

OpenTheo

#13 Christian sexual ethics, homosexuality and transgender

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In this edition of the podcast Tom answers listener questions on how to have better conversations on sexuality in the church, co-habitation, whether the New Testament understanding of homosexuality was different to today and his thoughts on Transgender following a letter he wrote to The Times newspaper.

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Transcript

[Music] Premier Podcast

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[Music] Hello and welcome along I'm Justin Briely, theology and apologetics editor for Premier sitting down once again with Tom Wright, New Testament scholar and prolific author on the podcast where you get to set the agenda. You're the one who asks the questions and the show's brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online. Glad to say we've had over 200,000 downloads of the show so far.

Thank you so much for sharing it, reviewing it, telling people about it and thanks for the feedback you sometimes leave as well. I got some of these messages via the Podbean platform from the podcast. Adam said, "Just want to say thank you for these podcasts.

I've been a fan of NT Wright for many years but these sessions provided new levels of

practical insight and done so in a very refreshing personal way. Thanks again." Someone else comments, "Tom's a great teacher, his depth and insight come out in these podcasts, never dog maddening. He's always willing to change his mind and opinion if the study of original texts take him that way." He always points to the Messiah as the central source and theme.

And Dickey Dale says, "Always stimulating a good podcast to listen to and easy to recommend to Bible college students and something I'd love other parts of the church to listen to as well. Sometimes the answers come across almost as a mini lecture leading me to think, "I'd love to sit down and have a real conversation with Professor Wright. Not simply the snippets we get here." There's always something worth thinking about, always well presented.

I'd heartily recommend listening. Thank you so very much for leaving some of those reviews and of course you can leave reviews wherever you get your podcast from whether that be iTunes, Podbean or whichever podcasting software you use. If you enjoy this show, you may also enjoy my other podcast, The Unbelievable Show and we've got our London conference coming up on Saturday the 20th of July.

I'm going to be joined there by 12 international thinkers including Chris Candier, Christy Mayer and Bruxy KV on Speaking Truth in a Post Truth World. If you want to come along, our discounted early bird ticket offer actually ends very soon on the 19th of May. After that you have to pay full price.

So if you want to do go and check it out at premierChristianradio.com/unbelievableconference and I'll make sure there's a link in the info of today's show. If you want to join me for this year's Unbelievable Conference 2019 on Saturday the 20th of July. Well today's episode of the Ask and T-Rite Anything podcast is one lot of the people have been asking for.

Tom talking about sexuality and LGBT. Well inevitably we're only going to be scratching the surface of some of these issues today. There's always more questions than we can include in any podcast and well we may yet revisit this subject in the future.

But I hope you enjoy it. Again if you'd like more episodes, updates, bonus video content or want to ask a question yourself for a future program then do register at our website askentirite.com. Welcome to the program and it's great to have you back. Tom as we continue to bring all kinds of different questions your way.

It's such a joy to sit down and be able to hear you very often off the cuff responding to all kinds of different things. I've been arranging them by theme over the weeks and we finally come to one that we got a lot of questions on. A very sensitive issue obviously and one that is a powder keg in both the church and society these days.

So I fully understand that this is one you have to treat carefully and sensitively but it is the issue of sexuality, transgender, Christian sexual ethics and so on. I don't think it's any secret that you hold a traditional view on this around sexual ethics. Often it's the only thing people often want to talk about sometimes and you have a lot of other things to talk about obviously.

I suppose just leading out with a general question on this. How best do you think Christians can work alongside each other deal with the contentious issues when they come up in the church? Yeah, this is a real problem because of the fact that many people have commented on this in many areas. Western society as a whole over my lifetime has found doing public discourse really hard.

Al Gore wrote a book about this, I think there's a decline of discourse or something like that, about the way in which we used to know that you built up what you wanted to say from first principles which you could demonstrate to an argument which could then be debated and somebody else says no there's a slippage in the logic there etc. etc. And that's one of the great tasks of philosophy always has been to enable people instead of yelling at each other and throwing things at each other or calling each other names to say no no no no we can talk about this sensibly there is this, there is that, there is the other.

Now how do we put that together? If somebody else wants to say no you're doing it wrong let's have that discussion. And I have always in whatever sphere of life I've been, been let's have the discussion person and I bitterly regret the way in which now things get hugely polarized and people accuse one another of phobias or victimization or whatever it may be so that it becomes almost impossible to express a moral view. And that's at the heart of it and I think the church ought to be constantly in the business of reminding people how to do moral discourse.

And I would say that on any issue whether it's investing in arms sales or whatever it is and the church itself hasn't been good at it tragically because we are taught Paul insists on it to be transformed by the people who are not going to be able to do it. And it may be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And in that same passage Romans 12 Paul goes on and says if it's possible so far as it lies with you live at peace with all people.

In other words constantly be striving for ways in which you can say even to people with whom you have major disagreements please can we sit down and look each other in the face and actually talk about this. And we used to be much better at this than we are and so it's that larger context which in America that's very very politicised at the moment the culture wars have gone on dividing and it's worse now than it's ever been I think. But we have our own equivalent and other in Europe and other parts of the world do as well.

So when you then say what about sexual ethics it's not just that this is special it's actually we are throwing that question into a world which already doesn't do discourse

well. Yes absolutely I suppose part of that is because obviously it is one level such a personal it's not an academic or dry subject it's one that impacts people in their daily life but your plea is doing all that with the level of graciousness and compassion that is obviously required in anything that has a pastoral dimension. We still need to be able to talk about it.

About 20 years ago I was part of a group that was working under the radar as it were with people from very different points of view meeting together privately church people to get to know one another without a sort of particular agenda that we were going to produce a report or whatever just to say can we at least understand what we're talking about here and understand one another and why this matters. And some of that is still going on thank God I haven't been involved with it since I left my previous job but that needs to go on but here's the really tricky thing. The fact that we say let's sit down and talk about it doesn't mean that actually we're all agreed and it's only a matter of dotting a few eyes and crossing a few tees.

It's like John Henry Newman once said that there are two types of disagreement there's disagreements about words and disagreement about things that often you and I will in fact agree but you use a particular word which I don't like and I use a word that you don't get what I'm meaning. And when we tease that out we say oh I see we're really in agreement fine but there are other things which when we cash them out we really are saying no this actually is a deal breaker. And then the question is how do you say what is a deal breaker within the church and obviously within the early church there were lots of things that some people thought were deal breakers that others didn't and that's we're on the same page except with a different issues.

So there are questions for today and I suppose a speculative question inevitably but do you it seems like these this is the issue sexuality that particularly the Anglican Church and many others is in a sense fracturing over and do you do you think there will be a sort of an ultimate kind of split in some significance. It's very difficult because it varies enormously from part to part of the world and of course there's this is Q for a lot of implicit racism you know that if it's African bishops who are saying no to the innovations then one sometimes gets the impression from some people that oh well they're only Africans what would they know and you'd know that let's not go there excuse me but that can work in the other direction as well and so that there's all sorts of things which throws dust in the eyes and makes it harder because immediately the temperature gets up how do you say that and I've seen that at close up but also at a distance and it's not a pretty sight and I think part of the problem there not sure how to say this really part of the problem when people are dealing with issues like that is that the different cultures in which we live are so very different I remember at Lambeth in 2008 the Lambeth Conference the meeting of Anglican bishops one of my colleagues hearing a conversation between a Sudanese bishop and an American bishop and just seeing these two totally different cultural contexts and both of them trying to be responsible and

sensitive in their context and just saying how do we have that conversation we'll get to one or two of the questions on some of the really contentious issues in the moment let's start though in in a sense with something somewhat simpler not necessarily Emily in London wants to know when it comes to say a heterosexual Christian who is perhaps a new Christian but in say has just come into the church but is still in a cohabiting relationship and what would your council be to that person and that church if you take a sort of traditional view on Christian sexual ethics should they immediately abstain from any sexual relations live apart what will the impact be then on that relationship they've had is that too much to ask are we simply to ask for a sort of a gradual changing of priorities and behavior and so on that's a question which I know a lot of people face and I remember from 30 years ago hearing a talk that John started as part of University of Michigan in Cambridge which I thought was really sensitive addressing exactly this issue and people expected start an old traditional bachelor you know that he wouldn't be talking about so obviously he'd met exactly this situation as a pastor again and again and again pastor of a busy London church you would this would be in the in the 1970s or 80s and his council was so somebody comes to faith in Christ this somebody is in a cohabiting relation with somebody else what to do some rigorists might say oh well you gotta leave at once get out and he said no he said you are already bonded with this person and now you need pastoral help to see how the the bondedness that you two now have can best be part of God's future for you both from here on and with that pastoral help it might be that the other partner would say actually what you've got with Jesus stuff is so amazing I want it to and let's work on that or they might say huh if that's the way you're going I'm not having any of that and that might precipitate a change in the relationship and in the meantime the pastoral sensitivity you're not starting from cold you're not starting from scratch at the same time I would say this our culture is absolutely soaked to the bone in Aphrodite worship we are doing mean by that there is the goddess of erotic love right Eros the little boy and pick into the circus but but the ancient goddess Aphrodite who is a very demanding goddess she says oh this is what you want erotically this is you know the pornography industry just massive now that's the modern incarnation of Aphrodite worship well it's part of it it's part of it but but the lie at the heart of it is that it's irresistible and that to resist it is bad for you right and those of us who've been fortunate enough to know people in enclosed monastic or conventional communities will know that yes there are problems there are pastoral problems you have to deal with but actually these are some of the most fulfilled happy wise whole people that you could ever wish to meet and actually I think I want to say the same about Jesus and Paul and so I think the idea that life without regular active sexual relationships is not worth living that's a modern lie so if it was the pastoral thing to say to this couple well maybe while this turbulence is going on you might find it better actually simply you may be still live in the same house or whatever but you might find it okay to refrain while we sort this out but I would emphasize the pastoral thing yeah pastoral business is never about somebody like me on a podcast saying do this and all of the well it's always about working with an actual pastor on the ground don't don't try and

be pastored by a podcast that's exactly exactly yeah I suppose though the overall sort of where you would see that the momentum going though is towards that that ideal if you like of sexual of being expressed within a marriage and I mean when I was younger people never talked about this stuff but such as I've read and I'm not an expert on this is to do with that the chemicals that are released during sexual activity which are designed to bond you with this person so that it is almost like in in in mid-summonite stream the sprinkling of fairy dust whatever so that when you wake up this will be the person you want to live with the person you're happy with do you would you even tie that back to the sort of you know Jesus saying one flesh absolutely I think the one fleshness we have tended I think I have tended in thinking about that over the years to think of it almost as a legalistic thing will you know one flesh there it is but actually as he says somewhere that when the man lies with the woman let's just keep it a heterosexual for the moment then there is a bond set up between them Lewis makes that a sort of a mystical almost supernatural thing I would say it's actually first and foremost chemical right and and there is something about that about the bondedness which isn't just about God said so you know those whom God has joined together let no one put us under as you say in the wedding service or we say in the wedding service it's not just God's law says you mustn't do it it's actually when you pull apart a couple who've been living together it is a tearing a flesh it's a trauma which is much more than just who has which of the CDs the ask anti-write anything podcast is brought to you by premier in partnership with SBCK and anti-write online SBCK is Tom's UK publisher and they've created a special discount for podcast listeners on a selection of Tom's titles so when you buy one you get a second half of the podcast by one you get a second half price there's a number of titles in the deal including some of Tom's most popular books surprised by hope simply Jesus and simply Christian get the buy one get one half price offer by going to this link SBCK publishing dot code dot UK slash ask anti-write that's SBCK publishing dot code dot UK forward slash ask anti-write let's let's open up the can of worms now Francis asks is the homosexuality we understand today the same as that which is condemned in the old and new testaments for a start old and new testaments are interestingly different in that it's very contentious as to which of the famous passages in the Old Testament say what precisely about sexual relations I mean for instance that the question of Sodom in Genesis is that it's a very important thing to leave that to one side it does seem that the prohibition in Leviticus 18 about lying with a man as you would lie with a woman that is something which is then picked up explicitly in the language of 1st Corinthians 6 etc. there is a similarity there but we're talking about documents produced over millennia and so we have to be very careful but more particularly we have to be very careful about any word ending in ITUI as in itty homosexuality it's rather like words ending in ISM Judaism Buddhism etc.

Muslims were invented in the 19th century you know when the British missionaries went to India and told the Indians that they the Indians had a religion called Hinduism the Indians were surprised they didn't know we didn't know that was the right this is a 19th

century construct in the same way homosexuality is a 19th century construct and in particular it's a modernist construct it's an essentializing construct which comes out of modernism rather than post modernism now which I think is where some of the leading edge of those movements is now doesn't say this is my essence it says today I feel like being this sort of a person or that sort of a person and it's deep fluid it's much more fluid and I think that's where the leading edge is which is ironic because in the church often people talk as though we were all signed up to an essentialized view but actually essentializing is not where the culture is at now I think we're behind on that but then here's the key thing I'm an ancient historian first and foremost when I approach these texts I read Greco and sources and I try and understand how the New Testament would have impacted in that world one of the poets that I really enjoyed reading when I was at school is the rather scurrilous Latin satirist juvenile no doubt as many school boys did you enjoy juvenile for all the wrong reasons and you you have an explicated text is in the back of the classroom you have an explicated text in class but then you know where to find in the library the thing with all these strange Latin words you look them up and oh my goodness is that what they got up to and juvenile in satar nine describes very clearly what you might call the gay scene in Rome and it isn't a matter as people have often said of powerful men exploiting boys slaves etc that happens as well of course but it's also very much a matter of some long term partnerships and also a lot of people who juvenile describes in lavish detail who choose what juvenile describes as the female role in homosexual behavior in other words there's nothing that we know about actual behavior that they didn't know and so just to square that circle very often the contention is among some people that well what Paul describes and prohibits in certain of his letters in terms of that behavior where he's referencing some kind of as you say pediristy exploitative temple prostitution whatever well that's all completely different to what we consider to be loved by faithful that is that is that is a view that people have taken if you read not only the text I've referred to juvenile satas if you read Plutarch's Treat is on Love Plutarch is a near contemporary of Paul if you read Plato's Symposium which is a discussion of love okay that's written a few hundred years before Paul but Plato is one of the go to authors Homer is the Old Testament for Greek civilization Plato is the New Testament and if you look at the school curricula of the time Plato is widely read and the Symposium has all kinds of relations including long term faithful stable partnerships so the rather trivial suggestion that oh this was all exploitative thing and now we have something quite different historically that won't work now let me say I would expect that many historians of many persuasions would agree with me on this and that doesn't then foreclose the issue as to what you do with it because in many church circles people will say at that point we're just going to disagree with Paul and fine that raises quite other issues and then you have to start talking about the integration of what Paul says in these very small passages and they are small passages obviously with all the other things he's doing and then it's about creation and about the redemption of creation and that's what's really at the heart of it many more issues we could unpack but we'll leave them for now and move it into a different kind of world I had a number of different questions

on this actually come in from different people like Carol in Arizona for instance the question of transgender and that in a sense if the sexuality issue has kind of come on a pace I think the transgender issue has more than doubled the terms of the rapid change changes in the social issues that we've been talking about and I suspect a lot of that is to do with the technological age we live in and the way things can spread so incredibly fast these days but rather than comment on specific pastoral issues that some people have written in about which obviously you're not in a position to really speak into you did sort of put your head above the parapet let's say in the times a year or two ago commenting on a couple of articles and issues that had come up there and this was the letter you wrote and I'd just be interested in you expanding on your comments on this perhaps I should say one of the articles was by that I was commenting on was by Hugo Rifkin who's son of former Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkin and Hugo I think is basically a secularist who's just observing the scene rather than taking a particular model these were just sort of cultural analysis type pieces in fact in whether they filled it in for you or you did it's mentioned here anyway it says sir the articles by Claire Fojas gender fluid world is muddling young minds and Hugo Rifkin social media is making gender meaningless and the letters about children wanted to be pandas dogs or mermaids show that the confusion about gender identity is a modern and now internet field form of the ancient philosophy of Gnosticism the Gnostic one who knows has discovered the secret of quote unquote who I really am behind the deceptive outward appearance in Rifkin's apt phrase the ungainly boring fleshly one this involves denying the goodness or even the ultimate reality of the natural world nature however tends to strike back with the likely victims in this case being vulnerable and impressionable youngsters who as confused adults will pay the price for their elders fashionable fantasies you wrote so yeah expand that one a little bit I mean you've probably got a little bit of backlash I'm assuming on this letter I did a little bit I actually got a bit of whatever the opposite of backlash is because the Washington Post phoned me up and asked if I'd like to write a whole op there and I courtesy declined their invitation I've said you know what I've written I've written I mean what struck me particularly again as an ancient historian was with that article by Rifkin when he describes people not being satisfied with his boring fleshly body that they've got and looking inside for a different identity I thought I know that stuff that there's a lot of that in the second and third centuries and it's very interesting the rise of Gnosticism in roughly the middle of the second century onwards then chimes in with the fact that Gnosticism has been one of the default American religions particularly for the last 200 years Harold Bloom says this in a famous book in other words and you find it in Jung and other psychologists the idea that who I really am is what I discover when I look deep inside my heart and then I discover and then if I look at my body oh dear this doesn't quite match what we could do something about it and the early Christians were quite clear on two fronts first the created order is good and to be redeemed not to be rejected Gnosticism is ultimately dualistic second with Jeremiah the heart is deceitful above all things and who can fathom it and Jesus says it's out of the heart that they're proceed and then he gives a rather worrying list of things in Mark

chapter 7 and he implies that these are the things that defile us and the problem with Gnosticism is finding my inner identity and this is the stuff of many many movies novels plays etc who I really am now I have known as we most of us have some people who have had transgender issues shall we say and again I would stress this is not something for somebody like me to come down from a great height and say you're all silly go away these are genuine dear people who one loves and wants to help and affirm and so on however as with some other styles of behavior if I as a pastor see somebody doing something which I deeply and with care believe is really destructive in some way I need to say something about that and particularly I worry about children I have grandchildren now I worry about them being in a world where somebody might ask you know a seven year old do you want to be a boy or a girl as though this is in the whole the whole rhetoric of saying you were assigned that gender at birth but actually you may be somebody else this idea that that gender is a so purely socially constructed phenomenon so constructed phenomenon which can be then wished on you by people other than us as part of what Gnosticism is responding to is the imperial power of a regime that tells you who you are and not it's a protest movement but it goes inside and protests against its own embodiment it's an interesting one because this stuff is all moving so fast anyway I think even in the secular postmodern world people are coming up against certain consequences let's say in the sports world where certain female athletes are saying hang on I'm all for transgender people but it doesn't make sense to have people who are physically male competing against women and indeed the so-called you know trans-exclusionally radical feminists I think now that the tradition you know the first way of feminism you know Jermaine Greer and so on who are actually saying well I've got a problem and suddenly you've got people who you might expect to be bed photos actually and I just think that demonstrates the confusion that results from saying that my identity is constituted by some feelings within me about maleness, femaleness both identity and desire and that's partly the residual platonism of Western culture that we think in terms of the physical being irrelevant and there's a spiritual reality which is different and the Bible is very keen on the physical stuff so when God said he created the male and female he said it was good there's a givenness in your opinion to that identity and that interestingly in the New Testament I know that in Galatians 3:28 it says neither Jew or Greek slave nor free no male and female that's because you are all one in Christ but all the rest of the time Paul is very much aware that he is a Jew that other people are not and we have to navigate that and in the same way he is male some people are female and we have to navigate that the fact of being all one in Christ doesn't mean that we deny any differences or differences exactly fascinating stuff the time is up already and thank you for delving into what is often obviously a very very you know obviously explosive sort of area to raise any sort of thoughts on but appreciate your openness to doing that Tom on today's edition of the show this is the ask enter anything podcast and you can ask your own questions too I'll make sure to leave you the ways to do that towards the end of today's program but for now thank you very much Tom thank you very much for today's edition of the podcast and next time it's the subject of the

church worship and unity so look out for that in your podcast feed and as I mentioned earlier don't forget if you'd like to come along to book in now for this year's unbelievable UK conference and that way you get to benefit from the cheaper early bird price which ends on the 19th of May go and check out the info and speakers at premier Christian radio.com forward slash the show will conference and if you'd like more about the ask enter anything podcast you can get more by subscribing to our newsletter updates bonus content videos access to book giveaways and of course the chance to ask questions yourself go and get yourself subscribed at ask enter com thanks for being with me and we'll see you next time you've been listening to the ask enter right anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcast from premier visit premier.org.uk/podcasts