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#4 Qs on Mission, Evangelism, Islam and other religions

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In this episode Tom Wright fields listener questions on evangelism in a post-Christian world, returning to a message of repentance, whether we can know that Jesus is the only way to God, and how to talk about Jesus with a Muslim.

And Tom gets his guitar out again...

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Transcript

[Music] Premiere podcast.

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[Music] The Ask NTYN-thing podcast.

[Music] Well, Happy New Year, and welcome back to the show where I sit down with leading New Testament scholar Tom Wright and ask your questions.

It's as simple as that. The podcast is produced by Premiere in partnership with SBCK and NT-Right Online. I'm Justin Briley, Theology and Apologetics editor for Premiere.

Very glad you're with us for today's show as we draw once again on the thought and theology of Tom Wright, research professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of St Andrews. And today, as the New Year dawns, we're looking at the questions you sent us on Mission and Evangelism. And before we get into them, if you'd like more episodes, updates and want to ask a question yourself for a future program, then do register at askntright.com. And while you're there, do check out the video section of the website.

We've got some great videos circulating on YouTube. We're always releasing new ones

of Tom answering your questions. And you do actually get bonus video material when you register with us at askntright.com. Do stick around to the end of today's podcast and you'll see the other side of our favourite Bible scholar as he reaches into his back catalogue to bring us another edition of Tom Wright Unplugged.

But now, let's get into today's subject. It was great to be sitting down with you again, Tom, to record another edition of our podcast. We're trying to segment these up into different themes as they come in with various questions and a number of the questions that came in were on Mission and Evangelism.

That's the broad title I've given them. Do you ever think of yourself as an evangelist? Yes, in a sense, yes. In a sense, no.

Let me explain both of those. What I spend my life doing mostly is trying to explain the New Testament and what it's all about and particularly trying to present who Jesus was and is at the meaning of his death and resurrection. And it seems to me that is to be talking about the gospel, the good news, and trying to present it to a wider readership and audience as I can.

However, when I preach, I haven't found it my main vocation, as it were, to be preaching to the rank outsiders. I've done a fair amount of that, but I think my vocation has tended to concentrate on teaching Christians, and how to already part of the faith community in whatever way, how to understand their faith and how they can be living witnesses. And in particular, I remember when I was quite young being disappointed because I heard a lot of sermons about how we should all be bringing our friends to the Lord and explaining the faith to people so that they would become Christians.

And I've done a bit of that, and I've prayed for many friends, some of whom have become Christians and some of whom haven't, often without me having anything to do with it, other than praying. And I know some people who are very gifted what we call personal evangelists, and that's simply not been my vocation. I've had all sorts of other things to do.

And I sometimes regret that, but then I think, well, actually, my life's been quite busy. Well, it has. Let's start with a very simple question from Dan in London who says, "What do you think is the best way to evangelize our friends? And how can the church best re-evangelize the UK and battle indifference to quite different questions?" Yeah, well, of course, there is no one's eyes for it's all.

And when I look at the early church, I see them not simply as a bunch of people who were talking to people about Jesus, though they were doing that, but they were a community who were living in a radically different way. It's hard for us to realize just how different it was in a world where everyone worshipped the gods and the goddesses, in a world where everybody lived in the normal pagan way, then suddenly to have these

people radically changing so that they no longer went to the church. They no longer went to the festivals of the God Apollo or whatever it was.

They no longer did the processions and the sacrifices. This is actually deeply socially disturbing, but then people realized that the same community were being kind to the poor and were looking after the sick and were working hard in education and to teach people to read and so on. What on earth is all this about? And they seemed no longer to be angry and hostile and so on, but were living in a totally... And people would say, "Don't know what you've got, but it seems to be a new way of being human." And in the middle of that, when they talk about Jesus, then, "Oh, this makes sense.

These stories about this Jesus, no wonder you live like this." So, when the churches in the UK are visibly counter-cultural in that way and are living a cheerful, radical new way of being human, then talking about Jesus will make sense. And in "Surprised by Hope," I think I argue that there are two things in particular. The gospel is about God putting the world right.

If we don't care about putting the world right, and the whole is if we don't care about justice globally, locally, whatever, then we can say all we like about Jesus, but people won't hear that in the right residence. Likewise, the gospel is all about the God who made a stunningly beautiful world going to remake it so that its ugliness is stripped away and a new wonderful beauty will emerge. If we don't care about beauty, about the arts, about music, about all the beauty of this world, then no wonder if we present Jesus in an ugly way, if people don't see the point.

So, there's a larger context within which then we can actually talk. And I think you're right that a lot of the church has woken up in recent years to the fact we need to do this in a holistic way, in a way that represents the best in that way. But is there still a place at some point for presenting the "gospel message"? Oh, of course.

Billy Graham died last year and he was probably the archetype of the 20th century for doing that, to large crowds. And that sort of, I think, has informed the way a lot of Christians see their duty to, at some point, present the challenge of the gospel to individuals. Yes, yes.

I mean, the challenge has to come home to individuals and families and so on in all kinds of ways. But Billy Graham in the 50s and 60s particularly was largely speaking to people who've been to Sunday school, speaking to a culture that still thought of itself as vaguely Christian, certainly in Britain and America, in a way that simply radically is a place to be. And simply, radically isn't true anymore.

Most people today have not been to Sunday school. Most people today haven't ever darkened the doors of a church except possibly for a friend's funeral or something, or maybe to get married or something like that. And have only the minimal idea of what it

might all be about.

And so in a sense you have to start further back, where do you then have to start further back with rationalist apologetics, you know, arguing reasons why there might be a God? Well, possibly that might work for some. But that is only one of many ways in. And it seems to me actually the lived community is one of the key things, a church that is actually being the church on the street.

In a sense, the very first Christian communities also were reaching a culture that knew nothing of their claims and so on. So we're in a sense in the same boat to some extent. And there's a heck of a lot we can learn from the first and second century church about this.

Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity*, a famous book is really helpful on this because he makes the point that Christianity is not spread by the great brains, passing ideas to other great brains who developed them. And then there was a sort of trickle down effect. That's going on.

That's part of the scaffolding, the structure. But the reason people became Christians was because their neighbors were behaving differently and the way they were behaving was deeply attractive and they wanted to know why. I must ask some more questions from people who have emailed in.

Colin in Gateshead says, "Why do you think that the biblical message of repentance and remission of sins through the name of Christ has largely been replaced with a more visitor-friendly version which doesn't spell out repentance taking up our cross and amidst the place of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins?" There's quite a lot involved in that question. Yes, there is. I'm not sure you can generalize like that.

Part of our difficulty is that the word repent to us means you've been a very naughty little boy and you need to say sorry and we sort of cower away from that. And okay, there are things that I've done that I know are wrong and that I do need to hear that message and I hear it and I repent. That is part of it.

But in Scripture, repent is much bigger than that. It's a change of mind and a change of direction and a change of lifestyle. Josephus, the Jewish historian, talks about confronting some brigand leader in the mid-60s in Galilee.

He says, "I told him to repent and believe in me." What does that mean? It means I told him, "You're going about things in the wrong way. I've got a better plan. Come with me." And when we hear the gospel like that, then we still have all the "you're a sinner and you need to stop sinning" but you have it in a much larger framework.

And yes, I do think that we have often found baptism quite difficult to get our minds around, partly because we still live in a culture which thinks of baptism as something

that gets done to little kids who know nothing about it and then nothing seems to happen thereafter. And I think we have to reclaim baptism. Most of the rest of the world, interestingly, knows perfectly well that baptism is a radical break with the old life and a radical entry into the new life.

I have had the privilege of baptizing people who have come from countries like Iran and come because they were finding their way into Christian faith and they know perfectly well that their family back home see their baptism as basically a death, which is of course what the New Testament says it is. So I would agree that there's a lot more we need to do, but I don't think we can generalize. I think there's a lot that is being done quite creatively.

Gene in Northeast Derbyshire says, "I've had trouble answering this question from a friend to her satisfaction. How can I know for sure that Jesus is the only way to God?" I think knowing for sure is something that our culture is so keen on doing. How can I know for sure that Sibelius is 7th Symphony is the greatest symphony ever written? I can't actually know that.

In my bones I affirm that and other people will disagree and we can have the debate. But in terms of when, say in John 14, Jesus says, "I'm the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me." Theologians have struggled with, "Well, what about people in other cultures who seem to be feeling their way towards this loving Creator God?" And they've said, "Well, somehow Jesus is at work through the Spirit in many different cultures." Now, I have it as an absolute maxim. God can do whatever God wants to do.

The Holy Spirit is sovereign. The wind blows where it wills and we hear the sound, but we have no idea where it's coming from and going to. So that's basic.

I cannot control that. I can't tell God what he can and can't do. However, when I see the great story of Scripture, I see the story of Creator and Cosmos converging onto the story of Israel.

And part of the question is, do I really have to believe that the Jews were God's chosen people? And the answer is, "Well, actually, yes, you do." So that there is something about the Israel story coming down to the Second Temple Jewish story, which as a faith statement is where God's story with the cosmos is going to land. Our whole Western Enlightenment story rebels against that. We think it's undemocratic.

If God was going to reveal himself, it should be exactly the same right across the board. The answer is, "No, this is what we call the scandal of particularity." And then the Jewish story converges on Israel's Messiah. And so in a sense, for Jean and her friend, there is a sort of scandal.

Yes. Yes. Even if her friend sees it as an arrogant claim, if it's true, then it's true.

Yes. If it's true, then it's true, although the word true itself is slippery, as we know. But I think the minute the claim feels arrogant, we are falsifying it.

Because the Jesus who we're talking about is the Jesus who died on the cross to reveal the generous love of God. And as soon as it's, "Oh, well, you know, my Jesus, so I'm kind of special because I'm one of his friends." A friend some years ago who at a conference somebody gave him a t-shirt to her and insisted he put it on before he knew what it said. And it said, "God loves you, but I'm his favourite." And the answer is, "No, as soon as you find yourself thinking that, this is not a good place to be." I mean, it naturally does lead into that question, "What about other religions? What about other cultures? Places that may never have heard of Christ?" and so on.

I mean, a huge question that we could spend a whole other podcast debating. Yes. If that's the next question, where might you go? Well, it's a curious thing because when you look at the New Testament, they knew perfectly well that the world was full of other faiths.

And in some cases then, as Paul says in his speech on the Ariopagus in Athens, "God, the Creator, is not far from every one of us and wants all of us to feel after him and find him." And Paul is saying, "Yeah, that's how things have been, and now this very specific message about Jesus brings the inarticulation into articulation." So that's perfectly okay to go that route. The interesting thing is this question of what about the other faiths? People have grabbed onto it in the last hundred years or so, as though, "Oh my goodness, this is something that might just rock up." They get used to it. The early church knew perfectly well that they were surrounded by other beliefs.

And not all other belief systems are benign. A lot of belief systems have been and are extremely dehumanizing and damaging. And if you look at the ideologies of the last 200 years, then, well, excuse me.

Are you going to say that the Hegelian or Marxist philosophies that drove Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany, are we going to say, "Well, yes, that's one way to God." I want to say no. Those are idolatrous. They are dehumanizing, and the gospel confronts them and says no.

Well, it seems like a good moment to remind you that "Entirite Online" is the place where you can find all of Tom Wright's online theology courses taught by Tom himself in video format. Now, they're currently running a very special offer for podcast listeners. Sign up at antiriteonline.org/askentirite. And you can receive Tom Wright's course on the book of Philemon absolutely free.

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Tom's video teaching course on the book of the day the revolution began with 75% off the normal price. You want to take advantage of that special podcast listener offer, you can get that at antiriteonline.org/askentirite. So, inevitably, there are some people that we speak to and have those kinds of conversations with who may believe that they have a revelation of a particular view of God.

And Daniel, interestingly in Beirut, asks, "How would you explain the good news to a Muslim?" Now, he asks, "In two minutes, I won't force that particular time frame on you." I think it depends. There are great varieties of Islam, and I am not at all an expert on that. I have read the Quran.

I have taken part in some Christian Muslim dialogue, so I know just a little bit about it, but it's not where I have been called to work. So, I would be very, very cautious. And depending on whether this Muslim is somebody who is likely to be very hostile to the faith, in which case we would have a very gentle opening conversation, and maybe look at some passages in the Quran and the New Testament, which were similar but subtly different and discussed that.

That's a great way in, by the way, to have scriptures open in front of us and to see the similarities and the differences. But ultimately, it is about Jesus because the Muslim reveres Isa as a prophet, and Jesus talks of himself as a prophet. But now, it seems as though this prophet is going a bit further than that.

What does that mean? In what way is he more than a prophet? And what would it mean if he were Israel's Messiah? And then, of course, all sorts of other questions come in about Isaac and Ishmael and all that, which takes it way back. But ultimately, then, it's about the message of the cross and the message of this God who we see in Jesus is the God whose self-giving love takes him and the person of his son to die on the cross. And that is something which the Muslim has, by definition, almost ruled out.

You said you've had the privilege of baptizing Iranians who have obviously become Christians. And has there been in that sense a kind of journey that have gone on, biologically, from the way that he goes? It's extraordinary listening to their stories, and I've heard this from several sources quite independent. There are people in the Muslim world, apparently, who have vivid dreams of Isa without ever having read the New Testament, without ever having been talked to by a Christian.

And I have no explanation for this, but it does seem to happen. And then they go looking, I want to know more about it, because I had this dream. Who is he? And then, sometimes they get hold of a New Testament, which may itself be very risky.

And then, sometimes they come to faith, and then sometimes they have to get out quickly and come to the West. So this is a toughie, and I pray for the people who work in that area. And I observe that God is on the move in very strange and interesting ways.

Turning to the wider question of peace and justice, and that sort of missional aspect of the Christian church in the world. This one, interestingly from El Salvador, Vic, writes in to say, Archbishop and Marta, Oscar Romero, was just canonised by the Catholic church. He had a strong stand against injustice, but nowadays injustice is still prevalent in politics, and there's severe gang problems where Vic comes from.

How can the church respond and what evidence is there in the Old and New Testament that violence is actually a consequence of the church's disobedience? And Vic goes, I'm going to say Catholics and evangelical Protestants add up to about 90% of the population, I presume he means in El Salvador. And yet, these problems of violence and injustice still exist. Well, of course, we've had it much closer to home than El Salvador from the British point of view in Northern Ireland, where the two warring sides in the troubles in Northern Ireland, called themselves Catholic and Protestant.

Now, many Catholic leaders and many Protestant leaders would say, not in our name. We are not blessing that violence. However, there are lots of gray areas, and lots of people saw the British presence in Northern Ireland as oppressive and as itself unjust, and hence needing to be resisted in the name of resisting tyrants, and people will invoke to treat Bonhoeffer for whatever.

So part of it is a matter of how you read the signs of the times and the situation you're in, and along with Oscar Romero, if I remember rightly on the Western to Westminster Abbey, is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And Romero was advocating peace and clamoring for justice against violence, and Bonhoeffer was prepared to join in a plot against Hitler. So that's always been ambiguous, and yet both of them are seen, well, Bonhoeffer hasn't been canonized.

He wasn't a Catholic, but both of them has been seen as saintly in some ways as Jesus like in some ways. And that represents something of the ambiguity of the whole Christian tradition. I've always worried about Bonhoeffer, but then I am not living under Hitler, thank the Lord.

And he agonized and prayed mightily and wrestled hard with the question of what to do when faced with utter destructive tyranny. And do you just sit back and say, well, I'm keeping my hands clean? And I honor those who've had to struggle with that. Romero obviously gunned down while celebrating Mass, having denounced the Prince Paulist powers for what they were doing.

That is a much more obvious sort of sign of a Christian witness. But right from the beginning, the question of violence was raised by early Christians. For instance, if you're an ordinary person in the second or third century, and your job is to be a soldier, what you do about that? And some Christians said, well, actually, I have to give that up.

Another said, no, this is a job that one has to do, and we can't help that. And I think as

with many callings, there are ambiguities, and we live with that ambiguity. And there are many people in Scripture who we see living with ambiguity.

But when it comes to Christians in the name of Christ using violence, then it seems to me a line has been crossed, which probably means that a line was crossed some way earlier when people stopped realizing what the gospel was actually about, God taking the force of the world's evil on himself in order to make a new creation. And this is very interesting. In some Jewish traditions, the Sabbath is seen as an anticipation of the age to come so that you don't kill even a fly on the Sabbath because in the age to come, all species will live together.

Now, Jesus inaugurated the great Sabbath. That's what his sermon in Nazareth is all about. Does that mean that we Christians should live as Sabbath people, as Isaiah 11 people? And I have many friends who would say, yeah, absolutely.

I've never been a pacifist myself. Maybe that's just because I'm a muddled Englishman who hasn't thought it through, but I have good friends who keep on saying, actually, Tommy needs to sort this one out. Yeah, same questions that were there for the first century Christians as well, in a way.

Absolutely. Again, this takes us into broader cultural issues as to how we live Christianity in the modern world. But Sean in Gainesville, Florida, asks, Christianity appears to be moving into a post evangelical or post-christened and era.

What comes next? What effect will it have on society? Will it become impotent without a reliance upon biblical principles such as the infallibility of Scripture? Biblical literacy is at an all time low. Will the Bible even have a role in the new form of Christianity in a post evangelical world is the way Sean puts it? Which kind of comes back to that thing that you said Billy Graham was speaking to people who essentially had knew their Bibles, at least at some extent today. We live in a very different kind of culture.

I would say that the culture Billy Graham was addressing was a culture that had been to Sunday School, but what they learned at Sunday School was often how to behave yourself in the moment and pray that you'll get heaven one day. Now, better to behave yourself and pray for God to be in kind to you after death, the not, but it's still not adequate. And actually, one of the things that postmodernism, post evangelicalism, post whatever has done is to shake things up so that we can see a bit more clearly where some of the biblical integrations are.

You know, I grew up in a world where either you were an evangelical who believed that Jesus died, said you'd go to heaven, or you were a liberal who believed that Jesus was doing the Kingdom of God, so he had to have better housing and better food and all the rest of it. And never the train shall meet. Now, I think we all know today that that's a false antithesis.

When we read the Gospels, it's about Jesus doing the Kingdom and dying to bring about the ultimate victory over the powers that corrupt and deface human life and all the rest of it. And so what I see is a younger generation excitedly exploring the biblical integrations which an older evangelicalism had actually missed out on. And I know, and that was a question from Florida, that when I have been to Florida and when I know Christians from that part of the States, there is still an older evangelical world in which the whole message is, here's the prayer that you pray so that you will one day go to heaven and don't mess with all that city, social, political stuff.

And I've had many, many Americans say, yeah, that's where my church is. And then have asked me, how do I help them on from there? The good news is that the Bible itself will do that job when you let it free. And I don't see a world of Christianity without a Bible.

I see a world in which all the new Bibles we've got, the new translations, the new study guides, whatever ought to be fueling the next generation who are not content to drift along with the way that Christian culture has been in the West. But perhaps what you're saying to Sean in a way is, well, what has been conceived as the way Christians think of scripture and their relationship to God may be changing, but that may not all be bad because it's opportunity. And exactly, there's all sorts of things that we need to clear out, sort of old baggage that we need to get rid of.

And see, for me as a biblical scholar, my life has been one of constant surprises that every few years. I find myself tripping over another idea which has been there in scripture all along, which I'd never really noticed before. And that's been enormously exciting.

And I think we just have to work our way through that and find where God is taking us to the next generation. Hope that's been helpful, Sean. Thanks to all of those who asked questions on this edition of the podcast.

We got through quite a lot there, actually. Thank you. We've done quite well for 25 minutes or so.

But thank you so much, Tom, for being back on the show. Look forward to next time. We're going to be talking Paul and justification in the next podcast.

You know a thing or two about that. We'll see what we can fit in. Don't forget, if you're interested in feeding back on today's show, we're asking a question of your own.

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So if you're listening via podcast, we'd love to hear from you and to let other people

know about the podcast. But until next time, Tom, we'll see you then. Thank you very much.

Thank you. Well, we haven't quite finished. There's actually a little treat waiting for you at the end of this podcast, Sticker Ann.

Thank you for being with us on this week's edition. As I mentioned, next time, Tom writes best known area of theology, probably St. Paul, and the doctrine of justification, an issue on which Tom has had some high profile disagreements with other significant Christian leaders. Do look out for that in your podcast feed.

And don't forget to register at the website to get additional articles, videos and bonus content. Askentiright.com. Okay, we've got to that point that we sometimes get to in the podcast where we hear a little something from the playbook of Entiright. You're going to be drawing on one of your inspirations this time, Bob Dylan again.

And a classic, someone that we probably all know and love. Do you want to tell us about it? Yeah. I came into guitar playing in the 60s as many of us did.

And one of the great gurus was Bob Dylan. And we all learnt the chords too blowing in the wind. And it's one of those things I've often said to people, you know, if you're studying the parables of Jesus, you think, well, how did the disciples remember all that? And the answer, if you go around from village to village and Jesus is telling more or less the same story again and again, you know it in the same way that my generation, 90% of my generation never saw the words of blowing in the wind written down.

But you start singing it. Everyone joins in. It's part of the culture.

So here we go. I should really have a mouth organ, don't you? How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man? How many seas must the white of sail before she sleeps in the sand? How many times must the cannonballs fly before their forever ban? The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind. The answer is blowing in the wind.

Come whistle. Ee dee dee dee dee dee dee. How many years can a mountain exist before it's washed to the sea? How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free? Yes and how many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see? The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.

The answer is blowing in the wind. How many times must a man look up before he can see the sky? How many years must one man have before he can hear people cry? Yes and how many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died? The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind. The answer is blowing in the wind.

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