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#73 Vocation and calling

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Does our vocation and calling on earth make a difference if God is going to put everything right in the end? Does my past disqualify me from a call to priesthood? These and more questions are answered by Tom Wright. · Support the show – 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

[music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[music] Welcome back to the show. I'm Justin Briley, Premier's Theology and Apologetics Editor, bringing you another edition of the programme that brings you the thought and theology of Tom Wright, former Bishop of Durham, currently in a research position at Whitcliffe Hall at Oxford University, though he's written many books and ministered and worked in lots of parts of the UK.

Today's show brought to you is ever by Premier SBCK and anti-right online. Today, Tom taking questions on vocation and calling, so we'll be hearing from Alejandro in Columbia, Seth in Texas, Dave in Ireland and Travis in Omaha. So look out for the questions coming up on today's show.

Don't forget you can find out more from the show over at our show page, that's askentwright.com. There are more shows there, there are more resources and you can of course give and support the show as well. We'll send you an e-book if you're able to do that as a thank you. For now, let's get into today's show.

[music] Well, Tom, it's been a little while since we've seen each other and the last time was in person, which was lovely. We're back on the Zoom today, but you came to London to be part of our unbelievable conference. It was a fun day, wasn't it, with you

and Tom Holland? It really was and I've always enjoyed meeting Tom Holland and thank you very much for introducing me to him personally, having read several of his books and so on.

And he and I think if we were in a room together for half a day, time would not flag. We've got plenty to talk about, so it was great to be able to do it personally and partly on air. Yeah, and I've had so much good feedback to both the sessions you presented individually and the conversation you had at the end, which I thought was wonderful and I hope we can have many more of those.

I'd love to just stick a microphone between you when you're there for half a day together. Well, it's fascinating and we might be talking about a cricket match or we might be talking about theology and churches, but he's just very good company. Yes, I think you're similar characters in that way.

I think you both enjoy company. Well, look, let's talk about vocation and calling. That is what the questions have come in on today on the show.

In fact, it was Tracy in Denver who sparked my thinking that we should do a show on this. She asked, could you please speak a bit on calling and vocation? Thanks so much. Loving the podcast.

Thank you very much, Tracy. Well, I've compiled a few questions here, Tom. First one comes all the way from Columbia, Alejandra asks, could you talk about vocation calling and what our purpose on earth is while we await God's ultimate redeeming work? Do our efforts in participating in putting the earth right such as fighting for justice or bringing order and beauty eventually meet and add up with God's work to form the new earth? Or is the new earth a new clean slate? And in terms of our own personal spiritual maturity, how does it work? Do our efforts matter if after we die? We will suddenly be made perfect anyway.

So lots of questions there from Alejandra. How? Yes, yes. I'm delighted that Alejandra, if that's the right way to pronounce it, has framed it like this because I think so often when people think about vocation, they simply think about me.

What do I want to do? What am I called to do? And then we oscillate between what I really want to do, what my parents or friends think I ought to do, or maybe what God wants me to do. And often those appear to be intention that's quite difficult, but it's good to put that within a kind of a much bigger picture of what is God's purpose for the world and for human beings. And then to say, well, God has promised again and again and again in scripture to put the whole world right.

Psalms 96 and 98, I always go back to them, but also Isaiah 11, etc. The earth should be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. And within that

human beings have a particular calling, which is primarily to be praising God, to be celebrating God.

That's the number one thing, to live and work to his praise and glory. But then the work bit is framed in terms of what in various passages in the Bible is called the royal priesthood. So there's the royal bit and the priestly bit.

The priestly bit is to sum up the praises of creation and present them gladly before God, the maker and redeemer. But the royal bit is to share God's rule over the world. People get frightened at the word rule because it sounds bossy or bullying.

But the whole point about God's rule is that we see what that means in Jesus. Jesus is constantly saying, let me tell you what God's rule looks like. And then he's going and healing an elderly lady with an longstanding problem.

Or he's going and feeding 5,000 hungry people or whatever it is. This is what God's rule looks like. And we are to share that ruling priesthood of God by becoming genuinely human.

And this is all about being made in God's image. So that kind of sets the parameters. And once one gets that, then one can say, now, let's be realistic about my gifts.

Maybe I would like to be a concert pianist, but actually I never really got beyond the scale of D-flat minor or whatever it is. I'm probably not going to be up there with the great pianist. So, okay, I enjoy music, but that doesn't seem to be the thing I'm particularly good at.

Or whatever it might be. But then, often gradually, sometimes little inklings during one's school days, sometimes sooner than that, but sometimes coming into fruition in one's late teens or early twenties, a strong sense that this is really what I have to do. I could tell you all sorts of stories about people I've known.

One famous philosopher, and I asked him once, how did you know this is what you wanted to do? And he said, oh, first day in class, I just sat there listening to the lecture thinking, this is what I'm going to do with my life. And he has done that. He's now retired, but after a very long and successful career.

Sometimes it happens like that. More often, for more people, in my sense, is that it happens gradually. And sometimes it can shift over time.

Sometimes it shifts at the time of marriage. Somebody thinks, this is really what I want to do, but then actually I seem to be called to be marrying this person. And together, that may not quite work.

So there's all sorts of navigation and negotiation on the way. The important thing is

prayer. Prayer within that scriptural context of here I am.

I'm called to be part of the royal priesthood. I have the gifts, the background, the skills that I have. And also, I live in the country where I live where there may not be opportunities to do some things that I would absolutely love to do.

But I have to pray humbly that I can be part of God's servant team wherever I am. And to be getting on with that, there's always things to do today, which are the beginning of that. And which often by strange twists and turns lead one to a point where suddenly you realize, actually, this is what I was supposed to do all along.

And that happens by prayer and faithfulness and paying attention to one's own gift in this, paying attention to what friends, family, teachers, et cetera say, I think you'd be really good at such and such. Don't dismiss that when people say that, even if it doesn't fit with what you're thinking at the moment. And pray about it all.

And what about Alejandro's bigger question, which is, given all of that, given that I'm sort of trying to find my way and understand how I can contribute to God's recreation plan, how does that link up with what God is doing, you know, at a bigger level? And as he says, do our efforts matter if at the end of the day will suddenly be made perfect? Yes, I think I've made that. I mean, it will and it won't be sudden. Paul says, in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, when Jesus returns, then that will be the completion of everything.

But part of the deal at the moment, it seems to be, and, you know, we can't see it from God's point of view. If we were God, we might have done it differently. Thank God.

We aren't God because I suspect he knows better than we do how it ought to be done. But part of the deal is that God wants human beings to be part of a process of getting ready for that day to bring real anticipations of God's future into the present so that when the final great day comes, things that we are doing at the moment that may not necessarily seem hugely important at the time will actually shine out as, wow, that was a genuine signpost. It was an anticipation of where we are of what this glorious new future is.

And Alejandro's other question about our own personal spiritual maturity. It seems to be part of our spiritual maturity is the humility of being able to pray and wait and say, well, I thought I was going this way, but are you now saying that way, actually, or whatever it may be. So, I think, again, the humility of prayer is so important of being able just to say, okay, I may have got it wrong.

Please will you guide me and then paying attention to scripture and to sermons and to wise advice of Christian friends, etc, etc. We've got some specifics here about people who are thinking about a call to ministry. Now, some of what you've said obviously

already applies to these questions.

So, so, so hopefully it will have already helped Seth in Carrollton, Texas, who says every few years thought of becoming a priest comes into my mind in my heart. What can we learn from scripture about how to discern whether or not a specific vocation is right for us and what advice would you give to those thinking of entering the priesthood. And Dave Parkinson in Northern Ireland has a more specific question.

He says, would there be anything that would ever disqualify someone from full time ministry within the Anglican community as someone who was walking in faith and then went on a prodigal journey, then came back to faith with a son. I feel called to ministry as an ordained minister, but would worry that being a single full time father would disqualify me from following a path that I'm being led to. Wow.

Yeah, those are those are very interesting questions and obviously in part of my own previous life, I have had quite a lot to do with ordaining people and so watching people through there and helping them through their path towards ordination. And I have to say several people that I've ordained in midlife are people precisely like Seth from Texas, who have had the thought of being a priest coming back on a loop every four or five years. And eventually somebody has said, you know, you would be a wonderful priest, go and talk to the bishop or something.

And then suddenly click click click it all falls into place. And God seems to work on different timescales. Some people, he seems to say, right from almost day one I mean in my case I knew, I don't know if major seven or eight or something this is what I was going to be and do.

And so there are other paths as well which joined up with it. And that was very clear. That does happen more normally it seems to happen in people's teens 20s 30s 40s even 50s or 60s.

There's no one size fits all. And I think again, it is, it is a matter of growing within by serving in the place where you are growing within the life of the people of God, and discerning. And people say, Oh, it would be really good if you could help lead this Bible study it'd be really good if you could help run one of our Sunday school classes or perhaps you could head up our street pastor ministry or something and people will see in you.

And then the pains of whatever sort of appropriate leadership it may be, a lot of people that's as far as that will go for some people, then as they do this and they learn to pray with others about this form of ministry etc. And then they sort of see well, actually looks as though I am being shaped into some kind of full time ministry and then talk to clergy who know you talk to friends who know and love you talk about anyone who prays for you regularly. And I think will you share with me this journey, and sometimes other

people will see it before you do and I've had that experience with people where I have seen this is going on, and I've watched and waited and prayed and eventually they've come back to me and said, you know, I think maybe God is calling me to the priesthood.

I'm glad you realized because some of us have seen this for some while so there's a kind of almost a gentle divine sense of humor about that. In terms of things disqualifying you, well, there might be some things that might disqualify you if in your past, there is a kind of open and unhealed scandal. I've had tragically to deal with some people, some thinking towards ordination some who already ordained, who have done things which would make it more or less impossible for them ever to be credible, standing up in front of congregation and leading them in worship because people would think, "Oh, my goodness, what did he do? What did she do? Whatever." And there is stuff in scripture about an open and public scandal and in the Anglican prayer book, that's there as well.

At the same time, we do believe in forgiveness. We do believe in fresh starts. That is what the prodigal son, etc.

is all about. That means that people who've made dire mistakes and who, if everything they'd ever done was to be displayed in public, they would hang their head in shame. Actually, so would we all pretty much.

But there are some specific things where you just think, actually, this is too much. This is not going to be because the ministry has to be received by the people. And if among the congregation for good or ill, there are just a lot of people saying, "Oh, but didn't he do such and such." Sometimes it may then be a matter of the bishop coming and saying, "Yes, he did, and he has repented, and I know he is a Reformed character, and this is absolutely fine, and God is authorizing this, and let's get on with it." But it's then a matter of very specific things.

In the case of Dave in Northern Ireland, it seems to me a single parent, there are plenty of people I know in ministry as single parents. Some who came in as single parents, some who came in as married parents and whose partner after a year or two in ministry said, "I'm not with this, I'm off, leaving them high and dry as it were." Sometimes the church has said, "Oh, we can't have that," which is cruel and frankly despicable when this person is an authorized, trained, qualified person whose fault it wasn't as it was. So there is discernment, and that discernment is a very delicate thing, a matter of prayer and thinking it through and wrestling with it by those individuals.

I suppose it's really, if Dave is feeling called in this way, there are people who can speak to people in his diocese. One would hope so, yes, absolutely. Who can help revise him on and have a bit more of obviously a detailed chat on his circumstances.

Of course, of course. And Dave talks about being an Anglican in Northern Ireland, and the Anglican church in Northern Ireland has some fine bishops, Harchdeekans, directors

of Origen, etc. And ultimately, somebody in that sort of position, or just a local parish clergy, should be able to advise and hopefully would be gentle and wise and clear.

I'll ask you just to be brief on this final one, Tom. This is Travis in Omaha. But his question is quite long, but hopefully we can deal with it fairly quickly.

And I think it's a very important question, because my question is on a vocation. You've talked about how you entered into biblical scholarship in your younger days, Tom, due to an absolute fascination with the academic side of biblical studying. I felt like you were describing my own position in detail.

I'm a 23 year old that wants to pursue a career in biblical scholarship. But I don't know if that's a real possibility due to the job market. I've been a lot of need or opportunity in the field, but my heart is burning with is art to learn, teach and write in historical theological context, not just as a hobby or side job.

My question is this, as somebody who has thrived in this field of study for decades, what are your predictions about the future of biblical scholarship, and what's your advice for somebody who wants to enter into it now. That's great and Travis bless you. What a wonderful sense of vocation that is and has been for me.

The church will always need people to teach Bible. And that might mean going into Central Africa and teaching people there how to read New Testament Greek. It might mean going to Harvard Divinity School and doing a PhD.

And anything in between as it were. And there is a problem in America at the moment because some while ago the retirement age was abolished so that a lot of professors have just gone on and on and on. And that means that there's a kind of wedge of scholars in their 30s and 40s who find it very difficult to get teaching positions because older people, people my age, are still going on on full time salaries and that there aren't openings.

But that will change. I think over the next generation, there will be a huge turnaround and many, many colleges, Bible colleges, universities, seminaries, etc. We'll be looking for well qualified teachers.

And the main thing to do at the moment is to get the biblical languages into your head and your heart to get the ancient world into your head and your heart to get to know Genesis to Revelation which ever bits are particularly buzzy for you at the moment, as well as you possibly can. Learn them by heart when your mind is in its early twenties and able to remember things by heart. Get a sense of the big picture of what the rest of the Hebrews is all about or how Matthew's gospel works or what the middle section of Isaiah is really all about and how that works because the patterns that you absorb and understand now will be with you for your lifetime and read widely, read commentators

you like and read commentators you don't like because even the ones you don't like may nudge you towards noticing things in the text which you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

As you do that, be praying for the church, be praying for the next generation of teachers, of ministers and God willing, an opportunity will emerge. It may not be exactly what you'd have thought at the beginning, many of us and many people I know have had to go through twists and turns and do two or three years part time teaching there and a bit of teaching plus a bit of pastoring whatever that's fine because teaching Bible and pastoring are actually cognate disciplines and they cross over from one to the other because the Bible comes out of the living time and space of the early church. If we're not being part of the living time and space of our own church, then it may well be will be missing a trick in some of the key bits of the Bible so take as full of parts as you can in the church where you are.

Soak yourself in the biblical languages and the biblical texts and pray your socks off for the next generation and then see which way in the middle of all of that God's going to lead you. Thank you for the advice. I hope it was helpful to you as well, Travis.

Well, that's all we've time for today. Thank you very much, Tom, and look forward to seeing you again next time. So, indeed, thank you.

Well, thanks for being with us on today's edition of the podcast. Next time parables will be our subject. You've got questions on some of the parables that Jesus taught.

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The links are in the show notes. You can find out more there for now. Thanks very much for being with us and we'll see you next time.

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