

# OpenTheo

## #146 Can a Christian vote for Biden? Can faith be disentangled from left vs right politics?

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom is joined by Texan Bible scholar Justin Bass as they respond to questions from US listeners about right wing politics and faith. Where does patriotism fit with Christian worship? What do I say to family members who say I can't be a Christian and vote for Joe Biden? How do I talk to post-Christian friends who have rejected US evangelicalism?

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## Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask NTY Anything podcast.

[MUSIC] Hey, I'm so glad you could be with us again for the show that brings you the thought and theology of NTY. Tom is senior research fellow at Wickliffe Hall Oxford University celebrated theologian, historian and author.

I'm Justin Brally, head of apologetics and theology for Premier Unbelievable. And thanks for this review from a listener in Canada who says, "Doctor Wright is unbelievable. I'm a black woman and listening to European, able-bodied, cisgendered male theologians automatically set my radar on high alert.

But I find Doctor Wright to be easy to listen to because I can drop my barriers and hear his messages, he is demonstrated time and time again and unbiased to the greatest extent anyone can, perspective on scriptural interpretation. Love, love, love this podcast and anxiously await new episodes." Well, thank you so much. I'd be really interested to know what you make of today's episode because we're actually joined again by US Bible scholar Justin Bassen.

And that's partly because we're going to be responding to some questions from US listeners about right-wing politics and faith. Where does patriotism fit with Christian worship, for instance? What do I say to family members who say, "I can't be a Christian" and vote for Joe Biden? How do I talk to post-Christian friends who have rejected US evangelicalism? So we'll see what Tom and Justin have to say in today's edition of the show. And just a reminder, the next big thing coming up from Premier Unbelievable is renowned New York pastor to skeptics Tim Keller.

Tim has been on a journey with cancer over the last two years and he'll be telling us about that, about that journey and taking your questions. Tim also has a new book out on forgiveness too, which we'll talk about. So do join us live on Tuesday the 13th of December from anywhere in the world.

You know the website, it's [Unbelievable.live](https://unbelievable.live). That's our website for joining us for live webinar events. Free to attend, but you do need to register. That's at [Unbelievable.live](https://unbelievable.live). I'd love to see as many.

Ask and to write anything listeners as possible joining us for this special time with Tim Keller. Thanks for being with us on today's show. Here come your questions.

Welcome back to the show and we've got some special episodes that we're recording at the moment where we're not only joined by Tom Wright as usual, but also Justin Bass, who's a New Testament scholar and you can again find links to his book and of course to Tom's from today's show. But I thought it would be fun to do as well as some questions around the Bible and the New Testament. Some of those cultural questions that come in so frequently for us, Tom, particularly from American listeners who want your advice on issues around the political state and the sort of Christian nationalism and those kinds of issues.

Now sometimes you get criticized by some folk when we answer these questions, Tom, saying, "Well, you don't really understand what the full picture is and so on over there in the UK." Well, I thought, well, at least we've got Justin here who perhaps can bring that side of the argument to bear in this conversation. So we'll see where we go with these questions. But why don't we leave Brighton with Tom from Orlando who wants to ask about patriotism.

He says, "Often I found a strange mix of patriotism woven into religious worship. How

should one view loyalty to country in concert with loyalty to God? Can one remain patriotic when patriotism so often is lifting one's country's needs and desires over another? Can we truly love our brother when being asked to bear arms against him?" And I've been to many places in America where not only will you perhaps have a religious service but frequently God bless America and a certain amount of frequently the American flag is there along with the cross in church services and so on. I'll start with you, Justin, on this one.

What do you think? Where do you think the right sort of balances when it comes to patriotism? When does that cross over into some sort of idolization of a country, the primacy of America and that sort of thing? Yeah, I guess I would say there probably are people out there that worship their country that make it an idol, that everything their country does is perfect. But I think when it comes to Christians in America, I find the ones that are called right-wing and all this. I find many of them are just proud of America and consider America to be the greatest country on Earth.

Even though I'm an angel and I think I'm going to say that. I think it's got a lot of problems. There's no doubt.

It's not perfect. It's not the kingdom. But I do think America has done things with freedom of speech and certain aspects of freedom that I think have been better than just about anywhere.

And so I think it's okay to be proud of your country. I think, you know, I think of like Romans 12 versus Romans 13, I think of like Romans 12 kind of, you know, leading and quoting to the Sermon on the Mount. This is the action of living in Christ's kingdom.

Romans 13, there's some aspects of living in Caesar's kingdom and living in, you know, if you're in the government. And when John the Baptist told the, had Roman soldiers come to him and asked him what to do, you know, John the Baptist said the man who has to should give, you know, give at least one of the things, you know, if someone is in need, you know, give him what's in need. Be content with your wages.

You know, he didn't tell him to stop fighting. He didn't tell him, you know, well, give it up, you know, give up your arms. So I think there are ways to be, you know, in Christ, you know, love Christ, you know, above all, but also be patriotic and be thankful for the country that you're in.

Tom? Yes. I'm broadly in agreement with that. And of course we in Britain have a long track record of being inordinately proud of our country and imagining that actually this is the perfect country and that everything else is a rather shadowy copy of it and that America is rather sort of odd parody of it.

Now, I wouldn't say any of that, but I observe these feelings in my country from time to

time. It's difficult because we are shifting now into a global village where we're much more aware than we were even when I was young of just how interconnected the whole world is and hence just how much it matters that we try to understand and try to get along with and try to make space for cultures other than our own. So the whole question then of multiculturalism and what that should or could or might look like is very much on the agenda.

And I see that actually as a sort of a secular version of the dream of the New Testament, which is to say that you may with one heart and voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the vision in revelation of a large multitude of every nation and kingdom and tribe and tongue, gladly worshiping together. This is not something for the ultimate future only. So we can say, well, okay, we'll do our own thing at the moment, but then one day in God's future, we'll all be together.

I think the church is the place which ought to be modeling what it looks like to transcend national ethnic cultural boundaries at the moment. So then you get the second century apologists talking about being a citizen of all countries and none and of how our real allegiance is to God the Creator. And that makes us good citizens where we are, not uncritical citizens, but good citizens where we are, we pay our taxes, we respect the authorities, we live peaceably with our neighbors.

But we know that we have an ultimate allegiance which doesn't reduce our present allegiance and it merely contextualizes it in a larger and more generous framework. Yeah, and I'll just add it, you know, a scripture that I feel like is exactly what Tom's expounding on his Jeremiah 29, you know, when the Jews were exiled into Babylon, you know, God said, plant, build, prosper and seek the prosperity of amazingly Babylon. Babylon, which worshiped all these false gods, which we're doing untold things.

I mean, I'm sure they did so many things against the Geneva Convention and the way they treated criminals and the way they treated people. So God was saying where you are, you know, seek the prosperity of it. Don't worship it.

Don't worship their gods. Don't don't mingle with things that are evil, but seek the prosperity of the place and be like Tom said, be a good citizen. And I feel like that's the thing like, like I'm, you know, I'm not even, you know, I love America, but I love Texas, maybe even more.

So I'm a Texan, I'm an American, so I'm passionate about that. You guys from England should be passionate about England. People from Africa should be passionate about that.

People from Australia should be passionate there that and Christian should be good citizens anywhere they go, but never think that that's the kingdom. Yeah. Yeah.

I think that's a pretty good rule of thumb. Yeah. I mean, it's take ways into our next

question, which is from Christie and says some members of my family are prone to saying that anyone who voted for Joe Biden is not actually a Christian, that our faith in Jesus Christ is somehow fake or false that we're enthusiastic for killing babies.

There are these are the same people who seem to be almost worshipful in their admiration for and loyalty to Donald Trump. These are good people of faith who somehow now believe the lie that Joe Biden rigged the election and is now trying to destroy America, that somehow any person who loves Jesus and didn't bow before the throne of Donald Trump is going to be turned away on judgment day. And Christie says, honestly, I'm trying so hard to follow Jesus and read the Bible, learn more about God, become more like him.

What can I make of these charges being thrown at me? Fellow Christians who were a bit concerned within the last four years, I've, I'm so done with this and would love to get your take on the situation as honestly, a lot of Christians in the United States seem to have lost their minds. And it's not going away anytime soon, even though we have a new president. Obviously, we, we, you know, can expect probably Donald Trump to be coming back, certainly to contest the White House in the next election and so on.

And this is, we've seen again and again. So I know I'm really interested to see what Justin has to say to this in a moment. But Tom, do you want to start us off on this one? Well, just briefly, because obviously this gets into the detail of the contemporary mindset in America, and let me say, I have friends in America who tell me of friends of theirs or relatives of theirs who have more or less cut them off because they won't, as your question says, a worship at the throne of Donald Trump.

And I think it's fascinating to me how the issue of abortion has taken the center stage for many people. And I understand that I take a, what you call it, a traditional or conservative view of abortion myself, not an absolute extreme view, but I would broadly share the view that many American Christians have of that. And hence, I grieve over the way in which in my country and in America, politicians on the left have tended to say that abortion is a woman's right, et cetera, et cetera.

I think that fudges the issue and creates a very dangerous and dark place. So the trouble then is in politics, you have to do deals. You have to make compromises.

You have to say, well, in order to get all sorts of things done, we're going to have to agree to differ on this particular thing in order to get all those things done. And the idea that because the Democrats were broadly pro-abortion or they would use the phrase pro-choice, that that means that everything else they do must be wicked and satanic, et cetera, et cetera. And then we can spin all sorts of lies about them and conspiracy theories.

That's a kind of political immaturity which one would have hoped that a great country

like America would have grown up out of by now. I mean, part of the difficulty of seeing as an outsider, but I love America and I go often and I've lived in America for some while, I see still bits of the Civil War playing itself out the battles of the 1860s with the liberals in the North East and the rednecks down in the South, imagining one another in the stereotypes and then playing off against those stereotypes. And it's so ironic because America was founded largely on the business of a separation of church and state that we're not going to have church and state mixing, but now what's happened is the rushing together in a disorderly fashion of Christian sentiment and ideas with politics in a way which seems to be uncontrolled and unthought through and we in Britain have a rich old muddle on that and up at our established church in a sense, let's us hold the ring for trying to think more wisely.

And let me say we don't expect that when we vote in a British election, we are going to get utopia. We expect that at the best we will get the least worst. Whereas in America, I think people still think that if only they can get the right person in the White House, then utopia will arrive.

And I think that's an enlightenment dream which the French gave up on a long time ago, or many of them, but America still clings too. So let's go to someone who has voted for Donald Trump and just tell us where you land on this question. Yeah, the point about just on that question, I would say no person can be called a Christian or not a Christian based on who they vote for.

I mean, I think that when we stand before the gates of heaven or the new creation or the kingdom, we won't be asked, well, who did you vote for in the 2016 election? Who did you vote for in the 2020 election? That's going to determine it. So I think that the people that this person in the question is talking about, these people would be on the more extreme. But I'll just use an example from England that I feel like captures the mindset of many Christians who are not in that extreme and people like me who voted for Trump, Paul, Trump as a lesser evil.

I think William Wilberforce would be a good example of this. Somebody who's a strong Christian who gets involved in politics, who loves this country, and who wants to see evil slavery, you know, be done, done away with, and what, and how is slavery going to be done away with, except by raw power, except by raw government, British, hegemony, I mean, that's what it took to end slavery. And so just to give kind of a parallel, which I think is an app parallel because I think abortion is kind of a modern day slavery, people who voted for Donald Trump in 2016, as opposed to Hillary, ended up getting three Supreme Court justices that were pro-life.

And as a result, Roe v. Wade was overturned just very recently. And that was the first time in 60 years. And so that, you know, I would love Trump or whoever the Republican or Democrat nominee to be like a Wilberforce.

They definitely aren't that. They definitely aren't the moral, godly, you know, solid Christian type leader. But there are leaders that I think in America that are more likely to vote and push forward policies that are going to end certain evils and promote certain freedoms.

And that's the ones that I want to vote for. And so I wouldn't say a person is not a Christian for voting for Biden or that side. But I would say they are ill-advised.

And I would say they are then partnering with certain evils that they are doing. And it's not just abortion now. I mean, we're dealing with actual, Biden has made it clear he supports this, you know, gender-affirming care, which is basically the mutilation of minors, you know, a boy who wants to become a girl can be castrated, a girl who wants to become a boy can have a mastectomy and have her breasts removed.

And this is happening already in hospitals in America. And if they had their way, they would make this, you know, who knows how young they would allow this kind of thing. And so there's just a lot of evils that I think are coming out of one side.

You know, they're neither side's perfect. Again, but the lesser evil I think is on the Republican side right now in American politics. I think these very specific anti-vibble-cool anti-god evils are coming out of the Democratic Party.

And I think they need to be stopped in a similar way that Wilbur Force sought to stop, you know, the evils of his day. Tom? Yeah, I'm not going to take Justin on in terms of analyzing the different evils of the different sides. And you know the American scene better than I do.

But I've heard this thing about the gender reassigning, et cetera. We've had a chunk of that in Britain. It now is actually being, I think, pushed back a bit.

It's still very difficult, but some of the key newspapers have taken a firm line against that kind of thing, which surprises me because the same newspapers would normally be very liberal on all sorts of issues. But I think people have seen that there is something really damaging going on here. And I mean, as well as sheer nonsense, and part of it is truth-telling.

Part of it is telling the truth about God's good creation. When somebody born to all intended purposes, male says, "I want to be a woman, I want to be female." I think the right question to ask is, "What is this thing called woman or female that you want to be?" Because female should include things like having a uterus, et cetera, et cetera. You don't have one, we're not planning on transplanting one into you.

And if we did, it wouldn't work. Just what is it that you're asking to be? And I think part of the difficulty there to get into the specifics is that we've been so bombarded with the rhetoric of sexual politics over the last generation that now we're frightened of saying to

anyone who says, "I want to be this, I want to live like that, oh no, you shouldn't because we're telling you that's wrong." At the same time, the truth question cuts both ways. And looking from the British side of the Atlantic, it seems to me that there's a real problem in truth telling about the last election, for instance, and truth telling about all sorts of things that are going on, and the QAnon conspiracy theories, some of the perpetrators of which are getting themselves elected to office.

These are very serious things, and we look at it and shudder and think, "What would happen if Trump got a second term?" To many people around the world, that is just as horrific as Biden getting a first term, although Biden's term is not unproblematic, I fully agree. So this is the perspective of a friendly outsider who wishes America well. Part of the difficulty here, as with the President's State of Israel, is that if you criticize one leader, one party, or one set of actions, people assume you are criticizing the whole country.

And if you criticize Benjamin Netanyahu, "Oh, it must be that you're anti-Semitic." No, I'm sorry. I do not have an anti-Semitic bone in my body, but I do think that Netanyahu was a disaster in the past and might be again. And so maybe again, compromises.

So these are very difficult issues. But I think trying to make it easy so that if you're a Christian, you must do this, and if you do that, you're obviously not a Christian or not a real Christian is, as Justin says, that's just not a good way to go. It's immature and fails to take seriously the minds which God has given us to think serious issues through.

And I can say one thing. And I agree, it's an issue of conscience, I think. But if I had a Christian before me who was going to vote that other way, these are the kind of things I would bring to them.

Talking about the question about if you don't have a uterus, how are you claiming to be a woman, this is an amazing thing that this has really become, I wouldn't say all Democrats, people who vote Democrat just across the board. But with the leaders, when it comes to this question, you can basically know in America who's a Democrat leader and who's a Republican leader just by that question. It's an amazing thing.

If they can answer the question, what is a woman, an adult human female, then they're Republican. If they can't, then if they refuse to answer, we know they're Democrats. So it's become that polarized.

Isn't that interesting? It's that we have analogies, not exact analogies, but some analogies in our politics at the moment. And I'm looking forward to coming around that corner and going in a wiser way. But I do think it's partly because of the many years of being bombarded with the propaganda about the gay issue where people have been so anxious because of hard-edged, if you like, homophobic rhetoric, et cetera, saying, you know, God hates fags or whatever, that people have reacted against that.



And so, oh, we've got to be nice about people, we've got to let people say who they really are. And then on the back of that, this whole new wave of the trans thing has happened. And I'm with JK Rowling on this, and I hope that doesn't get me trolled by the Twitter party because she's had a lot of that.

Well, we both stand with JK Rowling. Well, one quite question. Yes.

Post-Christian far-right baggage is our final question from Chris in Minnesota. He says, "My wife and I love the podcast. I went to a Christian university and I'm in ministry full-time.

But one of the greatest heartaches I've had in the past couple of years is watching a significant number of my friends from university and other Christian institutions become openly quote-unquote, "post-Christian." Some simply want nothing to do with the far-right evangelical movement, but some seem to hate Christianity itself and all it signifies. My question is, how do we approach those who label themselves post-Christian? I feel any argument or debate will be perceived as just mental or theological gymnastics and over-explaining of Christianity that many see as deceptive. It feels impossible to separate the life and truth of Christianity from the baggage it carries for them.

What is the way forward? And I meet this a lot with people, perhaps other labels are used, deconstructed and ex-vangelical and other things. And I do wonder how much of it is bound up with a certain cultural manifestation of Christianity that they've rejected. Perhaps they haven't truly rejected the real heart and spirit of a Christian faith itself.

But it's very difficult to disentangle it sometimes, depending on the culture you're coming from. I mean, I want Justin, if you could start us off on this one. Have you had similar friends who have gone in that direction and say, "I don't want anything to do with it anymore?" Yeah, this has been a very big thing in America too.

Just deconverting people, deconverting their destruction. Lack of a better word. Backstreet Boy, 90s, Christian band members.

I think you've had some on our show. But this has been like public kind of celebrity Christians coming out publicly and saying, "I did believe, obviously, I was a Jesus freak. I was saying the song Jesus freak." In the 90s and now they say they're not a believer.

I think on a case-by-case basis, we need to focus on them. We need to, especially if they're open and still wanting to seek things out. But especially some of these people who want to make it real popular that they're denying Christ and that they're becoming an apostate.

I think we need to maybe debate them and deal with them and maybe be in stronger with them and talking about what's the implications of this if you denied Christ, what will happen after you die. Let's talk about hell. Let's talk about some of these things.

I think another point that I don't see many Christian leaders making on this is Jesus bringing back John 6 after the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus says some very hardcore things. If you don't eat my flesh and drink my blood, there's no life in you and some people leave. It's fascinating all throughout the Gospels when people walk away from Jesus, he never chases him down.

He never runs after him. No, no, no, come back, please, come on. What can I do? What else can I say? We'll do something for you.

I'll compromise. Jesus doesn't do that. I think we as Christian leaders, we need to be loving.

We need to welcome all. But I think sometimes chasing these people who leave, we neglect the people who are there. I think we need to focus on the people who actually are coming to church.

We need to be training them up and making disciples of the people that are there and empowering them so that way they're not going to 15, 20 years, deconvert later because they're getting a third grade, second grade education of Christianity. I have this view of at this point, I'm like, hey, let's hunker down and focus on the people who are actually at church now. Let's not be chasing after the Backstreet Boy member that left.

Let's stick with the people that are at church. That's just one of my thoughts. That's fascinating.

I very much agree with you that Jesus remains cool and calm when people say no, they walk away. Jesus may be sad, but as you say, what I want to say is that the people who are still hanging in there, they need to be encouraged so to order their outward facing, cheerful Christian work, Christian life, Christian work in the world that whether people want to believe it or not, they are struck by the fact that these Christians actually seem to be doing some good around the place. When I was working as a bishop, I was fascinated by the way in which some of the communities in the northeast of England where I was working.

The church was to use exactly the wrong metaphor punching above its weight. Just a few people, not necessarily hugely well educated, who were doing things for the benefit of the wider society in the town or village where they were living and that people would look and say, wow, and obvious examples like food banks, but all sorts of other things, which if the church suddenly stopped doing those things, that community would be in real trouble. People even who don't want to believe and who have probably been bruised by some form of Christianity that they had formally embraced can look at it and say, well, maybe there is such a thing as genuine Christianity and I think I'm looking at it over there.

That can often pave the way for somebody to return. That's by the church being what it ought to be anyway, if it has that effect, well, that's great and we should pray that it will. I think as well, we have to face the fact that in my country, as well as most countries, I guess, the sort of Christianity that people had in the 1980s and 1990s, especially young people growing up and maybe a bouncy Christian fellowship and some Christian rock music or whatever, that may only have been quite a superficial version of Christianity and it may be that there are deeper things going on which they never connected with and as their lives have gone on as if they have matured, they haven't had that depth to draw on, but the depth is there and God willing they might find it.

I notice in your splendid book, *Bedrock*, you quote at one point an article by A.N. Wilson, who's a British journalist, and you say he was a journalist, an intellectual atheist, but actually to begin with, he was a very devout, very narrow, constrained, high church, Anglican Christian. He actually went to seminary and was thinking about being ordained and then he gave it all up for various reasons. I ran into him in the 90s when he wrote his book about Jesus, which was based on bits of Gays of Amesh's book actually.

And as you remember, one of the chapters in my book, *Who Was Jesus*, was against him. He then wrote a book on Paul similarly and I wrote a book on Paul with the final chapter, which was *Debunking Wilson*. We then had a public debate in St. James Piccadilly, which was quite a nerve-wracking experience, but he was very much, you know, I'm just a wooly atheist and I think that's the best thing to be and et cetera, et cetera.

How he got from that in the mid 90s to where he is now, oh, that article you quoted was in 2009. I do not know. I have not met him.

I have not been in touch, but it seems to me he had a very narrow and immature faith, a very nervous faith to begin with, which probably needed to be broken into pieces so it could become anything at all and then has now come back into a much more, perhaps I don't know, mature and richer faith. I know he and Rowan Williams have become friends, for instance, though we've not made that connection across. So I think different people are on different journeys.

Sometimes that just has to happen and it may just take time and we may grieve over them while they're gone and hope they don't mess their own lives and other people's lives up too much in that context. Although of course, Christians are pretty good at messing their own and other people's lives up as well. So it's not a matter of just us and them being totally different on that one.

Well, and the Ann Wilson story gives us great hope for someone like Barterm and because Barterm and came from a very fundamentalist, maybe not very understanding, appreciating, became an atheist, an agnostic and who knows what will happen in the coming years, God willing. Yes, no stories over till it's over, as they say. And as we've said on previous podcasts, often, as you said, and it's been my experience,

deconstruction can be a route for some people to reconstructing something far deeper and stronger in the long run.

But I hope that's been helpful in some way. Chris and Minnesota and others have been emailing in with your questions. It's great to be able to have a conversation across the pond, though Justin is with us on this side of the Atlantic on this occasion on some of these issues.

So thank you both for engaging with each other in that way. We'll be back with another episode featuring Justin next time. But for now, Tom and Justin, thanks for being with me.

Thanks. This was fun. Thank you.

Good to be here. Hope you enjoyed today's show. Thank you for being part of it.

You can find more, get our newsletter and support us over at [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). It's the one-stop shop for all our resources, podcast, videos and much more besides. Next time on the show, Catholics have questions. We'll hear what some Catholic listeners want to ask, Tom.

And just a final reminder, our upcoming webinar with Tim Keller happens on Tuesday the 13th of December. You can register to be part of it at [unbelievable.live](http://unbelievable.live). For now, thanks for being with us. See you next time.

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