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#174 Do I have to agree with St Paul? (replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From July 2020. Tom answered listener questions on the life of the Apostle Paul, whether he wrote all the letters attributed to him, and whether contemporary Christians need to agree with all the views he gives. • 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 show, I want to share some good news. I've mentioned that Premier Insights Financial Year ends on June 30th and that we are needing to meet a gap in funding of \$135,632 by June 30th. The great news is that another challenge grant of \$5,000 has been offered for the final push.

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The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Welcome to another classic episode of Ask NT Wright Anything. I'm Peter Byram and we're going back to an episode from 2020 today.

In this episode, Tom Wright answered listener questions about the life of the Apostle Paul, whether he wrote all the letters attributed to him and whether contemporary Christians need to agree with all the views that he gives. Welcome back to the programme. It's a great joy to be joined again by Tom Wright, who is the author of many books, including of course the best-selling book, Paul, a biography, which came out.

We were trying to work this out before we started recording, Tom, but we're about two

years ago now, early 2018. We've got questions on the Apostle Paul. We've done that before, but there are so many things that people ask about this that it's time to revisit it.

An area of expertise for you, of course. And so I think we'll dive straight in if that's all right, Tom. Now, first question from Daniel in Lemington Spa says, there are often questions raised about the authorship of various parts of the New Testament.

For instance, which of Paul's letters did Paul actually write? How important are those types of questions? In other words, does it actually matter if Paul didn't write some of the letters he's purported to have written? Yeah, it's a good question. And over the last two or three hundred years, people have raised that question again and again in relation to different parts of the Pauline corpus, interestingly. I mean, there were some in the middle of the 19th century, various skeptical German scholars who said that Paul didn't write any of those letters.

So actually, what do we mean by the word Paul if we don't have any letters from him, especially if Acts was written as a fiction later on, are we sure there even was a Paul? And people have come right back from that to say, no, it makes far more sense historically to think there really was a Paul and he really did go around and he really did write letters. Then it becomes a question of two things, of style and content. And people have said, well, the style of these letters is very different from the style of those letters.

So these look like the real Paul. Let's take Romans and Galatians. And then you move to Ephesians and Colossians.

And some people say it's written in a very different style. And then other people say, and the contents different too, because in Romans and Galatians, he's saying that what matters is justification by faith. And in Ephesians and Colossians, it's much more about being in Christ.

And at that point, I and many others, I should say, hold up our hands and say, hang on, who says that these are incompatible with one another. In fact, when you look at Galatians, there's a lot about being in Christ there. And it's welded together with justification by faith.

In Romans, Paul expounds it a bit differently, but it's all one letter and it's all coming together. And actually, the biggest stylistic difference in the whole Pauline corpus, and I speak as one who's translated the whole thing, is between one and two Corinthians. And that's explicable because in one Corinthians, he's quite cheerful.

It's a bit of a knockabout thing. You've asked me these questions and here are these issues and we go through them and we nail the issues and we put it all to bed and there we are. In two Corinthians, he's fighting his way back from a terrible, horrible time, which we would describe almost as a nervous breakdown.

And you can feel it in the sentence structure that it's coming out all jerky and awkward and difficult. And he's been through really hell on wheels and back again. And so when we look at the style, I want to say, Paul writes in various different styles.

And it's very difficult to say, we now know that Paul looks like this and therefore that can't be him. The one letter that I really find each time I read through Paul, and I read through Paul in Greek, usually probably once or twice a year, each time I hit first Timothy, I think, oh, this really sounds and feels very different. Like the rest.

And there are various clues for that. The way he uses certain key phrases just aren't the same as the way he uses them elsewhere. At the same time, I'm aware a generation ago, John Robinson wrote a book called Redating the New Testament when he said, you know, as a bishop and as a theologian and as a preacher and pastor, I write letters to the clergy, I write books, I write learned articles, it all comes out differently each time.

Why shouldn't somebody like Paul, who was nothing if not a brilliant mind, write in quite a different register? So the real issues then come down to theology. And it used to be said very emphatically, Ephesians and Colossians, let alone the pastoral letters that Timothy's and Titus. This must be later than Paul.

But actually, all it takes is a very slight shift to perception of what Paul is all about, and they all come back in. So the real question is, how do we understand the center of what Paul was talking about? So I want to say, let's keep the questions on the table, because it's always worth asking. And I'm not phased by asking those questions.

If it could be shown, proven more or less, that at least some of the letters are written in Paul's name, but weren't written by him, perhaps some sort of community trying to yes, to channel Paul, is that going to be a problem given that they do claim to be all the Bible? Yes, yes. I mean, then people get into the debate about how widespread was the phenomenon of pseudonymous authorship, or people writing in somebody else's name. And it's possible that sometimes in the ancient world, somebody gives a scribe the task of writing up a letter and says, I need to write so and so I want to say this and this and this and this, could you draft it for me? And they can write it, but with the bullet points, they write it in their own way.

That's possible. I don't think we have very good first century evidence that that sort of thing was widespread, or that somebody writing in somebody else's name wouldn't have been perceived as a bit odd. There are debates about that.

Some people say, no, that was perfectly common. I'm not convinced about that. So it would raise the questions.

Of course, how would you prove it? There have been studies done on the stoichiometric analysis, you put into a computer and see, and part of the problem is that the sample is

too small to get any solid generalizations. I mean, his name comes up quite frequently on this podcast, but Bart M and wrote a book a while ago now called Forged, or his very issue of letters in the New Testament being passed off that he believes were not written by Paul. And he kind of trumpeted that as a big problem for the New Testament.

That basically this document that's supposed to have this divine authority is nevertheless, basically got forgeries in it. I mean, do you draft it that way? But the word forgery is a very modern word and would have modern connotations. In the ancient world, I'm not sure it would really work that way.

As I say, I've lived with these letters day and night for most of my adult life. And the older I get, as I say, I still do get puzzled by first Timothy, but that may be just my problem. And I don't want to project it onto Paul.

I think if all we had of the pastures was second Timothy, there wouldn't be a problem. And I am quite convinced as was my teacher, George Cared, the Defusions and Colossians are thoroughly Pauline. And it really is a matter of how you understand his whole theological position.

Let's go to another question on Paul. John in Pittsburgh says, big fan of the show. I've always enjoyed your works, Tom.

I have a question I feel a little silly asking, but I fundamentally have a problem with the idea of Paul. It seems odd that Jesus trained and then charged the 12 apostles to go out and spread the word. But just after his death and resurrection, he appeared before this completely unrelated fellow and imbued him with authority to the point where he's teaching, playing an outsized role in our understanding of Jesus, at least compared to that of the apostles.

Why not enlist Paul prior to his death and resurrection instead of just after? To put it bluntly, why should I believe Paul? That's a great question. And I mean, I hear what's being said there. It does seem odd.

At the general level, there are many theological questions which people ask in terms of if I were God, would I have arranged it like that? And the answer is, sorry, mate, you're not. And just get used to it. And that God's world is full of oddities of things that we wouldn't have done like that.

Fortunately, God is God and not us. Who ever thought of a God coming down and getting himself grooves? Well, that too. That too.

I mean, in retrospect, one can sometimes see some of the reasons why certain things are very interesting. Paul himself faced with a question of why has this happened like this intrudes the word, perhaps, when he's writing to Philemon about Anisimas. Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, so you can have him back.

In other words, I'm not going to say this was absolutely what God was up to. But though it seemed very odd when he arrived and I happened to know you and O.D.E.R. how we're going to sort this out, maybe there is a purpose to it. And so I want to say perhaps with a big P for the perhaps that what God was doing was emphasizing the radicalness of the new thing that was happening, by taking somebody who was a ferociously zealous Phariseeic Jew and Jesus appearing to him, the risen Jesus in such a way that he had no choice but to say, okay, I see, right, because only somebody who had come through that would be able to do and be the things that he had to do and be.

And of course, there is an ongoing, curious apparent tension between Paul and the Jerusalem Apostles, which we see in Galatians, which we see in 2 Corinthians, and they're working it out. They have to live with that. And that too, I think, perhaps is part of the point that church unity is never straightforward and that we have to live with the fact that there's some people there who seem to be teaching some weird stuff.

We just don't get it. How on earth do we maintain unity across that? And Paul kind of embodies that question in himself. But I think it's particularly the great joke of it is that when God wants to convert the Gentiles, he takes a zealous Phariseeic Jew and says, right, this is your job.

How does that work? But has a sense of humor. But it's all part of the extraordinary apocalypse, the radical unveiling of something radically new, which is, nevertheless, the fulfillment of what was promised. And Paul embodies all of that.

Another really interesting question here from an anonymous person, Inkent. Says, isn't it okay to disagree with Paul? Many people seem to be trying to reinterpret him to make him more palatable to today's sensibilities. Isn't it just easier and more honest to say, Paul was a man of his time.

That was then, this is now, how should we apply kingdom or gospel values now? And accept that it might need to look different today. If Paul were around today, how would he apply and live out his discipleship? If he were writing letters to today's church is, I suspect his instruction might be very different. 2000 years of different trajectory, hermeneutics, you might want to say what exactly that means, attempts to project this kind of thinking forward.

So, yeah, is it okay to disagree with Paul and just accept he was a man of his time. And if he was doing the same thing now, he might be issuing different sorts of instructions to Christian. Yes, there are different sorts of differences.

And I think the first thing Paul would say is that the great turnaround in history has happened with the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is no other turnaround until Jesus comes again and restores all things. There is no other similar transformative moment.

And he, Paul, is at the cutting edge of the beginning of this new post-death and resurrection and ascension in the spirit moment. And therefore, he himself wouldn't expect that until Jesus comes again, there would be any basic change. Because the basic things he's talking about are being genuine humans at last.

And that's not going to change. Because being genuine humans means bearing God's image into the world and reflecting God's image into the world is going to mean what it meant in scripture and in the teaching of Jesus. And particularly in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the dealing with evil and the launching of new creation.

I think Paul himself would say that's not going to change. But then when it gets to some of the specifics, I mean, trivially, when Paul wants to go to Rome, he goes by boat, we would probably take a 747. Other things like that in terms of ethics, I think Paul would say actually know that what Paul is doing is working out in the rich, varied culture of Antioch and Syria, of Ephesus in Western Turkey, of Athens and Corinth in Southern Greece and ultimately of Rome and on beyond.

Working out the basic issues of what it means to be human, of what it means to be a community of renewed humans, neither June or Greek slave nor free male nor female, that's again not going to change. The problem is not that we need to change it, but that we need to catch up with the vision which Paul actually had. I'd love to talk to Anonymous in Kent about which differences he or she thinks typically, you know, if I can bring up two examples, one is the way Paul talks in certain passages about women apparently and their role.

And we've sort of talked about that ourselves on another edition of this podcast. And you've come to the position that you don't think necessarily actually Paul was forbidding women. So to some extent that matter settled for you in that way.

Obviously the other big tin of worms is sexuality and what Paul says about that. And presumably that's an area where you don't think Paul would necessarily revise his opinions today in light of modern, you know, same-sex partnerships and so on. Well, I mean, there were ancient same-sex partnerships as well, but that's a whole other issue.

And Paul in Corinth, Paul in Ephesus, Paul in different parts of the Roman world, life is very much lived in public. Paul knew about all sorts of things that were going on and were accessible. It's not that Paul was leading a sheltered life and we now know more than he did on that.

Just like, you know, Shakespeare knew a huge amount of stuff. And yet he was 200 years before the Enlightenment. How did that happen? Well, the answer is that actually some stuff doesn't change with the calendar.

Deep human insight and so on wisdom continues. There are passages like 1 Corinthians

11 where Paul uses a particular argument for why women should wear head coverings. When leading in worship, I mean, that's really important.

He assumes that they're leading in worship and that they should look like women when they're doing so. The particular arguments he advances as to why they should wear head coverings is a puzzle to me as to many people. And I've looked at some of the contemporary theories and some of them may be right about that this may have been more of a dialogue where he's quoting things that the church was saying and responding to them.

I am agnostic about that at the moment. But in terms of the actual conclusions as to what Christians should believe how they should behave, and particularly how the church should be as a community, I think he would say, you haven't even caught up with me yet. So don't try and get ahead of me until you've caught up.

And I think that's a real challenge. I suppose it's always a case of as wise readers of scripture to know what trying to work out, I think the problem is, is what's culturally something that Paul is addressing and what's kind of has ongoing impact. So when Paul follows the house or codes regarding slaves and masters and so on, well, that's not necessarily an endorsement of modern day slavery or something like that.

But this is a very big can of worms in itself, of course. But the culture of masters and slaves is often quite different from what we think because we are so attuned to the slavery of the 18th century, which was basically white on black, et cetera, although there was black on black slavery going on in Africa, et cetera. But in the ancient world, anybody could be a slave to have nothing whatever to do with race or background or upbringing.

All you had to do was lose a battle. And you might, if you were lucky to be alive, you might well be enslaved for the rest of your life. And Paul's rules about slaves are more like what we would have today as codes for employers and employees.

And okay, slavery was the way it was practiced was a wicked institution. But Paul is humanizing it and putting time bombs beside it in the letter to Philemon, et cetera. And the problem about saying, well, something's a culturally conditioned, is it actually it's all culturally, the option of justification by faith comes straight out of the first century Jewish culture.

Do we then put it to one side? We say, no, actually, we have to understand it in its culture in order then to see what it might mean for us today. So it's not as easy as, oh, well, that was then this is now ethics don't change with the calendar. Theology doesn't change with it.

The only change with the calendar is when Jesus of Jesus Christ died and rose again and

poured out his spirit on his followers. Quite literally changed our calendar, didn't they? Well, exactly. Exactly.

And that's very sweet. I just wanted to remind you that premiere insight depends fully on wonderful friends like you to make its programming possible. As I mentioned earlier, we are facing a funding gap of \$135,632 as we come to the end of our financial year on June 30.

The great news is that another challenge grant of \$5,000 has been offered for this final push. So please do give your best gift today knowing that it will be doubled by an additional \$5,000 challenge grant. You can give now at [premiere insight.org slash NT](http://premiereinsight.org/slash/NT) right.

That's [premiere insight.org slash NT](http://premiereinsight.org/slash/NT) right. Thank you so, so much. Another interesting question here from Penny who's in upstate New York and also mentions that they're an online student with [NT right online](http://NTrightonline.com).

Of course, we do this podcast in partnership with interesting on this. When Paul, known as Saul at the time, was going about participating in the death of Christians were his actions and illegal act with legal punishment under Roman law? I didn't find an answer to this in your autobiography. I think that was the slip of the the typewriter.

It's funny. People often had the prefix auto to biography without realizing what they just did. I hope it isn't an autobiography.

I have no intention of eating that kind of life. I know that you probably almost feel like Paul's mind inside out but not maybe quite enough to call it an autobiography. My fear is that he might end my mind inside out.

That would be really worrying. No, I think it's a very interesting question. My sense is that Paul's persecution of Christians takes place within a Jewish context, within a synagogue community, or within the larger world around Jerusalem and that area where the Jewish rule of the high priests, etc, would be running.

Paul gets authority from the high priests. He doesn't get authority from the Roman governor because this is basically an inner Jewish disciplinary activity. In the same way when Paul himself goes to synagogue as a Christian apostle and talks about Jesus and they say, you're blaspheming.

We have to punish you. He gets the 40 lashes minus one. The local synagogue authority doesn't have to get authority from the Roman magistrates in Galatia or whatever it is to do that.

This is an inner synagogue business. I think Paul is acting within the enclosed world of the Jews and the Romans would say, get on to it yourself. Like Galileo says in Corinth in

Acts 18, when the Jewish authorities bring Paul before the tribunal and say this man is teaching us to worship God in illegal ways.

And Galileo says, this is a matter, an inside matter for you Jews sorted out. It raises all kinds of interesting questions for me at the same time, which is obviously we know Paul was obviously repentant and bitterly regretted the way he tweeted, followed up to his conversion. But he never in a sense after that point faced legal consequences if you look for it.

And whereas today if someone had imprisoned and even murdered Christians and then had some kind of conversion experience and admitted to what they'd done, they would face some kind of legal sanction regardless of whether they went on to have some great ministry as well. I think, I mean, then it's a question of how does this work within the Jewish world at the time? And just as we look back on the 16th century and see heretics being burned to the stake, etc. And this was very seriously justified by very serious devout and apparently in other words, in other ways, wise people.

I mean, think of Thomas Moore, for example, completely justifying burning heretics at the stake because this was a very dangerous disease like cutting out a cancer. We have to deal with this. And if we don't, we are complicit in their wickedness ourselves.

And in the same way, there would have been many, particularly among the more zealous Jews of Paul's day and zeal is precisely you need to purge the iniquity from Israel. Think of some of the Old Testament stories about a daythou and people. And in the Pentateuch about people who do this must be cut off from among their people that that that you're in danger of catching a fel disease here as a community.

And we've got to deal with it. So I don't think the question of public law would have entered into it. That's interesting.

Here's another interesting one about Paul's personality, Ryan in Kitchener, Ontario says, do you see Paul as having traits of what we call asperges or autism today? If he was alive today, your picture of him in Paul's biography makes me think he'd be considered autistic or ASD. That's an interesting question. Do you have any ideas? Well, of course, he's sharing that perception with with with the Roman magistrate who is trying Paul in Acts 26.

And Paul is actually addressing King Agrippa, who is there, one of the Herod family. And it is putting him on the spot and saying, now Agrippa, you believe the prophets, don't you? And Agrippa is going to say, yes, because he wants to be a good Jewish. And you say, I know you believe the prophets.

So therefore, you believe in resurrection, don't you? So why? And at which point the Roman magistrate yells out Paul, you're mad, you've been studying too long. It's turned

your head. He says, no, actually, I'm not mad.

Agrippa knows I'm speaking sober truth. So but but depending on your culture, different things that people might quite reasonably do might appear mad. Yeah.

About 10 or a dozen years ago, somebody from the New Statesman was sent to interview me as well as Bishop of Durham. And they had to come and do an interview with me. And the chap in the interview who said that a friend of his from a different denomination from my own hearing he was coming to interview me had said, he's mad, you know.

So that's nice. Yeah. And the New Statesman interview was, I think, rather disappointed that I seem quite normal.

I mean, not that we're equating asperges or anything with madness. No, no, the point being that the personality, the personality, I think, well, I think interpreted in different ways in different cultures. Yes.

I say in the biography, Paul would have been a very high maintenance friend. Yes. And you know, we do things like Myers Briggs patterns, we do things like the Enneagram, we have ways of lining people up and saying, and Paul was relentless.

There's no question. Intense. Yeah.

Intense and relentless. Does that mean he had asperges or something? I really don't know. Because he was also a high functioning individual who could not only write about love, the greatest of these is love.

But from all that we see, for instance, in First Thessalonians, was a person of utter personal generosity who would weep with people who would pray with people who when he had to leave, they were they would weep because they loved him so much. And I think I think he was a full on human being in a way which we rather restrained westerners are a bit embarrassed about being. And I don't think he had a particular syndrome.

I think he was just a very vividly alive person. Another question that is an interesting historical one, Annette in South Africa, having read simply Jesus and Paul of biography and others, I'm intrigued by the relationship between Jesus and Paul and wonder if Paul the Pharisee studying in Jerusalem, probably at the time Jesus was there, ever would have encountered Jesus in person. What are your speculations on this? I have wondered that too.

There is absolutely no evidence. There's any such meaning he did take place. Some people have said in the past that when Paul says in Galatians, he loved me and gave himself for me, we should hook that up with the story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10

when it says Jesus looked at him and loved him and he went away sorrowful.

That is fairly speculative. Extremely speculative. And it's the kind of speculation on which, as C.S. Lewis said in different contexts, no one would risk tenchillings in ordinary life.

He wouldn't lay bets on that. But though Jerusalem was quite a small, tight-packed city, it's perfectly possible that Jesus and his followers might be in one place and that's all of Tarsus. And you know, there were different movements, there were people coming and going.

So though it's physically possible, historically possible, we have no evidence for exposing it to him. Is it likely at least that Saul, as was, would have heard about this person making waves during large crowds? Absolutely. No, that is highly probable because it was a great renewal movement.

There were other renewal movements. And the Pharisees, and Saul was nothing if not a Pharisee, were anxious about this because they too were a renewal movement. And it's as though you start this great political party and you're going strong and then here's somebody else doing a very similar thing.

Do they share our objectives? What's going on? Do we approve of them? So I think there may well have been some tension there. But again, no sign of an actual personal meeting until the road to Damascus. Indeed.

And Donald in Conroe, Texas said it's accepted by many that Mark wrote his gospel under Peter. When it comes to the actual content, I don't doubt this. However, considering Mark was also a companion of Paul, do you see a connection between the actual message or intent of Mark's gospel? And the Pauline message of the kingdom as described in your book, Paul, a biography? Yeah, I think there's a lot of toing and froing between a lot of early Christians, a lot of the work that's been done, say, on the gospels recently, well, over the last generation, has indicated that the gospels were for all Christians and that there was a lot of traveling in the first century.

The good Roman road system and Christians pop up here and there, the same people in Ephesus and then back in Rome and in Corinth, and they're taking documents around with them. And there's every reason to suppose that as the gospels are written, that this was going on all the time, the problem comes when people imagine that the gospels are about the kingdom of God and that Paul is talking about something else, namely Jesus and how to get to heaven or something, is really not like that. They're all talking about the kingdom of God as being inaugurated by Jesus and established through his death and resurrection.

Paul, of course, focuses on the death and resurrection, but they are the death and

resurrection which established Jesus as the King, the Lord of the world, which is where the whole kingdom of God's message was going. So really, there is a very easy confluence between the two. Of course, Paul is not in his letters telling us the whole story of Jesus' life as Mark or whoever it does or part of it.

But I'm assuming that Paul knew a great deal about Jesus' life, but for him, that was all summarized in what his death and resurrection achieved. I mean, I suppose when Paul's traveling and writing and establishing churches, for a certain period of that, the history of Jesus, that the stories are being passed on in an oral way. But being written down, Mark, at least within Paul's lifetime, yes.

I always say to my students that if you read the textbooks, they will say that Mark is written in the late sixties and Matthew and Luke and John thereafter, we actually don't know that. There is no hard evidence for saying any of that. They might all have been written, as early as 50 AD, I don't think they were, but they might have been.

They might all be not written until 85. I don't think they're that late, but they could be. Because the crucial bit of evidence about where are they in relation to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 is much more ambiguous than people have usually made out.

And as well, there was some prejudices in the last century or two about saying, well, they should have really been living by faith in just waiting for the Lord to return. They shouldn't have been writing history. And so this must represent a failure of nerve after the first generation.

That is complete rubbish. That's simply not how they thought. And they're not writing history in the sense of nostalgic jotting about how it was way back when.

They're telling the story of how God's age-old purposes for Israel and the world came to their climax in Jesus in order to launch this new movement. And you could tell that story in 35 AD, or you could tell it in 95 and you still want to do it. And Paul will be right there in the middle of it.

Good stuff. I hope that's helped with some of the questions that have come in on the Apostle Paul. I'm sure we'll return to that in due course.

There were lots more questions about Paul that I could have reached for in the mailbag. But do make sure to get us your questions as well. Whatever they're on, we try to keep mixing up the themes from podcast episode to episode.

And we do try to tackle as many different things as we can. And next time it'll be something completely different. So do come back again for the next time.

And for the moment, thank you very much. Thank you. Good to be with you.

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