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#90 Galatians, Tom vs Luther and gender

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom has recently had a major new commentary on Galatians published. Justin talks to him about it and poses question from listeners about aspects of Galatians, including the fruits of the Spirit, whether gender will exist in the new creation, and where he disagree with Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians.

For Tom's new Galatians commentary: <https://eerdword.com/galatians/>

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome to this week's edition of the show with me Justin Brierle, theology and apologetics editor for Premier and as always the show has brought to you in partnership with Premier and also SBCK, Tom's UK publisher and NT Wright online who published Tom's online video teaching. If you enjoy today's show which is going to be looking at Galatians, Tom has a brand new commentary out on the book of Galatians, then why not share it with others, tell others about the show, rate and review us as well if you're listening to our podcast that helps others to discover the show too. And if you want more from the programme you can of course go to our webpage [AskNT Wright.com](http://AskNTWright.com) if you sign up there you'll get our regular newsletter and also be in with a chance for prize draws and bonus content too.

[AskNT Wright.com](http://AskNTWright.com) and of course you can still get hold of all the video teaching from this year's unbelievable conference where NT Wright was our special guest along with people like Tom Holland and others. Links again all at [AskNT Wright.com](http://AskNTWright.com) Okay, why don't we jump into today's show. Well welcome along to another edition of the podcast and really excited to be sitting down with Tom on this occasion to be talking about one of his most

recent books it's a new commentary on Galatians and I remember during the pandemic and the lockdown this the title of this book came up a few times Tom you've been working on it for a little while now haven't you.

Tell us about this because it can't be the first time you've written on Galatians. What's significant about this particular commentary? No I've actually got the book sitting here. There you go.

Fairly brand new just a few months old. Yes Galatians was one of the books that I began with in the early 1970s when I first started having a passionate interest in Paul Galatians and Romans were sitting there side by side and kind of smiling at each other across an apparent divide and one of the great things was are they saying exactly the same thing is the one just a longer version of the other or are they different and if so how and has Paul changed his mind and I started to get quite teased by that and started to investigate the different words he uses the way Abraham comes in Galatians 3 versus Romans 4 and so on and so on and so on so I've been living with this stuff since the early 1970s and yes when I did my New Testament for everyone the series of little popular commentaries then Galatians was one of the first ones I did in that series so that would be 20 or so years ago I think I wrote that in maybe 2000 or 2001 it's the one on Galatians and the Thessalonian letters and so but inevitably as well whenever you write about Paul and I've written quite a lot about Paul as you know Galatians is always going to be on the agenda and so for instance if you write about Paul's Christology what did you mean by Son of God well bang here we've got it the end of Galatians 2 I live by the faith of or the faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me that's a wonderful explosive central statement but in order to get at that you have to understand the whole of the paragraph in order to understand the whole of the paragraph you have to think into the situation of Paul and Peter confronting each other in Antioch and then guess what you're halfway to writing another commentary so finally I pulled it all together and I actually found it very exciting to do this and it took me a year or two of doing seminar papers getting feedback from colleagues and students and so on and then finally editing it all up so yeah it's been an important part of my life yeah just just for those who aren't familiar with sort of the chronology of the letters where about Stas Galatians fit in in the life and writing of Paul that that is a contentious controversial issue because some people are seeing how similar it is to Romans in some ways in some ways and then dating Romans towards the end of Paul's writing career so perhaps in the late 50s have said well Galatians must be really close up to that I think that's completely wrong I think it looks similar because he is dealing with some similar issues not all the time but actually I dated in the late 40s before the so-called Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15 and Paul is in Antioch he's just got word that's Syrian Antioch he's just got word from the churches in southern Turkey that people have come in and said hey you've got to do this you've got to do that and simultaneously he's been having a confrontation with Peter about whether Jewish believers should eat with uncircumcised gentile believers etc

and so he fires off this letter in great haste and then he and Barnabas and presumably Peter's gone already head off south to Jerusalem for the conference so that's where I put it so from my point of view I think it's the earliest letter Paul wrote yeah yeah interesting the earliest letter we have but you maybe he wrote a dozen others that we don't have but so gosh what would happen to the world of biblical scholarship if we turned up another one a but anyway I think how exciting I mean you know it could happen when when I was very young the Dead Sea Scrolls were just being discovered and then edited and nobody saw that one coming and changed the face of our understanding of second temple Judaism so things can happen absolutely absolutely who knows who knows anyway let's let's look at some of the questions that have come in by the way we'll make sure there's a link to the the new book of course it's by the way it's Galatians by anti-right the inaugural publication of the commentaries for Christian formation published by Edmonds so um do look in the show notes for for the details of that let's go to Christopher in Denver Colorado who says this I've decided to read Martin Luther and anti-right's respective commentaries on Galatians for the sake of putting a 16th century reformer and a 21st century New Testament historian into a dialectical conversation because it is clear they both read this book differently and I want to judge which reading strikes me as superior it may be the case that Luther has the upper hand in some interpretations and rights in others my question is how can we move beyond the impasse between the old and new perspectives on Paul when we interpret the book of Galatians so often it seems the church's hermeneutical conflicts are actually a false dichotomy must we really choose between Luther and anti-right or should we try to hold their interpretations together in a dialectical play which yields a deeper and wider picture after all as iron sharpens iron so one person sharpens another according to Proverbs so take it away Tom well well it's a nice quote from Proverbs but um I'm not going to allow Hegel to get smuggled into a question under the guise of Proverbs you know this idea of an endless dialectic with A then B then a C which joins A and B together yes that can happen curiously I was at a meeting last night where somebody asked me a similar question on a different topic and I said well you know John Henry Newman in Oxford 180 or so years ago said that there are two types of disagreements disagreements about words and disagreements about things disagreements about words where you and I use different words but when we tease out what we really mean turns out we're saying the same thing oh few okay now we can be happy about that but there are other things when when you really tease it all out we are actually disagreeing and then you have to say who is right and how do you know and what's your standard and by what you judge so it's always possible that not least in theology I would say that where person A and person B seem radically to disagree then somebody else can come along and say hang on you're just trying to hold on to this bit and you're holding on to this bit let me show you the larger whole which joins them together sometimes that can just be a patronizing power play I'm the person who sees it all and you two are just silly people messing around sometimes that can actually be true and a wise tutor or professor can sometimes reconcile apparently perfectly validly reconcile apparently divergent views

however when it comes to Luther I really do want to say if you're faced as Luther was with the corruptions of the medieval church and if you're faced with people reading the Bible in Latin but only the clergy reading the Bible in Latin and then giving the usual medieval interpretations whether it's about the kind of rather low-grade versions of trans-absanigation in Eucharistic theology that that he was faced with or whether it's the doctrine of purgatory which was massive and culturally formative in the 14th and 15th century when you're faced with that then if you're Luther yes for goodness sake pick up the Bible and say no this won't do we've got to do better than this and it is all a nonsense so Luther's protest was justified and he was right to go back to scripture and he was absolutely right to say that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the very center of everything and we have to think around everything else has to be reorganized around that yes absolutely where I think Luther and I would disagree and where I think there is simply no question of compromise here is the meaning of the law and works of the law in Paul because sadly Luther simply didn't understand how the Jewish mind of the time worked and what the role of the law was and he assimilated Paul's statements about the law to the rather fierce ethic which he had learned as a young Augustinian monk and so he projects onto Moses himself all his own frustrations with the heavy-handed moralism that he'd been dealt out under which he had cowed before he quote discovered the gospel unquote well fine he discovered the free grace and love of God in Christ fantastic but that's a total misrepresentation both of the mosaic law and of the way it is being treated in Paul's own second temple period and I've tried to tease that out as to what's actually going on at the time interestingly Carl Bart said this back in the 1950s in one of the volumes of church dogmatics Bart already who was a great fan of Luther and Calvin could see that Luther had projected his view of medieval Catholicism onto Paul's opponents in Galatia and that it just didn't fit and didn't work and actually for me the real crunch is if you read Galatians that way you'll find Galatians and Romans themselves at cross purposes and as I said a moment ago one of the features of my early research into Paul which has remained with me ever since was looking at Galatians and Romans side by side and seeing how apparent not contradictions but difficulties between the two are in fact easily held together there's a place where they do really belong together let me say one more thing yes recently this book came out by Matthew Thomas Paul's works of the law in the perspective of second century reception Matthew Thomas goes right through all the writers in the second century who are reading Paul and for all of them the works of the law are not the moral deeds that we do in order to impress God they are the things that Jews do in order to express their membership in the Jewish covenant relationship with God so as one of my colleagues here in Oxford now says it's not a matter of old and new perspective there is only one perspective which is that works of the law are for Paul the things which the Jews do to mark them out as God's people but now in the new world inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus these are irrelevant for membership in the people of God so Luther and I would agree about a great many things I hope we'd shake hands and be friends but on many key issues of interpretation I think history has to win okay there you go hope that's

helped Christopher not everything can be held in a dialogue by the way can we just say to Christopher as he reads the two commentaries I would love to know how he gets on with it absolutely yes do get in touch Christopher we'd like to hear back from you good stuff great start thank you Tom so more questions on Galatians here from listeners another Christopher oh Christoph in this case in France emails in to say I've been thoroughly enjoying the podcast the answers to the questions have been very inspiring and helped a lot in understanding some of the more complicated spiritual concepts my question concerns that passage in Galatians 5 where Paul says against such things there is no law it always puzzled me that he would see the need to mention that there was no law forbidding such virtues lately I've been thinking rather that the word against is often used to mean in preparation for which seems to me to make a lot more sense with the point Paul is making I then understand this statement to mean something like no law will be able to produce this fruit could that be what Paul was trying to say if not what exactly does he mean by this statement thank you Christoph any thoughts Tom very very interesting obviously I discussed that in the commentary not this particular question because I've never quite heard it put that way before and I was puzzled by the question when you sent it to me before so I checked in one or two dictionaries and so on and yes the Greek word *κατὰ* which is normally here translated against does have quite a range of meanings but actually I think the idea that it's in preparation for such things there is no law that would create more problems than it would solve I think the easiest solution is that Paul as he is throughout Galatians 5 is being ironic he's saying well the fruit of the spirit is love joy peace all these other things self-control you won't find any law forbidding those will you in other words you can get on with developing the fruits of the spirit in your life and the mosaic torah will just look on and smile in other words you won't be upsetting your name your Jewish neighbors you won't be upsetting anybody you won't be upsetting the Roman authorities if you're practicing that stuff but it's particularly the Jewish thing that he has in mind and there is of course great irony throughout Galatians 5 and some of the sharpest things that Paul ever writes come in that chapter and I think it fits exactly with that Raja Vengalil I think it is in Kerala India says Tom thank you for your ministry when thinking of the new heavens and the new earth are we expecting a completely or mostly new creation or is the restoration of the state of affairs to how they were before the fall when Paul speaks of our oneness in Christ in Galatians 3 verse 28 is there an eschatological element to it in that in the new heavens and new earth there is a dismantling of racial economic and even gender differences if yes then given that gender was a pre-fall conception it seems to lend credence to the idea that everything will be new similarly when Jesus speaks of resurrection reality he says that they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven that again seems to be a dismantling of the institution of marriage which was also a pre-fall conception so anything we can say about these things now or do we simply not know well great question it obviously relates tangentially to one verse in Galatians Galatians 3 28 neither june or greek slave nor free no male and female but it's obviously much much wider I would preface it by saying what I always say about the

ultimate future that all our language about God's intended future consists of a set of signposts pointing into a fog or a mist and I was making this point to somebody who was walking down the street in Oxford the other day and there was a signpost right in front of us pointing down the road leading to the Sheldonian theatre and because it's a theatre it had the theatre symbol which is the the sort of badge with a smiley face on ones that were you know the two masks that actors would wear the smiley face and then the sad face and I said you can go all the way around the Sheldonian theatre and you won't see anything that at all looks like that mask however we all know that that's the sign for theatre and so it's pointing in the right direction if you follow the sign it will take you to where you're going so in the same way all our language about the future is like those signposts they're true but they're not accurate represent they're not photographic representations of what we'll find when we get there so when you read Revelation 21 which is the obvious place to go to 21 and 22 and all sorts of things about the the the gates of the city and the the streets and so on and this is just a way of saying this is amazingly lavish it's the fulfillment of everything God had ever wanted to do and he's now doing it etc etc but if we arrive at the the final New Jerusalem when it's come down from heaven to earth and we complain because the jewels do not look exactly like what we'd imagine from the text then I think God would say you're missing the point actually that's not what it was about so when it comes particularly to genderedness and marriage then what Jesus is saying in that passage in Matthew Mark Andalouc his debate with the Sadducees is that in the new creation there will be no death people humans raised from the dead will be immortal and when you're immortal there is no need for procreation and we assume that therefore marriage itself which is the institution designed among many other things to enable procreation to happen to enable the human race to continue to move forward etc won't be necessary anymore will there be gender related relationships in the new creation we simply don't know that's been a topic of discussion since the early fathers actually and some have said yes some have said no and I suspect that means there's a whole new dimension of reality to which are present gender relatedness simply maybe a distant pointer but that's that's about it just like in Revelation 21 it says there'd be no sun or moon because the Lord would be their light so though the sun and moon clearly are pre-fall parts of creation that they seem to be swallowed up as though they themselves even in the original creation was signposts to what God eventually intended that that God and the Lamb will be their light whatever that actually means and looks like the other passage I would want to bring in is Mark 10 where Jesus is faced with the question about divorce and they're saying well Moses allowed us to divorce so what do you say and Jesus says for the hardness of your heart Moses gave you this command but from the beginning it was not so in other words Jesus is launching the renewal of the created order which is why there he says marriage is now one man one woman for life whereas Moses because of the hardness of your heart gives you the permission in other words that was a temporary thing and we are now going back to the creator's intention however Jesus ministry is inaugurating this new creation with this renewal of the creator's intention within this phase between the inauguration and the completion of the

kingdom of God on earth is in heaven so what we are commanded to do and be at the moment both is and isn't a signpost to what it'll be like in the future that's complicated I understand but I think the really important thing is that at the moment the one man one woman for life thing is absolutely mandated by Jesus Mark 10 and the parallels and that the future remains mysterious but it's a future which will be full of the faithfulness and the love and the generosity of God implying that faithfulness and love and generosity in the present are the sort of people that we should be in our marriages in all our relationships in order to be anticipating in the present the ultimate reality whatever that will in fact look like and just to bring it back to Galatians the question Raj had specifically was on Galatians 3:28 which again one of the best known verses in the whole of the book there is no longer Jew or Greek no longer slave or free there is no longer male or female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus I mean that was obviously a revolutionary statement in its time but is it a statement as Raj seems to be asking that points forward to some sort of abolishing of these different categories in the new creation or is that not what it was intended to be? Well you have to be very very careful there first thing is that in the Greek Paul is not just saying there is no Jew Greek no slave nor free no male and female it says there is neither Jew nor Greek slave or free and then no and it's a quotation male and female which is a reference back to Genesis 1 male and female he made them in other words men and women stand on equal ground in the in the community of the new creation which is what the church is supposed to be but that doesn't mean clearly if you look at Corinthians and other passages it doesn't mean that gender differences are abolished in the present some people have said oh it looks as though Paul in visages that we are now all sort of theologically speaking him aphrodis that it really doesn't matter where the male female distinction is now abolished and then you read 1 Corinthians and it's quite clear that that's not the case and likewise the Jew Greek distinction though that's abolished in terms of membership in Abraham's family you have to be very careful how you say that in case as the postmodern language now has it all the identity politics in case you are erasing someone's identity now in a sense all identities are erased in Christ but in another sense they are honored they are part of God's created order so Paul can say in Romans 11 I am a Jew now I'm thinking I could Jew and this is how it works out and you Gentiles and you Jews etc you've got to be very careful how you navigate that one and the last chapters of Romans are specially concerned with that so we have to be very careful about imagining that what is true in terms of church membership and that yes Galatians 3:28 is really really important in that respect can then be projected onto all sorts of other areas as well you need to tread extremely cautiously when you go down that road thank you so much Tom again if you would like to get hold of the new commentary on Galatians it's available now we'll make sure there's a link from today's show so that you can do that and I'm sure it will be worth your time but Tom it's been wonderful to catch up with you again on today's show and I look forward to seeing you next time thank you thanks for being with us on today's edition of the show and as I mentioned a couple of times you can find a link to the new Galatians commentary from today's show in the show notes or at askentiright.com where you can find this podcast

and many more besides we've covered so many issues and I believe or not by the new year we'll be approaching our 100th episode amazing next week on the show Platonism we often hear that term used by Tom but what exactly does it mean and why is he so concerned about it when it comes to Christianity a number of you've been asking questions around Platonism and we'll hear them at the same time next week for now do check out the show page askentiright.com for more from the show and to sign up otherwise we'll see you next time

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