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#176 Free will and Problem of Evil (Replay)

July 13, 2023



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From Sept 2019: An atheist listener asks a question about free will and the problem of evil. Will it be possible for there to be another 'fall' in the new creation? And the hosts of the Libertarian Christian Podcast have some questions for Tom about living as Christians in today's world. • 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> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

Before we get started with today's podcast, here's a question that we've all wrestled with. Why does God allow suffering? It's not only a question we all wrestle with at times, but an objection that seekers often raise when engaging with issues of faith. It's a deep and challenging question, but one which is possible to answer with clarity and confidence.

To equip you to do that, Premier Insight is produced a free download titled, Why Does God Allow Suffering? To get your free copy today, simply visit premierinsight.org slash resources. Once again, get your free copy today of Why Does God Allow Suffering by going to premierinsight.org slash resources. Please let us know in the comments below.

Thank you. Thank you. The danger then is if we as clever theologians or philosophers think we can make sense of it, then we're saying that actually God created a world within which, yeah, there's a place for evil and we'll let evil exist so that it can do this and that and the other, which is actually a very dark conclusion to reach.

Of course, people can pose the question then in terms of Genesis 3. Where did the snake come from? Why was there a snake in the garden in the first place? There is something

then about the freedom of God and the freedom which God gives to creation, which remains a mystery. But I remember when I was teaching in Oxford, one of my fellow examiners one year for the finals paper, set a question, would it be immoral to try to solve the problem of evil? And I remember looking at that and thinking, what an odd thing. And then I thought, oh, yes, I see.

Because if you were able to say, yes, we understand why there is evil because it isn't this and this tick, we've solved that one. Then what you're saying is something pretty drastic about the way the world is. And I bet you can guess who the examiner in question was.

Rowan Williams. So perhaps we should expect that. And I think Rowan would say emphatically actually it would be immoral because you would then be accusing God of having made a world in which this was just part of the way stuff was.

Well, there's one general question, which I think sets the scene up really quite well from Deb in Garland, North Carolina, who emails in to say, hello, I'm an atheist who's interested in faith. Could you explain free will and how it relates to evil? I've had Christian friends explain that we've been given free will to love God, but also free will to do evil. But that makes it sound as if God allows cruelty to happen to innocent people so that he or it or she can be loved.

Am I misunderstanding the concept of free will and the reason behind it? By the way, I've just started your book, Paul for everyone, Romans part one. Oh, well, well, well, that's funny enough that that will cover some of this ground, way to go. A bit, a bit though I'm delighted if somebody who's a self confessed atheist would be starting with a commentary on Romans, a great place to start in all sorts of ways.

Though there might be other places you could start as well, but wherever you start, just find your way through, I would say. Of course, part of the puzzle is that for the atheist, there isn't a problem. For the atheist, there's a problem of good, because if the world is simply the random product of blind chance with atoms bouncing off each other or swerving as in epicureanism and just producing new life forms, there is no reason to suppose that we would like the resultant mess.

The problem with natural selection, which is a way of solving that problem, to say, well, the survival of the fittest, so we're getting better and stronger and better and stronger, is that the survival of the fittest assumes lots and lots and lots of unfit life forms, which just fall by the wayside. If you go that, it's basically new epicurean forms of philosophy, then you really have a problem. Why would we say that anything is good? The answer that the epicurean gives is, good simply means I like this.

But actually, that's not what most people mean by good. If somebody tortures somebody else and then when challenged says, well, I like doing this, most of us would say, sorry,

that's not good enough. And even if those, I mean, many people have tried to still tie it to an actualistic account of good saying, well, we know that torturing people is bad for the flourishing of our species in an evolutionary sense.

Even that I found doesn't really get to the root of why we disagree with it. It's quite a utilitarian argument. Quite.

There isn't an eight moral sense, and even though that does vary from culture to culture in certain interesting ways, it can't quite be eradicated. And one of the things I've tried to argue in the Gifford lectures is that there are certain things like justice, spirituality, relationships, beauty, freedom, truth and power, which all of them have a certain draw across cultures and across time. But equally, all of them are puzzling because we know that justice matters, but we all are inclined to bend it when it's in our own favor, and more seems to be in our own favor, and same with truth and power and so on.

And that's part of the problem of being human in this world. And that's part of setting the parameters for why questions like the problem of evil have to be dealt with within this larger whole is not enough to say, here are these things which we deem to be evil, both human evil and so-called natural evil, though whether an earthquake is evil or not, it's just what the Earth's crust does. And but it produces suffering.

People of course build houses and skyscrapers on it. Of course, absolutely. And in a sense though, this specific question is about free will.

And that's there's been a typical defence of evil beings as well. God gives us freedom. Obviously, that enables us to experience love, relationship with God with each other, all the goods, but it comes at the cost of what we do with, on the negative side, which is freedom.

Now, I mean, part of the problem there is that under rather fierce Calvinistic legislation earlier on, etc, etc. In Britain, we don't have that discussion. We have very different one.

And we have muddled along with an uneasy alliance, a very British fashion of church and state, which Americans look at and say, how does that work? And the answer is, well, it doesn't. It doesn't. And you have to live with it.

And yes, it's all very peculiar. But we don't have that extreme separation. So then the question comes, actually, Kingdom of God is a theocracy.

But the problem with theocracy is which theos have you got. And when people hear theocracy, they often think of a big, bullying, angry God, who has given a hotline to him, to certain people, call them clergy or whatever. And they will simply tell you God's decisions, and you've got to get in line or you have your head chopped off or whatever.

And of course, we know that there are some religions and some regimes that have

behaved and indeed are behaving like that as we speak. The difference with Christianity is that the theos in question, who is the theos of the theocracy, is the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ, who says, I love you so much. I'm giving my son to die for you.

I love you so much. I'm putting my spirit within you so you can be genuine humans now. I like the idea of that theos running the world.

And I notice that that's what the Sermon on the Mount is about when Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the hungry for justice people, peacemakers, etc. That's how theocracy works by ordinary, prayerful people being peacemakers, hungry for justice folk, etc, etc. And of course, that's bitty and messy because the God who God is doesn't send in the tanks, he sends in that lot the little people who are grieving over the ruin of the world and determined by the spirit to do something about it.

Now, I like that theocracy, but you can't translate that theocracy straight onto the statute book because as the early Christians knew there are many religions and life forms out there. And so the church from the beginning was a new sort of politics, which both was and wasn't competing with the existing ones. I mean, by saying Jesus is Lord, it's quite clear.

It means Caesar isn't. But when then Caesar decides three or four centuries down the track that so many of his subjects have become Christians that he wants to get on board with that, that's a very dangerous and risky moment. But the answer isn't, oh no, please go on persecuting us because we'd be so much more authentic to be a beleaguered minority.

The answer has to be, okay, so what's this going to look like? And presumably it means creating a wise and safe environment in which the church can do what it does best, which is looking after the poor, healing the sick, bringing education to everybody, etc. Those three things, by the way, looking after the poor, medicine and education have been part of the church's DNA from the beginning. We think that's odd in the Western world because the state does those now and tells the church to get its hands off.

But actually, that's what we've always been good at. And it's difficult, isn't it? Because we obviously live in the afterglow of a kind of Christendom in the West as an extent, where to some extent, the state did sort of, because it has been shaped by a Judea-Christian worldview, take on those responsibilities. And then the church sort of forgot that it was also supposed to be doing that.

And some have argued, and I don't know if this is Doug's position, but that, okay, let's let the state do what it does and let the church do what it's supposed to do. And we shouldn't be too concerned about whether the state does or doesn't reflect Christian values. I think the question then is, this is going to vary enormously from place to place.

I remember at the Lambeth Conference 10 or 11 years ago, being with some Christians from Myanmar, and they were talking about whether there are one or two members of the ruling elite, the hunter, whatever they were, who were closet Christians. And I remember thinking, oh my goodness, if you live in a country like that, all the questions of church and state and Christian freedom and law and so on look totally different from either if you live in a model country like mine, or if you live in a country like America, which had this big, rather rigid, typically 18th century split, you know, very Thomas Jefferson. And I want to say we need to become more savvy at navigating our own histories in those moments and saying, this is where we are now.

What does it mean to be followers of Jesus in this place now? And I don't think for most of us in the Western world, this means we'll retreat to our own thing as church and let the state do its thing, because the church has to have a prophetic voice vis-a-vis the state in John 16, which happened to be my morning reading this morning by Nice Goansons. Jesus says, when the Spirit comes, the Spirit will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment and explains that a bit. And I remember, I may have said this to you before, for years thinking, what a great thing the Spirit holding the world to account.

And then it suddenly dawns on me. Jesus doesn't give the Spirit in general terms. Jesus gives the Spirit to his followers so that his followers can hold up the mirror to power and say sin and righteousness and judgment.

And if you want to know what that looks like in John's gospel, you read John 18 and 19 where Jesus confronts Pontius Pilate and argues with him about kingdom and truth and power. And Pilate eventually kills him, but in the great irony of the gospel, that is the victory of the kingdom, Jesus is King of the Jews, because thereafter new creation is launched. And Pontius Pilate is yesterday's man, as it were.

We only know him because of the creed of the Christian church. Well, pretty much. Pretty much.

So that is the church's vocation to figure out what it would mean to do vis-a-vis our own governments, be they benign or not benign, what Jesus was doing with Pontius Pilate. One more question here from Doug. If declaring Jesus's Lord means implicitly that Caesar is not, how might Christ followers live today in a world of American and European empires that are somewhat more democratic than the Roman Empire? They may be, but they may not be the Romans voted all right, but there was a system and you had to be rather rich and powerful to get in on the system.

That does sound rather like what some of us see when we look across the pond at our American friends that, you know, in order to be a senator, you have to be a millionaire, in order to be a president, you have to raise multi-millions. It's, you know, yes, it's voted for, but there's all sorts of constraints. And one of the things I pray for regularly is that

God will raise up a new generation on both sides of the Atlantic, of wise leaders who will be credible and voteable for in a way which actually of late has not been true in my country and perhaps some Americans might say has not been entirely true for them either.

Thank you for tackling a wide range of questions. On the podcast today, Tom, it's been a pleasure as always and I hope you've enjoyed listening as well. Don't forget you can ask more questions of Tom or you will be recording some more sessions of the podcast soon, so feel free to get them in and avail yourself of all the other bonus content that's available from the website when you subscribe to our newsletter.

That's all available from AskNTRight.com, but for now, thank you, Tom. Thank you, thank you very much. Thanks for being with us on today's show.

Next time we'll be answering more of your pastoral questions that have been sent in. Thanks for being with us and see you next time. And he has got his own way of working to solve it, which won't necessarily be the way that we might like, but that's partly because we don't understand his ways.

And drawing out this part of the question from Deb, which is I think where the crux of it is, can perhaps accept that we need free will to choose to love and to be human and all those good things, but says if it means God allows cruelty to happen to innocent people as the cost of that, I guess Deb is struggling with whether the cost is worth the good, if you like, and is it to kind of trade off between you two? Yeah, yeah, well, I mean, that is the great question, which comes in famously in Dostoevsky and elsewhere. Is this the gamble, the risk that God has taken? And the Christian answer comes back again and again to say the story that we tell is a story in which God himself has come in person to take the full force of all that evil onto himself. And one of the, I wrote a little book on the problem of evil, oh, 10 or 15 years ago, called *Evil and the Justice of God*.

And one of the insights which helped me as I was working through that, it's only a short book, was that the gospels themselves tell the story of Jesus and his announcing of God's kingdom and his going to the cross. But it's not just about Jesus doing that. As Jesus comes and says, it's time for God to be king, follow me, and it's going to happen.

Then evil of all sorts seems to be drawn to him as though to a magnet that there are plotting scribes and Pharisees and there are shrieking demons in the synagogue and some of his own followers get it wrong and plot against him and people are out to get him. And the story, you know, it's like the plot of a movie where you realize that from every corner, there are insidious forces and whispering voices in his own head. And then the whole thing rushes together, puts him on the cross and then something has happened on the cross through which the power of that evil is broken.

So this isn't a philosophical answer. It's a way of saying that the philosophical question

needs to be confronted by the actual Israel narrative reaching its climax in Jesus. And then the church's agenda in the power of the Spirit must be to say, okay, if we are the people who celebrate Jesus' victory over the powers of evil, we must be the people in and through whose communities injustice, oppression, wickedness, lies are actually being dealt with.

And that's why it was interesting that it is this Romans part one that Deb is studying because when I think of a passage that deals with that, it is Romans 8 and it is the fact that Paul acknowledges we live in this broken world, this in bondage to decay. And yet simply accepts that and says, but we are the ones who are being born for this new world. And God works all things together for the good of those who love us.

Yes, yes. And that in Romans 8, we who believe in Jesus are being scooped up into that purpose so that the suffering of Jesus through which the basic victory was won is then reinstanced in the groaning of Jesus followers, as we don't know what to pray for as we all to are surrounded by so much suffering and rubbish and horrible things. And we stand there saying, Lord, I'd love to pray about this.

I'm not even sure what. And Paul says at that moment, the spirit is groaning within us and the Father is listening. And in that dialogue of Father and Spirit, we are being conformed to the image of the Son.

And so this puts the mystery of the Trinity, if you like, at the heart of the biblical answer to the problem of evil, not that it's an answer that will satisfy the philosophers, but that it's a way of translating the question into a narrative and historical mode. And we are part of that history. What's the next book that Deb should read once they've completed Paul for everyone? Well, perhaps even in the justice of God.

Okay. Yeah. Well, whatever helps or I hope this answer has helped, Deb.

And we wish you the very best in your continuing journey as you explore that. Moving on to a slightly different angle on this, we talked about, you know, some of those classic philosophical issues around free will and love and evil and so on. But Paul in Kansas asks, many of the theodices I've heard on why God would allow so much suffering in the world are predicated on the necessity and goodness of free will.

But then my question is about the new heaven, a new earth. Is this a literal place where believers are gathered with glorified bodies who love God? Does not this new state of existence also require the presence of free will and would not that in turn necessitate the possibility of another fall or sin itself? And yeah, that's an interesting question. Are we somehow experiencing free will in a different way in the new creation that doesn't mean the possibility of sin? It is a great question.

And I think the New Testament is very much aware that that question could be raised.

And I think though it's a very dark passage, that that's why towards the end of the book of Revelation that the Satan, the old dragon is released for a short time and then is finally given his total comeuppance. And I think that's a richly symbolical way of saying we can imagine that there might be a snake in the new garden, but actually the snake has done his worst and we are quite sure that that he's been dispatched.

So that's that's one possible way in. Another way is to say this is the problem with our analysis of free will and the use of that free will defense could push in that direction. It's interesting in America at the moment, much more than in Britain, I think there are quite a lot of younger Christians who are being quite philosophically savvy in a way that their British counterparts probably aren't, but who get sometimes a kind of a rationalistic apologetic which would include that sort of free will defense.

And I want to say just be careful what you do with that because it does lead you into strange places. And part of the dynamic of freedom in the New Testament is that as Paul would say, we are set free from slavery to sin in order to be enslaved to righteousness. And Paul is saying that as a deliberate paradox in Romans 6, but then he fills that out in Romans 8 with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

And the point of the spirit is that when the spirit is at work, then we are truly free and there is a freedom about that. And this is, it's like if I'm driving a car, I am free, I'm free to steer into the path of an oncoming truck. I'm free to steer off the road into a ditch.

But actually, if I use those freedoms, I will not be free to drive this car anymore. I may not even be free to be alive anymore. And so freedom is a little more complicated than simply I can do what I like.

And you've used that, I know the analogy of music before that it's only once we have learned and understood the boundaries of how music works that we can then do the improvisation. Exactly. Because we need the boundaries to be free.

Exactly. And certainly improvisation or the brilliant violinist or pianist who learns to play the concerto by the long hours of discipline. I listened to something on the radio the other day, the professional pianist talking about the boringness of practice.

Take the same phrase over and over, you play it backwards and sideways. And he said, only when you've done that for a few hours, then when you come to play that sonata concerto, whatever it is, there is a freedom. You can now pour yourself into it, knowing that your fingers will do what they should.

And this is the paradox of freedom and virtue, that virtue is a second nature. It's a second freedom, if you like, that you submit yourself to the discipline of learning the stuff in order that you can then freely practice it. And this, I suppose, is the answer we might give to the skeptic who says, why would I want to be a Christian? It's all about

rules and regulations.

I want to be free. Well, the fact is you're in bondage to something else. We were always master to something or ever.

And we might still make it God and his... Well, good mind. Well, yes, quite demanding. But yes, that's part of the appeal of the gospel.

If the son sets you free, you will be genuinely free. And that's very controversial when Jesus says that to his Judean interlocutors. They say, we've never been slave to anyone, which is an odd thing for first introduced to say, but they do.

And Jesus says, no, there is a deeper sense of freedom. And therefore, it's really about what does it mean to be human? And being human doesn't mean being free like somebody, you know, supposing I'm randomly dropped from a helicopter into a strange city where I know nobody, but I've got some money in my pocket. I'm free to do what I like all day, but I really have no idea what I ought to be doing.

Well, that's a sort of freedom. But actually, it's not nearly as exciting and interesting as the freedom, which I have when there's a well-planned trip to somewhere that I know and love, where I can go to a football match or a music event or whatever it might be. And I'm totally free because I have made the effort to be within this context, which enhances who I am instead of just wandering around thinking, what am I doing here? Well, the two kind of different strands that we've taken there in this whole discussion on evil and freedom.

But I hope that's helped both Paul and Deb. Where I've often simply landed is that there are no easy answers to the problem of evil. But for me, I'd rather live with evil and suffering as a mystery in Christianity than it's simply being meaningless as you said to him in an atheistic worldview.

And that's, I mean, the classic thing, which I think it was Martin Luther said, there are certain things we can understand by the light of nature, but there are mysteries there which we can only understand in the light of grace. And even within the grace of the Christian life, there are things which we can't understand, which we will understand in the light of glory. Now, I would want to nuance his vision of the future somewhat differently, but it's as though at every stage we should expect there to be mysteries and puzzles.

And if there weren't, then I'm not sure that God would be God. He would just be a function of our little limited understandings. The fact that you're listening to this Ask, N.T. Right, anything podcast today shows that you want to think deeply about issues of authentic faith and modern culture.

One hot topic causing heated debate right now is the continuing advance of progressive

Christianity, a growing movement that questions orthodoxies around salvation, scripture and sexuality. To help you understand the issues at stake, premiere insight has published a brand new resource titled *Is Progressive Christianity Another Gospel?* This ebook will stretch your thinking around the progressive Christianity movement so you can respond with faithfulness and integrity. This brand new ebook comes as our thanks for your financial support today, which in turn will help more Christians engage effectively with the issues of our day through premiere insight.

In fact, shows like the one you're listening to today only exist because of the generous support of listeners like you. Yes, your support is truly important and very much needed, which is why we want to thank you for your gift today with this powerful resource. So if you're enjoying the *Ask, N.T. Right*, anything podcast and want to share these kinds of faith building resources with more people, visit [premiereinsight.org slash N.T. Right](http://premiereinsight.org/slash/N.T.Right) and make a gift today.

And remember to get your copy of *Is Progressive Christianity Another Gospel* as Thanks for your partnership. Let's turn to another set of issues now. We've talked about the big philosophical question, theological question of evil suffering, pre-will.

This is a much more practical how we are to live as Christians in the world that we find ourselves in. And these questions are both being submitted by Doug Stewart from the *Libertarian Christian* podcast. If people enjoy this podcast, they may also enjoy Doug's one.

And the first question from Doug is, Tom, many Christians like to use the Bible as a moral guidebook and extrapolate from that what their fellow citizens must live by. And the debate tends to circle around what good biblical politics looks like. Personal moralism on the one side and corporate moralism on the other.

But can Christians really take the scripture and use them to tell the rest of their country what laws they must live under? Does this get too close to a theocracy? Great question. And it looks very different from America than it would in Britain or indeed in France or indeed Germany or indeed Africa, et cetera, et cetera. In other words, I understand where in America things have swung this way and that because by constitution 240 years ago, whenever it was, they said, church and state separate.

And that's been very difficult to live with. And many Americans today are now having to come to terms with the fact that actually if you say total separation, then you can have an atheistic state which goes charging off and does its own thing, leaving the Christians who thought they were in quite a friendly environment feeling decidedly discriminated against. But how do you put that back together without producing the sort of nonsense is that many people think were going on under rather fierce Calvinistic legislation earlier on, et cetera, et cetera.

In Britain, we don't have that discussion. We have very different one. And we have muddled along with an uneasy alliance and very British fashion of church and state, which Americans look at and say, how does that work? And the answer is, well, it doesn't.

It doesn't. And you have to live with it. And yes, it's all very peculiar.

But we don't have that extreme separation. So then the question comes actually, Kingdom of God is a theocracy. But the problem with theocracy is which theos have you got.

And when people hear theocracy, they often think of a big, bullying, angry God, who has given a hotline to him to certain people, call them clergy or whatever. And they will simply tell you God's decisions. And you've got to get in line or you have your head chopped off or whatever.

And of course, we know that there are some religions and some regimes that have behaved and indeed are behaving like that as we speak. The difference with Christianity is that the theos in question, who is the theos of the theocracy, is the God who is the father of Jesus Christ, who says, I love you so much. I'm giving my son to die for you.

I love you so much. I'm putting my spirit within you so you can be genuine humans now. I like the idea of that theos running the world.

And I notice that that's what the Sermon on the Mount is about when Jesus says, bless it to the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the hungry for justice people, peacemakers, etc. That's how theocracy works by ordinary, prayerful people being peacemakers, hungry for justice folk, etc. etc.

And of course, that's bitty and messy because the God who God is doesn't send in the tanks, he sends in that lot the little people who are grieving over the ruin of the world and determined by the spirit to do something about it. Now, I like that theocracy, but you can't translate that theocracy straight onto the statute book because as the early Christians knew there are many religions and life forms out there. And so the church from the beginning was a new sort of politics, which both was and wasn't competing with the existing ones.

I mean, by saying Jesus is Lord, it's quite clear. It means Caesar isn't. But when then Caesar decides three or four centuries down the track that so many of his subjects have become Christians that he wants to get on board with that, that's a very dangerous and risky moment.

But the answer isn't, oh no, please go on persecuting us because we'd be so much more authentic to be a beleaguered minority. The answer has to be, okay, so what's this going to look like? And presumably it means creating a wise and safe environment in which the

church can do what it does best, which is looking after the poor, healing the sick, bringing education to everybody, etc. Those three things, by the way, looking after the poor, medicine and education have been part of the church's DNA from the beginning.

We think that's odd in the Western world because the state does those now and tells the church to get its hands off. But actually, that's what we've always been good at. And it's difficult, isn't it? Because we obviously live in the afterglow of a kind of Christendom in the West, as an extent, where to some extent, the state did sort of, because it has been shaped by Judea Christian worldview, take on those responsibilities.

And then the church sort of forgot that it was also supposed to be doing that. Sure. Sure.

Sure. And some have argued, I don't know if this is Doug's position, but that, okay, let's let the state do what it does and let the church do what it's supposed to do. And we shouldn't be too concerned about whether the state does or doesn't reflect Christian values.

I think the question then is, this is going to vary enormously from place to place. I remember at the Lambeth Conference 10 or 11 years ago, being with some Christians from Myanmar, and they were talking about whether there are one or two members of the ruling elite, the hunter or whatever they were, who were closeted Christians. And I remember thinking, oh my goodness, if you live in a country like that, all the questions of church and state and Christian freedom and law and so on look totally different from either if you live in a model country like mine, or if you live in a country like America, which had this big, rather rigid, typically 18th century split, you know, very Thomas Jefferson.

And I want to say, we need to become more savvy at navigating our own histories in those moments and saying, this is where we are now. What does it mean to be followers of Jesus in this place now? And I don't think for most of us in the Western world, this means we'll retreat to our own thing as church and let the state do its thing, because the church has to have a prophetic voice vis-a-vis the state. In John 16, which happened to be my morning reading this morning by Nice Coicens, Jesus says, when the Spirit comes, the Spirit will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment and explains that a bit.

And I remember, I may have said this to you before, for years thinking, what a great thing the Spirit holding the world to account. And then it suddenly dawns on me, Jesus doesn't give the Spirit in general terms, Jesus gives the Spirit to his followers, so that his followers can hold up the mirror to power and say sin and righteousness and judgment. And if you want to know what that looks like in John's gospel, you read John 18 and 19, where Jesus confronts Pontius Pilate and argues with him about kingdom and truth and power.

And Pilate eventually kills him, but in the great irony of the gospel, that is the victory of the kingdom, Jesus is King of the Jews, because thereafter new creation is launched and Pontius Pilate is yesterday's man, as it were. We only know him because of the creeds of the Christian church. Well, pretty much.

So that is the church's vocation to figure out what it would mean to do vis-a-vis our own governments, be they benign or not benign, what Jesus was doing with Pontius Pilate. One more question here from Doug. If declaring Jesus' Lord means implicitly that Caesar is not, how might Christ followers live today in a world of American and European empires that are somewhat more democratic than the Roman Empire? They may be, but they may not be.

The Romans voted all right, but there was a system and you had to be rather rich and powerful to get in on the system. That does sound rather like what some of us see when we look across the pond at our American friends, that in order to be a Senator, you have to be a millionaire, in order to be a President, you have to raise multi-millions. Yes, it's voted for, but there's all sorts of constraints.

One of the things I pray for regularly is that God will raise up a new generation on both sides of the Atlantic of wise leaders who will be credible and voteable for in a way which actually of late has not been true in my country and perhaps some Americans might say has not been entirely true for them either. Thank you for tackling a wide range of questions. On the podcast today, Tom, it's been a pleasure as always and I hope you've enjoyed listening as well.

Don't forget you can ask more questions of Tom or you will be recording some more sessions of the podcast soon so feel free to get them in and avail yourself of all the other bonus content that's available from the website when you subscribe to our newsletter. That's all available from AskNTRight.com, but for now, thank you Tom. Thank you.

Thank you very much. Thanks for being with us on today's show. Next time we'll be answering more of your pastoral questions that have been sent in.

Thanks for being with us and see you next time.