

OpenTheo

#133 Is faith anti-intellectual?

September 1, 2022



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Is faith a valid way of knowing truth? Will we need faith in the new creation? Why is my church so anti-intellectual? Tom answers listener questions on faith, knowledge and reason.

- Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192>
- More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com>
- For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live>
- For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/training-and-events>
- Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow>
- Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello, welcome back. It's Justin Briely and the show is brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online, SBCK and Premier Unbelievable where I'm head of theology and apologetics. Today, Tom is answering questions such as "Is faith a valid way of knowing truth?" We need faith in the new creation and why is my church so anti-intellectual? Tom's answering listener questions on faith, knowledge and reason today.

Just a final call that Tuesday next week, 13 September, I'll be hosting an online panel discussion falling from grace, addressing power, leadership and abuse in the church. It's a really interesting panel of guest speakers, Amy O'Ewing, President of Oka and former Vice President of RZM which of course had that well-known implosion a couple of years ago following revelations of sexual abuse by its founder, Ravi Zacharias. Rachel then Hollander, attorney and advocate for abuse survivors, she was the first woman to bring

charges against Larry Nasser, the USA Gymnast, Doctor and that led to a whole avalanche of other women coming forward.

Mike Cossper, presenter and producer of the "Rise and Fall of Mars Hill" podcast, phenomenally popular podcast in which he details the "Rise and Fall of Mark Driscoll's Ministry". Dan Langberg, psychologist and trauma specialist is going to be part of this panel as well. A really, really interesting and top-level set of speakers taking part and we're going to be asking what about these leadership scandals that rock the evangelical church in recent years.

You can be part of this as we ask what the church needs to do to repent and be transformed and make a difference for survivors. It's free to attend from anywhere in the world. You can ask your questions too.

It's taking place as I mentioned. Tuesday the 13th of September, it's at 8pm UK, that's 3pm Eastern, 12 noon Pacific, just need to register your place to be part of it. That's an unbelievable dot live and the link is with today's show.

Do hope you'll be part of that with me on Tuesday. Right now, let's leap into another conversation. Your question is coming up this week on "Is Faith Anti-intellectual?" Welcome back to today's show where we've got a number of interesting questions around the issue of faith and whether there is an anti-intellectualism sometimes in the church as well that sort of they see faith as the sort of opposite of reason and so on.

Faith in the new creation and fancy words like epistemic will come up as well in today's show. So let's begin with Zach in Raleigh, North Carolina who asks, "I'd love to hear Tom's thoughts on epistemology." And perhaps Tom you can define that for us in just a moment. "But how can Christians be confident that faith is a valid means of knowing truth and how should Christians persuade others that faith has equal epistemological footing with empirical or scientific knowledge?" Let's just define our terms here though.

Tom, simple dictionary definition of epistemology if you would. Epistemology, that rather heavy English word comes from the epistemé route in Greek which is about knowing. Epistemology is the theory of how we know things and this has a long history going back through the Middle Ages, going back to Plato and Aristotle and all sorts of different theories coming and going.

And sometimes people have tried to collapse all knowing into a sort of objectivity that I simply know this because I know this. I know that this is a bookcase. I know that this is a microphone, etc.

And then people have said, "Ah, but supposing there is some mad genius manipulating your brain to give you a sense of this and so on. Can you be quite sure that that really is what you think it is?" And then this bounces back and so maybe all that I really know is

the inside of my own head, is my own sense data that I have the feeling of seeing or touching something which is brown and solid like a desk or a chair or whatever it is. And so theories of knowledge go to and fro oscillate between subjectivity and objectivity.

And that is why I and many others have explored possibilities in terms of what I have called an epistemology of love because love affirms the otherness and the goodness of the other, the reality of the other, something that is other than myself, while at the same time enjoying celebrating delighting in it. And that delight doesn't mean it's collapsing into my own enjoyment, but rather that as I am in a relationship, whether it's a person or a tree or a star or a desk or whatever, I'm enjoying it for what it is or enjoying them for what they are, not trying to collapse them into my own reality. So there's lots of debates about this.

The question of what happens when you put faith into the middle of that is it's a bit awkward because the word faith again is, it's a little word and people think they know what it means, but it's actually much more complicated when you get inside it because people can have faith in all sorts of things. And I've been in discussion recently with people who were having faith that God was going to do something particular in American politics. And they'd heard a sermon saying God is going to do A, B and C, and they had faith that that would happen and then were shocked when it didn't and so on.

And that, of course, has been so in many, many cases where people have been encouraged to believe that somebody they love who was sick was going to get better and then the person died and then what happens to my faith and so on. So it is a problematic area to say that faith must be validated as a mode of knowledge. Because in Christian terms, faith is not a thing in itself.

Faith is like a window in my house, in my room. And I have that window, not because I like having one bit of the wall made of glass just for its own sake, but in order to see through it what's going on outside and to allow the light to come in. So faith isn't a thing in itself.

It's about information which is coming in and about me being able to see out. And the fact that we use the word faith in the way that we do in the modern Western world at least can be a problem here. Because when you have Christian faith, what you are doing is not saying, well, I have faith, therefore, this is true, but you are believing in the God who we know in Jesus.

And so Jesus is the heart of Christian faith. And this is where the question of history comes in, that we really do know that Jesus of Nazareth was a first century Palestinian Jew who died on a cross and rose again. We know that just as much as we know the death of Julius Caesar 50 years earlier, or the fall of Jerusalem 40 years after Jesus' time.

Of course, the question of how we know about Jesus' resurrection, we have to explore

that and I and others have done that in various books and other forms. But the key thing is to focus on Jesus himself and to allow our faith to be shaped by that, because Jesus is the reality with whom we are in touch. And that's where faith does become love, the form of knowledge, which is affirming the otherness of Jesus.

Jesus is not just the projection of my fantasies and desires. We have evidence about him in the gospels. We get to know him.

He is different from what we might have imagined. But as we learn to delight in him, so our faith becomes that flexible, robust thing with which we reach out and grasp the reality of who God is. So it's not just a matter of saying, "Well, you've got scientific knowledge over there.

You've got faith here and faith is just as good as scientific knowledge." Because faith, sadly, that English word "faith" covers too many things for us just to be able to say, "You've got to allow faith to be valid." Because people have believed in all kinds of things. People have believed very seriously and sincerely in all kinds of things, which turn out not to have been the case. And that's why faith gets a bad name.

That's why it has to be anchored in Jesus. The reason we have this glass window called "faith" in our lives is so that we can get to know Jesus and through him get to know the God whom he embodies, and so that the light of the gospel may penetrate back into all of what we do intellectually and in every other way. And so do you think that in a way the second part of this question from Zach is, again, possibly asking the wrong kind of question when he says, "How do we persuade others that faith has equal epistemological footing with empirical or scientific knowledge?" Because scientific knowledge and empirical knowledge is a different way of knowing about things than what we're talking about if we're talking about the things of all faith.

I mean, all knowledge is a matter of going to and fro. All scientific knowledge is a matter of hypotheses. We observe phenomena.

We form a hypothesis about what is going on. We test the hypothesis and we modify it in the light of the tests that we apply. Now, history basically works the same except that you can never repeat the experiment.

You can merely assess the evidence. Science studies the repeatable. History studies the unrepeatable.

That's not strictly true because things like geology, you can't repeat the experiment of what some great geological age was about astronomy. Ditto, you can't simply tell the star to go back to where it was 10 light years before. But you heard what I'm saying.

So that actually, so I don't want to be caught in the false either or of scientific knowledge over there versus faith over here. There's much more of a complicated overlap than our

modern Western world has often allowed for. And we have to rattle some cages there and make sure that when that we really know what it is we're talking about.

I wrote about this a bit in my book, *History and Eschatology*. And I don't know if your correspondent would be able to get hold of a copy of that. Might find that quite helpful.

I highly recommend that book. Yes, *History and Eschatology*. And is it under the same name both in the US and the UK, Tom? Yes, it is.

Yes, it is. OK, good, good. Well, let's keep talking about faith because another interesting question here from Michael in Perth, Western Australia is asking, "Will we still need faith in the new creation?" He says, "My question is if in the new creation we are in perfect union with Christ, would we still need quote unquote "faith" many thanks? What do you think of that question, Tom? Yeah, it's a good question because people have often said, "Well, faith is something we have at the moment." And Paul says, "In the present moment we walk by faith and not by sight.

The implication is when we have sight, then we won't need faith." At the same time in 1st Corinthians 13, he says, "Now there abide these three, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. And the abiding is because he's talking about the new creation and he says, 'Now we see through a glass darkly, then face to face, etc.' And the point seems to be that love, which he's emphasizing in that chapter, is something we are to practice in the present because it will be fulfilled in the new world. Now, is the same true for faith and hope? Many people have said, "No, there's a hymn by Bishop Christopher Wordsworth, which has the line, 'Faith will vanish into sight, and hope be emptied in delight.

Love in heaven will shine more bright, therefore give us love.'" In other words, we'll be seeing, we won't need faith, we'll be delighted, we won't need hope, but we will need and we'll have and celebrate love. I want to say a bit richer than that, actually, that faith is me utterly trusting the God who we know in Jesus. Will I stop trusting God when we know face to face, when we are in the new creation? No, I will delight in trusting God totally.

And the present, so there is a sense that we use the word 'faith' maybe in two different senses, partly as a way of saying, we don't have the visible evidence, but we're going to trust anyway. But then also, we are going to trust and we won't stop trusting in God. And because the new creation will be an ongoing creative world and not simply a tableau where we just sit there or hang around strumming harps all day, yes, hope will be trusting God that where this new project is going is going in the right direction, going to more extraordinarily beautiful and wonderful places where God wants to take it.

So faith and hope, I think, will have their counterpart in the age to come even though they won't have any longer that sense of hanging on by our fingernails which faith and

hope sometimes do in the present. I hope that makes sense. Yes, it's very helpful.

I mean, just as an addendum to that, I just looked up that well-known sort of definition of faith in Hebrews 11 and reading from the, I think, this is the NIV translation, now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. I mean, is that helpful at some level in sort of thinking about the nature of faith? That is the nature of faith at the moment, yes. But I think what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 13 is that there is that about faith which even when we do see it, faith is trust.

I mean, part of the problem again is this English word faith and its Greek counterpart, Pistis, means reliable, reliability, trustworthiness. Will God stop being trustworthy when we are with him face to face? Of course not. We will utterly trust him.

So I think we need to separate out the different stages in our journey and figure out what the word faith means in relation to those different stages. I've often found that helpful to think of faith as more in that sort of sense of trust than a sort of just summoning up a kind of form of belief because that for me is very often what you are doing with faith. It's putting it into action.

It's the trusting in God rather than simply sort of having some belief up here in my head. And the problem with saying faith is a valid form of knowing is when somebody says I believe X and somebody else says well that's true for you but it isn't true for me which is one of the most common stock responses in the present world to any form of Christian faith. Somebody says well I believe in Jesus, they were good luck to you and I don't and you can't make me sort of thing.

In other words, people have tried to overuse the faith is a valid form of knowledge argument in a way which then is trying to stand up all by itself without and back to the window analogy without reference to that in which the faith is namely the God revealed in Jesus. Final question then and this is from an anonymous correspondent in Canada who says I'm single female in my late twenties, currently a teacher and graduate student in education. I felt called in my early adulthood to teaching and pursuing graduate studies.

However, my graduate studies have required a deep understanding of philosophy, political theory, music and the humanities. Despite having a personal relationship with Christ, I've been struggling with finding community in a church because my calling both as a teacher and training academic have not been well accepted in many church communities. How do I approach the topic of Christians, particularly women, studying in areas that many believers consider taboo or a waste of time.

I've never doubted that God's wanted me in this field and has opened the doors to graduate work, but I am finding many believers have a bad attitude towards me and my studies because it's not obviously or directly linked to the Bible. My studies have always

been with the purpose of serving others. However, I'm wondering how does one approach the topic of what discipline or knowledge is worthy of being studied by believers for the betterment of the kingdom.

Go ahead, Tom. Yes, I thought at the beginning of this question that this was about people in the church not thinking that she ought to be doing this because she is a woman, but it seems to me by the end of the question that the people in the church are not thinking she ought to be doing it because who needs all that stuff anyway. I think it's really the latter that's the crucial issue.

There's a very interesting essay by C.S. Lewis, which I have a feeling you and I just have referred to before called on learning in wartime, which was an address he gave in Oxford near the beginning of the Second World War when some students were asking and some other people were asking, what's the point in doing university studies of literature or physics or whatever when there's a war on or not everything we're doing be geared to the war effort? And Lewis says actually there's always a war on. There's always big issues going on which demand somebody's attention, but it also is absolutely vital for our health as human beings that as a community we are studying, we are learning because we are acquiring wisdom. I mean there's a debate actually in British educational circles at the moment where some people are saying because courses in literature don't do anything to help the gross national product, they don't boost our economy, etc.

etc. Therefore we ought to shut down university departments that are doing that kind of thing. That is the most horrible Philistine attitude because actually part of the point of having an economy, of having a gross national product, is so that we can be human beings who are growing in wisdom and understanding and in that flexible, mature approach to life which is embodied in the study of whether it's poetry or drama or whatever or whether it's music or art.

And what we're seeing is the shrinking of western ideology so that it's only about pragmatism, it's only about what can we make, how can we earn money, what can we do, forgetting that the whole point of making money, if there is a point to it as a society, is in order to enable all of us to flourish and thrive. And that would include people being able to appreciate and contribute to works of art and beauty, people appreciating and being able to contribute to works of poetry and literature, etc. You have to do the basics in order to let a thousand flowers bloom but if somebody comes along and says you're not helping us with the basics therefore we can forget all those blooming flowers, then we need to say no, we need that larger holistic view of what being human is all about.

It's tragic when this happens in the church, of course sometimes there is an imperative on some church people to say we've got to batten down the hatches, we've got to focus on getting the gospel to impact on this bit of society, therefore that stuff seems to us at the moment rather trivial, let's not do it. Be very, very careful of that because actually

there is a holism about being human which the gospel ought to contribute to. I've had this with artists who've said to me after they've read for instance my book "Surprised by Hope" where I talk about the role and vocation of Christian artists, that this was the first time that somebody as a teacher of the faith had affirmed their vocation as artists.

It's when we see God's purposes for the new creation that we realize that what people are called to do in these areas in the present really matters in the light of that larger purpose and sooner or later if the local church doesn't see that, this poor lady who's written to us needs to find other ecclesial communities which will and there must be some, I don't know where in Canada she lives, but there must be plenty of churches which would value such contribution. Yeah and we need Christians in all those areas, you know it is this false dichotomy isn't it that we've brought into that somehow to do the gospel work you have to be doing the ex-specific thing whereas of course we need the light of Christ to shine in all of these areas she mentions sociology, philosophy, political theory, music, the humanities and that is the Christian vocation is seeing what God wants us to do with our lives in the place he's put us and that won't necessarily be simply in some sort of explicit form of Christian ministry but I hope that's been helpful to you anonymous in Canada and rest assured I mean I was almost surprised to read this because it seems to me almost perhaps it's because I'm so familiar with your work out of time. I don't understand why a church would sort of have that kind of anti-intellectual stance but rather would welcome you know someone who's engaged in that way and bringing their faith you know into it.

There are some churches that have focused so much on very specific Bible study and very specific types of evangelism that they really have no room for any other vocations except possibly medicine and law which is the old-fashioned British educational strategy that to be a clergy, to be a doctor, to be a lawyer those are okay as though we don't need all these other things as well. Well we'll leave it there for now thank you very much for all the questions and we look forward to digging into some more next time on the show but for now thank you very much for being with me Tom. Thank you thank you.

Well thank you for being with us. Next time should we cancel theologians of old who did or said things that we consider unethical today that's part of what we'll be asking next week. Don't forget you can find out more about this show and ask a question yourself get loads more content as well by visiting and registering at our website premierunbelievable.com you'll also find details there for that upcoming live webinar on the 13th of September on power leadership and abuse in the church featuring Amy O'Ewing, Rachel Den Hollander, Mike Cosper and Diane Langberg free to attend from anywhere in the world but you do need to register at unbelievable.com/live and the link is with today's show.

See you next time.

[BLANK_AUDIO]