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#110 I feel guilty about evangelism

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

How far should Christians seek to impose their moral beliefs on a secular society? How do I evangelise without being a 'Bible Basher'? I've been made to feel guilty about evangelism - so how do we fulfill the great commission? Tom answers practical questions on outreach and evangelism.

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello and welcome back to the show bringing you the thought and theology of NT Wright to Senior Research Fellow at Whitcliffe Hall Oxford, and brought you in partnership with NT Wright online, SBCK, Tom's UK publisher, and of course Premier Unbelievable. I'm Head of Theology and Apologetics for Premier.

So today we're looking at your questions about feeling guilty about evangelism. How far should Christians seek to impose their moral beliefs, for instance, on a secular society? Can we evangelize without being Bible bashers? How do we fulfil the Great Commission and not feel constantly guilty about how little we're doing? Tom's going to be answering your questions today. Kim from New Zealand got in touch as well to say, "sensitive, broad, honest and makes you think."

This podcast isn't someone who tells you what's right and what's wrong and what you should think. I've learned so much, not just from the podcast but also from other works by Tom Wright. A refreshing view, challenging content, I'm very grateful.

It's refreshed my lifelong interest in theology and studying the Bible with renewed zest." Thank you, Tom. Thank you for leaving a review, Kim, over on Apple Podcasts. And

wherever you listen to the podcast, whether it's Apple Podcasts or Google Podcasts, the podcast being somewhere else, do write and review as it helps other people to discover the show content too.

And you can register as well for our regular newsletter, for more about the show at Ask Anti-Right.com. You can also find news of Unbelievable the Conference 2022, Saturday the 14th of May. Live from the British Library in London, you can register at unbelievable.live. Got some wonderful guest speakers for the day, Alistair McGrath, Lisa Fields, Glenn Scrivener, Sharon Dierichs, Joseph DeSouza, John Wyatt, Phil Vischer and Sky Jatani all helping us to think about how we can speak with grace and truth in divided times. It's called God Unmuted, how to take God off mute.

So if you want to be part of that, unbelievable.live, we're looking forward to lots of guests joining us from all over the world because it's all being done online this year as well as the in-person option. Okay, time to get into your questions. Welcome back to today's show.

And well, we always get questions from audience listeners who are asking about outreach and evangelism, Tom. It's obviously a high priority for many people. Understandably, people want to be able to share their faith in helpful, fruitful ways with friends, neighbors, colleagues, family and so on.

And so we're going to have questions today from Luke, from Wes Lee, from Jenny, who are all interested in this. But often feel maybe a little bit guilty if they're not doing it right, if they're not doing enough of it. Let's really leap in.

Luke from Preston in the UK says, "Thank you, Tom, for your work. I'm a new Christian and I've been working my way through the New Testament commentaries you've written this year. They've been a great help during lockdown and have challenged me to live a more Christ-like life." My question is about how we should engage with the morals of wider society.

As Christians, we seek to change things for the better, since that's pleasing to God. But does that mean we should seek to impose our morals on non-believers through things like changes to the law or government policy? It seems that Jesus only tells us what we should or shouldn't be doing ourselves, not what we should try to make others do or not do. So should we, in effect, just leave them to it? Thank you for your help.

What's your thoughts on this, Tom? This is, of course, a question which has exercised Christian people from the very beginning. If you look at the writings from the second and third century, when the Christians were a persecuted minority within the Roman Empire, they are still asking the question, "How do we follow through on what Jesus said about, let your light shine before other people so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven?" And from the very beginning, Christians have sought to

do that, not necessarily in the second and third century, that they might have thought that they would be able to change imperial policy or the policy of the countries they lived in or whatever, but that they were showing to their neighbors, their non-Christian neighbors, there is a different way to be human and this is what it looks like. And they were doing things, or in some cases, not doing things which shocked people because nobody had ever thought you could live like that and so on.

So that's how it worked from the beginning. And the interesting thing here is we need a more robust view of creation as a whole, as God's good creation, and humans as a whole, as made in God's image, so that even though people may not even have heard of Jesus or know nothing about him and certainly may not have come within the reach of an actual gospel message telling them about his death and resurrection and what that could mean for them. Nevertheless, there are many things which we are called to do and be as Christians, which resonate very deeply with what many, many people know in their bones would be a good way to live.

Most people know that it's actually good to tell the truth rather than to be lying all the time. Most people know that it's better to be faithful to promises you've made than to break them all the time and so on. And we could go through all sorts of things like that so that it's not as though we Christians are totally discontinuous from everything else that other people would want to do.

Now of course, different cultures have differed on this. Some cultures, not least ancient Greco-Roman culture, had things which were commonplace, which the Christians like the Jews by the way were horrified at. Obvious example being the exposure of unwanted babies, that if you had more babies than you really wanted, especially if they were girls, then you would leave them out for either vagabonds to take away or people to take and sell into slavery or just for the wolves to eat.

And people didn't think twice about that. That was the norm. The Jews refused to do that and the Christians refused to do that and so on and so on.

There were many other things like that. And so it came about that actually despite the persecution, many people by the end of the third century were saying, "This is a much better way to live. How does it work? Why do they do it? And where do I sign? And what will it mean?" And then the empire became officially Christian, which brought a whole other set of questions in its train.

One of the things I want to say is our problem today is people often when they grasp the gospel or are grasped by it assume that there is an absolute right, 100% answer to every question that comes along and all we have to do is to find what that is and do it and then it will all be all right. And so much of Christian living throughout history has always been more complicated than that. But it's interesting what Tom Holland, the historian, says in his book *Dominion* and elsewhere, that in fact the influence of the Christian church has

been massive so that even the modern secularist movement is in a sense a Christian heresy.

It's trying to do things which the church had always tried to do but trying to get the results of that without God, which causes all sorts of problems. But it's not as though there is a complete disjunction. And so it's interesting when I was younger people used to say, "Of course you can't translate the Sermon on the Mount straight into the statute book." And I would still agree with that.

You can't legislate for people's deep emotions and feelings. However, now we have got the stage with some rather pushy secularism where they're trying to do exactly that. It's not enough that you shouldn't behave in certain ways.

You must not have certain thoughts. And if we will convict you of having certain thoughts, then we will label you and shame you and cancel you and whatever. And it's very interesting that in my lifetime that shift has taken place so that now if Christians try to argue for, say, if it's the change of the law on euthanasia, which is a constant topic in the UK at the moment, when I was a member of Parliament of the House of Lords when I was Bishop of Durham, if I and my colleagues tried to argue against euthanasia, people would say, "Oh, you're trying to force your morals on the rest of us." But actually, the arguments we were making were not specifically Christian.

They were specifically human. And that's where we have to build bridges. But then it'll vary from culture to culture within one country.

It'll vary from place to place in America, from state to state, no doubt. And we have to be wise to take counsel, to see the larger picture, and to, above all, to be living in such a way that people find that attractive, even if they don't know why. That was what the early Christians did their best to do.

It's a tricky balance, isn't it? Because, on the one hand, the modern day equivalent, arguably, of exposure, which obviously the Christians stood against and indeed worked to go and gather in those children and so on and adopt them, arguably could be abortion today. Now, in that sense, Christians may feel a moral duty, obviously personally, not to have an abortion and to counsel people against it, but also a duty to politically advocate for more conservative laws around that and so on. And I think the problem is that many people see that as Christians trying to impose their morality on a society that is largely non-Christians.

And then that itself can be, in some ways, a barrier to good witness because people just feel you've just got this political agenda or whatever it might be, you know? And it's very sad that things have got put into a conservative or liberal, either or mode, because all issues are actually different and they don't sit comfortably on the modern. It is a very modern left and right ends of the spectrum. And if I would argue, as I would, against the

way that abortion is done, very often casually, et cetera, et cetera, as I would and have, I would do so on human grounds, not because I'm a Christian, so I know what the right answer is and I'm going to impose it on you.

Of course, there are many motives for many things, but it's very important that we rebuild the bridges between specifically Christian things and generally human things, because part of the point of being Christian is to be genuine human beings. It's written into scriptural through. Coming back to evangelism specifically, Wesley in Leicester, here in the UK as well, says "I'm a pastor.

Always find it difficult, though, to get a good balance when it comes to sharing the gospel. Christians have had a really bad reputation among many of being so-called Bible bashes, but I'm also of the opinion that too many Christians are too quiet when it comes to Jesus. I don't want to be a Bible basher in the negative sense or come across as fire and brimstone, but I'm desperate to tell people about Jesus in a way that is accessible to them.

How would you say the Bible helps us on how to reach that balance and do you have an opinion of your own on how to do that?" Yes, this is a very tricky one because there's a lot about personality and a lot about culture. I have known Christians who've heard sermons about how you must all go out and win your friends for Jesus and if you're not doing that every month, every year, then shame on you, etc. I want to say actually, I don't believe that.

I don't believe everyone is called to be an explicit verbal personal evangelist to people. Probably more are than would like to admit it, but I think there are many, many people for whom that's never going to be their ministry. It may happen from time to time that somebody says, "By the way, what is it you do on Sunday mornings when you get up early and I see you going off down the street? Where are you going? What's that all about?" We all ought to be ready.

There's a verse in 1 Peter which says exactly this, 1 Peter 3, verse 15 and 16. Always be ready to give an answer if people ask you about the hope that you have, about the hope. That's interesting, not just the faith.

What do you think the answer to the world is? What where is it all going? Is there a garden? Where is he taking it? Every Christian, man, woman and child ought to be able to give at least a short basic answer to that which would grow naturally out of who they are, not as something learned to be trotted out in a rather inconsequential way. But then interestingly, the next verse, verse 16, 1 Peter 3, verse 16 says, "But do it gently, do it gently." In other words, don't bash them over the head. Okay, there may be a time when if you're with friends and you know them and they know you, there may be a time when you can give them a friendly punch in the arm and say, "Now come on, it's time you've got your head around this stuff or whatever." But normally it's to be done in a gracious

and gentle spirit because the gospel is about God's gentle, gracious spirit and you can't communicate that by being ungracious and un-gentle so that it's very interesting that throughout Paul's letters he hardly ever tells the people to whom he's writing to go out and witness to their friends.

He assumes that if the community is living as Jesus people in the way that it should, indwelt by the spirit, guided by the teaching of the gospel, then the wider world will see and take note and they, you can bet they will because the Christians won't be doing a lot of the things that people expect them to like, going and worshiping in the idle temples and going and joining in the pagan festivals with all that goes with that. The Christians won't be doing that. People will be cross because, well, you're supposed to do this and if you don't the gods will be angry and bad things will happen and then the Christians have to explain.

Actually, we believe in the one true God who made heaven and earth and he has revealed himself in his son and we are followers of this son of God Jesus and that's a shock to people. The only passage in Paul that I know which speaks explicitly about the witness of the church is in Philippians where he talks about people shining like lights in a dark world where that is actually about who this community is perceived to be as a community. What good do they do in the community? Why are people glad to have some of these strange Christians living near them on the street? They're good neighbors.

They rejoice with those who rejoice. They weep with those who weep. They're people we like to have around.

Maybe we should ask them what it is that makes them different. That's the New Testament picture of witness, not of people coming, charging out of church with a big black Bible ready to bash it over the heads of the next person they meet. Yes, I always have thought as well that quote you had from 1 Peter 3.15, always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the reason for the hope that you have.

There's an expectation that your life should provoke questions. That for me is the point. At some point hopefully someone's going to ask you why do you believe this? Why do you do that? Exactly.

It's something which people have often said to me when I've been teaching on the gospels that Jesus regularly taught in parables. People have sometimes said how can we find appropriate parables for our day? One of the answers I've often given is you'll notice that a lot of Jesus parables were told in answer to a question and the question was why are you doing that or what did you mean by doing that? Well, once upon a time there was a man who had two sons, etc. etc.

So the question is what ought we to be doing that would provoke people to ask the questions to which a strange new story once upon a time there was a woman who had

two daughters, whatever it might be, might be the right answer. Well, thank you so much Tom. Final question, this one from Jenny in Ahiyo, who feels like she's not sure she does enough on this front.

I greatly appreciate you taking time to answer my question, she says, but can you please explain to me what the Great Commission really is and how the average Christian non-preacher is supposed to fulfil it? It's greatly hurt my faith. I've been part of the Evangelical Church for years but oftentimes pastors come off as though this is the greatest commandment instead of just loving God. I've also had pastors act as though I'm responsible for others going to hell since I didn't tell them the gospel.

They tell you you need to share that gospel with every single person you come across and the pressure is too much. As someone who has major social issues anyway, I've almost lost my faith over this. I know we should share our faith but as I don't even know what God is asking for me and I often feel God is just mad at me about it all.

So yeah, what do you do for Jenny who's been told that this is the way it should be but just feels I'm not cut out for walking up to everyone I meet and telling them about Jesus. My heart goes out to Jenny. I'm totally with you.

As I say, in an earlier part of my life when I was quite young, I did sometimes attend churches which were very much telling us that every single member of the congregation ought to be getting out and telling people we were quite a well-educated, articulate congregation. So it was a reasonable expectation that some of us at least might be able to put into words to our friends what was going on. But I felt that I often prayed for opportunities to talk to friends.

They were few and far between. Sometimes when they did come, it was actually much easier than I'd expected. But I discovered quite quickly that my particular calling was more to be a teacher within the church and sometimes a commentator on larger public affairs rather than an old-fashioned evangelist of the type that clearly Jenny's pastor or preacher wants everybody to be.

And I think the great commission, those amazing words at the end of Matthew's gospel when the risen Jesus commissions his followers, that is really important but it's a commission for the whole church. And when Paul is talking about the different ministries within the church, evangelists is just one of different things. Apostles, evangelists, pastors, teachers, etc, etc, etc.

You can look at the list of gifts and ministries in Ephesians or in 1 Corinthians or in Romans 12 and you can say, "Well, maybe God is calling me to do this and this." And I'm very glad that he's calling this person and that person to be evangelists. And that's not that every Christian can't talk to people about Jesus. But many people are not given that specific gift of being an evangelist.

I know one or two personal evangelists who are absolutely brilliant at it. And whether they're on a train or in a pub or walking down the street, they're very gifted in a friendly and funny and clever way at saying to people, "Now hang on, what do you believe about God? Have you considered who Jesus really was, etc. And do it in a win some way.

Many, many people just don't have the personality for that. And I think that's absolutely fine. We are given different gifts.

But I would say as well, the great commission going to all the world and make disciples of all nations is part two of what Jesus says there. And part one is, "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me." That's an extraordinary statement. Many of us Christians, certainly I myself, have been used throughout my life to think of Jesus as having all authority in heaven.

The idea that he already possesses authority over earth is very strange to many of us. It doesn't look as if Jesus isn't in authority over it. But the answer is you want to know what Jesus' authority looks like, read the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus' authority is his commissioning of people to live in such a radically different way that his world will be transformed kingdom-wise by his people living, praying, working in the way they're laid out. It's within that that then people will want to know and can be told about who Jesus really is and about the fact that his kingdom has been launched on earth as in heaven. And I think part of this goes back to an older vision of what salvation is, that salvation means souls leaving this world and going to heaven.

It doesn't. Salvation is God rescuing this whole world from the grip of sin and death. And that the church is supposed to be the pilot project for that ultimate goal.

And in the church, which is the body of Christ, the body of Christ has many members. And probably yes, more of us ought to be more explicit evangelists than we often are. But mostly we ought to be getting on prayerfully loving our neighbors, praying for the world around us, seeking every opportunity to be people known in the community for people who are bringing God's love to bear on local issues.

Within that, the explicit witness can and will come. Yes. But the advice for Jenny here is don't have a guilt trip.

Just pray into and do what God is calling you to do. And it may not be exactly personal evangelism in the way that your pastor describes, but God will use you if you're open. Thank you so much, Tom.

There's helpful answers all along the way there. And yeah, we'll get to more of the questions same time next week for now. Thank you very much for being with me.

Thank you. Thanks for listening to today's show. And don't forget that SBCK, Tom's UK

publisher, have some special deals on Tom's books for podcast listeners.

There's a link with today's podcast. If you want to find out more about that next time on the show, we're going to be asking your questions on how important it is to get our doctrine right. You know, why read the Bible if theologians can't agree on its interpretation and would Tom actually recommend any books by people he actually disagrees with? All those sorts of questions on differences on doctrine and theology coming up on next week's show.

Just a reminder, Unbelievable.live, the place to check out the ticketing for our unbelievable conference this coming May, helping you to take God off mute in your life. You can find a link with today's show as well. For now, thanks for being with us and we'll see you next time.

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