

# OpenTheo

## #188 Jean Vanier and when leaders let us down (Replay)

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From 2020: In the wake of the news that L'Arche founder Jean Vanier was responsible for sexual abuse of women during his ministry, Tom Wright responded to questions from listeners let down by leaders and the church. Be part of the Ask NT Wright Anything live show in London at Unbelievable? • 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 into today's episode, I want to let you know about a special e-book that's yours to download free today. It's called Five Ways to Connect with God, Ancient Practices for Modern Times. I believe it's safe to say that in today's fast-paced culture we're all seeking more rest and less chaos.

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And now it's time for today's podcast. Welcome to this replay of Ask Enthi Right Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and

theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions submitted by you, the listener.

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It's myself Justin and Tom sitting down together for another round of your questions. And Tom, we've got the breakfast things laid out again. We're looking forward to another session of Looking at People's Questions.

Got some serious issues on today's show. But just a quick recap, what have you been up to over the last few months? Because I see you here, there and everywhere. We've been to America a couple of times.

It was in America a couple of times in November and then my wife and I've been moving house again. This is the 16th time in 48 years. The saga of the house.

Maggie is wondering which clause it was in the marriage vows that said she was committed to moving house every few years. We actually were in Scotland for 10 years. So this is as the longest we've been anywhere.

So this has been quite traumatic from some points of view. And Oxford, where we've moved to, is wonderful from some points of view, but it's far too far from the sea. Far too far south.

We've become very much Scottish in our outlook on things. You've got this new post at Wickliffe of course. I'm doing some part-time work at Wickliffe of all.

The glorying in the title of Senior Research Fellow, which means I'm an old guy who's around the place and getting to know the graduates particularly and doing some preaching and teaching, which is delightful. Is it nice to be back obviously you spent a number of years in Oxford? Yeah, absolutely. No, it is.

It's very strange. It's like going back to the house you were born in. I mean, for us, this is Oxford 3.0. I mean, we had our student time and then when we were first married, that seemedlessly one into the other.

Then we were back for seven and a half years in the late 80s, early 90s. And so now it's nearly 30 years since we lived there. But some of the same people are still around.

Looking a little over. I mean, given you've got that long length of time academically, and of course, what's changed, would you say, in terms of the student population, the kind of feel of the university? Interesting. I mean, the buildings don't change much.

The buildings don't change much. No, that's true. I mean, of course, one of the things

you notice is it's trivial and obvious, but in the late 80s, early 90s, hardly anyone was carrying a mobile phone.

Well, yeah. Hardly anyone was walking down the street apparently talking to themselves only when you got close to you'd realize that they had a little thing. You know, that is weird.

If anything, even more bicycles than there were. You know, you take your life in your hands, you step off the pavement to Oxford, swoosh as a bike coming. And to my horror and Maggie's astonishment, I have actually bought a bike myself.

Wow. In my 70s, I'm relearning the cycling around. Well, it's the way to get around.

Well, you might bump into Richard Dawkins. He likes a good cycle. And one might quite literally bump into it, which we'll see.

Anyway, as I said, we've got a series to topic on today's program. We're talking about people who feel let down by Christian leaders, sometimes hurt by the church and some other pastoral issues that we'll try and get to. But this particularly comes in the wake of a very sad story that came to light recently of John Vanier, the founder of the Larsh community.

And I'll read out the question from Michelle in Gilbert to get us started on this. Michelle says, Yeah, that's a huge question. And actually, until you sent me this question, I hadn't heard that bit of news.

And the time of recording, it's only recently come to light. Yeah, I've been very busy the last few weeks and just hadn't crossed my radar screen. And I have kind of a disconnect with this.

Like many people, I imagine, one has no no of John Vanier. I never met him. I never went to Larsh.

And I haven't actually read very much of his stuff. I think maybe one book. But I know of his work.

And I know people who've worked there with him and so on. I mean, I think one of the things that the great Christian spiritual tradition teaches you is that the people who are recognised as great as saints are the ones who are most in fact conscious of their own weakness and sin. There's a line in a hymn which says, and they who feign would serve the best are conscious most of wrong within.

I don't know the detail of this. I just saw one report, which is online, which said that Vanier and apparently his his own mental. Had actually either excused or explained sexual abuse of women who they were close to by saying that this was a different level

of mystical experience or something.

Now that is very warped and diseased really. At the same time, rather like the Pope when asked a similar question said, who am I to judge? I mean, the sort of sense that everybody, all leaders, not least when people are in the public eye, they have weak spots. I've often said to Ortonands and so on.

Whatever your particular weakness, watch out because when you're in the public eye, when you're in ministry, that'll be one of the places where an attack comes and you need to be specially conscious of that. I simply don't know the detail of this. Does it undermine everything he didn't said? No, it casts a shadow on it.

But maybe that's a way of saying that there's no human being other than Jesus himself who we should look at and say they are the absolute model. That's what we have to do. We're so frequently put people on pedestals, don't we? They're so easily toppled from.

Well, that's right. And of course, this happens to come the same time as we have the Me Too movement and Harvey Weinstein and all the rest of it. So we're horribly aware and rightly aware that for generations men have, quote, had their way with women who seemed to be vulnerable and impressionable to them particularly.

And that's a warning. I would sort of hold this in the face of the next generation of male ordonans and so on and say, now watch out because this can happen to you too. Obviously, not the first and probably not the last sadly person of a significant stature and responsibility.

And there have been numerous sort of falls from grace of major church leaders over the last several years. And even significant scholars. So, you know, when it came to light that John Howard Yoda, for instance, had sort of been guilty of similar stuff.

A lot of people, it led them to someone who they greatly admired in terms of their theological work. Great, obviously pacifist writer. But then left the question, well, how does that leave me when I then go back to his work? Does it lose its value or something? What's your feeling on that? I don't think if an argument is a good argument, it doesn't lose its value.

If the argument has some shadows in their personal life, some Paul would be the first to say, yes, I have all this incredible shadow in my own personal life. As I was the chief of sinners, I persecuted the church, et cetera. But at least in that case, there was repentance.

I mean, that's quite a difference between somebody who says, I behaved like this and that was terrible and I have apologized. I've said sorry to God, I've accepted forgiveness and I'm ashamed of this. There's a difference between that and somebody who says, well, it was trivial or well, it was, you know, a consensus or... A preteve or something.

Yeah, quite, quite. Better to say, no, this is absolutely wrong because we all do things of which we're ashamed. And the idea that we're all aspiring to be 100% saints, well, from one point of view, we are.

But from another point of view, we're realistic or we should be... There is a reason why, forgive us our trespasses is in the daily prayer that we as Christians pray. And just again, just to wrap this one up, in terms of the emotional point there, which is simply that... Yes, yes. Almost even though this person didn't know him, I've seen this repeated by many people on my social media feed saying they just feel betrayed personally almost because they held him in such high esteem.

He was such a valuable spiritual writer and mentor in that way. I mean, I would feel that if something similar came to light about C.S. Lewis, because I learnt so much from him, I don't know, was agree with him. But if there had been a shadow side like this in his life, and of course, some people have tried to say, well, as a young man, this and that and the other, but that was before his conversion, et cetera, et cetera.

So yes, and people that I know now who I hold in really high regard in the church, if something suddenly came to light, I think, oh my goodness, have I been betrayed by this. And I think it's to do with something in our culture that either wants people on pedestals or wants them crashing down on the floor and isn't prepared to live with the real complexity of Satan. The real complexity of life.

But it also is a warning that Jean Vanier was a visionary. He saw that something needed to be done. And my goodness, it was a hugely self-sacrificial thing.

And the emotional cost of what he did, I imagine, was eating away at him and was emerging in other unhealthy ways. And that's the point where one needs to say, we need structures of accountability. And one of the odd things about the Crikey Old Anglican system that I've worked in is that we do have structures of accountability.

We don't always fond them, we don't always get them right. But I think particularly of people who launch independent church movements, they often can be the great I am within their own system. And they're accountable to nobody.

And that's a very dangerous issue. That's always dangerous, isn't it? Put not your trust in princes as the sounds put it. This is an anonymous person from Memphis, Tennessee.

And again, this is coming from a personal point of view and it's a little lengthy, but I'll read it out in full. This person says recently Professor Wright made a comment about Christian virtue as opposed to pagan virtue. And I wonder if he could talk more about the differences between the two.

This is the context of this question. They say, I often wonder, based on the teaching I have received, and indeed the brand I received, what really is distinctly Christian. And

what have we claimed as distinct to reinforce our brand? There are lots of good and decent people out there who practice some virtues much better than we Christians.

And they have no real affiliation with the faith at all. And those same Christians who ardently teach the virtues as distinctly Christian, as if we've cornered the market on goodness, have no idea what to do when faced with a case of sexual abuse, for example. My personal example comes from choosing to confront a past pastor slash abuser.

And having the church first sweep it under the rug, then secondly sorted out only in ways that favor the protection of their assets and insurance benefits. Congregation who had shaped our entire lives spiritually evaporated. After all the years of Sunday morning fanfare, singing and Baptist preaching, here we were in crisis and no one had anything to say, pastorally speaking.

We found solidarity with our local child advocacy center, which turned out to be led, served and funded mainly by the homosexual and Jewish communities in our city. So what's the Christian distinction? And as an addendum here, that personal story is actually my husband's abuser. Faith has never been the same for us since we confronted that darkness.

And your podcast has been one of the very few things he has been able to hear and receive. We usually listen together on a Sunday. Wow, that's a real tragedy and my heart goes out to the ladies written that and the husband.

There are so many layers to this. And I think when I've written about Christian virtue and pagan virtue, obviously there are all sorts of crossover points because part of the New Testament vision of being a Christian is being a genuine human being and affirming and celebrating and living out the things that all human beings know in their bones. They're called to do and be.

And it doesn't surprise me at all that sometimes the Christians who are supposed to be doing that actually fall way short and ordinary human communities without a particular faith commitment or with a different faith commitment, actually are pegging away and doing the caring and the concern and so on. But I mean, the distinction that I made in my book after you believe or the English title was some virtue reborn was that there are some things which emerge in 1st century, Christianity as distinct Christian virtues, including patience and chastity interestingly and the whole business of forgiveness and kindness, which comes out very strongly in the early Christian teachings in ways that you wouldn't know from a lot of regular teaching and preaching. And people have sometimes said, do we have to obey early Christian morality? And I say, well, kindness, generosity, etc, etc.

These seem pretty important to me. And nobody much in the ancient world was doing that stuff except for interestingly the Jewish community within their own number trying

to live as an extended family. So when the early Christians tried to live as an extended family, my goodness, you need patience.

You need a very clear rule of chastity because as we saw in another question, that's one of the places where if you try to live as extended family, all sorts of emotions can come bubbling up and bad things can happen. And I think particularly the ecclesial context that this person writes about, particularly the way that the businesses try to be hushed up, etc. That is so tragic.

And again, however bad it is, the Anglican or Catholic system of accountability, of layers of accountability ought to work in such a way that when something like that happens, there is a larger structure in which people can be held on to. Of course, as we all know, in the last generation, the Catholic Church has been caught out very badly on this one and has done exactly what's described here. And sometimes my own denomination too.

But I would rather have some sort of structures of accountability than no structures because then you just get that vacuum which this person so tragically describes. And I think then it's also to do with the fact that so much modern Western Protestantism hasn't really known about how virtue happens. There's been this sense that you hear the gospel, you say a prayer, so now you are going to heaven, so that's all right.

And then there's a sort of general assumption that you're supposed to kind of keep in those clean while you're waiting for heaven. But you've already been forgiven and if you doubt that, then you're doubting the gospel. So the heat is off in terms of moral effort.

And I want to say no, sorry. The heat is on because the Holy Spirit is the heat of God within you and that's got to do some burning up of stuff which is there. And Jesus says it's out of the harp that they're flowing all these wicked things.

And that's in Mark 7 when he's talking about clean and unclean foods. He's actually the real unclean, this is what comes from inside. And much modern Western evangelical and Protestant teaching hasn't really addressed that.

That yes, you are a Christian, you have come to faith in Christ and now there's all that stuff which is bubbling up within you. And we need to figure out what to do about that. And that's why the practice and learning of virtue is like learning a musical instrument or learning how to play tennis or something when you're not a natural ballplayer.

And you're going to have to practice it and you'll get it wrong, but practice it more and it'll gradually come naturally. Whereas we have thought that, oh, if I'm a Christian and the Holy Spirit is working in me, then obviously whatever I want to do must be the will of God. And that's been the cause of some moral disasters, not just recently but over the last century or two.

And it's time we actually got a more nuanced view of the role of the Holy Spirit and the

aspiration to Christian virtue. Because otherwise, as this person says, the children of this world are sometimes wiser in their generation than children of light. And in a sense, I would say, well, no, Christians don't have the corner on being the most moral people.

There are many good non-believers I know people of other faiths and so on. And I think the question seems to be, and I've seen it in other questions that have come through as well for us, shouldn't Christians somehow be doing better in general than the rest of the life? Yes, yes, I mean, C.S. was faced this question years ago and he said, yes, when you see some Christians, you think, oh my goodness, they're what a mess. And then he says, you have to say to yourself, just think how much even worse this person will be if they want a Christian.

Because actually, Christianity was always designed for sinners and was always aimed at picking up people who were in a total mess and rescuing them. So don't be surprised if they've still got some way to go because we actually all have. Likewise, even if somebody is doing wonderfully well but without Christian faith, think of the extra dimensions that will be added to that person's life if they did have a Christian faith.

This continues really with Eric's question, Eric is in California and says, given the theological importance of the church as the bride of Christ and as the collective body of God's agents in the world, how does one respond to believers who have been wounded by other Christians and are therefore hesitant to integrate into a church body or even identify themselves as Christians as a result? Thanks for your time. I'll exactly be where this person is and who've seen as it were the same side of the church and have said, Christians, no, please don't give me that stuff. I've been fortunate in that in my work as a bishop, I went round parish after parish after parish in the Darsus of Durham and I saw so many churches being real churches, welcoming people, being communities of healing and hope, being communities that the local city council or government officials would look at and say, at least there's somebody here who's helping us deal with drug abuse, deal with youth unemployment, whatever it is.

And there are many, many communities which are beacons of light and it's tragic when some people only have seen the manipulative, the abusive, the bullying, et cetera. And I want to say that is not the norm, but it's again part of the problem that if people think that by saying a prayer, by making a commitment, they are now okay, there's nothing more to work at. Many Christians today don't have anybody in the form of a spiritual director or a council who they regularly check in with.

I've often said to clergy, you're seeing people partially, you yourself need regularly to check in and go into the dentist every six months, whether you need your not. You need to go and have a once over and wait a minute, there's something going on here. Let's look in the mirror and see how you're doing with this issue.

And I think the failure of so many Christians to do that results in the kind of thing



wounding and bullying and manipulative staff. It's the difficulty of the way that church is because it is obviously a human institution at one level. But it's the kind of institution where at its best it's encouraging you to open yourself up and be vulnerable to other people in a community of love and friendship and sacrifice.

But of course, by the same token, when things go awry, it can be terribly hurtful. And I think that's where a lot of people are coming from. I've met so many people who have been turned off church because of some bad experience.

And I think the question here is, what do you do with someone like that? What advice can you give to someone who's saying, I just don't feel I can trust people anymore in your church context because of such and such. I do understand that. I wouldn't want just to rush in and say, never mind, you have to swallow hard say your prayers and go anyway.

I mean, there are some people whom that's the right advice. But there may be others for whom a previous questioner said that she and her husband listened to the podcast on Sundays. And rather implies that that's almost the closest they can get to church at the moment.

And I think if that's where people can get to, that's where they have to start. But it shouldn't be, oh, now we're here, that's where we're going to stay. Because there are in fact many, many good Christian fellowships, probably within easy reach of most of our listeners' viewers.

And I think if one prays for the right Christian fellowship, God Canada does provide that. It may not come in the form you expect. But to have people with whom one is worshipping, because the danger of then isolating oneself, say, I'm just going to say my prayers at home and that's good enough, is that you're not then getting the stimulus and the affirmation and the acceptance and the friendship, which ideally the church ought to be providing.

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That's [premierinsight.org](http://premierinsight.org) forward slash NT-Right. Thank you for your support. Let's move on to some slightly different questions so we start to close up today's show.

This was a rather interesting one. They've said I'll try and keep it brief. Well, it was briefish.

They say this is an anonymous one but say this is almost a continuation of the recent question from a doubting pastor. That was several episodes ago now. This one says, I am the son of the respected mega church pastor in the American South and over the last few years I've slowly moved towards Judaism and away from my Christian upbringing.

Recently went through a rather jarring and sudden total conversion in the face of my attempts to double down on my Christianity. I'm trying to figure out how to tell my family about what for them will be a painful new stage of my life. I worry that my parents will have feelings of failure and disappointment in themselves and with me.

Everything inside me wants to embrace and celebrate my new faith but I can't escape feelings of betrayal, self-doubt and uncomfortable changes in dynamic that will happen when my family and many long-time family friends find out about my conversion and seem overwhelming. As Minister and parents, how would you want to see a child of yours deal with a transition like this if it came to that? Yeah, I mean as a minister and as a parent, one watches one's children and one's grandchildren go through different stages and phases. However much you try to say, wouldn't it be good if we did this or had you thought about doing that? They are themselves, they will go on their own journeys and so they should.

And there were many stages in my teenage life when my parents were deeply worried about the directions I was taking, particularly when I started to play the guitar. But quite absolutely. That was a form of teenage rebellion right there.

And I think take the long view but the idea of conversion to Judaism, I take it, that's what he's saying. Yes, yes, I think when he says a sudden and total conversion in the face of my attempts to double down on my Christianity, I wasn't quite sure what that meant. I think he was trying to embrace his Christian faith at a new level and found himself yanked into the Jewish world.

I assume so. And that's why this is a slightly different sort of question to what we might expect. You might expect someone to be writing to say, I become a Christian and now I'm a parent also and they're having trouble with that.

But obviously in this case, asking and knowing that we're both Christians and therefore are going to be in a sense, not if you like in complete agreement with his choice to become. I mean, they're all sorts of difficulties here and without knowing the person without being able to hear the full story, I'm not sure what's got him to this place. I'm not

sure what's going on in his life.

I'm not sure what he's rejecting, what he's accepting. Because I really do want to say there's a huge danger in, and this is very much a post-enlightenment Western problem of seeing something called Christianity and something else called Judaism and comparing and contrasting them. And that's a very modern perception which doesn't do justice to the first century reality or the biblical reality.

The biblical reality is, was Jesus or is Jesus or is he not Israel's Messiah? Now, if you say, well, actually yes, God raised him from the dead, validating his pre-death messianic claims, King of the Jews above his head and the resurrection says, actually this was true, then if he was in Israel's Messiah, then however we feel about that, that is the reality. In any first century Jew would tell you that if God reveals his Messiah, then this is where Israel is now being reconstituted. That's a Jewish perception.

It's not in that sense a Christian perception over against Judaism. So the idea of Judaism and Christianity is two separate isms. It's very victorious.

And I'm interested to, I mean, obviously we don't have enough information here to know exactly what form this Judaism takes now if it is some form of effectively fulfilled Judaism. And I have heard of a number of Christians who retain their belief that Jesus is the Messiah, but kind of have moved into a much more culturally Jewish expression of that because they feel somehow that's more. I think often the church has de-judayized itself so much that then when people suddenly discover the riches of the Jewish tradition, and particularly when they discover, the very meaningful round of festivals and fast days and so on, and how this can give shape and color and balance and so on to one's life, I can well understand how that's so attractive.

And particularly within a free church context where you don't keep the Christian year, where you don't do Advent and Christmas and Lent and Holy We can Easter and Ascension and all the rest of it, which is what I grew up with, then I know many in free church contexts who have none of that, have none of the traditional Christian shaping, and then when they discover the Jewish shaping, wow, this is great. You have Passover, you have the High Holy Days, and you have the domestic routines which say that all of life has become a prayer. And that's a wonderfully attractive thing.

But I suppose your advice ultimately to this man, if he has, if you like, rejected the fulfillment in Jesus, is to look again. I would just say please read the gospels as first century Jewish texts. A good friend of mine, Danny Byarin, who's a famous rabbinic and Jewish scholar, author of the Jewish Jews, he and I met once when we were both curiously in Rome teaching on sabbatical at the Gregorian, and I said, Danny, what are you teaching? He said, they asked me to teach some first century Jewish texts.

He said, so I'm doing Matthew and James, and I thought, good, okay. So I want to say to

this man, please read Matthew as a thoroughly Jewish book and just see what that means as a Jew and go on from there. Just as we close this out, I mean, just on the practical dimension of this, as he asks, as ministers and parents, how would you want to see a child of yours deal with a transition like this if it came to that? I suppose this could be generalized into any sort of transition, as you say, and most frequently, of course, what is often happening in our culture is people who were raised in a Christian context and be losing their faith.

Yes, ultimately rejecting it. And what's your advice, both to the child and the parent in that situation, where there may be distress on both sides? It's tough. You just have to hang in there and go on offering love and acceptance and forgiveness and doing everything you can together that you still can do together and making sure they're a good festival times and they're a good days out at a purely secular level, times when you can really enjoy and love one another.

And that imperative within family life remains whatever they actually do. And that doesn't mean that you are agreeing with or condoning everything that they're doing or saying or believing, but that they are still your person, you are still their person, you're there for them. I mean, I've always tried to tell my kids that, you know, anytime they need to phone me, they can.

That's kind of basic, it seems. Thanks so much for the time. Some tough questions today.

And as ever, with anything where we deal with things of a pastoral nature, as Tom Oye says, he's not your pastor via podcast, do seek wise counsel Christians you can trust to speak to. But thanks very much for being with me.