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#193 Should women preach and lead in church? What about marriage? (Replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From the archives: Tom answers listener questions around gender, women in leadership and the dynamics of family life. • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> • More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com> • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/training> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

Thank you for joining us on this Ask NT Wright Anything podcast today. Before we bid in the programme, I want to be sure that you don't miss out on a comforting free resource designed to help those dealing with pain and hurt. The question of why God allows suffering is one of life's greatest theological puzzles.

Christians and non-believers alike have wondered, often in Knight's most painful moments, why doesn't God always heal? And while there are no easy answers, God's words says so much about both our shoes. Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of God. Tom Wright, answering questions submitted by you, the listener.

You can find more episodes as well as many more resources for exploring faith at premierunbelievable.com and registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos, and e-books. That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. Greg, delighted to be joined by Empty Wright again for today's edition of the show.

And we're looking at issues around women and gender today. We're fully aware that we're both two men talking to issues around women and gender. But lots of people want

to have your thoughts, especially on the biblical questions in the way this interacts with scripture, Tom.

Now, right at the top, I'm going to point people back to one of our early episodes of the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Number six is titled female church leadership complementarity and marriage. And we did something of a deep dive, actually, into one particular passage, first Timothy 2, which has often been used by many to suggest that there's a complementarian or view that only men should be leaders or teachers in churches and why you don't think that's the correct reading of that particular passage.

And you've spoken in many contexts about your affirmation of women in church leadership roles and preaching and so on. And some of the questions we've got here will want to dig into that in different ways as well. But let's talk about the concept of gender and joy in Virginia says, my question is, it seems that we see gender roles democratized in the Bible, other than roles in the church, women leadership.

How does the Bible view gender? Joy goes on to say, of course, there's the biological differences. But I'm confused as to how to view biblical manhood and womanhood. In short, what differentiates a man and woman other than biology.

The question is more on my mind these days as I'm raising two young girls and we're being faced head on with gender identity in schools and churches in my area. I'm trying to differentiate between cultural versus biblical views on this issue. Yeah, well, Joy, I wish you joy with this question.

This is a very strange and awkward moment in our culture in Western culture, American, British, European and satellites out beyond. Actually, there are many parts of the world where this isn't a question at all because it's fairly obvious to many people in traditional communities around other parts of the world. Men and women are different and do different things and have different roles, et cetera.

But this is a problem for us and it's partly because of a big cultural shift within Western modernity post enlightenment. There was always the push to say that men and women are basically identical and yeah, they have some different biological functions, but that's irrelevant. They are identical.

So we have the great movement for women getting the vote, which isn't that long ago, historically speaking. We have the great movement for women being allowed to be part of the great universities, which we celebrate now and it's hard looking back to think we didn't do that. What was that coming from, et cetera, et cetera.

But all of that has been equality, identity, equality, identity. But then with postmodernity, as people have seen the dangers in that homogeneity suddenly, and this has been very sudden in the last 25, 30 years in Western culture, the emphasis has been

on this backward identity, a friend of mine looked up in the Cambridge University online library. The word identity in book titles and it's suddenly spiked in the early 1990s and has continued up there.

It wasn't an issue until then. So we should avoid being blown off course by something that's very new like this, because it's a result of a kind of a backlash from all that time of being told where identical were just the same, we do the same stuff. Suddenly to being told, no, no, no, men and women have very different identities and then the race is on how do you define that? And my goodness, that's difficult, because after all the years of equality and identity, suddenly to be told, no, femininity means this or being a woman means this or being a girl means it, masculinity, male, boy, et cetera.

So we shouldn't be surprised that this is a difficult place to stand right now. And as I often said, Romans eight is about the world groaning in travail, the church groaning in the middle of the world groaning, and God's spirit groaning within the church within the world. It seems to me that we in the church are having a big struggle because we are called to be in prayer at the place where the world is in pain, in order that God's spirit may be groaning within us, in order that God's new creation may come about.

So don't be surprised that we have to wrestle with this one and that we can't necessarily get straight good path answers, but biblically speaking, men and women are different. And the biological differences clearly go with differences as it were all the way down. Now, having said that, psychologically, what little I know about this and I'm not a specialist, there are certain kinds of brain formations, emotion formations, which seem to be a little bit different.

More normal among men and others which seem to be more normal among women. And if one doubts this, you just have to go into a news agent and look at the magazine section, where there are men's magazines and women's magazines. And if there wasn't at least some obviousness about that, those magazines would go out of business.

But, as we all I think now know, there is very considerable overlap, so that in terms of psychology and mental processes and emotional life, etc. Whether you do it in Myers-Briggs patterns or Enneagrams or whatever, yes, there are some constants, but there is a great deal of overlap. So we have to be very, very careful.

And precisely that point, it seems to be very cruel to say to young children, to prepubertal children or even to teenagers, anything about, oh, never mind what they said at your birth, you now have to choose what you want to be. And how that is going to work. I know that there is a tiny minority for whom at birth it is actually a matter of things not being clear, things being indistinct.

I've had friends who've had children in that position and that very sensitive and delicate issue, but almost always it is clear this is a boy, this is a girl, and then it's a question of

how in the society they are then to live. And then the biblical commands and shaping of family life of societal life takes place within that. And there are female leaders in some parts of the Old Testament, just as there are female leaders in some parts of the New Testament.

And so this then goes on into leadership questions, but the basic thing I think ought to be clear. Question from Ivy in Nebraska asks us, sort of wants to follow up this, but how would you explain what it means to be a female image bearer of God as a woman and mother of all girls, I'm really trying to deeply and rightly understand this. And here's his son background to either situation says, my most formative years as a Christian have been and still are in what would be considered a complimentary and church and for those who aren't familiar with that phraseology, I suppose a church that essentially believes in a division of roles within church that men should take preaching and leading roles and that isn't something women should take now.

Again, we can talk about that, but Ivy goes on to say, we've dearly loved it and it's people for 15 years now. I've had to reckon though with how I felt limited in what I can do with gifts God's given me because I'm female in a context where emphasis has often been placed on the development of male leaders. There seem to be many ideas about what it means to be female or feminine, but very few explanations that are truly compelling.

I realise I'm asking two men this question, but I do greatly appreciate any insight and encouragement you have to offer. Yeah, I mean clearly, as I've said, the ideas of what it means to be male and what it means to be female are very much culturally conditioned and if one went round the world as objectively as one could, one would find many, many different views. And because this connects very deeply to how we know ourselves inside, as it were, we can be very defensive and anxious and nervous if people start playing around with these and no doubt will all subject to that.

In terms of image bearing, it's quite clear in the Bible that men and women both and together reflect the image of God. Let's be clear about what the image of God is all about. God desires to work in the world through human beings and God intends that the worship of all creations should be reflected back to him through human beings.

So humans are like an angled mirror with God reflecting out into the world through us in his love and generosity and his stewardship, his looking after creation and his working with the grain of creation to bring it to the new creation he has in it. And then with that same angled mirror where we as humans take the inarticulate worship of everything from the stars and the planets to the trees and the flowers and turning it into articulate praise of God the Creator. Now this image bearing this is therefore something which every single human being can and should be doing and which men and women by being men and being women together different but in that sense complimentary should be

doing together.

From that point of view, I resent the way the word complimentary has been used to mean women go and make the tea, men are in charge here. That's not the complementarity that I see in scripture. And so I think we need to recapture that sense of neither June or Greek slave nor free, no male and female, all are one in Messiah Jesus Galatians 3 28, the whole passage 26 to 29 actually needs to be brought in there.

But then yes, there are many ideas about what it means to be female or feminine and so many of them are culturally conditioned so that people assume that if this is a little girl she will be interested in playing with this kind of toy doing this sort of thing and many little girls are but many little girls aren't just as you can't assume that boys will necessarily want to do the sort of things that the boys you grew up with and always did or whatever. However, that doesn't mean that there is a total gender fluidity rather it means that we're all very different characters and we have to explore what that's going to mean wisely and sensitively within our respective cultures. But I don't think the Bible gives us necessarily more specific guidelines than that.

And she's sort of trying to work out is that because I have, is it true that as a female image bearer of God I there's only certain types of ways in which I can reflect that worship back to God. Or would you say to Ivy, no, that's not a correct way of thinking about it. No, I think in terms of the giftedness that Ivy has frustrated about, I've met this again and again when I was Bishop of Durham I would meet the people who were training for ordination before I ordained them.

And again and again the women in that cohort would tell me about the years sometimes decades that they knew deep inside them that they were called to ministry and would pray and struggle about this. And finally, when the church changes mind on this in the early 1990s or when their particular church changes mind on it. Phew, I can now go ahead and some of those people some of the best people I ordained wonderfully gifted and finally few of the church was releasing those gifts and honoring them.

Of course there are muddles and problems on the way those muddles and problems and everything on the way but that that's really really important. But the image bearing this is something which is common to all of us as humans. We are all to reflect God's love and stewardship into the world.

We are all to reflect the worship of creation back to God. And whether male or female, whether young or old, and out or child, that's pretty clear. What would be your advice then on a practical level I wonder Tom to someone who finds himself in a church community as Ivy does that she says we really love it and it's people have for 15 years.

But find themselves butting up against this issue. What's the right thing to do? Is it to jump? That's a real problem because I believe passionately in the unity of the church and

regret that we don't see it in practice. And that we see a more and more vociferous Western church dividing all sorts of issues.

You do your thing, we do our thing, they do their thing, whatever. And that's a tragedy that no wonder the world doesn't take us seriously because we're not living as a community and working out these differences. So how can we be setting an example to the rest of the world about living as a community and working out differences? That's what we the church should be doing and we're not.

So I would want to say that somebody in that position should get together with even if it's one or two or three other like minded people and pray for the direction of the church. And then wisely non angrily talk to the leaders of the church about how scripture goes this way in there and about how it seems that we are being sidelined and giftedness which we have isn't in fact being used. Sometimes the last that does mean that people find themselves eventually being squeezed out.

We don't want people asking those questions here, you better go down the road they'll like you down there. That's always tragic tragic when it happens. Sometimes that seems to be the only way.

I hate it when I see any sort of splits but sometimes if the churches set itself up in a particular narrow box then sooner or later people are going to need to break out of that. And that has been true sadly again and again in church history. I would like to take just a moment to remind you that it's listeners like you who make programs like this one today possible through your financial support.

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Enjoy the rest of your episode. I mean obviously you're talking obviously from the perspective of someone who does take that to put a label on a egalitarian perspective on these issues. Now there are, well you don't like that label.

I know because it's too brutal a label I understand. But coming to this you know talking about different church networks and denominations that do take different views on this. Someone in Coventry I won't actually give their name because it might be able to

pinpoint who they are given that they say I grew up in an evangelical New Frontiers background which had a male leadership policy.

But I as well as my denomination have been slowly coming around to the biblical reasoning for female preaching including from your arguments on this very podcast. However in my circles a distinction is made between the role of preaching and teaching and church governance, i.e. eldership from 1 Timothy 3 with the latter still seen as male only. But this person wants to know specifically why did Jesus appoints 12 men to be the first disciples slash apostles if God meant women and men to have the same church leadership roles.

Why did he not include at least one woman in the 12. And to preempt your answer I don't buy the idea that it wouldn't have flown in patriarchal Jewish culture. Jesus did lots of shocking things to undermine the patriarchy.

I'm sure he could have appointed a few female apostles if he'd wanted. And I think because it relates to this let me just also bring Mary's question she's in New York and says my question is also one first Timothy 3. Paul exhorts that pastors must have only one wife the personal pronouns that follow are always male. It is the one scriptural passage that sticks for me in regards to women in pastoral or elder positions.

Am I missing some history here or some language that would open this up to women along with men without knowing anymore it appears that women aren't to be the head of a church body. So both this person in college and Mary are asking okay we know that you know people are changing their perspectives maybe some church networks are opening up to women preaching and teaching but they still see that as different to this idea of those who have been in the governance and that's. Let me just put one thing to one side which is that blessed word head.

There are passages about headship for instance 1 Corinthians 11 verses 2 and following which is a very tricky passage and I think almost all commentators agree that whatever view you take it's a very strange and difficult passage and some people think Paul is quoting something that the Corinthians have said which he does elsewhere in the letter in order then to refuse it or modify it or whatever. So that's a tricky passage already and then there's Ephesians chapter 5 where the husband is the head of the wife and so on which is specifically about marriage not about church leadership. I think that's really really important because people have taken the idea of headship from those passages and have then transplanted them onto other passages about church ministry and leadership.

In terms of 1 Timothy 3 I've always been struck by the fact that in verse 11 having talked about the bishops or elders or whatever we're going to translate them and about the deacons then in verse 11 he says the women likewise must be must be holy well you can translate the different words differently not slanderers etc. must be faithful in all things

and it looks as though including the women in verse 11 doesn't just mean the women folk in the church he's talking throughout this passage about leadership in the church and I think that is quite clear that in verse 11 if there are women in leadership positions they too must learn how to behave and be good examples of what the Christian is all about. So I'm not convinced that this passage actually does marginalize women obviously at the time I don't know when 1 Timothy was written I've argued in my biography of Paul that if 1 Timothy was indeed by Paul it must be written sometime after the time when he was in Rome as at the end of Acts 28 because the personalia and the travel details don't seem to fit with the narrative of Acts and the narrative we can construct from the other letters so I don't know when it's written it's quite possible it was written to the church in Ephesus which was actually in a very female oriented culture so it's kind of an interesting thing where the male leadership in the church has to make its way in that context and that's something we talked about I think in that previous podcast that you mentioned when we were talking about we went into some detail on that but but this first Timothy 3 issue is this issue of it does appear on the face of it to suggest that yes we're called Bishop Elder whatever they are talking about men and having only one wife and then as this person says the rest of the references seem to be towards men.

It seems to me that what's going on then is an assumption that in the church at the moment they are most male leaders certainly the church to which Paul is writing or to which Timothy is involved because that does seem to have been the majority at the time however the clear signs are in Romans 16 particularly well-known passage that there are apostles in the church who are female, Junia is a celebrated case in Romans 16 there's been a lot of argument about that but now the scholars are absolutely agreed that Junia is female and she is an apostle which means she is one of those who saw the risen Jesus and is thereby commissioned constituted as that first generation of primary witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus and of course that the standing example there this is the answer to the question about why did Jesus choose 12 male apostles the answer to that is because this was the beginning of the new Israel and so like the 12 patriarchs these are as it were the patriarchs of the renewed or reconstituted people of God with Jesus himself not being one of the 12 but the one who calls them into existence which is interesting in itself but then with the resurrection stories the person who is commissioned to be the very first person to tell other people that Jesus is raised from the dead and he is ascending to be the Lord of the world is Mary Magdalene it would have been perfectly easy for Jesus to say or for the evangelists writing up the story to say that Jesus had said to Mary or Mary you happen to be here but please will you go and get Peter because I've got something to tell him because he's got to be the one to tell this news obviously no Jesus says to Mary go and tell my brothers I am ascending to my father and your father and your god in other words Mary Magdalene as many Roman Catholic theologians have recognized is the apostle to the apostles she is the one the very first one to do the primary Christian witness or other Christian ministry flows from

the declaration that the crucified Jesus is raised from the dead and is now the Lord of the world Mary is the first one to be given that commission she I think quite deliberately on Jesus part on God's part breaks the mold from now on now that the old world has ended with the cross and the new world has been launched with the resurrection from now on we are a cheerful mix of men and women commissioned to a wide variety of tasks in the service of the story of Israel then necessarily being determined by the patriarchal culture and Jesus wasn't going to sort of absolutely our modern language about patriarchal culture is very broad brush and actually there are many movements of sort of feminist liberation in the first century Bruce Winter wrote a very interesting book on on that in the Roman world there were many women who were very independent and Paul indeed entrusts the letter to the Romans to a lady who looks as if she is herself an independent business woman and Phoebe who goes to Rome with the letter and presumably will be the one not only to deliver it but to read it out and not only to read it out but actually maybe to explain it that's one of the extraordinary things that may be the first person ever to do an exposition of the letter to the Romans was an independent business woman from can cry the eastern port of currents we've got one more kind of words to open up before we finish this episode Tom and you freeze yeah and I think it's worth opening stuff because you did differentiate just a little earlier on between the headship issue that's referring to marriage and we shouldn't necessarily import that to church leadership roles and so on but I'd be interested to know what your view is on that when it comes to marriage I mean Eric in Texas asks a question along these lines when it comes to marriage and says my question is about the so-called complementarian versus a egalitarian view between a husband and a wife I've grown up with the complementarian view but recently came to see that I was treating my wife in a manner I wouldn't want to be treated in the same position I'm now thinking that maybe both sides missed the point in trying to enforce conservative versus progressive norms and rather arguing about labels we should be genuinely trying to put ourselves in the other person's shoes to see how they feel on the other side and goes on say I look at Proverbs 31 and rather than the model of quiet domesticity I see a strong female entrepreneur who basically finances her husband's entry into local politics through the profits of her businesses essentially fulfilling her God given potential enables the husband to achieve his and the two together achieve more than either could on their own now is that a correct interpretation of that passage and how radical was this passage for the ancient world and what are your views I suppose in this specific issue of marriage on the complementarian versus egalitarian debate? That's a great way of putting the question and again I wish we could get away from those labels because complementarian and egalitarian emerge out of that modernist perspective that says there we are egalitarian we're all the same and the complementarian has this absolute fixed roles that you stick in that role and that's it and the roles very much come out of bits and pieces of modern western culture which actually vary whether you're in Texas as this questioner is or whether you're in Scotland or whether you're in Russia or whether you're in South Africa or whatever different cultures have developed different ways of handling the male

female thing and because it's been such a sense to this you and because we are now horribly aware of abuse within the home and it isn't sadly always male on female abuse it's sometimes female on male and sometimes it's get very murky and very muddled and clearly any sort of violence any sort of ill treatment any sort of dismissive behavior should be ruled out from the start and it seems to me that husbands and wives I speak to myself as somebody who's been married for 49 years we need to read and reread Ephesians 4 and 5 and 6 about being kind about being forgiving about being loving about being supportive etc. Those are very basic Christian standards and if we use a particular ideology about maleness and femaleness as a way of avoiding the Biblical commands to kindness and gentleness and sensitivity and tender heartedness and forgiving one another then were bititis we are asking for trouble here and here after and so I totally agree with what Eric says about trying to enforce conservative versus progressive norms this gets bundled up as you will all know with modern American culture the great cultural divide where it looks as if you're either all in one direction or you're all in the other direction I was saying this in the previous podcast this is just radically unhelpful so back to Proverbs 31 which is an amazing passage and you're absolutely right it does look as if the wife is able to manage the household is able to run independent businesses and enable her husband then to get on with his particular career and vocation and I don't know how radical that was in the ancient world I'm not an expert on that I would like to look up some commentaries on Proverbs and see but the last time I looked to Comtron Proverbs it didn't actually help me answer that question but certainly the ancient world knew of plenty of women who were able to do independent things like that there are some of them in the Bible as well and the idea that it's only in the very modern world that women have been able to do things independently and run businesses and so on this is simply a modernist rant it's a bit of smokescreen a way of saying we can discount everything before of course they may have been able to do things independently and run businesses and so on. I have made mistakes in the past but there were many very independent minded women and just as in my country we look back to people like Queen Elizabeth I in the second half of the 16th century a very independent minded and very powerful leader who held the country together at a very difficult time and there have been many many such in most cultures throughout history so it seems to me that the wider complementarian versus egalitarian debate really needs to be parked so that we can talk about the actual issues of being male and female and struggle with that as we move forward hopefully in our present cultural difficulties.

May I hold your feet to the fire just a little bit on this one though and ask that is a very sensible position to take in a sense whether you take a so-called complementary or egalitarian view on this but I suppose I suppose what I'm interested to know is do you do you believe that all of that being said that there is as many people would say from scripture and so on a sense in which the male in a marriage does have some kind of leadership role that is not necessary there for the wife in a marriage? That is a great

question and it's one which my wife and I have lived with for 49 years and I think it's something that every couple has to wrestle with for themselves. Of course there are caricatures this way and that of the bullying husband or the hen pecking wife or whatever it is and one has to live with that and it's partly a personality thing that some people some women are naturally strong leaders some men are quite naturally very happy to live within a framework that somebody else is drawing up. It seems to me there is then a negotiation a navigation and I mean if one were meeting people pastorally sooner or later one would want to ask about the way in which the roles that the husband and wife take are reflected in other aspects of their marriage such as their sexual relationship etc.

Because all these things actually go together in a very sensitive way and it may shift over time. There may be times when the husband is so worn out with what he's been doing that the wife actually has to take this particular decision right now and other times when the husband has to take the decision because the wife is so taken up with whatever it is. But ideally ideally the big decisions in life should be taken together and if the husband needs to give a lead in some circumstances then it seems to me there is something to be said for that but the Ephesians 5 model is of the headship of Jesus being about Jesus giving up his very life for the church.

And so there is a sense that the leadership one should expect from the Christian husband is from the Christian husband giving up his particular desires hopes whatever it is because he wants to make things the best for this wonderful lovely person to whom he is privileged to be married. Well thank you Tom for taking some tricky questions there which I know are obviously hotly debated both in wider and church circles but I appreciate your sensitive handling of them. And yes there's more to come from the podcast do make sure that you check back as well though for more on these issues especially as they relate to the roles of women in church.

That podcast I mentioned at the beginning number six way back in our archive if you want more detailed discussion on that from Tom and myself but for the moment Tom thank you very much for another enlightening and really interesting edition of the show. Thank you very much.