

OpenTheo

#65 Acts Q&A Pt 2 - Tongues, doctrine and evangelism

May 13, 2021



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Should we use Acts for doctrinal guidance? Is speaking in tongues the mark of a mature Christian? Is there a difference between the Paul of Acts and the letters? How should Acts inspire us to live today? Tom responds to more questions from participants on the NT Wright Online video course on The Acts of The Apostles.

- See NT Wright & Douglas Murray live in conversation on Thurs 13 May, 8pm UK, 3pm Eastern
- Book for the Unbelievable? & Ask NT Wright Anything conference on Sat 15 May
- Get a listener discount on the NT Wright Online course on the Acts of the Apostles
- Support the show and receive a free book – give from the USA or Rest of the world
- For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com
- Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online
- Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

Well hello and welcome back, I'm Justin Briley and today's show brought to you as usual by Premier SBCK and Anti-Right Online. And part two of a couple of shows brought to you in partnership with Anti-Right Online where you can access Tom's video teaching courses. There'll be more about that in a moment's time but we've got part two of his responses to questions on the book of Acts.

Now if you're listening in time we've got two special Anti-Right events happening imminently. Today, Thursday the 13th of May as I record you can be part of the live stream conversation that I'm hosting between Tom and cultural commentator Douglas Murray on identity, myth and miracles. That's tonight at 8pm UK, 3pm Eastern.

And then this weekend on Saturday, Tom will be my special guest at Unbelievable the Conference 2021. How to tell the greatest story ever told. It's going to be a wonderful day of learning from some other wonderful contributors to including Tom Holland, Claire Williams, Sean and Josh McDowell, hosted by myself and Ruth Jackson.

And in the live edition of this show, the Ask Anti-Right Anything podcast around off the day, you can attend from anywhere in the world. It's not too late to register. Unbelievable.live is the place to go.

If you have booked by the way but haven't yet seen an email with your link for joining or if you need any kind of technical help or want to watch the conference in delay, do just email tickets@premier.org.uk if you've got any questions. All the links that I've mentioned to the upcoming conversation tonight, this year's conference and everything else is all with the info with today's show and how to get in touch and leave a question for the show yourself. So today's show features Tom continuing to answer questions on the book of Acts that he gave as part of a Q&A for anti-right online who deliver Tom's video teaching courses.

One of their popular courses is based on the acts of the apostles. Now if you'd like to access the full video teaching course we've a special listener discount for you in the info with today's podcast so do check that out. But let's leap into the questions again and let's start with this one.

How does acts contribute to doctrinal discussions? One of the funny things about acts is that though it's such a brilliant and passionate book it is often set aside by congregations and denominations when they're discussing doctrine. People tend when discussing doctrine and going back to the Bible to go to Paul and Hebrews particularly and then perhaps particularly in some respects at least to the gospels. And the doctrinal traditions of churches in the western world, especially Protestant churches, has tended to put Paul on a pedestal and because the speeches of Paul in Acts don't quite fit what some people expect to hear people sometimes just hold back from them a bit.

But as I've worked on Acts again and again I've been struck by all sorts of ways in which acts actually contributes directly to doctrinal discussions for instance on the resurrection. Sometimes people write whole books about the resurrection taking 1 Corinthians 15 which is obviously important and central but forgetting that in passages like Acts 2 and many other places we have very clear statements about resurrection based on the Psalms and elsewhere where David says you will not let your Holy One see corruption which makes it clear that for Luke resurrection is not a fancy way of talking about going to heaven when you die or your soul going away from the body but is about new bodies or the renewal of physical life and so on and so on. And in particular when it comes to the meaning of the cross people have often gone for Paul and Hebrews quite rightly and naturally but have forgotten that it's in Acts that we find Paul saying to the Ephesian

elders that you must feed the church of God which he purchased with his own blood and it's in Acts that you find that Jesus is commissioning Paul to go to the Gentiles because they are to turn from the power of Satan to God because the power of evil has been defeated on the cross and likewise with the question actually of who Jesus himself is.

Acts begins with the ascension but the ascension is often misunderstood. The ascension doesn't mean Jesus just going away and leaving us to our own devices. I've sometimes heard people say that.

The one who is now seated in heaven is the one who is joining heaven and earth together and is its rightful Lord and if we've got that right then all sorts of things not only about who Jesus is but about the social and cultural and even political implications of who Jesus is might have come out clearly. So I suspect it's a kind of long-term laziness on the part of many churches down the years to go to the obvious places that people have written dogmatic textbooks out of and to few acts as simply giving us some of the back story and actually that isn't just a problem about acts it's a problem about the gospels as well but that is another story. The next question is is speaking in tongues the mark of Christian maturity? From time to time and it's happened throughout my adult life the question of speaking in tongues comes back onto the table and there it is in Acts chapter two and at certain key moments later on in Acts though not actually as often as people sometimes imply and it's there of course in passages like 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 14 as well though again not elsewhere I think in Paul.

So clearly it's important but not that important and anyone who thinks that speaking in tongues is the mark of healthy Christianity I think needs to read right through the New Testament at a run and think again but that's not to say it's unimportant. In the book of Acts there are perhaps two different sorts of speaking in tongues and certainly some have said that that has continued in the church today. On the one hand there is the to us very strange phenomenon of people being able under the inspiration of the spirit to speak in languages that they've never learned and never heard and never read or studied.

I used to think this was a bit far-fetched but I've actually met one or two people to whom that has happened where they have found a strong impulse on a bus going through a street in London for instance one of them was telling me to speak in tongues and then to have somebody else on the bus saying how do you know fluent Hindustani or whatever it was and well they didn't know that's what it was. I have no explanation for that except God can do whatever God does and if I happen to be a spectator or even a participant that's fine but there is another meaning to speaking in tongues and if that first one has often been useful as it was on the day of Pentecost to communicate to a wider audience in their own language what God was doing then the other use which I think is what's going on in 1 Corinthians and perhaps in some of the passages in Acts is simply that speaking in tongues whether privately or out loud is a kind of a language of love it's a

special language which when you find that you want badly to pray about something but don't quite know what to say then this language can take over in the power of the spirit and you have a sense that as Paul says in Romans 8 we don't know what we should be praying for in this particular situation but we put ourselves into the hands of God and trust that the spirit within us is praying for these people this situation whatever it may be. So it seems to me on the one hand that we should never say that speaking in tongues is the be all and end all of Christian maturity.

I've known some people who've tried to teach that and I think even in most Pentecostal movements there are few people today who would actually insist that until you've spoken in tongues you haven't reached Christian maturity and I would say having worked with many Christians from different traditions that there are many who have spoken in tongues either as young people or as older people who still themselves have a long way to go as I think we all do in our journey of Christian maturity. However it seems that in our day as in the first century God can and does give both the gift of other languages surprisingly and the gift of a kind of private language of love and prayer and that when these gifts are given there to be used humbly for God's glory without any sense that they make that person any more special than the person who doesn't have those gifts. After all as Paul says in the body of Christ we are not all a hand or an eye or a foot we need one another the gifts are important but they're not the whole of the story.

Question number three on Acts. How does the Paul of Acts compare to the Paul of the letters? When we compare the Paul of Acts with the Paul of the letters there are various things which strikers is a little surprising particularly if by the Paul of the letters we mean the Paul of normal 19th and 20th century western Protestant imagination which has tended to focus on Galatians and Romans and perhaps particularly on Galatians and has often tended to read that in the light of Luther's stark antithesis between the law over here and the gospel over here as Luther once unwisely said I think he said many more nuanced things but once he did say Moses knows nothing of Christ. Now the Paul of Acts would never have said that because the Paul of Acts is constantly going into the synagogue and preaching about Jesus there from the Old Testament and the Paul of Acts goes through purification rituals he takes a vow he goes into the temple to offer a sacrifice.

See how could the Paul we know from Galatians have done that? Well Galatians is addressed to a very specific situation and Paul is arguing in Galatians that the Torah was God's law and it was given by God for a particular purpose and for a particular time and the problem is that we live in the overlap of the ages so that it's absolutely vital that new Christians becoming converts from the pagan background do not think that they have to become Jews in order to become Christians but when Paul is going to Jerusalem or if he's going to dinner with some Jewish friends in Corinth or anywhere else or Ephesus or somewhere then as he says in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 to the Jews I became as a Jew. The end of 1 Corinthians 9 has some very interesting statements which need to be

pondered before we rush too quickly into separating out the Paul of the letters from the Paul of Acts because actually I don't think the Paul in Acts is in that sense strictly following Torah. Acts doesn't tell us what Paul did in relation to the food that might be set before him if he was having a dinner with Gentile friends in 1 Corinthians it's quite clear that he says eat whatever is put before you make no distinction between things unless somebody is present whose conscience is going to be offended.

So it seems to me that we need to grow up a bit in our reading of Paul and when you put not only Galatians but also a full reading of Romans right through to the end not just certain key passages earlier on and a full reading of 1 Corinthians and indeed Ephesians on the map then in fact things are more complicated and interesting than they might have seemed and particularly when Paul in Acts 13 says that by this Jesus you can be freed from everything that you couldn't be freed through the law of Moses then even though people have said well that looks like a rather rough and ready attempt to say something about justification I think once we understand how justification works and how the meaning of the cross in Paul works then we can see that that is a perfectly good or be it perhaps Lukeon summary of what Paul was teaching so I'm all for a bigger picture of Acts a bigger picture of the letters and then we find that the Paul of both actually dovetails together pretty well. Our final question on Acts for today's show what do we learn from Acts about our calling to spread the gospel? So as we read the book of Acts and we think we are called today to spread the gospel what might we learn from Acts for a start as the disciples had to discover in the first chapter of Acts Jesus is Lord they are surprised they don't know what they're going to be doing but he is Lord he's going to send the Spirit and he will tell them what to do that is the absolute basic principle and if we think we can say well yeah we'll believe that as a bit of Christian dogma and now we have to plan and have committees and do things our own way then watch out we always have to go through the rhythm of going back to worship and to prayer and perhaps to fasting for our plans for how we do what we are to do and then of course as we see the early church spreading the gospel often it happened by accident they found themselves in a particular place couldn't stop talking about Jesus and learn behold some people come to faith and then they find themselves with a small or growing church but there are all sorts of other things which I think we can learn more specifically one of which would be Paul's methods which seem to be to go primarily to some of the major conurbations places like Ephesus and Thessalonica and Corinth and ultimately wants to go to Rome and on to Spain and I think there's two things going on within that strategy one is that if there's a metropolis where people are coming together where people come for business or for whatever reason and then we'll go back and out into their other places of dwelling then if you can get something going in that metropolis the word will get out into the surrounding countryside I think Ephesus is the best example we have of that where it's quite explicit that that was going on but I think that was happening in northern Greece and in Corinth and Paul wanted it to happen in Rome as well but alongside that the cities that Paul chooses tend to be major centers of Roman influence

and Paul is well aware that the normal Jewish perception of Rome is as the great empire from over the seas that they hoped would be benign but now they think it's demonic rather like Babylon in the Old Testament and indeed Rome often gets characterized as Babylon and so I think what Paul is saying is we are going to name Jesus as Lord in the places where Caesar is named as Lord and if we're thinking about spreading the gospel today that oughtn't to be about retreating from the world and saying never mind who thinks they're running the world we're doing this thing in a safe space over here and we'll get you through this world and out the other side no we ought to find ways of saying who thinks they're running the world right now what would it mean to worship Jesus and to spread the gospel in precisely that place and space and I think there are many Christians around the world who are doing that today but then the final thing I would say is that again and again the people through whom the gospel spreads are the people who are living this strange new life which is modeled on Jesus himself and his teaching and his way of life and the fact of dying to the old world and coming alive to the new you don't have to be high-powered have lots of money a sophisticated organization you have to be humble prayerful wise loving serving Christian people and then to your surprise perhaps people will notice they'll say what's different what have they got what's this all about and they will sign on that is actually how the gospel spread not only in acts but in the first three centuries even when the Romans were trying to persecute it and stamp it out and it's how the gospel has spread and continues to spread to this day even in some very unlikely places. Thank you for listening today today's show again a bit different than usual but you've been listening to Tom's responses to a number of questions sent in by participants on the anti-right online video course on the acts of the apostles if you'd like access to the full video teaching course we've a special listener discount for you in the info with today's podcast so do feel free to check that out also final call to book your place for unbelievable the conference this Saturday the 15th of May that's at unbelievable dot live and if you can join us for the curtain razor tonight Thursday the 13th of May it's the live stream conversation with Douglas Murray we'd love to see you there again links with today's show we'll be back with the podcast next week for now god bless see you next time