

OpenTheo

#111 Why can't Christians agree on doctrine?

March 31, 2022



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

How important is it to get our doctrine right? Why read the Bible if theologians can't agree on its interpretation? Whose books do you disagree with that you'd still recommend? NT Wright responds to questions about differences on doctrine and theology.

- Support the show – give from the USA or UK & Rest of the world
- For Premier Unbelievable? live events & conference: www.unbelievable.live
- 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

Hi there. Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways, and I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that.

It's called Five Ways to Connect with God, and you can download it for free right now at premiere.insight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premiere.insight.org/resources and download your copy. That's premiere.insight.org/resources. The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

Hello and welcome back. It's Justin here with the show bringing you the thought and theology of NT Wright, senior research fellow at Whitcliffe Hall Oxford University, and brought you in partnership with our show partners NT Wright Online, SBCK, and of course with premiere unbelievable. I'm head of theology and apologetics at premiere.

We're really pleased that our unbelievable conference is not far away when we'll be introducing some of the various speakers and thinkers and apologists that we feature regularly on our shows and on our podcast, including Alistair McGrath, Lisa Fields, Glenn Scrivener, Sharon Dierichs, Joseph DeSousa, John Wyatt, whose new podcast Matters of Life and Death recently joined our lineup. Phil Vischer and Sky Jatani, it's going to be a wonderful day where you'll learn from some brilliant thinkers and minds and really help you to encourage you, I suppose, in taking God off mute. That's the whole theme.

God unmuted. So if you want to be part of that and you can join from anywhere in the world online, then go to unbelievable.live to find out more. Great to hear from Sue, who got in touch to say, thankful for the opportunity to gain clarity from Tom's careful explanations, his warm encouragement and exaltations.

I think of Tom Wright as Christendom's "Bate Hovn," a man with a brilliant mind who's written countless symphonies that can gently and patiently explain the how and why of the way the notes work together. Thanks for you all for contributing to what you contribute to listeners through this podcast. Bless you, Sue, and all those who leave ratings and reviews and comments alongside the podcast.

If you're able to rate and review us, it does help other people to discover us. And you can find out more about the show as well at askentiright.com. For now, we're going to get into today's discussion. We're talking about how important it is to get our doctrine right.

You've got lots of questions on that. Let's leap into them now. I so enjoy getting to sit down on a weekly basis with Tom.

So, to ask questions, and a lot of the questions that come in are questions I want to ask, but I throw a few of my own in along the way frequently. Now, what we're talking about today is getting things right. And so often, I think what the questions tell us that come into this podcast, Tom, are that people are really concerned about sort of knowing exactly how things are and the way things should be believed and so on.

And as we often discover, it's never quite that simple. Life is often mysterious. But these are sort of in a sense, these questions are more on that wider scope of, well, how do we know what's right and how important is it to get things right.

So, let's start with Mike in Manchester, New Hampshire, first of all, who says, "Thanks primarily to your help, Tom and Tim Mackey from the Bible Project. I've come to see how rich, full and complex the Bible and the world truly are, especially compared to the way things were presented in my younger years in what I would call default American evangelicalism. I definitely know and love God more as a result.

However, seeing how difficult it is for a modern person to come to a quote unquote, correct understanding of everything the Bible is talking about, much less the average

person, 500 to 1000 years ago, I'm left wondering how important or necessary is it to have all the right answers on doctrinal questions. I'm thinking primarily of things like Pido versus Credo, baptism, eschatology, regulative versus normative principles, et cetera. Thanks for pointing me in general towards Jesus though.

Okay, so interesting question here from Mike, what, how important is it to have the correct theology, the right doctrine and how would we even know necessarily that we would, I suppose, but yeah, your thoughts, Tom? Yes, it's very interesting, thanks to Mike for this question, but it's very interesting that the questions that he raises are not do we believe in the Trinity or the resurrection, but things like the mode, the proper subjects of baptism, eschatology by which I assume he means pre-millennial versus post or a-millennial, regulative versus normative principle, that's very interesting in terms of, presumably that means when we go to the Bible, does it tell us what and only what we should do, you know, do, so for instance, in the ordering of worship, are we allowed latitude in how we do it within a general biblical thing or is it much more specific, do we have a specific, thus says the Lord for this, those who are very much 19th century debates between, say, Charles Haddon Spurgeon in the Victorian period and Anglicans. And so I think with questions like those, these are subjects on which people who acknowledge one another as faithful disciples of Jesus have traditionally disagreed, and I would say there are good answers to which we can work, but they are things which ideally shouldn't divide the church. Obviously, the Peter versus Credo Baptist, I don't like that phrase, but that has divided the church, there's nothing much we can do about that at the moment except make friends across that gulf and try to live wisely and peaceably and prayerfully with one another, and I've tried always to do that.

But I want to say that doctrine is like that the scaffolding around the building, the building of the church, like any ordinary building, gets weathered, you know, rain and hail and snow come and winds blow, and if you're not careful, bits of who the church is supposed to be, get fragmented or fractured or even blown off by the things that are going on around in the world. And doctrine is a way of saying, let's put some scaffolding up around this and check that the stonework is okay and that the woodwork is right and that the windows aren't leaking and that sort of thing. And so the church must always be thinking through what it actually believes and how that works out and every generation has seen theologians come forward to teach, well, actually in our present day it looks as though this is a good way we can explain who we are and what we're doing.

And that's the task of systematic theology, if you like, to explain to the church and then for the sake of the world, because the church exists for the sake of the world, to witness to the world that Jesus is Lord, that God is God. Within that then, how much latitude can we live with? And that's an important question. I've often argued that the key question to ask is how do we tell the difference between the differences that make a difference and the differences that don't make a difference.

There was somebody in one of our British magazines, one of the ordinary secular magazines the other day arguing yet again, because I know this person's writing quite well, that the Anglican church shouldn't make such a fuss about things like sexual ethics, because we can agree to differ on that just like we've agreed to differ on women's ministry and various other things. Well, we have and we haven't. And the answer to that is that actually in the Bible itself there are some things very specifically which we are told you should agree to differ on, e.g. whether you eat kosher food, which means you may well eat only vegetables if you're in an area where you can't get kosher meat, or is it actually the case that all foods are now clean? Paul addresses that specifically in Romans 14, and he says, "Let not the one who chooses to eat this, judge the one who doesn't, and vice versa.

They are servants of God, God has accepted them. Likewise, keeping special holy days. Some people do, some people don't, let's not divide the church over that." And Paul is pushing towards a great unity of people from different cultural backgrounds living together joyfully, and working at the remaining problems from a position of togetherness, not from lobbing theological hand grenades at each other from the other side of the street.

However, there are many things, and Paul's letters are full of them, where it's quite clear that certain styles of behavior are absolutely ruled out. 1 Corinthians 5, incest. Sorry, this is not something which is permissible.

Just because we are free from the old Jewish law, this doesn't mean that all lifestyles are now open and okay. Paul doesn't say, "Let not the one who believes in incest, judge the one who doesn't, and vice versa." He says, "Kick him out. This is not acceptable." So it is vital for the church to know the difference between the differences that make a difference, and the differences that don't make a difference.

And the only way to be sure that you're being wise about that, and not just prejudiced, which is what everyone's frightened of at the moment, is through proper theological thinking. Theological thinking rooted in scripture, rooted as well in the goodness of God's creation and God's intention to renew creation. Those are the great things which we see writ large in the story of Jesus and his death and resurrection, and we must constantly be going back to that great story and to the gift of the Holy Spirit, to say, "How does this all shape who we are meant to be?" And in the light of that, what do we teach about eschatology? What do we teach about baptism and so on? Hi there.

Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month called "Critical Race Theory and Christianity." This ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rassalbury, Owen Strand, and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, "Has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church, or is white privilege a problem in the church, and is critical race theory

compatible with the gospel?" I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the ministry that brings you this podcast each week. You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources, and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you. Without your generosity, none of this would be possible.

So please, go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today. That's premierinsight.org/give. And don't forget to download our newest ebook "Critical Race Theory and Christianity" as my special thank you. I suppose the tricky thing, and this will come up in our next question from Robert in Kalamazoo, Michigan, is, you know, how do you sort of get to that sort of, even that sort of clarity, though, of what the, you know, the key issues are that we need to, you know, say, no, this really is a point of which we need to go our separate ways.

I mean, to kind of encapsulate Robert's question, it's why read the Bible if even the Holy Spirit can't stop conflicting interpretations from theologians, but I'll read the longer version here as well, because he says, "Tom and so many others recommend reading the Bible regularly and asking the Holy Spirit to guide our understanding." At the same time, he and others talk about how people are misinterpreting the Bible and various translations of the Bible can't do justice to the original languages. It seems trivially evident that different people interpret the Bible differently. For example, "The View of Scripture by Tom speaks of a new creation, the use of allegory in the book of Job and the early chapters of Genesis, while a fundamentalist Baptist in the American South might talk about a vengeful God and a completely literal interpretation of the Bible." Even more than that, these different takes on the basic interpretation of Scripture has led to factions of Christians ranging from angry, dismissive, burning hell, literalists to the more kind welcoming, and to me, more rational type represented by people like Enthirite.

Would you comment on why you recommend that lay people like me read the Bible when it's clear that professional theologians or scholars cannot agree on some of the most basic meanings of Scripture, such as the very nature of God. It seems to me that people generally come up with interpretations based on their individual personalities and immediate cultural influences rather than something inspired by the Holy Spirit. And here's an interesting addendum to this.

Please note I'm fairly recently converted from over 40 years of agnosticism by a profound religious experience at 63 years of age that left me with no doubt about the existence of God. Since then I've been consumed with trying to better understand this God, and I believe I have had some success, not by raw reading of the Bible, but by reading what I think are thoughtful New Testament commentaries by William Barkley and many others currently available books. I'm sure yours are included in that, Tom.

So what's your advice to Robert here who wants to get to grips with this faith that he feels he's been brought to us, but just finds who I'd agree with. If people can't agree amongst themselves and what the Bible actually teaches, why should I even start and think that I could be led by the Holy Spirit? I mean I very much understand that and as I've traveled around the world, around America, etc. I've met obviously many many different interpretations of scripture and bumped up against people.

And in my own culture here in the city where I live in Oxford, I know people who would quite significantly disagree with some of the things to which I have come over the years, and my views have changed and grown and developed because I've been fortunate in that I've been able to be given the time to study the historical context of the New Testament in particular, and to see what some of the key words and some of the key arguments meant in that original context. Now the church has always said in theory that the literal meaning of scripture, that is what it what it meant when it was first written, is absolutely vital and we then might be able to build off from that in different directions. But the question is how do you know what the original meaning was? One of the great things that's happened in the last two or three centuries is a rush of new historical material, new manuscripts, new ancient texts coming to light through archaeology like the Deadseas Grolls being an obvious example, which actually then shed a flood of light back on the New Testament and we say that's what was really going on in that passage in in Matthew or 1 Corinthians or Revelation or whatever it was.

Now the church has always done a bit of that but over the last two or three centuries as I say there's been a huge push towards a better historical understanding. Sometimes that has been seized by the skeptics to say, oh now we've done the history we can show you that Christianity is based on a mistake, Jesus didn't rise from the dead, whatever. That that is pure smoke screen, pure modernist skeptical smoke screen again and again when we delve down into the original Jewish context particularly we find a richness of meaning which then reshapes other things that we're doing and I've found that even in the last ten years in my 60s and things which I've stumbled across particularly to do with the meaning of the temple within the New Testament and the way that Jesus and the Spirit are themselves embodying what the temple was really all about and how that then shapes our church life.

I hadn't really seen that when I was young, I think I started to see it maybe in the 1980s but it's gradually crept up and I'm confident that there will be other things as well which will go on doing that. Now as that happens it's then my job as a teacher to explain it to the church through writing and teaching and preaching and so on but there's something William Temple said oh 60 or 70, no 80 or 90 years ago which is really profound that when a Christian teacher glimpses something fresh that needs to be said they have an equal responsibility to explain to the puzzled or worried faithful how what it was that was really central and important to them is retained and enhanced within the larger new picture which is being offered. I hope I've been able to try to do that of course there are

some people who get so fascinated by the new thing that they basically say forget all the other stuff you've ever thought just have a look at this now no that that's never the way and so the larger answer is we need to see the whole picture of church history because there are things that we can still learn from Athanasius and from Augustine from the great Middle Ages scholars like Aquinas as well as obviously from the reformers like Luther and Calvin and Tyndale and Cranmer and so on and great thinkers since their day and in each case we don't say well they got it all right but they probably saw things which we may be in danger of missing.

C.S. Lewis said one of the reasons we read the old books is not because they're absolutely right not because they never made any mistakes but they didn't make our mistakes and they may be able to correct us in places where we are liable to go off the boil so this is part of being the body of Christ across time as well as now across space we need to pay attention to one another and we need to reckon that God is not necessarily interested in us all getting it absolutely right by 6 p.m. tomorrow night but in us wisely living within the great tradition constantly correcting it in the light of Scripture allowing Scripture to speak from within that tradition but also by historical research over against that tradition sometimes to say to us no this is the living word of God the historical tradition matters because Jesus was a real space time and matter and is a real space time and matter fleshly human being raised from the dead but now able to be the Lord of the space time and matter church so it's really about living with the puzzles pursuing the problems as far as we can and with the whole church which means reading things that we might necessarily be recommended to by our particular pastor whatever it may be trying as best we can to work towards that ideal in Romans 15 that you may with one heart and voice glorify God the father of our Lord Jesus that's to do so across cultural divides within the church that's where we should be aiming every generation has to struggle with that just on a purely practical level when when Robert next sits down to maybe crack open the Bible and and yeah what would you advise because if he if he's approaching it almost as a sort of well what am I supposed to make of this text given all the different opinions that are coming at me is there a different way to approach Scripture in the first place where because I fear maybe part of the problem might be that Robert's sort of treating it as a sort of a text to get some kind of doctrinal truth out of by the end of reading a passage and maybe there are other ways of treating well sometimes sometimes that will be the case one of the first things is if you don't have Greek and Hebrew please have in on the table in front of you two very different translations two or more because no translation is a complete literal translation it's it's impossible that's not how languages work we need different translations to remind us that there are other possibilities in this text than the one that we regularly hear on a Sunday morning or whenever so that's for starters but then prayerfully to soak oneself in particular passages maybe to be part of a Bible study group and perhaps a meditative Bible study group which wouldn't be so much didactic this is what this passage says as let us listen to this passage together pause for maybe five or ten minutes of silence

having listened to it then read it again in a different translation pause again read it again in a different translation and then start to share what are you hearing out of this passage just one or two sentences what are you hearing and then gradually to discern some new things which maybe none of us had thought of before this doesn't mean that we can then write a new creed or whatever but it means that we may be paying attention to scripture as the Holy Spirit is leading this group not that the Holy Spirit makes us infallible that the Holy Spirit will open our minds and hearts to new possibilities we mightn't have considered before. Final question Tom I thought this was quite a fun one from Jonathan in Coventry very short among those authors you tend to disagree with Tom whose books would you still recommend and why? My temptation is to look around at my study and say well here they all are take your pick because there are very few people whose books are on my shelf with whom I would disagree with whom I would agree all down the line but I have learned most from historians from people who have helped me see what's going on in say first century Judaism now that doesn't mean that I agree with every book on first century Judaism on these shelves because we're all having to look at the same texts at Qumran and Josephus at the early rabbis etc and so we come up with different constructs but people who are doing that continually nudge me into thinking of things differently. My former colleague from here in Oxford Ed Sanders who's now for a long time been back in America, his writings have been enormously stimulating not because I agree with him because I regularly don't but because he had the courage to say hang on I've been living with all these first century Jewish texts and I come back to the New Testament and I find that half the people writing about the New Testament aren't actually living it mentally in the world of first century Judaism at all so Sanders boldly in his book Jesus and Judaism advanced the question of Jesus confrontation with the temple to the very front of his exposition curiously rather like John's gospel does.

I'm not sure that Sanders even noticed he was doing that but he said no Jesus was a prophet of Jewish restoration eschatology that is to say we expect that God is going to come in person to transform the way we do things and so obviously the temple is at the heart of that and so Sanders began with that which is like a revolution no other New Testament scholars were doing that in fact some were allowing the confrontation between Jesus and the temple almost to drop off the back as though that was simply a reflection of early Christian attitudes to the temple or something so that's one example I could give many others of people that I've learned from not because I agree with them but because they've made me stop in my tracks and say well hang on we've got to take that very seriously I engaged in a loss of debate in the 90s with John Dominic Crosson who's now quite an elderly American scholar but some of his books were explosive and again wasn't that I was agreeing with him but that he was raising issues which I couldn't ignore because he was reading the texts in a very creative and interesting way so if I was going to push back I had to know what I was doing in pushing back and I've found again and again that I've learned just as much by doing that as by reading the people

that I naturally agree with so there's two out of two thousand yes there you go really really helpful thank you Tom thanks for all the time you spent answering questions on today's show and in previous ones as well lovely to catch up with you and look forward to seeing you again in the near future but for now thanks for being with us thank you very much indeed thank you well thank you for being with us on today's show you can receive more from the show by registering at askentiright.com you can ask a question too and in fact we're going to be recording some fresh material with Tom for your questions very soon so now's a great time to get registered and submit a question askentiright.com is the place to go to find the link once you join our newsletter you'll be sent the link that helps you to to ask a question now next time we've got some bonus material coming up from recent conversations Tom's been having with some interesting people so look out for that next time on the podcast and just a final reminder as we close out today's show unbelievable.live is the place to register for ticketing for unbelievable the conference this coming may helping you take god off mute in your life if you enjoy the askentiright anything show I think you'll love being part of this year's conference live from the British library in London but available to be attended anywhere in the world online again the link is with today's show unbelievable.live thanks for being with us see you next time

[buzzing]