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#197 US politics, conspiracy theories and prophecy (Replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

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Transcript

Before we dive into today's podcast, I need to tell you about an urgent year-end need that's facing premier insight. While our number of listeners and supporters has grown massively in recent months, inflation has taken its toll on this ministry, leaving an \$120,000 funding gap that must be closed before the year is out. The great news is that generous friends, knowing how critical it is to close the gap, have offered to double your year-end gift today, but we only have until December 31st.

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That address again, [premierinsight.org slash donate](http://premierinsight.org/donate). Thanks for your generosity. 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 Tom Wright.

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Anything.

Tom, welcome back to the show. It's lovely to be sitting down with you again to record some more of your thoughts on all of the questions that have come in. And today we're looking at questions that have come in.

And then around the USA, culture and society conspiracy theories, seems like we come back to this every so often. Many, many listeners in the US who are interested in your thoughts on these issues. But speaking of conspiracy theories, one thing that obviously has been in the news is the coronavirus vaccine.

And there's even been, you know, a certain amount of speculation in some communities as to its efficacy and certain conspiracy theories that have been doing the rounds and so on. them. I understand you and Maggie have both been vaccinated recently though.

Yes, we got a note on our phones from our GP saying, you're on the schedule for, it was last Saturday actually from the time I'm speaking now. And so we were mightily glad and we went along and queued, not a very long queue, but it was very efficiently done. And we were asked various questions where we sure we wanted to do this, etc.

Say we say, yes, please, let's do it. So we were vaccinated, told there might be side effects. We both felt slightly woozy the next day like mild flu symptoms, which is exactly what they said would probably happen.

And then we've just been going on from there. Who knows whether this vaccine is totally effective against all variants or partially effective against some variants. But it seems to me it's a very good thing.

We were praying for the last year for God to find ways through and forward, etc. And something like this seems to me in principle a gift from God and we ought to accept it as such. We are hearing worrying stories here in the UK, at least of BAME communities that are skeptical and buying into a certain number of conspiracy theories around the virus, which is worrying, isn't it? Yes, it is worrying.

And I think there's all sorts of levels of misunderstanding there in terms of how God works in the world and how God works to rescue and save people. And the example which came readily to my mind was if I'm going to drive to the other end of the country, for whatever reason, I will pray to God for a safe journey. Does that mean I shouldn't wear my seatbelt? Forty years or so ago, there were some people who said we shouldn't wear seatbelts because it restricts our freedom.

Why should we be told to strap ourselves into these cars? Then they looked at the statistics about the number of road accidents where people were badly hurt when they weren't wearing seatbelts versus when they were and they became compulsory. Now, I know it's not exactly the same, but I believe the seatbelt is a gift from God among other

things. And I believe these vaccines are in principle a gift from God.

I say in principle because the scientists have been having to go very fast. We don't know yet what new strains of the virus will be. But the scientists are doing this for our health and not in order to give us some nasty, diabolical life-watering change, substance, whatever.

And I think we really, really have to grow up and go with it. Well, having said all that, perhaps this is a good question to begin with then. This is a marieca, I think it's pronounced, in Utrecht in the Netherlands.

And says, dear Tom, my question is about Christianity and conspiracy theories. Over the past year, my family has become super suspicious of the media, started to believe conspiracy theories about COVID, vaccines, Bill Gates, Agenda 21, Deep State, Trump, etc. Very much linked to their devout faith in God and their conviction that we live in the end times.

It's become a struggle to talk to them on a meaningful level because it's nearly impossible to avoid contentious issues. Furthermore, they believe it's important to be vocal about these opinions. They have become conspiracy theory missionaries.

This is difficult for me as I share their faith, but not their convictions. Do you think Christians are more prone to believing conspiracy theories because of something intrinsic in Christianity? And do you have any advice on how to stay sane when your close relatives seem to go astray? And if there is a crisis like a approach to this situation, we feel your pain, marieca. So yeah, Tom, where do you begin on this one? Yeah, I marieca, I very much resonate with what you say.

I have several friends in America who have said more or less exactly the same thing to me. People who simply don't know how to talk with their family or with close friends, because suddenly this great divide has opened up. I suppose the closest thing we've had to that in Britain has been the Brexit controversy that's people discovering that close friends and family members were on the other side on Brexit and felt it very passionately and strongly.

Certain dinner parties that you had to be very careful what you said. I think it is important to say that the media are never neutral and have never been neutral. And this is well known going way back that the people who run newspapers etc have their own agendas.

I have been a London Times reader for most of my life, and I have watched the Times be pulled this way and that by various bosses and suddenly realized they seem to be giving us a lot of stories about this right now. I wonder why? And then you discover that some politician has lent on them and said, could we really get a message out about this? So it

does happen. I'm not saying the media are always squeaky clean and neutral.

They select the stories to put out and they select the spin they want to give them. We all do that. That's why it's important to watch different channels and to read different newspapers.

And I try to be sure as well as reading the Times I read the Guardian online and so on and try to get different angles on things. And that's really important. Just because they're none of them neutral, it doesn't mean that they're all in some great big fat plot together.

And of course there are all these huge conspiracy theories which are out there now. And yes, they have got bundled up with end time speculation. This is a feature particularly of American culture over many years now.

I remember all 30 years or so ago there was a book by a guy called Frank Parette called This Present Darkness. And that was one of a string of books by other people that go way back to the 1920s and beyond which were telling in a novelistic way stories about some poor little American town that was taken over by some strange group. And it turned out that it was all demonically inspired and bound up with battles in the heavenlies.

And then you've had the the left behind series as well. I was about to say that. The left behind thing comes in on that.

And that picks up other things about flying saucer cults and goodness knows what. And there's been a lot of that in other countries as well. But for whatever reason, particularly in America, I think partly because it's a vast country and you know that things are going on all over the place, but you don't know what they are.

And these all fuel this sense that we the Christians have an inside track, a special insight on what's really going on and that these people are trying to deceive us, etc. And the fact that in Christ we do have insight, we do have the mind of Christ, we are given fresh wisdom doesn't mean that we can now decode everything that's going on in the public domain and construct these great theories. So it's really, really difficult.

And I think therefore there are some Christians who are more prone to believing conspiracy theories because we are told that God will reveal things to us, etc. But we are also told Paul says very emphatically in Philippians that your public life and behavior ought to be worthy of the gospel of Christ. And he says, let all people know your forbearance.

You have to be the kind of community, the kind of good neighbors that the world around likes to have on their street, as it were. And that's a pretty central early Christian imperative read Romans 12 down the same line. So it's very difficult when people in your family or among your friends really are taken over with these ideas and interpret

everything that happens in the light of them.

It's a form of paranoia. I'm afraid and the trouble with paranoia is that if you hint at somebody that they're paranoid, they're likely to get even more paranoid and think that you have joined the dark side as well. My friends, the only way through this is prayer.

We have to be prayerful people. We have to be humble people. We have to get on calmly and quietly as best we can with loving and serving our neighbors, our family, our friends, so that they see in us a gentleness and hopefully a wisdom which might just make them say, wait a minute.

So and so actually seems to be quite calm about this, quite prayerful, quite wise about this. Maybe we're getting a bit extreme. I can't say that's going to happen, but that would be my hope.

The prayer and wisdom and love and gentleness has to be the baseline. And then to learn as much as we can. So if a conversation happens where we can put something wise in, we are able to do this.

But it's a tough time. We're in. Yeah.

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I suppose I look at the early church sometimes and think, well, they were not immune either to conspiracy theories. Paul was sometimes having to quash, you know, rumors of this and rumors of that has the end come and, you know, no, no, precisely. And in the ancient world where you've got your news by somebody coming from a distant city, it might have taken them four or five days or a week or whatever, you hear of wars and rumors of wars and people on the street.

So did you hear that Caesar has fallen or whatever? And oh, no, that was just a rumor. So it's frustrating that in the information age, we are still subject to that, but that's part of the trouble. We have too much information, especially on social media.

Exactly. Yes. And we no longer seem to trust any particular sources, do we? We'll come back to the issue of prophecy as well, which has been swirling around in this sort of whole area.

But inevitably, there has also been questions around the political situation of late in the US. A couple of questions here I'll roll into one, one from Thomas in Austin, Texas, says I was greatly disturbed to see crosses and Jesus saved signs at those US Capitol riots in January. And I'm having difficulty understanding the appeal of Christian nationalism today.

Is there a genuine theological misunderstanding such as believing the kingdom of God refers to a political government? Or do you think Christian language and symbolism has become a smoke screen for political ends? And a similar sort of question from Laura endorser who says, what are we to make of American evangelicals who sometimes have extremely vocally acquainted hit Trump with Jesus? This problem's been worrying me for some time and was brought to a head by BBC Four documentary, Till Kingdom Come. I'm aware that evangelicalism in the US is rather different from that in the UK, but I find it hard to understand how any Christians could have supported Trump. Now, obviously, this is somewhat in the back mirror with Joe Biden now as the president.

But yeah, I feel these are all part of the same sorts of questions, Tom. Yeah, and I fear that those questions aren't going away. I mean, yes, Biden has been sworn in, has been inaugurated, et cetera, and is now handling things.

But there are a lot of people out there who still believe that it was all fake and that, in fact, the riots were caused by anti-fart demonstrators in disguise and all that sort of thing. Let me just say before I say anything else, it's very difficult for a Brit to be in any way seen to be criticizing America. And Americans naturally don't like that, just like I wouldn't like it if Americans, even friends started criticizing Britain.

But to think wisely about what is going on there is not criticism. It's an attempt to understand. And after all, since America is both Britain's biggest ally really on the world stage, but also the most powerful nation supposedly on Earth, we all of us as global citizens and Christians have a responsibility to be thinking through it.

So I see the roots of this way, way back. The American Constitution split apart church and state, but actually that's an artificial divide because as all Christians know, if Jesus is not Lord of all, he's not Lord at all. And so Christians have always tried to say, well, actually we're one nation under God.

And then there's a debate about prayer in schools and all that sort of thing. But the American Constitution did not really allow for what that might look like. I know the British Constitution has a big muddle on this as well with an established church that both is and isn't in that position.

But the trouble is that then like with a vacuum, things rush back in and people get the wrong end of the stick. And of course, the kingdom of God refers to God being in charge through Jesus himself in the world. But what that ought to look like ought to be like the Sermon on the Mount, not like military or quasi paramilitary gangs going around and beating people up and so on.

And yes, it's very important to realize that the word evangelical has become very slippery and defaced and deformed. And it means something quite different in Britain from what it has meant in the USA. And there are many Americans who want to call themselves by the word evangelical, who are just as horrified as I am.

If you read Pete Wainer, W E H N E R in the Atlantic, he's a Republican, worked in the Bush administration and for other Republican presidents. But he writes through has been deeply critical of Trump, precisely as an evangelical Christian, he's been deeply critical of Trump. And there are others like the House of Representatives, man from Illinois, Adam Kinsinger, who was in the Sunday Times this last weekend.

Though the Sunday Times didn't mention that he is a devout evangelical who says in other places, not in the Sunday Times, that when he stands before Jesus as his judge, he wants to be able to say, Yes, I told the truth. And he cannot do that if he's supporting Trump. So life is more complicated.

But yes, evangelicalism has by and large in the person of Billy Graham, son of Jerry Falwell, junior et cetera, et cetera. It has slid in the direction of right wing American politics in various, I think deeply unhealthy ways. And I see this deep rooted in, as I say, several aspects of American culture.

So it was it was very disturbing and distressing to me to see those Jesus saved signs. And to hear the rhetoric, there was somebody one of the writers in the Capitol who was standing there praying for angels to come and intervene to stop Biden being confirmed. And you see, sorry, what is going on here? And that is that is really very, very concerning.

And again, the main answer is prayer. We need to be praying for the health of the world, because the world is in a mess right now in all sorts of political terms. But also for wise discourse in America and among particularly Republicans who are worried about this whole thing, and for the Democrats to realize that just because Joe Biden is now elected, that doesn't mean that everything that the Democratic Party has ever wanted to do must now be done.

Again, there's a matter of God must be telling them to do it. The binaries in America, like elsewhere, are not healthy and not helpful. And people need to realize that all the issues that they face, whether it's gun control or abortion or war against Iran or whatever it might be, these are all separate issues and have to be thought through wisely on their

merits at the time.

And I hope and pray for a new generation of wise leadership to come through all of this and to say, we need better ways of not going there again. Let's finally talk about prophecy. Now, this has been in my timeline quite a bit in the run up to the elections afterwards and during the inauguration time.

Dryden in Vancouver, Canada says, I was raised in a very charismatic Christian tradition, which believes strongly in the gift of prophecy. But over the last few years, I've grown quite discouraged by seeing so many people in the church label themselves, prophets, and preach things which turn out to be false or are at least things which I find troubling or not aligned with the character of God. I'm thinking especially of several prophets around North America who prophesied that Donald Trump would win a second term as president, which, as we all know, turned out to be false.

I know that Jesus said that there would always be false prophets among us, but I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, as I still believe that prophecy is a real gift that can be glorifying to God. So I'm curious to hear your thoughts. What's the proper use of prophecies, a spiritual gift in today's church? And how may the average Christian reliably discern between genuine and false prophets? I don't know if you heard of any of these stories of well-known names in the sort of charismatic church in the USA who did make these grand claims about Donald Trump winning a second term, which I did hear a bit about that.

And again, that gets bound up with some of the things that we were just talking about before, that people are coming on an incoming tide of a sense that somebody said to me four years ago, and Trump was first inaugurated, that he's like Cyrus in the Old Testament. He may not be a believer himself, but he will enable a new wise generation to come up. And that was about appointing a new Supreme Court judges and that sort of thing.

And it's all very shallow. It's all very either or. It's all very binary.

And that's not actually how the real world works. Now, in the Old Testament, there are people who seem to be wise prophets and whose prophecies sometimes do come true, but then get deceived and say things which are misleading. We see that if you read through First and Second Kings, you'll see that sort of thing going on.

And sometimes it's very hard to discern. At the end of First Kings, there's that great battle, and the king says, I want the prophets to come and tell me. And they all say, go up and triumph the Lord is with you, except for one.

And he says, no, it's all going to go horribly wrong. And the king says, I never liked this guy, put him in prison. And he says, well, if you come back safely, then the Lord didn't

send me.

So that's going on among the people of God. And in the New Testament as well, when Paul is making his way to Jerusalem, there are prophets in the church at the various places he calls who say, please don't go up to Jerusalem. It'll be the worst for you.

And Paul says, well, if I'm going to be killed, I'm going to be killed at that's God's will. And he goes to Jerusalem against their prophetic advice. And as it turns out, he is rescued and he gets to Rome, etc.

So it looks as though this has been a problem that's always been with us. But equally, there were prophets who said there was going to be a great famine. And there was that enabled people to get ready and to send money to the people who are going to need it.

So in every generation, it seems to me we should expect this kind of phenomenon. And it calls the wise, prayerful discernment again. And if the prophets are saying something, which actually does go against what a larger wisdom might say, then I think the church ought to say, well, we just need to hold onto this, to pray about it and to wait and not think and act rashly.

Because even people who in other circumstances are wise and truth telling can be mistaken and sometimes are. And I would say that about myself as a pastor, I don't see myself as a prophet in the sense you're talking about. But sometimes as a pastor, I find that I can, in fact, discern listening to somebody prayerfully, what's actually going on in their life and the ways they should go.

And you say it rather trembling. Can this be right? And then they do it and it works out. Thank you, Lord, I had prayed for that.

And now it works. Other times I may think I have an idea, but it may just not be right. So the part of the problem is this binary of either it's totally right and it's supernatural and it's God-given, therefore, get out of the way we're coming through, or it's totally wrong.

That is simply not how the kingdom of God actually works and we have to be grown up and wise about it. Well, we'll leave that one there. Thank you very much for the question, Dryden.

And yes, don't throw out the baby with the bathwater, but obviously exercise, you know, test all things, it says in scripture. But yeah, we're living through interesting times, times when lots of things are being mixed up, it would appear, and people almost are being called to work out where their allegiance really stands ultimately. But it's been great to have your thoughts on these issues, Tom.

Thanks for joining me and we'll see you again next week.