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#156 Have you ever struggled with your own faith Tom?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Listeners want to know about Tom - Who are his favourite authors? If he could have dinner with anyone from the 20th Century who would it be? Why is he an Anglican? Has he ever struggled with his own faith? First broadcast in 2019.

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Transcript

This is the best possible way to share your thoughts and thoughts on your faith. Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways.

And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that. It's called "Five Ways to Connect with God" and you can download it for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premierinsight.org/resources and download your copy.

That's premierinsight.org/resources. The Ask NT Wright Anything #podcast. Hello there. Welcome to today's show with me Justin Briley bringing you as ever the thought and

theology of Biblical scholar and former bishop of Durham Tom Wright.

And thanks to Francine who got in touch to say, "I really appreciate NT Wright's considered point of view. Many times I find here a sort of Christian bridge between the old and new worlds. Both the geographical, Europe, America sense and the chronological first century to 21st century sense." So to Justin and Tom, thanks for the great work.

And Francine left that review on her podcast provider. Do leave a rating and review on your podcast provider. It does help others to discover the show.

And on today's show listeners want to know about Tom, who were his favorite authors. If you could have dinner with anyone from the 20th century, who would it be? Why is he an Anglican? Has he ever struggled with his own faith? And this show, first broadcast in 2019, will be back with some fresh material soon. Do register for our newsletter by the way at premierunbelievable.com. You'll get full access to all our online material on the website and the link to ask a question yourself for this podcast.

And if you're able to support us too, that makes a huge difference. Again, that's premierunbelievable.com. That link is with today's show. Hope you enjoy today's conversation.

Today, we've brought together a number of questions that came in around yourself. So I know you're a very humble person. You don't like talking about yourself all that much, but people do want to know about Tom Wright himself.

So are you okay with that? Sure, yes. I have a friend who's writing a book on humility, and we tease him that it's going to be called "Humility and How I Approved It". Let me go actually to a question I was going to leave to the end, but actually I think I'll ask you at the beginning.

Jim in Davis, California says, are you planning to write your autobiography or memoirs in the future? Well, my publishers have muttered to me that a theological autobiography might be fun because I happened to have been, as it were, a guilty bystander in major shifts in the study of Jesus and Paul and various other things as well and resurrection and new creation. And so I've found that on the odd occasions I mentioned how I came into all that in lectures and so on. People are actually quite interested in that, so it may be that that will happen sooner or later.

I doubt if a real autobiographical memoir would work. The trouble is that there's a huge temptation to settle old scores, and that does not read well. Yes, yes, I suppose it's quite a biography of Paul, you know, two thousand years later.

For people who are still with us, that's slightly different. Well, yes. One person that they mentioned, actually Jim specifically says, I'm especially interested in reading about your time at Oxford with George Cadd.

I'm afraid the name doesn't mean a lot to me. OK, George Cadd who died sadly young. He was younger when he died than I am now.

He was 67 and just about Trito. He was the principal of Mansfield College. He was a great non-conformist preacher, lecturer, theologian, basically a biblical scholar, been a pupil of CH Dodd, among others.

He was from Scottish Shroots originally from the Dundee area. There is a Cadd Hall in Dundee, not named after him, but it's a famous name up there. George was a brilliant classicist who studied in Cambridge, then came to Oxford to do his theology, and then did a doctorate.

And he did doctorate on glory in the New Testament, a wonderful piece of work which has never been published. They were aiming now to get it published at last. And he ran Mansfield College.

He preached widely. He was a brilliant New Testament lecturer, and he would come in, sweep into the room, one more gowns in those days. And the Greek Testament would be on the thing.

And as Henry Chadwick once said, it's probably upside down because he knew it by heart anyway. And it was a theatrical performance. And we'd be sitting there absolutely spellbound.

And then he'd finished the lecture, snap the book shut, and shush out of the door. And no surprise is one of his sons. It's one of the most famous theatre directors of our time, John Cadd, who was one of the producers for Les Mis and all that.

But he, four children, other of whom was a concert oboeist, I mean a very, very talented family. And George was my supervisor all through my doctoral thesis. So the second half of the 1970s, I would go in fear and trembling to him.

Every few weeks for something I'd written. And he would say, "Well, now this very interesting, I'm not sure I agree with it, but let's have a cup of tea and we'll talk about it. Off we go." And I think we both changed our views, but probably me more than him.

I certainly mean more than him. But what I'm most grateful to him for was the historical approach, which then came up particularly in his famous book, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, which is one of those life-saving books, which actually explains what apocalyptic language is all about. When the Bible says the sun and the moon will be darkened and the stars will be falling from heaven, this is not a weather forecast.

You know, that this is language about empires and great power games going on. George understood that. He was a hebreist.

He translated some of the apocrypha for the New English Bible. I mean, he knew those texts intimately and knew how they worked and would slice through the nonsense that was going on a bit of his scholarship. So he's a great role model and I was privileged to co-edit a volume of essays in his memory after he died.

But we, how much we wished he'd lived to have them presented to him. Let's keep on the theme of people who have influenced you. Paul in California asks, "Who have been the top two or three preachers that you have loved to listen to on a regular or semi-regular basis?" One of the funny things about being ordained and then particularly being a bishop is that wherever you go, you're doing the preaching.

So for years, I haven't actually listened regularly to very many preachers. The church I go to now has had a succession of different clergy in the years that I've been going there, including along into regnant, where we would just get different people. So I haven't been regularly going to one person.

Can I say I would be terrified of being the minister of the church that Tom writes attends? Fortunately, it's a tiny church. The church I attend is not much bigger than this space we're in here and there's congregation about 20. And there's another retired theological professor also in the congregation.

Stuart Hall, who's a logistics player. That will be the reason to be terrible. But the church wardens and people always tell visiting professors, you know, these two are harmless.

They won't bite. Because, I mean, it's a very serious point. When I go to church on Sunday, I'm an ordinary Christian needing to hear that God is a God of grace and he is for me and Jesus.

And please come and I'm welcome to, despite everything. I need that just as much as everyone else, possibly more. If my wife is here, she'd snort and say certainly more.

So, you know, that's where we are. However, when I was young, I was very fortunate in Oxford to hear Keith Weston, who died not that many years ago. KAA Weston was rektrips and ebbs church.

Keith was a wonderful preacher, a warm-hearted good speaker. He'd done his homework. He loved exegesis.

He got us to open the Bibles, but not in a dry, wooden way. Brought it to life week after week. I also was privileged to hear some Bible expositions, and I used to get tapes of them from Alec Mater, who was at one stage principal of Trinity College Bristol, an Old Testament scholar.

And Alec opened the Old Testament. He once did a series of Bible rings in Cambridge on the whole of the Book of Isaiah in, I think, six or seven hour-long lectures, which opened

my eyes to ways of seeing the whole flow of Scripture, which I've always been grateful for and always tried myself to reproduce. I did hear John Start and Dick Lucas and people like that when I was young, great preachers with their own particular styles, but always with that sense of the detailed attention to the text.

The text is the text is the text. And we're not just using it as a springboard to jump off into fairyland. But then, nor is it just a mathematical exercise, it's got to translate out.

And so that's what I learned from them, and I'm really, really grateful for them. Are we just sticking with the idea of you sitting in an average church congregation and listening and being able to be fed yourself? I mean, do you have to sort of turn down the academic in you in order to receive, in a sense, the spiritual side of that? Yes and no, one never knows. I mean, part of the joy of listening to a sermon in the context of a worship service is that the words may be comparatively trivial, comparatively, you know, yes, that's the sort of thing that the average preacher would say.

But when it's hedged about with Psalms and hymns and Bible readings and when you're coming to the Lord's Table in and through it all, even ordinary words can mean more than they mean by themselves. Preaching is funny like that. And yes, for me, it's no trouble because the academic bit of me is the academic bit of me, but the person I am is an ordinary Christian who reads the Bible every day and tries to hear what God is saying.

I seem to remember some words from C.S. Lewis that I can't quote exactly, but I can't remember exactly where he talked about the importance of as Christians, he'd been being obviously a brilliant Christian thinker, but sitting next to the charwoman, I think, was how we'd used it in a church and accepting that God is just as much present in that service for her as he is for the great academic. Absolutely. And I mean, one of the sort of negative blessings of having been an academic for half of my working life when I was in Oxford and then in now in St Andrews is that certainly, let's say, looking back 30 or 40 years to my young days as an academic, some of the most dysfunctional human beings I've ever known have been Oxford Jack in Emmett's.

And some of the most highly functional, loving, shrewd, sensitive people I've ever met left school at 14. So that I have no academic snobbery, whatever wisdom and knowledge are not the same thing. Absolutely.

Absolutely. But yes, exupre stuff. People want to know the sort of people who are influences as well outside of the people you've specifically met.

Mario in Croatia says, what do you think about another big British giant and the literary scene, GK Chesterton? Oh, yes. I haven't read everything of Chesterton's, but obviously he's a great novelist and very funny and quirky. And his great book, *The Everlasting Man* and other things like that, were attempts 100 or so years ago to explore the world in ways that at the end of the 19th and 20th century, people just weren't doing.

Obviously he comes from a very traditional Roman Catholic perspective and was kind of exuberant in his delight at being able to say the opposite of what everyone was expecting. And I think sometimes he overdid that, I was just his personality. I'm not an expert on him, but I have always enjoyed reading him.

And he's one of those figures like Lewis himself, to whom I go back from time to time. And like Lewis, where you can read some of the things they were writing 18, 90 years ago and think, gosh, that makes perfect sense today. Yes, I mean, of course, in a sense, the human condition hasn't changed.

In another sense, it has things moved on. But yes, the great thinkers, it's why Plato and Aristotle is still important today. The great thinkers put their fingers on key things about being human, which don't change that much.

And if they're using wonderful imagery to do that, like Lewis's stories or indeed Tolkien, then we can relate from all sorts of points of view, lots of ways in. And another writer more recently departed that someone wants to ask about, this is Ryan in Nebraska saying, Dr. Wright's emphasis on the kingdom shares many points of contact with some of the spiritual formation teachings of Dallas Willard is right familiar with Willard. And if so, what are his thoughts? What authors does he find to be most insightful on the topic specifically of spiritual growth? Yes, it's interesting.

I have tried to read Dallas Willard, and I suspect precisely because he and I are really quite close. It's a funny thing. I found it with some other writers as well, that when somebody is saying similar things to me, I want to edit it.

I want to sort of fiddle around with it and say, well, could we move this bit over here? And surely we're now going to need a section on such and such. That's not a good way to receive a book. So I have tried to read Willard, and certainly I have a lot of friends who have told me exactly this.

And indeed, when I was at that Missy of Alliance conference to my astonishment, they presented me with something called the Dallas Willard Award for my work, which I was very proud of and have up on a mantelpiece somewhere. So yes, I accept that, but sadly I haven't actually made great inroads. So in terms of spiritual growth and development, I find two quite different sorts of sources.

One, the Bible itself, especially the Psalms, is simply there all the time and constantly refreshing. And two, poetry, and especially I'm thinking of some of the great English Christian poets like George Herbert or John Dunn, some of the more recent ones as well, Manly Hopkins and so on. And I find that when I go to them, there's a sort of sense of, oh, yes, of course.

Thank you for putting it like that. I'd forgotten and I need that. And it switches on the

sort of the imaginative element.

Of course, of course. And that is vital. I mean, so much in our contemporary culture has treated imagination, music, metaphor, etc.

as a dispensable bit of decoration around the edge. Whereas I passionately believe that is one of the highways to the very centre. Now in terms of personality, I would say that I'm an ENFJ and the F is reasonably strong.

But for those who may not know, this is Myers Briggs language. And if you don't know what he means, never mind. But whereas, of course, people who read my academic works perceive me as a thinker rather than an intuitive feeler.

But for me, the intuitive remains enormously important, hence music as well. Absolutely. And one more if you'll indulge us.

Michael also in California says, "If you could have dinner with any person from the 20th century, whom would you choose and why?" Classic foot of dinner party questions, isn't it? Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. It's a funny thing.

My oldest son, who's a historian, edits a history journal, the journal of modern French history. And they did a feature on him in a recent issue. And they asked him these rapid fire questions.

And one of the questions was, if you could go back to a particular point and meet somebody, what would it be? And he unhesitatingly said, it would be in early 1940 in Normandy, so that he could walk into captivity with his grandfather. My father was captured at the age of 19 and spent five years as a POW. And my son, as a modern historian, has tuned into that.

Because when you said that question, my reaction was, I would love to go and spend a day with my grandfather. Actually, my mother's father, who was an Archdeacon in rural New Thumblin, and had been around the Church of England and was brother-in-law of an archbishop and had cousins who had masters and goodness knows what. And I just love to find out from him what life was really like in the '30s and so on, and what the key issues for the Church were.

In terms of public figures, it mightn't be very good because we probably don't speak the same language, but my great musical hero from early 20th century is Sibelius, the Finnish composer. But I suspect he'd be far too busy, you know, out in the dark woods, north of Helsinki, dreaming up some wonderful... whatever. Well, at least you can appreciate the music he did create.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Hi there.

Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special e-book we're releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity. This e-book draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rasselberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, "Has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the Church, or is white privilege a problem in the Church, and is critical race theory compatible with the Gospel?" I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful e-book as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the ministry that brings you this podcast each week. You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you.

Without your generosity, none of this would be possible. So please, go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today. That's premierinsight.org/give and don't forget to download our newest e-book, Critical Race Theory and Christianity as my special thank you.

Let's talk about your own churchmanship. Gavin in Salt Lake City says, "What keeps you in the Anglican tradition?" After all these years, Tom, you're still an Anglican. That feels like saying, "Why are you still wearing the same skin?" Isn't it wearing out now? And the answer is, "Yeah, it actually is, but it's still my skin." I was born and bred up in Broadham, and Anglican and parents and family on both sides of the family, all Anglicans, lots of clergy, lots of active lay folk.

My sort of deep DNA folk memory is of reasonably good, middle-day Anglican things, certainly not Anglican Catholics, certainly not evangelical. Simply people who were reading their Bible, saying their prayers, singing the hymns, and thinking, "Now, as Elmas is Jones down the road, who needs some help with such and such more, now that we've got some spare time, should we be doing meals on wheels?" In other words, people just quietly being kingdom people in their communities, and though for myself, I prefer styles of worship a bit more vibrant in various ways than what I grew up with. The basic Anglican liturgy is Bible, Bible, and Bible.

I mean, you have older New Testament readings, which is really, really important. If you just have one, you forget that these readings are not abstract things, they're a narrative. How do you prepare for them, and how do you thank God for those readings? Why? By singing more bits of Bible, or "Cantacles Close Up" like the T.D.M. Particularly the Psalms.

So the most common or garden Anglican worship has Psalms, Bible readings, and "Cantacles", most of which are biblical themselves. And then when you turn to prayer, you are coming into God's presence as somebody who has been living in that story again. I think that I took that for granted growing up.

When I move around in other church circles, I find sometimes there are some bits of that missing. I mean, why now have we got to the point where a large swathe of

contemporary Christians don't use the Psalms at all? That's never happened before in the history of the church. It's very dangerous.

I think there's something of a movement. We'll probably address this a bit when we talk in another podcast about the church generally in ecclesiology and so on. But I think there is a bit of a movement in churches that have gone very informal, contemporary sort of sense back towards something that's more structured.

I think I'd say no. I think I'd say because I was in Willow Creek in Chicago a few years ago, and somebody said to me there, "You realize this isn't I've been going for a generation, and we're having to start to think about continuity and liturgy." To which I said, "I come from a church that has so much continuity and liturgy at hurts, and we could do with a bit of what you've got. So could we do a deal on this?" Do you find yourself at home in either setting, whether it be a fairly exuberant praise, guitars, drums, or quite a formal set liturgy type of call for the even song? I would like the best of both.

I love Corley even song. I've lived with that system for a long time and I'm aware that it can go stale and that it can become just a formality. But because of the actual content, it always has a capacity to regenerate itself.

The danger with the informal liturgy is that actually you rotate around the same ten songs. Quite extraordinary. You go to the other side of the world and they're singing the exact same stuff they were in the charismatic fellowship down the road.

I think we do a bit better than that. I worry about my grandchildren growing up not knowing the great hymns from Wesley and Watts and so on that have sustained some of us throughout our lives. It is partly the liturgy, which is central to being an Anglican, but it's also the sense that Anglicanism at its best doesn't say we are the only pebbles on the beach.

It says we are kind of sitting in the middle here and if we can help with everything else. One of my favourite moments when I was Bishop of Durham was working on a big project where I introduced the local Roman Catholic Bishop to the leader of the local House Church movement. I remember thinking, I think this is my job actually, to make this sort of connection.

Making introductions. You've never been seriously tempted to jump ship. No, my second year I think as an undergraduate at Oxford, the ones who fiery preachers I heard in the Christian Union who were urging us to get out of our corrupt structures and something different.

The Lord is doing a new thing, etc. The frustrating thing for me is that I remember feeling that as a very strong pull and I do not now know what it was that stopped me from doing it. It was the sort of debate between John Stott and Martin Luther.

That's absolutely right. It was in the backwash of that. I simply don't know, because there were plenty of Anglicans who would say, well at least it's the best boat to fish from.

I never really liked that as an argument. It was a pragmatism of it. Time for one more.

Samuel, who's a student at Copenhagen University, says, "Dear Professor Wright, have you ever struggled with a suspicion towards your own faith thinking I probably just believe in this because I've already betted so much of my life, meaning and identity on this horse? If so, how do you deal with that?" Yeah, that has never troubled me because I know so many people from similar backgrounds to me who went and have stayed right away from the faith. I mean, when I was at school, a lot of the boys that I was with, I was single-sex school, had church-going parents. There was chapel day by day, week by week at school, and most of the people that I knew were going right away from it.

So I was never tempted to think, "Oh, I only believe this because it's what we do here." I was one of the odd ones who actually did do that. Yeah, but by the same token, I have lots and lots of good Christian friends who have come into the Christian faith from right outside, having done a student yesterday who was describing coming into the faith from a totally non-church background, sort of mid-20s. And so it happens both ways.

So I don't worry too much about that. I think, of course, there are lots of bits and pieces of the faith as I have received it, which are as I have received it. And when you go to other parts of the world and other traditions, you think, "Oh, that's how they do this, my goodness." And why are they doing that? And no doubt they would think that in my church as well.

And that's when you just learn to lighten up and think, "This is the situation." I sometimes get this myself in a different way involved in Christian ministry and the broadcasting world. And so people do challenge me sometimes, especially the atheists and agnostics who listen to my other show, to say, "Well, look, you're sort of invested in it just in it, so of course you're going to always be biased to sort of see the arguments for God and to see that there is evidence for this." In a way I can't deny it. Of course I'm invested.

None of us come to these things with a totally neutral point of view. That's the implicit lie underneath the implication of the question as it were. It is that every day you should start with a blank slate, and now I'm going to believe it today.

It's a very post-modern approach to life, by the way. I'm going to invent myself again today, what shall I do? I mean, nobody in the legal profession would say, "Am I going to think like a lawyer today?" Now, of course you are. You've learned how to do it.

You're doing it. You've got this job. That might go dead on you.

And there are some people, some clergy, some bishops whose faith for whatever reason

does go dead. And then there is a problem because is this a dark night of the soul that I have to work through? Or have I actually totally lost the plot? And is it going to be like that forever? And I'm one of those odd people that I wonder about. I do the wrong thing.

I think the wrong thing. I say the wrong thing. And I come back and I say, "Sorry." And we start again.

And God is amazingly gracious. And I never really remember a time of not being aware of the presence of God. So it's not been a case of, "Do I really believe this?" It's like, "Well, do I breathe?" I do.

It's fascinating. Thank you so much for spending a bit of time answering questions on yourself. Always the easiest thing to do.

Strange. Anyway, I appreciate that. If you've got more questions, perhaps in a future podcast, we'll ask a few more of Tom's personal questions, and see what we can dig out from the past.

But it's been great to have you again for this week's podcast. Don't forget you can send your questions in as well. AskNTRight.com is the place to go.

Do tell other people about the podcast as well. Do rate and review us. And we look forward to seeing you again next time.

Thank you. Thank you so much for being with us on today's show. Next time we'll be discussing Genesis, Evolution, Adam and Eve, and The Fall.

And just a reminder, you can register for our newsletter and keep up to date with the show. PremierUnbelievable.com is the place to do that. Gives you full access as well to all our online material at the website and the link to ask a question here on the podcast.

And if you're able to support us too, it makes a huge difference. That's PremierUnbelievable.com. Again, the link is with today's show. See you next time.

[Music]