

# OpenTheo

## #134 Should we cancel Luther & Calvin?

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Should we value the theology of Luther and Calvin given the anti-semitism and killing they both endorsed? How do I convince my Lutheran friend that not all 'works' are bad? Is it a problem that the Lutheran baptismal rite uses the disputed ending of Mark? Tom answers listener questions on the influence of the reformers.

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## Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello, welcome back to the show. I'm Justin Briely, director of Premier Unbelievable with the show brought to you in partnership with SPCK and NTWrightOnli, where you get to ask the questions and today we're asking should we cancel Luther & Calvin? You have questions including should we value the theology of Luther & Calvin given the anti-Semitism and killing they both endorsed? How do I convince my Lutheran friend that not all 'works' are bad? Is it a problem that the Lutheran baptismal rite uses the disputed ending of Mark? Tom effectively answering questions on the influence of the reformers especially Luther today. Just a quick shout out to J. Mop who left this review for the podcast saying, "I was one of the only 12 year olds who loved attending confirmation classes each week.

I soaked up the details of the liturgical calendar, the meanings behind the rituals and learning the fundamentals of being an Episcopalian. And then I got distracted in college bouncing in and out of my faith walk for a few decades but never losing my core beliefs. Well a year ago God tugged at my heart, actually he came hollering at me through what C.S. Lewis calls God's megaphone.

So I began searching. That's when I found this podcast and the Anglican Catholic Church. Bishop Wright is so enlightening.

His wisdom, insight and gracious explanations have been instrumental in getting me excited again about my faith and building a closer relationship with God. The podcast is like a primer on the tenets of Christianity. Every week I'm back in class devouring information on my faith.

Thank you for being entrusted and honest resource in my growth. Oh God bless you. I'm so glad to hear that that's been your journey.

J. Mopman. If you're listening and you want to leave us a rating in the review it does help others to discover the show you can do that wherever you're listening from on podcast. Do check out as well our website premier unbelievable.com for more great podcasts from Premier Unbelievable.

The link is with today's show. We're coming back to a subject that we've addressed in one form or another a number of times over the last few years that we've been running this podcast Tom specifically the Reformation Luther and Calvin are kind of loosely the subjects of the questions that we've got before us today. Let's start with Phil Bray in Sydney, Australia who's asking should we cancel Luther and Calvin.

Now I don't know whether this is true the way Phil begins his question but you can comment on this. I know Tom Wright holds Calvin in very high regard. My questions are because I'm struggling to read Calvin and Luther in a positive light since discovering some of their quite despicable actions.

Calvin says that it is just to put heretics to death for instance and speaking about servitus he says he won't allow him to leave alive. Luther of course has been quite explicit in his hatred of Jews and suggested burning down their houses and schools killing rabbis. Now Calvin and Luther didn't seem to love their enemies quite the opposite and it doesn't seem to me as though they were bearing good fruit their actions weren't defined by love, joy, patience and kindness.

So I struggle to accept that someone can have good theology while not bearing good fruit or at least slowly becoming more Christlike and they don't seem to have repented from this kind of behavior or speech later in their lives. So is it possible to separate fruit from theology or should we see bad fruit and be wary of bad theology? So first of all you

know you perhaps can speak for yourself Thomas to where you place Calvin and Luther in terms of their theological lights but obviously Phil here has a real problem with the fact that some of their writings and what we know of their actions to us seem very unChristlike and therefore should that make us question their theology as well. Yeah these are huge questions and alas every generation of Christian leaders and teachers has had its own particular blind spots and problems and really the question ought to bounce back on to us.

What are our blind spots? What are the things which in two or three hundred years if there are still two or three hundred years of history left ahead of us? What are the things which our heirs and successors are going to look back and say those guys in the early 21st century they didn't realize that they were polluting the planet with their cars or actually they did realize it but they did nothing about it and so on and so on. You know there are all sorts of things which we currently tolerate are foolishnesses and and and follies which we've grown up with and take for granted which another generation might well see as as seriously problematic. It's only just recently that most Christians of as I know anyway have given up smoking for instance and those sort of great sea changes socially correspond to great sea changes which were happening in the 16th century and when of course most people most Christian leaders in the 16th century took it for granted that heresy on key issues of the faith was such a serious problem that if there were people who were genuine heretics then they could not be allowed to live and should be put to death in a way which would encourage others to take lessons from that.

I mean I live here in the middle of Oxford a few hundred yards down the street from where I'm sitting is the memorial to Cranmer Riddley in Latimer who were burned at the stake in the 1550s. So these were terrible times we look back and say how could they possibly have done that out of misplaced zeal and loyalty to God and the gospel what was that about? And the answer was from their point of view this was about trying desperately to keep the church and society pure from the devastating corrupting influence as they saw it of heretical teaching which would destroy the fabric of the faith and of society. Now we would probably say, should say, that they were wrong in making that assumption but that's where they were and for me it doesn't vitiate all of their teaching it merely means that they like all the rest of us get something seriously wrong.

Luther himself developed the theology of Simmel Eustace at Picato at the same time righteous and a sinner. Luther knew perfectly well that he was still a sinner even though in Christ and by faith God had declared him righteous and I think on the larger picture as well we have to say that in every generation the people who invoke God in Christ including myself we are doing the right thing by invoking God in Christ in the power of the Spirit but that doesn't mean that our lives and our habits and our larger policies are free from blame and as I say many many issues which subsequent generations will look back at. When it comes to specific theological issues it does seem to me that if you start where Luther and Calvin started which was with the Roman Catholic theology of the late

15th and early 16th century then if you look and see how that was playing out in terms of well for Luther the sale of indulgences and that sort of thing then they were forced to give fresh answers to those medieval questions and they did the right thing which was to go back to the original sources of scripture to re-translate or reinterpret the Greek and Hebrew of the new and old testaments and to say in the light of that what are we finding out? The problem from my point of view is that they were trying to give biblical answers to late medieval questions and from where I sit both of them Luther and Calvin were largely unaware of the subtle different nuances of the actual first century questions that were at the heart of scripture and so I applaud their method that is go back to the original sources and learn fresh wisdom they were concerned to critique medieval abuses that didn't mean they had no abuses of their own if I have to choose between Luther and Calvin I will choose Calvin but for all sorts of reasons for his positive view of the Old Testament and of the law etc whereas Luther who had this big law gospel antithesis was always in danger of saying and certainly some of his followers have said so we don't really need the Old Testament don't really need the law that's kind of a dangerous and dark thing whereas Calvin was much more positive but in both cases I want to say I honor their method let's read scripture in the original let's do our best to find out what it originally meant and that will relativize the questions as well as give us a new set of answers for the questions which we are facing in our own day so so ultimately we can go to these characters from the past and celebrate what we can see that's good in their theology without idolizing them or their actions because obviously they were as human as anyone and obviously you know absolutely and they themselves I think they themselves would have would have insisted on that yeah I hope that's helped Phil got another question about well more the Luther and Church the new to himself here from christine in los angeles who says I'm struggling with a dear friend who is a lifelong Lutheran now I attended non-denominational church and we frequently discuss the importance of works in the life of the believer not as a means of attaining salvation but as the natural byproduct of a relationship with christ but my friend every time he hears any words related to works or what we must do as believers or even making a choice to be a christian feels that we are engaging in works based righteousness tried for years to understand Lutheranism and how I better explain to him that we believe in salvation by grace through faith just as he does but to no avail any advice in understanding Lutheranism or advice for achieving a state of I understand you disagree with you but still love you place would be appreciated now it may be that this this christine's friend here doesn't represent all Lutherans by any stretch of the imagination in the way they obviously hold this very dogmatically view of this but and any advice at least for this this particular friendship and the way this person seems to regard any thought of works or making choices and so on it is a problem and it's not only within Lutheranism but also within some parts of American Reformed Christianity I think of say John Piper for whom any suggestion that there's anything that we now have to do is oh that's in danger of you think you're contributing to your salvation as though well God does his bit and now we have to do ours the problem with all of that is both exegetical and theological

exegetical in that it's often rooted in a reading of Romans 1 2 3 and 4 as the Romans rode we sinned God sent Jesus we believe that's it we're okay um actually Romans is much more subtle than that and the argument of Romans runs on certain it's chapter 8 and actually then throughout the whole of the rest of the letter you need then theologically a strong injection of the work of the Holy Spirit and in the New Testament again and again justification by faith which is of course a thoroughly biblical doctrine has the work of the Holy Spirit in the gospel to bring people to faith but then also through that process to transform their character to make them into God reflecting humans as they are meant to be so that the summary of it all would come in Ephesians 2 verses 8 9 and 10 by grace you are saved through faith not of yourselves it's God's gift not of yourself that anyone should boast and then we are God's workmanship the Greek word is "Puyema" we are God's poem God's poetry created in Messiah Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in so that all fits together and in fact Ephesians is a wonderful summary of Paul's teaching which is why sadly in some liberal Protestant circles Ephesians has been rather marginalized because people prefer their reading of say Romans 1 to 4 and find that Ephesians is muddying the waters a bit that's because they haven't really understood how Romans itself works I would say so the other thing to say is that the phrase "good works" in the New Testament regularly does not refer to the moral works that we do to show that we're behaving properly it refers very often to the works that Jewish people would do to show that they were God's faithful Torah observant followers and particularly the works which marked out Jews from their pagan neighbors like the keeping of the Sabbath the food laws and circumcision very interestingly recent scholarship on the second century fathers the people who are reading Paul two generations later indicates that they all understood Paul in that way it's only later in the third and fourth centuries particularly with Augustine that the idea of works got detached from the Jewish original these are the things we do because we're God's people and became me trying to be good in order to impress God and Augustine is very much against that because that's what he thought Pelagius was doing so we've been messed up by those controversies into false readings of the New Testament but the other thing that good works meant in the first century was quite different entirely and that is if somebody in the Christian community finds that they have some spare cash some resources which they can deploy they should be doing good works in the community if there's poor if there are poor people whose homes need rebuilding or if there's a hospital needs building or something or something else like that these are things that people can do which are good works which show to the wider community that we Jesus followers care about the health and well-being of that whole community and the letter to Titus interestingly is quite emphatic about this to people to be zealous for good works not in order to keep moral rules to show God that they're on his side but in order to demonstrate to the wider community that we care about health about education about poverty etc so we have to separate ourselves from the controversies which run from Augustine to Luther and on into our own day and learn to think more with the mind of the first century in order to be able to articulate things afresh for our own

day thank you very much i hope that's helped Christine as you go into that conversation again with your your Lutheran friend finally um another question around the Lutheran church tradition from Paul in New Jersey who says when my first child was baptized in the Lutheran church the pastor said in the last chapter of Mark our lord promises whoever believes and is baptized will be saved well i was slightly taken aback that for the ceremony of baptism the church would include the longer ending of mark using words that Jesus may not have said i agree with you tom right believe that the longer ending isn't part of the original text though i do disagree that the original was lost sorry tom says so Paul um i recently had a podcast where it was said that it's difficult for certain Lutherans to reject the longer ending of mark because Luther has in his confessions catechisms and other writings i find it hard to believe that a set of beliefs or confessions hinge on whether the longer ending is authentic or not could that saying of Jesus possibly go back to him i was just wondering what tom's thoughts are on it okay so yes obviously in certain formulations of these Lutheran promises and so on they do use these words that come from this disputed ending of mark and so on um what what's your thoughts tom on on the validity of using words from that and whether they do or don't go back to Jesus and obviously Paul feels this is you know a bit of a problem yes it's interesting i've not run into this particular variety of question before um because of course in the last 200 years virtually every saying attributed to Jesus in the four gospels has been doubted by some critics somewhere and to be honest quite a lot of them within uh Lutheran scholarship because that has been the dominant form of New Testament scholarship for much of the 19th and certainly early 20th century so that i think it's it's only one phenomenon among many to say oh well the Lutheran confession has that bit from mark 16 i i do agree that that um that passage the longer ending of mark so-called is almost certainly secondary that doesn't mean that it doesn't contain any words of Jesus and it's perfectly possible for somebody else to have remembered through oral tradition which was very vibrant in the first century things that Jesus said which subsequent to marks finishing of the gospel and its truncation or not and somebody will have put that together and after all that statement about believing and being baptized goes very closely with what Jesus says to Nicodemus in John chapter three that accept somebody is born again of water and the spirit and all the um all the emphasis in John three on faith that God so loved the world dot dot dot so all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life so putting John three together how are you going to summarize that well somebody might well say according to Jesus those who believe in are baptized will be saved and so it's it's not too far away from things which are there in the text anyway and of course different people will say well we can't be sure Jesus said this or sure Jesus said that but there is a convergence around that of baptism bringing people into the visible fellowship of the people of God and the faith which says Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead which is the baptismal confession these are the things which mark out those who are being born again and those who are already saved and will be saved so so we're not too far away there i think then the problem comes with and we said this in a much earlier podcast at what point do the human traditions that

have developed within different denominations becomes so strong that they as it were trump a straight reading of scripture so that we say well we can't do anything about this because that's what our tradition says and of course we meet that question in many many forms and I think we basically mature 21st century Christians ought to be able to navigate that without too many problems or bumps in the road that what we're believing is the central realities of the faith not necessarily the particular formulations which people three or four hundred years ago may have put together using words and texts and after all the great confessions of faith the Lutheran Confessions the Augsburg Confession the Westminster Confession etc etc used many bits of non-scriptural language and many non-scriptural terms and sometimes used scriptural terms in subtly different ways and it's the part of a wise Christianity always to say let's go back check this out see what was going on there because we're committed to the thing itself not to the temporary and time-bound expressions of it and that is not by the way a recipe for theological relativism just saying oh well it doesn't matter it all changes the central stuff jollywell does not change the words that subsequent generations have used to describe the central matter have been flexible and have come from Latin into German into English whatever and we always need to go back and check them out which is why I hope people like me biblical scholars still have a bit of a job to do I mean and I just I suppose want to just also address something that seems implicit in the question here from Paul which is that he might have got the impression that because you you know have an opinion on whether that longer ending of mark you know was original to mark or not that you therefore see it as somehow secondary or we shouldn't really trust it or it's non-authoritative in the way that maybe other parts of scripture are I mean how do you actually view that I mean what do you say to people who kind of think oh well maybe we should sort of dismiss or not think about this this bit of mark in the same way that we do other parts yes it is tricky because the longer ending is rather awkward it has that bit about handling snakes which some Christian traditions have taken over seriously as though handling snakes was the test of faith and most churches have not actually worried too much about that but I think again our problems sometimes come from an over brittle understanding of inspiration and authority of scripture that the scripture which I you know I my view throughout my life has been that scripture is the book that God has given us but that doesn't mean that there aren't places in scripture which are really rather puzzling in terms of their textual history and not only the longer ending of mark that that's perhaps the most notorious one but other places where there's a verse which has crept in in some manuscripts or been dropped out in other manuscripts and it always makes sense to say let's actually probe back and see if we can figure out what was going on here but that doesn't mean that things that came in later which I think the longer ending of mark did have nothing to teach us just as you know the the writings say of Clement of Rome the the letters of Clement or the so-called epistle of Barnabas or and the works of Justin Martyr in the mid-second century and we can't say because these aren't in the Bible we've got nothing to learn from them we have an enormous amount to learn from them these are our ancestors in the faith they were reading scripture and if in

their traditions they added a bit here and there we can still learn from that even if we are cautious about saying scripture teaches and then quoting it so I think we need to acquire a more mature flexibility not to say we don't really believe in the authoritative scripture because I certainly do but to say there are shadows around the edge of the canon if you like there'd been debates about which books as a whole belong in the canon the wisdom of Solomon for instance and that doesn't stop us believing that the basic text of scripture is the book that God wanders us to have yeah very helpful thank you very much Tom and thanks for all these questions on the Lutheran tradition and Calvin and so on that have come in for this edition of the program and we look forward to catching up with you again soon Tom but for now thanks so much for once again being my guest on today's show thank you very much good to be with you as always well thank you for being with us don't forget you can help us to bring more content like this helping skeptics to explore faith and Christians to understand defend and share their faith with confidence if you'd like to support us in doing that you can do so from our website at [premiere.unbelievablecalm.com](#) where you can find out much more about this show and register for all our resources best wishes see you next time

(gentle music)

[buzzing]