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#140 Q&A on racial reconciliation and female leadership with Pastor Miles McPherson Pt 2

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom speaks on the role of the church in racial reconciliation in the USA and why he believes the Bible affirms the leadership roles of both men and women. This is the second part of Tom's on-stage interview with Pastor Miles McPherson, recorded at Rock Church, San Diego in 2019.

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Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[MUSIC] >> Hello and welcome back. This is Justin and the show from Premier Unbelievable bringing you a regular dose of Tom Wright's Thinking and Theology.

We're currently hearing material from a special evening with NT Wright that was hosted at the

Rock Church in San Diego. And we're going to jump back in on his conversation with church pastor Miles McPherson today discussing issues such as racial reconciliation and women's ministry in the church. First though, thanks to a listener in Australia who left this review, thank you Tom and Justin for your great biblical teaching with such genuine pastoral care and compassion.

As well as leaving their questions from all over the world, people sending their ratings and reviews from all over the world. So it's great to have those helps others to discover the show if you can do that. By the way, if you haven't discovered them, we've a bunch of other great podcasts from the Premier Unbelievable Stable.

Our mothership as it were is the unbelievable show where I bring Christians and non-Christians together for dialogue and debate. We've had some really fascinating editions of the show recently, including Ian Dunt and Andy Banister debating whether religious funerals are empty and platitudinous in the wake of the Queen's State funeral. There's the CS Lewis podcast with Alistair McGrath.

So recently, Ruth Jackson has been bringing us some other interviews with different people looking at CS Lewis. Matters of Life and Death is a treasure trove of wisdom on issues around science, biology, technology with bioethics expert Dr. John Wyatt. And of course, Unapologetic is our newest podcast.

That's recently seen Mary Jo Sharpe on reaching young people. And the story of John D. Wise, who came to faith after 25 years as an atheist professor, a philosophy fascinating story there. So you can find all of those podcasts and more at premierunbelievable.com. We're also releasing the Unapologetic series now on our YouTube channel as well, if you want to check that out.

So links are all with today's show. And if you want to support us, get more info, register our newsletter and ask a question. It's the same link, premierunbelievable.com. Let's jump into the second part of this conversation between Tom and Miles McPherson.

One of the issues in our country is racial division. And it's a very, for some, very uncomfortable conversation, an uncomfortable situation. A lot of times we want to avoid it, but we can't.

So talk about reconciliation, unity. It's hugely important and every country has its own local version of how this plays out. I mean, you in America for very obvious historic reasons have a very sharply focused version of this.

I was actually in Birmingham, Alabama just a few weeks ago and I was taken on the Martin Luther King Trail and shown all the places. And I'd read about them. I remember, I know exactly where I was when Martin Luther King was killed.

You know, I remember all that. But actually seeing it focuses it for me. We don't have

anything quite as sharply focused as that in Britain, but we have other equally pernicious bits of history which we live with not very wisely or well.

And then if you travel around the world, each country, as I say, it's slightly different. And it's affected the churches slightly differently. And here's a puzzle.

500 years ago, we had this thing called the Reformation in Europe, Martin Luther, John Calvin, people like that. And one of the things they did was to say, we want to have the Bible in our own language and we want to have worship in our own language. We don't want to have to learn Latin or listen while somebody else mumbles incomprehensible Latin.

And that was a wonderful thing, a liberating thing. But it resulted quite by accident in linguistic group churches. So you have a Dutch church and a French church and a Portuguese church and English church, etc, etc.

And then over the course of time, they developed their own traditions and they sometimes developed their own theologies. And then we are doing it the right way and that lot are doing it the wrong way. And their heretics or whatever.

And then that encourages yet more divisions. And tragically, then you get the more explicit and unpleasant racial or ethnic overtones building into that. And especially the fear that people have of the unknown if in this village we have only ever had people who look exactly like us and suddenly a family come in who look very different.

And we don't know what they're going to do. We don't know how they behave. And because cultures are very different.

They may surprise us and frighten us by what they do. So those natural reactions, the church had lost in the 16th century the ability to name that reaction for what it is. Because in the New Testament, think of the letter of Paul to the Galatians.

The whole point of Galatians chapter two, which is the first place where justification by faith is ever expounded, is that all those who believe in Jesus belong at the same table as brothers and sisters, no matter who their parents were, what their social classes, what their gender, what their anything is. And by the way, in the first century, skin pigmentation is just not a big deal. The Mediterranean world is polychrome.

There's all sorts of different shades and nobody talks about it. It's not a problem. Unless you happen to get somebody who comes from so far south in Africa that their skin is absolutely totally black and then people do sometimes comment.

It's actually in the Song of Songs. There's one point where it does that as well. But so we have translated stuff into skin pigmentation.

And then you, that's come because of all the Darwinian theories of natural selection and so on. And that's pretty nasty stuff. And we have inherited that on top of the other mistake.

I'm sorry if this is complicated, but you need to know this isn't just, oh, I have this prejudice and you don't or whatever. There are deep social cultural roots to this in Europe and North America. So where it all comes down to is quite simple that in the gospel, in the creation stories, God doesn't say, I'm going to create this lot in my image looking like this and that lot in my image looking.

We are created in God's image, all of us. Let's get used to it and celebrate it. And then again, not only Galatians, but Colossians.

People says, here there is no Jew and Greek, barbarian, Scythian, slave free. We are renewed in knowledge according to the image of Creator and we are all one in Messiah Jesus. It's fascinating to me that the Western church, both Catholic and Protestant, both liberal and conservative managed to screen that stuff out.

And when some people by reading the New Testament in its world have said actually that's one of the main cultural imperatives. Some people have reacted against that and said, oh no, you're watering down the gospel, you're turning it into sociology. No, read my lips.

This is about salvation. This is about God rescuing the human race from the fragmentation and decay into which it had fallen. Good.

I'm going to say, let's give it a hand. I'm going to say, I'm going to say, I'm going to play this and this is prearranged so I'm not hijacking his time, but I'm going to attend two minutes. This book is all about that.

And in every race conversation in our culture, it's about us first them. And whether the us first them is black, white, Republican, Democrat, men, women, four against the police, there's always a division because it devils about division and God's about unity. The third option is that we honor what we have in common.

We're all human beings and the main thing that we all have in common, no matter who you are, is we're made in the image of God. So this is about, I'm not going to say that much more, it'll be in the book so, but that's what we were talking about. And I want to sign copy.

You want to sign copy? No problem, no problem. I think I can work that out. You know what I'm saying? How does, how, let's talk about women in ministry.

Yeah, baby. And women preachers, we got Christine Caine down here who talks that a billion people a year. God bless you, sister.

You bless me so much. The funny thing is that you get that round of applause for raising this topic. In Britain now, you just get a yawn.

We settled this one years ago. Why? I'm just trying to help out my sister. You know what I'm saying? Just trying to help out the ladies.

I get asked this wherever I go. And I have two quite easy biblical answers. John chapter 20, Jesus is raised from the dead.

And the first person he meets is Mary Magdalene. He does not say, Mary, I've got some really important news. I want you to go and get Peter because I need to tell him so that he can then go and tell everybody else.

He says, you see where this is going? Jesus says, Mary, go and tell my brothers, those men who are hiding at home because they're scared. Go and tell them, I am ascending to my father and your father. That is the foundation of all Christians.

This is a bishop speaking to you about Christian ministers. That is the foundation of all Christian ministry is the news that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now to be the Lord of the world. And it's Mary who gets to do that first.

And then the other passages, the other passages, Romans 16, when Paul gives the letter to the Romans, probably the most important letter ever written, who does he give it to take to Rome? A lady called Phoebe, who is a deacon in the church in Kencreti, which is the Eastern port of Corinth. She is presumably an independent businesswoman. She's on her way to Rome.

Phoebe, will you take this and deliver it to the different house churches around Rome? And almost certainly in the ancient world, the person who delivers the letter is the person who will read it out because she will know, because she was there when Paul was dictating it, et cetera. And also, this isn't absolutely certain, but it's high probability. She is the first person to explain when people want to Paul mean by that.

People get surprised when I tell them that, highly likely, the first ever exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans was done by a Christian businesswoman from Eastern Corinth. With those two in mind, whatever the other passages mean and they're difficult, they contain, like 1 Timothy 2, contain words that don't occur elsewhere in the New Testament, et cetera, whatever those passages mean, that narrative is so clear. To anyone in the first century, again, read the New Testament in its world, think what those passages would mean.

And I think, game over, we are sharing ministry together. We have a term in the United States where we say, "Drop the mic." Oh, yes. So you could, next time you do that in the US.

I've seen it done. You've seen it done. Just one other example, because some people get hung up on some of those passages about hate coverings.

Talk about hate coverings. Yeah. First Corinthians chapter 11, I was saying to Miles before, "If and when I get to meet some Paul, I have a short list of passages that I want to ask him about.

And I've been studying Paul's letters and translating them and writing commentaries on them and preaching on them all my adult life. First Corinthians 11 verses 2 and following, the main thing Paul wants to get across is that when women are leading in ministry and prophesying and praying in public, they should look like women and not look like imitation men." That's the main thing he wants to say. So women in that culture address, in a particular way, they have their head covered.

And women who go around without their heads covered in some way, they may be shameless women from the streets and Paul does not want the church to get that reputation. Or they may be trying to say, "Well, because doing this now, we are like men and men likewise should look like men." How Paul argues that is a very interesting line taken from Genesis about Adam and Eve and about men being in the image of God and then women being, reflecting and being the glory of man. Now, the glory is an interesting term itself.

I do not have a good exegesis of this. I put my hand up. I've read pretty well all the commentaries from this last century or so on that passage.

I've read articles. I've read books. They all disagree.

It's seriously, they do. It's clear what Paul wants to do with it. It's not clear to most of us exactly how that argumentation works.

If somebody's got a better idea, please email me and let me know because that would be fun to discover. So that's where I am with that one. How does reading New Testament connect with discipleship? With discipleship.

Well, well. I cannot envisage discipleship without reading the New Testament. I have to be cautious about that because people who have severely different mental states or say somebody with Down syndrome or whatever may find it very difficult to read New Testament, but my goodness, they can be disciples.

So I would say the norm, and this is why the early church taught people to read. So the early church was an educational institution. Many people in the ancient world were functionally illiterate.

The church taught them to read so they could read Scripture and they needed to read Scripture because Scripture is the vehicle of Jesus' authority for the church. Scripture is

written by prayerful people to shape God's people to be disciples of Jesus. And that means that Scripture is like a great river which is flowing along.

It's a great story. It's a great narrative. And we are caught up in it and we learn to swim along with it.

And it shapes us and we get the feel and flavour of it and we are learning to swim with its currents. That's one of many images one could use. And there are many different ways of reading Scripture.

And this is partly a personality thing. Some people love to study tiny microscopic details. Some people love to read whole books at a time.

I would say do both. Read the Bible in huge chunks. Take a day sometime and read a whole book or even two books at once and just praise God and let it wash over you.

All then take an hour or two and take one paragraph and drill down into it, asking every question you can about every verse you can. And whatever you're doing, whichever of those are somewhere in between, you will find your discipleship is shaped, directed, you will be nudged by the Holy Spirit in ways you hadn't imagined and so it goes on. I mean the Bible is the book for and of the people of God to shape us to be God's people for God's world.

Body, soul, spirit, if someone wanted to ask themselves in a very simple way, I know that I'm really walking with God and having a balance of my walk with God and my knowledge and my spiritual growth and relationship. How would you encourage them to assess that at a very high level, very simple level? There are many passages in the New Testament which tell us to examine ourselves and Paul says at one point in 1 Corinthians 10, "Let the one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." And I say that to myself as a preacher and teacher, we are all vulnerable and never more so than when we think we've more or less got it all together at the moment and God has ways fortunately of reminding us of this. In my case, the way in question is a lady called Maggie, to whom I've been married for 48 years and who puts her finger on this with brutal accuracy.

The fourth member of the Trinity. The fourth member of the Trinity. It feels like that sometimes.

Bless her, I thank God for every day. But seriously, you know that line at the end of C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories, The Last Battle, when the line is further up and farther in. That's always the vocation.

Wherever you have got to, there is in fact much, much more. One of the joys for me of being a biblical scholar, age 70 as I am now, is that I'm as excited by these texts and they are as fresh to me now. I really been as most sincerely as they were when I started

studying at 2021.

Because I keep on seeing more and I keep on thinking, why did nobody tell me about that? And then I think maybe they were trying and I just wasn't ready for it. And God is always trying to teach us more, not just the head knowledge, the information, though that too, hence the stuff, but also challenging us about this aspect of our lives or this aspect about God's world and where it's in pain and why aren't we doing something about it. And it's thrilling to me to see over the last generation that though the churches in general have made and are making many mistakes and many of the mainline denominations, including my own, are making some terrible mistakes at the moment, nevertheless, God is doing new things.

You know, I don't think a church like this would have been imaginable 50 years ago, 100 years ago. And there are many, many churches like this. Thank God for that.

People often ask me about the state of the church in England. I say, well, the mainstream churches are in decline. There are wonderful things happening within them.

But I look around and I see all sorts of new Christian movements. My only worry then is the disunity where they ignore one another and don't get together. That's why I'm always delighted as an Anglican to accept an invitation from somebody in a different tradition.

Let's get it together and hold it together. Paul says that you may with one heart and voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, the unity is the thing we should be aiming at. We were talking about evangelism and salvation and I'm always doing all the calls and you were saying how one size doesn't fit all.

And I said one size fits all to me because we just saw it different. It was great. So this crowd is probably mostly Christian.

I always assumed there's a non-Christian in the crowd. And so I always want to give that person opportunity. So we're going to do that.

If there was somebody here who didn't know Jesus, what would you say to them before I pray for them? I would say the Son of God, that is Jesus, loved me and gave himself for me. That's the most amazing thing that you can say. And when you know that deep down, it changes everything.

It's a quote from the letter to the Galatians chapter 2. And if that's something that makes you say, strange, it doesn't resonate with me, then read the story of Jesus dying on the cross, slowly, thoughtfully, and if you can prayer for me, and see what it says to you because it's all about that. It's all about love, God's love for you, the Son of God loved you and gave himself for you. That's where I would start with.

So in a minute, we're going to pray. And there may be somebody here that you came and you never asked Christ to be a Savior. You just been going to church and it's been head knowledge for you.

Or it's been a religious experience. Or it's been a tradition. But you say, I want to have a personal relationship.

I want the Spirit of God to live in me, forgive me of my sin. I want to be that working model and I want to start that journey. We're going to lead you in a prayer.

Whenever you see two people get married, when they say their vows, they are simply stating to the world that they understand the parameters of the relationship. The vows aren't magical. It's really them stating what they believe.

And when you ask Christ to be your Savior, really stating to Him, God, I understand that I'm a sinner and you died for me and that you love me and that you want to fill me with the presence of God and make me a new creation. The old is going and new has come. And God says, that's all I need to know.

Right? I got it and He'll take care of the rest. And then He walks with you in relationship. And so in a minute, I'm going to lead you in a prayer, but the prayer is not magic.

It's really God hearing your heart cry out to Him and say, Lord, I don't understand what to do. I just want you because I'm messed up. Okay.

Personally, I, as a matter of fact, we haven't met our miles in the past of here and then we started the church 19 years ago before that I was playing football with the churches. I was doing cocaine and I asked Christ to be my Savior and stopped it one day because of the power of God. And so He wants to do something amazing in your life.

So before we go, I want to pray and then we'll close out after I pray. Let's all bow our heads and pray just for one minute. Lord, we thank You so much for Your faithfulness.

We thank You for Your goodness. We thank You that You did indeed live 33 years in a body. You allowed sinful man to spit on You, pull your beard out, beat your face, question your integrity, hit you at Ross, nail you to wood and let you hang there.

But You did that because we are sinners and the penalty of our sin is death and You lovingly died in our place. And if we confess with our mouth that You are Lord and believe in our heart, God raise You from the dead and we surrender our life to You, we will be saved. We would have a relationship with You and start a journey with You that we can be working models with new heaven and new earth.

So if you would like to ask Jesus to forgive You of Your sin, if You would like to begin a relationship with Him, a spiritual relationship with Him, pray this prayer with me in the

privacy of Your heart. But as You pray, please believe and pray with the belief that God knows who You are. He loves you very much.

He died in rose from the dead for You to prove His love for You. And He is anxiously waiting to forgive You not to punish You, to love You and encourage You not to beat You down. So in the privacy of Your heart, pray, Dear God, I believe that I am a sinner.

The Bible says all have sinned. I believe the penalty of my sin is death. But I believe that Jesus loves me and He died on the cross for me and that He rose from the dead.

Jesus, please forgive me of my sin. Come live in my heart. I surrender my life to You.

As our eyes are closed and our heads are bowed, if You prayed that prayer, as our eyes are closed and heads are bowed, if You prayed that prayer, just lift your hand up really high and I can see You and pray for You. Anybody lift your hand up, God bless You. Anybody else, God bless You.

Very good. God bless You. Lord, thank You so much for Your faithfulness.

Thank You for Your patience. Thank You for Your love for us. In Jesus' name, amen.

Let's give them a hand. God bless You. I like your smile, man.

I like your smile. When I was in London two weeks ago, and whenever I hear, whenever I can't speak to everybody, but the people I know from America who hear your accent, we think that you guys are intelligent. But then I was in London last week, I found out that's not really true.

But then I met Him and I was like, "Okay, now I'm back to thinking that again." You need to come to Oxford. Those really tell us enough people. Is anything you would like to say before we thank You for Your time and Your work? It's great to be with You all.

And I think particularly, I have grieved over the disunity of the church as much as anything else. Not only that it's disunited, but that we often don't care. We just do our own thing, we plant our own churches and we ignore everybody else.

I see in this gathering people from many, many different styles of Christianity, etc. That's great. This is a symbol of something we need to work at it.

Thank you. How many people, just so he can see, how many people are not from this church, you're from other churches? Yes. How many of you all have never been here before? Raise your hand.

Now you have. Now you have. God bless us.

I'm going to tell you a quick story. When we bought this building, it started 8-19 years

ago. We had many, many experts say a church would never be here.

God said, "I have different ideas." So that's praise to God in heaven, amen? That is how God often works. Precisely the point when somebody says, "This will never happen or this can't happen." I think God gets a twinkle in his eye at that point. Thanks for being with us today.

That was Pastor Miles McPherson with NT Right. And thanks to the Rock Church for permission to broadcast this evening with NT Right that they hosted in 2019. For more details, look to today's episode.

And it also includes a link to our own website, premierunbelievable.com. We can find more editions of the Ask NT Right Anything show. And you can find out how to support us, ask your question and receive our newsletter too. For now, best wishes, and see you next time.

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