to do it and if in that context they are stirred up to think something's going on here I want to go a bit deeper well so be it but yes you can't force the pace but prayer and love it kind of goes a long way absolutely hope that's been helpful David thanks also to Jeba and Ronnie and David in Seattle as well for the questions as well on today's show and thank you for being with us again Tom and thank you next time thanks for being with us don't forget you can leave feedback on today's show from wherever you are by rating and reviewing us wherever you're listening to the podcast from you can send your feedback along with a question too if you get registered for the show at askentiright.com just a reminder that our show partner NT Wright online are offering a free ebook from Tom on the book of Acts to podcast listeners links in the show notes and more available at askentiright.com head over to unbelievable.live to register for our upcoming conference with Tom Wright you can attend wherever you are in the world on Saturday the 15th of May for now thanks for being with us and we'll see you next time you

(gentle music)