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#45 Worship in the age of Covid-19

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions on how the church will be changed by Coronavirus, online communion and the challenges of worshipping in a socially-distanced way.

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Transcript

[Music] Hi there! Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that.

It's called "Five Ways to Connect with God". And you can download it for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premierinsight.org/resources and download your copy.

That's premierinsight.org/resources.

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome. I'm Justin Briley, theology and apologetics editor for premier, sitting down again with the former Bishop of Durham NT Wright, Tom, as is often known.

Senior research fellow at Wickliffe Hall Oxford University, one of the world's leading New

Testament scholars, and today, Tom is answering your questions on worshipping in the age of Covid-19. And you can ask him a question of your own by registering over at our website. Plus, you'll get access to additional resources, our newsletter, and automatic entry into the competitions we run.

We'll be doing another giveaway soon, actually, to mark our 50th episode before the end of the year. So do register at www.askntright.com. Don't forget you can leave a review with this podcast. It helps others to discover it.

Thanks to those who've left these five-star reviews recently, and said things like, "NT Wright is one of the few world-class scholars that speaks and writes at the highest level and the lay level with excellence." This podcast shows his broader personality and talents. Another says, "I don't always end up agreeing." Yep, that is pretty arrogant, but he always challenges me to think and a perfect length for the elliptical. And finally, "I really enjoy reading Dr Wright's work, find that his perspective consistently challenges me, and helps me think more carefully." What a blessing to have his wise and thoughtful approach shared on these wide-ranging topics.

Just into the great job curating questions and being the conversation foil/partner too. Thank you very much for those lovely reviews of the podcast. Do leave one yourself if you're able to.

Now, today's show brought to you as ever in partnership with NT Wright Online and SBCK along with Premier. And more on Tom's new book from SBCK, "Broken Signposts" soon and his involvement in their annual lecture. I'll tell you a bit more about that a little later.

But for now, thanks for listening to today's show. Welcome back to the show with Tom and myself. And we're talking about COVID today, coronavirus.

I mean, have we talked about anything else for the last six or seven months? But this is why we obviously, to some extent, doing these episodes at the moment, Tom over Zoom, not together as we normally do. You explained in the last podcast just the Zoom fatigue phenomenon, which I think everyone can appreciate. Have you had some opportunities though more recently at least to do some face-to-face teaching, preaching? A little bit.

Yes, I gave a lecture just a couple of days ago, ostensibly to the community of Wycliffe Hall in Oxford where I'm senior research fellow. But because the chapel at Wycliffe is too small, and if we all got in there, we would be very close to each other, they have borrowed a larger church in North Oxford just up the road, where they can get more or less the whole student body in with everybody six feet apart from everybody else. So it's really bizarre looking down on the church with one person there, one person there and so on. However, these were real human beings, real warm bodied people, and even though we all had masks on, including me, I was speaking with a microphone, and that was an interesting thing speaking through a mask. But you can at least see half people's faces, you can see their eyes. And as any speaker knows, eye contact is really, really important, which is why it's so difficult.

I'm now staring at a little black camera rather than if I look down at the computer to see your face chomped in whatever. And I suppose for an extreme introvert, that doesn't matter, but those of us who are at least moderate or high on the extrovert scale, we kind of need that. And I think God uses that and God uses all temperaments, of course.

But for months, we weren't allowed to have church services. The government said no, church building was remained shut, even for private prayer, because if people go in, they may have the germs on their hands or they breathe them out. And if you're trying to clean any building, I've seen this done in small hotels where Maggie and I've stayed this summer, where straight after a meal, a socially distanced meal, they have to send everyone away and totally clean the entire room, including what they call fogging.

They spray something which will kill any germs. And now doing that in an old church with pillars and pews and kneels and so on, that's a really difficult and complicated thing. So I totally get that this was a necessary thing.

However, when we were allowed back in, or be it with one person sitting there, one person sitting there, the first day we were allowed back in for a communion service at eight o'clock one Sunday morning, I sat there in the pew with nobody near me, but with other people around in the church. And I looked up at the East window and I saw a picture of Jesus holding a text which said, I am the resurrection and the life. And I wept, I just thought, oh, few, yes, this is what we've been missing because when you're with other people with them in the building, there is a sense of life.

And if you're at home, even if you can gather with your family to watch a streamed service or whatever, it is just not the same. So we've used the AIDS that we can, but it's been like, I don't know, Paul in prison or something, longing to be with his friends, unable to be with his friends, but praying for them and them with him. So we've worked through this, but I see it as almost a physical need to be with people.

And certainly as a Christian, to have the embodied fellowship is the ideal. If we have to do without it for a while, it's like a sort of fasting. And we should be prepared to embrace forms of fasting.

That's been normal in the Christian tradition and certainly, as I say, when people have been in prison or whatever, often for their faith. But that is not the norm and we need to work back from it to them and then just celebrate the norm when we've got it again. Well, a couple of questions on the way this is impacted, especially church models, I guess, in the US as well, where so many of our listeners are, Tom, that two similar questions here.

So one from Robin Virginia, USA says, what do you think of the long term ramifications of the pandemic on the idea of mega church out of necessity, many larger churches seem to be focusing on things on a smaller scale, small groups, local outreach, et cetera, compared to prioritizing their Sunday services were for 1000 plus people. Do you think that trend will stay the course or will things all go back to normal once the Corinavirus is a less of a large scale threat? And a similar question from Jane in Johannesburg says, thanks for the podcast. It is life changing.

I'm glad to hear that Jane says, haven't we gotten church wrong? The way we do church, huge gatherings, lights, coffee bars, et cetera, is home church, the way it was meant to be intimate gatherings over a meal like we see so often in the Bible. Yes, it's got to be a both hand. I think the social psychologists have said that for healthy human life, people need to belong to a group which is slightly larger than a nuclear family, or today's nuclear family, a group maybe of somewhere between 10 and 15, shall we say roughly 12, but people also need to belong and have friendships and interaction with, with a group of roughly 70, somewhere between 15, 170 is about right.

Very interesting that in the New Testament, Jesus has the 12, he also has the three, Peter, James and John, who are special, close associates, but then there's the 12, and then there's the 70 who he sends out. And it's as though Jesus kind of knows instinctively, no doubt for all sorts of reasons, these are healthy numbers to work with. And I think people who run mega churches, and I've never run a mega church, but I've talked to people who do have, they will say that it's really important that within a church where there's a cast of thousands, that you do have small local house groups where people can meet in roughly a dozen, and you also have units where people are roughly in the 70s give or take.

For myself as an Anglican bishop, I would say there are many parishes in the darsis which I served, where you would have roughly 70 people in church on a Sunday morning and that's great. And the darsis or the Deenery would be the larger unit to which they would relate, but the 70 would be a coherent unit, and within that you would hopefully have some at least in house groups of 10 or a dozen or 15. So I think these patterns have always been there, and those who operate the large churches know perfectly well that those are healthy patterns.

And if for a season we have to retreat as it were into those smaller units, there's nothing to be ashamed of, there's nothing to be afraid of, because we have online resources, we can do an enormous amount now, with providing Bible study resources or fellowship groups or pastoral support, whatever, for people who are shut in. And that of course puts the owners on the church to make sure that all members of the church do have access to the online resources, which in many parts of the world may not be the case, but hopefully that's coming. So I would say let's use this opportunity to develop those smaller units, and if in the fullness of time we are able to go back to the larger things, just like in the secular world we are able to go back to symphony concerts or operas or art galleries with castes of thousands walking around, whatever, then we'll celebrate that, though I'm not sure if it will be the same, I think some things may change permanently, just like a war changes some things permanently.

So this extraordinary time may have that effect as well. As I suspect how large churches fair on the back of this coronavirus will to some extent, as you say, depend on their philosophy that they've had in terms of developing genuine small group relationships, because I think where that does exist and there's a strong tradition of that, then that will be fine, they will go through and the small groups will sustain them, if all they can offer to people has been a large group celebration and they can't do that, then I could see how that would be a major problem for people. I mean, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the large gathering, but for health of human development and Christian development, those smaller groups are important to I mean, when I was working in a cathedral, and we were very much aware with a large number of people coming and going, that for some people it was important just to be able to slide in and as it was in the pillar and sense the possibility of prayer and worship because they weren't ready for anything else yet because they were too bruised by things in whatever it was, then one would hope and pray that they would be brought in but you can't necessarily rush that.

And so I'm not saying everyone must join a small group at once, but that one should be working towards that as part of the overall health of the community. My feeling is, and as you know, I'm very involved in my church with my wife's the minister, and we've obviously had a long stretch of doing church from home initially we're now back in our building streaming from there and gradually getting back to actually having something of a congregation present. But the experience has been actually a lot of opportunity opened up by this with the online side of things that forcing us to go that direction and extraordinary number of people engaging that we hadn't come across before.

But the challenge is how do you grow that into actually people who are Christian disciples and it feels like you can only really do that when you actually get to speak to someone face to face you can you have opportunities that the online thing works for but you still got to have that face to face to actually see it impact in someone's life. Yes, yes, that is obviously the case and as I know and as I'm sure every minister knows some of the best initial pastoral contacts are when you're shaking hands at the door at the end of a service. And somebody just says something about a problem or about a joy or something that's happening in their lives, and you can kind of make a mental note and say a prayer about it and then follow it up later on in the week.

Well, if you're online and then we all just press the button says leave, you don't have

those handshakes and you don't have those moments of icon. And that's a real problem for a while, sadly handshakes are, you know, recommended. Yeah.

Here's another question practical question really to some extent and possibly quite specific to Anglican Catholic sort of ways of doing things on communion from Jason in Virginia says we find ourselves in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, I recently heard an Anglican bishop in the convergence stream vouch for cyber Eucharist virtual communion on the grounds that Christ was able to do miracles, despite there being physical separation, for example, the century's servant. So according to him, the elements can be concentrated across a distance because God wasn't or isn't confined to proximity.

What are your thoughts on his justification for this cyber Eucharist or a virtual communion? It's a very interesting one and of course it demands some sort of understanding of quote what happens, unquote, when people break the bread and share the wine. And the further you get towards the kind of medieval Catholic position, which was based on an Aristotelian ontology where in everything that there is, there is the substance, the real thing that you can't actually see or touch or whatever. And the accidents, that is the fact that it happens by luck to be flat or round or white or whatever it is, so that it was not that the accidents of the bread were changed, but that the substance, the real thing which was perhaps known only to God could be subtly changed.

That was by the late medieval period that was corrupted into being just the priest saying some magic words and the bread magically becoming the body of Christ and all sorts of bizarre things were thought on the basis of that. What we need to do and perhaps this is a time to do it is to think afresh about the sacraments in terms of the fact that in biblical theology, never mind medieval theology, God's world is made in such a way that heaven and earth are designed to overlap and interlock, and that the past and the future, God's act of redemption in the past, and God's promised ultimate redemption in the future can come together in the present, and that also strangely, this is the hardest bit, the material world itself can be, as Manly Hopkins said, charged with the grandeur of God, that God can become present in and with his creation. Now, you don't need a complicated scheme of how this particular thing gets changed to make that a reality, but it is a reality which happens in the course of the telling of the story of Jesus of God and Jesus in the world and us if you like, which is what happens in a Eucharist, a communion service, focused on Jesus on the night he was betrayed, taking bread, etc.

Similar things to be said about baptism by the way, but that's too complicated for the moment. Now, we had the discussion 30 years ago in the Church of England Doctrine Commission, where the Independent Television Authority got in touch with the Church of England to say, how about we lay on a communion service on a television, and we encourage people who are shut in and can't get to Church, but who would like to, to put

some bread and wine in front of the television screen, and then to consume it themselves and be thus drawn into this communion service. And we on the C.A.B. Doctrine Commission, this would be in the late 1970s, we had a very interesting discussion because this was a question that we never thought of before, and we came to the conclusion that though that was kind of a nice idea in some ways, it actually was a diminishment, a significant diminishment of what sharing in communion really is, which is why the Anglican way has always been.

If people are shut in, that somebody will go from the Church, two people usually will go from the Church with bread and the wine that have been consecrated, that have been part of that corporate telling of the story, and then share that with people who are shut in, one of my own family has regularly received communion in that way. And indeed I myself have taken communion to people who are shut in in that way. That was a way of saying there is something about the all of us being together, which is a non-negotiable part of what happens in the Eucharist.

The danger then is if people can put some bread and wine in front of a computer screen or a television screen and consider it consecrated. Sadly, history shows that some people will then ill treat that. There's all sorts of strange magical rituals which some people have engaged in with consecrated elements in the supposition that they can do magic tricks of whatever sort with it.

That's been a danger which the Church is aware of and wants to ward off. Having said all that, during the main part of the lockdown, every Sunday I would log on to the service from the diocese of Oxford, where I live. One of the bishops is often presiding, and because I am a self-amined ordained priest, I would actually say the words along with them and the bread and the wine on my table in the dining room, or one or two occasions out in the back garden, actually.

I would consume it and in a sense, distance to be part of that fellowship. That is definitely a second best or even a third best. And not something that someone in the Anglican tradition can do for themselves if they're not ordained.

I don't want to be legalistic about this. I would say that in extremies, in the classic prison camp or desert island or whatever situation, then God can do all sorts of things and the important thing is about the generosity of God. God is generous, God isn't stingy.

God doesn't say, "No, no, no, you're not wearing the right badge, so you can't do this." And any sense of that would be inappropriate. But God is a God of order, not a peace, and the danger is that if people think that they are now at liberty to invent their own way of doing things, well, hang on, no, you belong to the body of Christ, and the Eucharist is about the whole body of Christ as the church. So there's several things to be kept in balance there, but with the emphasis always on generosity, including people who might otherwise have a sense of being left out. [Music] Justice, love, spirituality, beauty, freedom, truth, these are ideals that we all strive for, yet so often we find ourselves falling short. Why is that? Broken Sign Posts is the new book by Tom Wright, available now from SBCK, looking to the Gospel of John for answers and showing how Christianity provides us with the vision and resources for engaging with the questions posed by each signpost, and points to a clear and compelling explanation of the world and of our role and responsibility within it. Also, you can join Tom and other SBCK authors for their annual lecture this November.

To do so, register free for the online event at sBCKPublishing.co.uk

[Music] Moving more generally to sort of worshipping through online means, which you've obviously been familiar with yourself and I'm sure have contributed to a number of online services in one form or another, Richard, who's in Yorkshire, says, "Do you have any thoughts about online church worship? Personally, I found it increasingly hard and soul-sapping even to engage with whether my own church or others that I've looked at." And what about, again, he wants to ask this push for online communion. Surely can't be right to do something remotely that's meant to be this physical corporate act now. You could argue, I suppose, the same to some extent for worship itself.

There is a communal element too, joining with the brothers and sisters in Christ to sing, to pray, to listen to the word. And obviously that is all stripped of its corporate aspect when we do it online, just on our computer, in our backroom or whatever. So what's your feelings on this? What is the use, what's the drawbacks? As I said before, one, we're obviously talking about a highly unusual situation.

And it's unusual in the same way that I remember when I read the autobiography of Terry Waite, who was held captive by terrorists in Lebanon for a long time. And much of that time he was in solitary confinement. And Terry Waite was not an ordained Anglican, but he was a devout layman.

And he had the old prayer book in his head. And he determined every day he would hold a communion service. He would go through the old prayer book communion service.

And that was that was what part of his sheet anchor. Now, if you say, well, that was inappropriate. Well, it was inappropriate that he was in that prison service.

Excuse me. And God is not bound by that. There is a sense of we need to distinguish between what is of the essence of something and what is in the Latin phrase, the Benet essay.

What would be the best essence of something? And the best essence of worship is corporate together. Yes. And absolutely.

Neither June or Greek slave nor free black nor white nor whatever. But we're not there. And when the government says it is extremely dangerous and we're trying to keep the spike of COVID down, then I found those old letters of Martin Luther very encouraging on this.

And I think I quoted one of them in my little book on the pandemic. Luther's letters of spiritual counsel, Luther faced epidemics and pandemics as most Christian generations have done in the past. These things happen in a city or a country or a region.

And Luther was quite blunt about it. I am not going to put other people at risk by my liberty, bringing them into danger. That's absolutely right.

And if that means that we wear masks and if it means that we actually shut our churches and we go into this time of fasting, as I say, then if that's what we need to do, that's what we need to do. Otherwise, we are colluding with manslaughter. And that's a real danger and possibility.

And we've seen communities getting on the edge of that. And the church should never find itself in that position. So for the sake of the larger community, we restrict our liberty.

And we come straight out of 1 Corinthians 9. I am free to do what I like, but for the sake of the others, I will reign in this freedom. And I rather wish that those who are saying, "Oh, our liberties are being trampled upon." Would just go and read 1 Corinthians 9. I'll get you to expand on that. We have some questions along those lines in a moment.

But just coming back to Richard's question, I mean, in a sense, you said this is a time of fasting and it's going to be uncomfortable. And if currently, Richard is not able to go in person. And even let's be honest, our in-person services under the current restrictions can feel a bit anemic.

We're not allowed to sing. We all have to be behind masks. We can't talk to each other.

We can't shake hands. So during this time, what's perhaps your advice to someone like Richard is saying, "I'm not getting what I used to get." The online thing just doesn't do it for me. What might be ways in which we can get those get? I want to say, "I'm totally with you.

I totally get that. It doesn't do it for me either." But I think this ought to make us say, maybe this constitutes in part a call to us actually to learn to pray the Psalms in a new way, to take time every day, every week, to pray slowly through the Psalms. Maybe five a day, gets you through in a month or one a day, gets you through in three months, whatever it is, sorry, five months, and something which will enable us because the church has always prayed the Psalms and is always praying the Psalms.

And when you pray the Psalms, there's a sense that this is Jesus' prayer book and it's the family of Jesus' prayer book. And we are with one another in the spirit in the heavenly places. And maybe it's a time as well for recapturing that sense from Ephesians and

elsewhere, that we are already seated in the heavenly places in the Messiah because we're raised with Him.

This is part of the baptismal teaching. We are already that people. And so even though we can't see Him or our brothers and sisters, we are in fellowship with them and we have to learn to remind ourselves of that and to enjoy that even while we wish we could have it a bit more visibly and tangibly.

So let's turn to the practical issue of what the right sort of balance of responses when something like a coronavirus pandemic comes along. Now neither of us are medical experts, Tom, we'll say that right to the right at the beginning of this. So, I'm just going with the best information that we in everywhere else seems to have.

But in a way, I've got two questions here and they're both coming sort of from different points of view on this Bonnie in Minnesota says, I'm struggling to respond persuasively to what I think are confused ideas about death, faith and God's will in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some Christians seem to want to defend a lax, a days ago approach to public health measures saying things like, my faith is stronger than your fear or speaking of God's will or God calling them home if someone does die of COVID-19 yet. I know those Christians wouldn't so easily ascribe other preventable best to God.

Wanted to know about the response to that. On the other side of the pendulum, Brian in South Carolina has a has a concern. He says, I'm really struggling to line up the common church response to the corona virus and the hope we have as Christians.

I've read, surprised by hope and it caught me off guard listening to your podcast on the corona virus. I'm not one who's taking extreme position by any means, but I just can't see that retreating fully indoors and removing all contact with people. If my hope is in the here and now, because I'll be resurrected with a perfect purpose in the Kingdom of God one day.

I was hoping how you could connect the two huge fan. Thanks for all you do. So, so where, yes, how do we get this balance right.

Not being lax, a days ago, but equally not being so fearful because we do believe that our hope ultimately doesn't. Yeah, I mean, if it was some other area, if I knew that my car had 40 breaks, it wouldn't be wise or Christian to say, well, never mind, because God will look after me. My faith is stronger than my fear about these stupid breaks.

And if I do have a crash on the motorway, maybe wipe out one of two other people. Well, that's all right, because we're going home to be with Jesus and we'll be raised again one day. We would all say, absolutely not.

You are being grossly irresponsible. How dare you, etc, etc. And likewise, I speak to somebody, but a family member, well, an in-law member at the moment in hospital,

because she's been, she's an older lady, and she's been ill with various things.

And we are really concerned and praying for her and about her in terms of whether she might actually pick up COVID either in the hospital or in an old people's home. And there are questions then of responsibility. And nobody in that immediate situation would dream of saying, oh, well, it's all right.

If she dies, she'll go home to be with Jesus. That's all right. And one day she'll rise again.

No, we want to say, this is a precious person. We love her. And here's the thing.

For Paul in teaching about resurrection, the present life is already part of the in Christ life. And what you do with and to your body and the present matters. This is 1 Corinthians 6, because God is going to raise this body.

So the truth of the resurrection doesn't mean that we can say, so who cares if we die? And there's a danger in that. And it runs from August in right the way through to C.S. Lewis and others when faced with people dying in war. Remember in C.S. Lewis's scruite letters, wormwood, the junior devil, is rubbing his hands with glee because of all the people are being killed in the war.

And scruite says it's totally irrelevant. The only thing that matters is the state of their souls when they arrived on the other side. And I want to say to that, actually know there is something about multiple deaths in war, which creates negative human experience for the whole of the next generation.

It wounds and disfigures all sorts of things in that society and stirs up hatreds and enmities which can then flare up again as we've seen throughout the 20th century, so that it isn't good enough just to say, oh well never mind because we've got faith and of course if you are faced with a sudden emergency where you have to act in a dangerous situation and you have to pray and you know that if you are killed in this situation, whether it's a war situation or rescuing people from a building that's in flames or whatever it is, then yes as a Christian you trust that if you're doing the best thing loving your neighbor as you can at the moment, then if you die in the process, God will honor that and hold you to himself and then raise you again on the last day. But to go into a situation where we know that irresponsibly acting like the brakes on the car or not wearing a mask or whatever saying, oh well my faith is stronger than that. That is simply irresponsible and as Christians we should not be colluding with that.

Yes, it's always, I suppose, very often the pinch points not so much that but the question of are we in our drive, the right, well meaning drive to keep people safe physically, what cost does it come to our psychological health, spiritual health and there are different kinds of risks to weigh in any kind of situation like this. There are and it's more complicated obviously because as we're being told in the British media every day, the balance is between the health risks and the economic risks that just up the street from where I'm sitting, there are two famous pubs on the street corner, the turf tavern and the king's arms and during university term they're absolutely thronged with students and visitors and so on. If they have to shut, then it's not just that the students haven't got anywhere to have a pint of beer or whatever, it's that the people whose livelihoods depend on that, the waiters and waitresses, the barman and barman etc.

What are they going to do? Are they all going to be furloughed in definitely? Is the government going to bail them out and are we going to have to raise taxes to a horrendous extent in order to pay for what we're doing? Nobody knows the answers to that at the moment but simply saying, "Oh well because our economic liberties are being trampled on, therefore we're just going to keep the pubs open all the time and let people mingle freely." Then we will see many, many, many more people dying. There will be a wave of grief, there is already a wave of grief, it'll be a tidal wave of grief and that will distort and damage a generation in all sorts of ways. We are balancing out many different things here and the danger is it gets sucked down, particularly in America at the moment, into political rhetoric about our freedoms.

There are one or two British commentators who are ranting on about that at the moment as well. I think we have to be very, very careful. Unfortunately, I'm not too sanguine about the leadership we've got politically and socially at the moment on either side of the Atlantic in helping us face these things.

Well, thank you for looking into some of these questions today, Tom. We had another one actually on that sort of political issue and the way some churches are seeing this as a sort of form of persecution. But perhaps we'll, well, a brief comment on that.

That's a red herring. That's a red herring. You think it's a red.

We'll leave it then. But you mentioned the turf actually. I spent, yes sir, I had a few drinks in there myself during my Oxford time and it would be a tragedy, wouldn't it, to see some of these landmark places.

It's these are the knock on effects of this time we're going through. But anyway, Tom, thank you very much for being with us on today's programme. Another just, yeah, honourable mention there for God and the pandemic.

The book Tom was written on this published by SPCK and I think is it's on to an out in the USA, Tom, who are the publishers. So do check that out if you're looking for a great resource to help you think through these times we're living in. For now, thanks for being with me on the show, Tom, and we'll see you next time.

Thank you very much. Good to be with you. Thank you for listening today.

Next time we'll be asking Tom your questions about bringing up kids at home and in

church. Until then, don't forget to register for more from Ask Enthy Wright at the website, askentyrite.com, where you can also support the show and receive our ebook with Tom's answers to 12 key questions about faith, life and the Bible. See you next time.

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