

OpenTheo

#162 Questions on sexuality and LGBT

March 23, 2023



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In this replay podcast from 2019 Tom answered listener questions on how to have better conversations on sexuality in the church, co-habitation, whether the New Testament understanding of homosexuality was different to today and his thoughts on Transgender following a letter he wrote to The Times newspaper. First broadcast in 2019.

- 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

Hello there. Before we leap into today's show, I want to share a powerful free resource with you. We often hear from listeners looking for answers to share with a friend or loved one who claims God can't exist for a variety of scientific reasons.

But science actually supports the existence of God, which is why I want to offer you a free download called "God's Not Dead". It explores scientifically how our own cosmos points to a creator in three clear areas. Again, this powerful resource is yours absolutely free.

So download "God's Not Dead" for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. That's premierinsight.org/resources. The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello there. Glad you could

be with us for the show that brings you the thought and theology of NTY right.

Tom is of course senior research fellow at Whitcliffe Hall Oxford University, a celebrated theologian and historian. And I'm Justin, head of apologetics and theology for premier unbelievable. Today you're going to hear a show first broadcast in 2019.

In this edition of the show, Tom answered listener questions on how to have better conversations on sexuality in the church. Cohabitation, whether the New Testament's understanding of homosexuality was different today to today's and his thoughts on transgender, following a letter he had written to the Times newspaper. If you want more from the show, of course go to our website premierunbelievable.com, reg to there and we'll send you the ebook editions of some of our most popular big conversations, including Jordan Peterson versus Susan Blackmore on Making Sense of Life, and Bishop Robert Barron versus cosmic skeptic on atheism versus Christianity.

That's premierunbelievable.com. For now, on to today's show. As I say, first broadcast in 2019, so you'll understand that Tom and I don't deal with some of the more recent controversies in Anglican circles regarding the living in love and faith process and the prayers for same-sex couples recently issued by the bishops of the Church of England. However, I do hope you find the conversation we did have at the time helpful.

We finally come to one that we got a lot of questions on. A very sensitive issue, obviously, and one that is a powder keg in both the Church and Society these days. So I fully understand that this is one you have to treat carefully and sensitively, but it is the issue of sexuality, transgender, Christian sexual ethics and so on.

I don't think it's any secret that you hold a traditional view on this around sexual ethics. Often it's the only thing people often want to talk about sometimes and you have a lot of other things to talk about, obviously. I suppose just leading out with a general question on this.

How best do you think Christians can work alongside each other, deal with the contentious issues when they come up in the Church? Yeah, this is a real problem because of the fact that many people have commented on this in many areas. Western society as a whole, over my lifetime, has found doing public discourse really hard. Al Gore wrote a book about this, I think there's a kind of discourse or something like that, about the way in which we used to know that you built up what you wanted to say from first principles, which you could demonstrate to an argument which could then be debated.

And somebody else says, "No, there's a slippage in the logic there, etc, etc." And that's one of the great tasks of philosophy always has been to enable people instead of yelling at each other and throwing things at each other or calling each other names to say, "Look, no, no, no. We can talk about this sensibly. There is this, there is that, there is the

other.

Now, how do we put that together? If somebody else wants to say, "No, you're doing it wrong," let's have that discussion. And I have always in whatever sphere of life I've been, let's have the discussion person. And I bitterly regret the way in which now things get hugely polarized and people accuse one another of phobias or victimization or whatever it may be so that it becomes almost impossible to express a moral view.

And that's at the heart of it. And I think the church ought to be constantly in the business of reminding people how to do moral discourse. And I would say that on any issue, whether it's investing in arms sales or whatever it is.

And the church itself hasn't been good at it, tragically, because we are taught, Paul insists on it, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And in that same passage Romans 12, Paul goes on and says, "If it's possible so far as it lies with you, you have it peace with all people." In other words, constantly be striving for ways in which you can say, even to people with whom you have major disagreements, please can we sit down, look each other in the face and actually talk about this. And we used to be much better at this than we are.

And so it's that larger context which, in America, that's very, very politicized at the moment. The cultural walls have gone on dividing and it's worse now than it's ever been, I think. But we have our own equivalent and other, and Europe and other parts of the world do as well.

So when you then say, "What about sexual ethics?" It's not just that this is special. It's actually, we are throwing that question into a world which already doesn't do discourse well. Yes, absolutely.

I suppose part of that is because, obviously, it is one level such a personal. It's not an academic or dry subject. It's one that impacts people in their daily life.

But you're please doing all that with the level of graciousness and compassion that is obviously required in anything that has a pastoral dimension. We still need to be able to talk about it. About 20 years ago, I was part of a group that was working under the radar, as it were, with people from very different points of view meeting together privately, church people, to get to know one another without a particular agenda that we were going to produce a report.

Just to say, can we at least understand what we're talking about here and understand one another and why this matters? And some of that is still going on, thank God. I haven't been involved with it since I left my previous job, but that needs to go on. But here's the really tricky thing.

The fact that we say, let's sit down and talk about it, doesn't mean that actually we're all

agreed and it's only a matter of dotting a few eyes and crossing a few teas. It's like John Henry Newman once said that there are two types of disagreements. There are disagreements about words and disagreements about things that often you and I will in fact agree, but you use a particular word which I don't like and I use a word that you don't get what I'm meaning.

And when we tease that out, we say, oh, I see we're really in agreement. Fine. But there are other things which when we cash them out, we really are saying, no, this actually is a deal breaker.

And then the question is, how do you say, what is a deal breaker within the church? And obviously within the early church, there were lots of things that some people thought were deal breakers that others didn't, and that's we're on the same page except with the different issues. Our questions for today. And I suppose a speculative question inevitably, but do you, it seems like this is the issue, sexuality that, particularly the Anglican church and many others is in a sense fracturing over.

And do you think there will be a sort of an ultimate kind of split in some significance? It's very difficult because it varies enormously from part to part of the world. And of course, this is cue for a lot of implicit racism. You know that if it's African bishops who are saying no to the innovations, then one sometimes gets the impression from some people that, oh, well, they're only Africans, what would they know? And let's not go there, excuse me.

But that can work in the other direction as well. And so that there's all sorts of things which throws dust in the eyes and makes it harder because immediately the temperature gets up. How dare you say that? And I've seen that close up but also at a distance and it's not a pretty sight.

And I think part of the problem there, not sure how to say this really, part of the problem when people are dealing with issues like that is that the different cultures in which we live are so very different. I remember at Lambeth in 2008, the Lambeth Conference, the meeting of Anglican bishops, one of my colleagues hearing a conversation between a Sudanese bishop and an American bishop and just seeing these two totally different cultural contexts and both of them trying to be responsible and sensitive in their context and just saying, how do we have that conversation? We'll get to one or two of the questions on some of the really contentious issues in the moment. Let's start though in a sense with something somewhat simpler, not necessarily.

Emily in London wants to know, when it comes to say a heterosexual Christian, who is perhaps a new Christian, but in say has just come into the church, but is still in a co-habiting relationship, and what would your council be to that person and that church? If you take a sort of traditional view on Christian sexual ethics, should they immediately abstain from any sexual relations, live apart? What would the impact be then on that relationship? They've had, is that too much to ask? Are we simply to ask for a gradual

changing of priorities and behaviour and so on? Yeah, that's a question which I know a lot of people face. And I remember from 30 years ago hearing a talk that John started as part of University of Mission in Cambridge, which I thought was really sensitive addressing exactly this issue and people expected start an old traditional bachelor that he wouldn't be talking about. So obviously he'd met exactly this situation as a pastor again and again and again, a pastor of a busy London church you would.

This would be in the 1970s or 80s. And his council was, so somebody comes to faith in Christ, this somebody is in a co-habiting relation with somebody else. What to do? Some rigorists might say, "Oh, well, you've got to leave at once, get out." And he said, "No." He said, "You are already bonded with this person, and now you need pastoral help to see how the bondedness that you two now have can best be part of God's future for you both from here on." And with that pastoral help, it might be that the other partner would say, actually, what you've got with Jesus, Jesus' stuff is so amazing.

I want it to and let's work on that. Or they might say, "Huh, if that's the way you're going, I'm not having any of that." And that might precipitate a change in the relationship. And in the meantime, the pastoral sensitivity, you're not starting from cold, you're not starting from scratch.

At the same time, I would say this, our culture is absolutely soaked to the bone in Aphrodite worship. What do you mean by that? There is the goddess of erotic love, Eros, the little boy in Piccadilly Circus, but the ancient goddess Aphrodite, who is a very demanding goddess, she says, "Oh, this is what you want, erotically. The pornography industry.

Just massive now." That's the modern incarnation of Aphrodite worship. Well, it's part of it. It's part of it.

But the lie at the heart of it is that it's irresistible and that to resist it is bad for you. And those of us who've been fortunate enough to know people in enclosed monastic or conventional communities will know that, yes, there are problems, there are pastoral problems you have to deal with, but actually, these are some of the most fulfilled, happy, wise, whole people that you could ever wish to meet. And actually, I think I want to say the same about Jesus and Paul.

And so, I think the idea that life without regular active sexual relationships is not worth living. That's a modern lie. So, if it was the pastoral thing to say to this couple, well, maybe while this turbulence is going on, you might find it better, actually.

Simply, you may be still living the same house or whatever, but you might find it okay to refrain while we sort this out. But I would emphasize the pastoral thing. Pastoral business is never about somebody like me on a podcast saying, "Do this and all of the well." It's always about working with an actual pastor on the ground.

Don't try and be pastored by a podcast, that's for sure. Exactly. Yeah, I suppose though, the overall sort of where you would see that the momentum going, though, is towards that ideal, if you see like, of sexual love being expressed within a marriage.

And I mean, when I was younger, people never talked about this stuff, but such as I've read, and I'm not an expert on this, is to do with the chemicals that are released during sexual activity, which are designed to bond you with this person, so that it is almost like in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the sprinkling of fairy dust, whatever, so that when you wake up, this will be the person you want to live with, the person you're happy with. Would you even tie that back to the sort of, you know, Jesus saying, "One flesh." Absolutely. I think the one flesh-ness, we have tended, I think I have tended in thinking about that over the years, to think of it almost as a legalistic thing, will you now, "One flesh," there it is.

But actually, as C.S. Lewis says somewhere, that when a man lies with a woman, let's just keep it heterosexual for the moment, then there is a bond set up between them. Lewis makes that a sort of a mystical, almost supernatural thing. I would say it's actually first and foremost chemical.

Right. And there is something about that, about the bondedness, which isn't just about God said so. You know, those whom God has joined together, let no one put us under, as you say, in the wedding service, or we say in the wedding service.

It's not just God's law, says you mustn't do it. It's actually, when you pull apart a couple of women living together, it is tearing a flesh. It's a trauma which is much more than just who has which of the CDs.

Perhaps you've noticed that culture is becoming increasingly antagonistic to Christian faith, especially in the public square. And as Christians, you and I can struggle with how to live out our faith in a society that is so hostile to it. That's why John Lennox's incredibly relevant book, *Against the Flow*, is truly a work for our times.

It explores the story of Daniel and how four Hebrew boys maintain their faith in an age of relativism. I'm excited to say that this month, *Against the Flow* is our special thanks to you for your gift to help keep this program and so many other resources coming to you with brilliant content from apologists like John Lennox. It's true that this program is only made possible by the generosity of listeners like you.

So I encourage you to give by going to premierinsight.org/NTRight. That's premierinsight.org/NTRight. And please do remember to request your copy of *Against the Flow*. Thank you for your generosity. Let's open up the can of worms now.

Francis asks, "Is the homosexuality we understand today the same as that which is condemned in the old and new testaments?" For a start, old and new testaments are

interestingly different in that it's very contentious as to which of the famous passages in the Old Testament say what precisely about sexual relations. I mean, for instance, the question of Sodom in Genesis, let's just leave that to one side. It does seem that the prohibition in Leviticus 18 about lying with a man as you would lie with a woman, that is something which is then picked up explicitly in the language of 1 Corinthians 6, etc.

So there is a similarity there, but we're talking about documents produced over millennia and so we have to be very careful. But more particularly, we have to be very careful about any word ending in ITUI as in IT, homosexuality. It's rather like words ending in ISM, Judaism, Buddhism, etc.

Isms were invented in the 19th century. When the British missionaries went to India and told the Indians that they had a religion called Hinduism, the Indians were surprised. They didn't know.

They could quite quite. This is a 19th century construct. In the same way, homosexuality is a 19th century construct.

And in particular, it's a modernist construct. It's an essentializing construct which comes out of modernism rather than postmodernism. Postmodernism now, which I think is where some of the leading edge of those movements is now, doesn't say this is my essence.

It says, today, I feel like being this sort of a person or that sort of a person and it's deep fluid. It's much more fluid. And I think that's where the leading edge is, which is ironic because in the church, often people talk as though we were all signed up to an essentialised view.

But actually, essentializing is not where the culture is at now. I think we're behind on that. But then here's the key thing.

I'm an ancient historian first and foremost. When I approach these texts, I read Greco-Roman sources and I try and understand how the New Testament would have impacted in that world. One of the poets that I really enjoyed reading when I was at school is the rather scurrilous Latin satirist juvenile.

No doubt, as many school boys did, you enjoyed juvenile for all the wrong reasons and you have an explicated text in class. But then you know where to find in the library, the thing with all these strange Latin words, you look them up and, oh my goodness, is that what they got up to? And juvenile in Saturn 9 describes very clearly what you might call the gay scene in Rome. And it isn't a matter, as people have often said, of powerful men exploiting boy slaves, etc.

That happens as well, of course, but it's also very much a matter of some long-term partnerships. And also, a lot of people who juvenile describes in lavish detail, who choose

what Juvenal describes as the female role in homosexual behaviour. In other words, there's nothing that we know about actual behaviour that they didn't know.

And so just to square that circle, very often the contention is, among some people, that well what Paul describes and prohibits in certain of his letters in terms of that behaviour, where he's referencing some kind of, as you say, pedicuity, exploitation, exploitation, temporal prostitution, whatever, well that's all completely different to what we consider to be lovely faithful. That is a view that people have taken. If you read not only the text I've referred to, Juvenal's Satires, if you read Plutarch's Treatise on Love, Plutarch is a near-contemporary of Paul, if you read Plato's Symposium, which is a discussion of love, okay that's written a few hundred years before Paul, but Plato is one of the go-to authors.

Homer is the Old Testament for Greek civilisation, Plato is the New Testament. And if you look at the school curricula of the time, Plato is widely read. And this symposium has all kinds of relations, including long-term faithful stable partnerships.

So the rather trivial suggestion that, oh this was all an exploitative thing, and now we have something quite different. Historically that won't work. Now let me say, I would expect that many historians of many persuasions would agree that they would be a little bit different.

And persuasions would agree with me on this. And that doesn't then foreclose the issue as to what you do with it. Because in many church circles people will say, oh well at that point we're just going to disagree with Paul and fine.

That raises quite other issues. And then you have to start talking about the integration of what Paul says in these very small passages, and they are small passages obviously, with all the other things he's doing. And then it's about creation and about the redemption of creation.

And that's what's really at the heart of it. Many more issues we could unpack, but we'll leave them for now and move it into a different kind of world. I had a number of different questions on this actually, come in from different people like Carol in Arizona for instance, the question of transgender.

And that in a sense if the sexuality issue has come on apace, I think the transgender issue has more than doubled in terms of the rapid change changes in society. No, no, no, no, no, no. I suspect a lot of that is to do with the technological age we live in and the way things can spread so incredibly fast these days.

But rather than comment on specific pastoral issues that some people have written in about, which obviously you're not in a position to really speak into. I did notice that you did sort of, you had above the parapet, let's say in the times a year or two ago, commenting on a couple of articles and issues that had come up there. And this was the

letter you wrote and I'd just be interested in you expanding on your comments on this.

And perhaps I should say one of the articles was by, that I was commenting on was by Hugo Rifkin, who's son of former Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkin. And Hugo I think is basically a secularist who's just observing a scene rather than taking a particular model. These were just sort of cultural analysis type pieces.

In fact, whether they filled it in for you or you did, it's mentioned here anyway. It says, "The articles by Claire Fojas, gender fluid world is muddling young minds and Hugo Rifkin social media is making gender meaningless. And the letters about children wanting to be pandas, dogs or mermaids, show that the confusion about gender identity is a modern and now internet-fueled form of the ancient philosophy of Gnosticism.

The Gnostic one who knows has discovered the secret of quote unquote "who I really am" behind the deceptive outward appearance in Rifkin's apt phrase, the ungainly boring fleshly one. This involves denying the goodness or even the ultimate reality of the natural world. Nature however tends to strike back with the likely victims in this case being vulnerable and impressionable youngsters who as confused adults will pay the price for their elders fashionable fantasies." You wrote.

So, yeah, expand that one a little bit. I mean, you've probably got a little bit of backlash I'm assuming on this letter. I did a little bit.

I actually got a bit of whatever the opposite of backlash is because the Washington Post phoned me up and asked if I'd like to write a whole op there, and I courtesy declined their invitation. I said, you know, what I've written. I mean, what struck me particularly, again as an ancient historian, was with that article by Rifkin when he describes people not being satisfied with his boring fleshly body that they've got and looking inside for a different identity.

I thought, I know that stuff. There's a lot of that in the second and third centuries. And it's very interesting, the rise of Gnosticism in roughly the middle of the second century onwards then chimes in with the fact that Gnosticism has been one of the default American religions particularly for the last 200 years.

Harold Bloom says this in a famous book. In other words, and you find it in Jung and other psychologists, the idea that who I really am, is what I discover when I look deep inside my heart. And then I discover, and then if I look at my body, oh, dear, this doesn't quite match.

Well, we've got to do something about it. And the early Christians were quite clear on two fronts. First, the created order is good and to be redeemed, not to be rejected.

Gnosticism is ultimately dualistic. Second, with Jeremiah, the heart is deceitful above all things and who can fathom it. And Jesus says it's out of the heart that they're perceived.

And then he gives a rather worrying list of things in Mark chapter 7. And he implies that these are the things that defile us. And the problem with Gnosticism is finding my inner identity. And this is the stuff of many, many movies, novels, plays, etc.

Who I really am. Now, I have known, as we most of us have, some people who have had transgender issues, shall we say. And again, I would stress this is not something for somebody like me to come down from a great height and say, you're all silly, go away, blah, blah, blah, blah.

These are genuine, dear people who one loves and wants to help and affirm and so on. However, as with some other styles of behavior, if I as a pastor see somebody doing something which I deeply and with care believe is really destructive in some way, I need to say something about that. And particularly, I worry about children.

I have grandchildren now. I worry about them being in a world where somebody might ask, you know, a seven year old, do you want to be a boy or a girl, as though this is in the whole rhetoric of saying, you were assigned that gender at birth, but actually you may be somebody else. This idea that gender is a purely socially constructed phenomenon.

So, a constructed phenomenon which can be then wished on you by people other than yours. That's part of what Gnosticism is responding to is the imperial power of a regime that tells you who you are and not as Gnosticism is saying, no, we're different from that. It's a protest movement, but it goes inside and protests against its own embodiment.

It's an interesting one because this stuff is all moving so fast anyway. I think even in the secular postmodern world, people are coming up against certain consequences, let's say, in the sporting world, yes, where certain female athletes are saying, hang on. I'm all for transgender people, but it doesn't make sense to have people who are physically male competing against women.

And indeed, the so-called, you know, trans-exclusionally radical feminists, I think, now that the terms, the tradition, you know, the first way of feminism, you know, Jim A. and so on, who are actually saying, well, I've got a problem. And certainly you've got people who you might expect to be bed-fos actually at all. Yes, yes, and I just think that demonstrates the confusion that results from saying that my identity is constituted by some feelings within me about male-ness, female-ness, both identity and desire.

And it's partly the residual platonism of Western culture that we think in terms of the physical being irrelevant, and there's a spiritual reality which is different. And the Bible is very keen on the physical stuff. So when God said he created the male and female, he said it was good.

There's a givenness in your opinion to that identity. And that interestingly in the New

Testament, I know that in Galatians 3.28 it says, neither Jew or Greek, slave nor female, that's because you are all one in Christ, but all the rest of the time, Paul is very much aware that he is a Jew, that other people are not, and we have to navigate that. And in the same way, he is male, some people are female, and we have to navigate that.

The fact of being all one in Christ doesn't mean that we deny any differences. Fascinating stuff. The time is up already.

And thank you for delving into what is often obviously a very, very, you know, obviously explosive sort of area to raise any sort of thoughts on. But appreciate your openness to doing that, Tom. On today's edition of the show, this is the Ask, Enter, Write, Anything podcast, and you can ask your own questions too.

I'll make sure to leave you the ways to do that towards the end of today's programme. But for now, thank you very much. Nice, Tom.

Thank you very much. I hope you found today's replay show helpful, and you can find more, get our newsletter, and support us at PremierUnbelievable.com. The link is with today's show. If you do like the show, do please leave us a rating and a review on your podcast provider.

It helps others to discover Tom's thought and theology. And if you want more, again, all of the bonus content and much more available from the website, PremierUnbelievable.com. For now, God bless and see you next time.

[music] [Silence]