

OpenTheo

#103 Vaccines, mandates and civil disobedience

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Should faith leaders speak out in favour of vaccines? Is it ok for Christians to disobey government mandates? What about pacifism? Tom answers these and more questions.

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Transcript

Ask NT Wright Anything Podcast Hello, welcome back, it's Justin Brierlee and the show brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online, SBCK and Premier Unbelievable. I'm head of theology and apologetics at Premier. We love answering your questions on this show, we've got some really interesting ones today on the church, vaccines, government and the case for civil disobedience.

Thanks to Adam who tweeted that he finds the podcast really helpful that we run, Unbelievable and Ask NT Wright Anything in particular. Adam says I like podcasts for their ease of listening to and introduction to subjects that lead me to finding authors I want to read and study more. I hope today does that for you Adam.

Thanks for tweeting us and don't forget if you rate and review this podcast in your podcast provider, it helps others to discover the show and of course the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Well, why don't we get into today's programme. Well, welcome back to another edition of the show, always a pleasure to be joined by Tom Wright for these dives into your questions today looking at various issues around government and

authority.

We're recording at a time when currently there are still COVID measures in place, though some of them have been relaxed recently, Tom here in the UK at least. And there's a feeling that perhaps we are edging towards starting to come out of this pandemic. Just a little update from you on what life has been like now that Christmas is behind us and you know and so on.

How are you feeling presently about life and COVID and all of that sort of thing? Well, it's been quite confusing because though of course the restrictions on say meeting or singing hymns in church, whatever have been lifted and we're able to do a lot of things that we weren't able to do when the first lockdown happened nearly two years ago. There is still a sense of danger and of frustration as well because people around me are testing positive and then we have to decide well, if I spent time with that person and now they've tested positive, do I have to isolate and all these questions? And because the rules seem to be changing with remarkable rapidity, it's kind of frustrating. You just want to say let's have a rule and know where we are and then we can follow it and be good citizens.

But actually changing it all the time isn't helpful. So masks in shops and all that sort of thing. And it's affected our family because family members who were geographically close to have tested positive.

So we've had to do some babysitting and helping out when somebody can't go to work because of this and that and the other. So we are just looking forward to a time when life will return to something like normal instead of being constantly disrupted all the time. And obviously the disruptions can be very serious.

There are still plenty of people in hospital and plenty of people dying. So I'm not treating this as trivial. No indeed.

Indeed, we've been having a lot of people testing positive. Fortunately, very few cases where there is serious illness involved but nonetheless it is greatly disruptive obviously when that happens. Well look, we've got some questions obviously that circulate around these sorts of issues that have come in.

So Kyle from Columbus, Ohio, is asking about vaccines and what the Bible says. Says he's a new listener just beginning his journey into faith. Well, great to know that you're listening Kyle.

So polling shows that Christians and more specifically evangelical Christians are some of the least likely to get vaccinated. I suspect these maybe polls especially in the USA. Kyle says my thought is that Jesus God would want us to get vaccinated, do no harm, love thy neighbour and so on.

But what are your thoughts on what we should do? What does scripture say? Should our faith leaders be more outspoken in favour of getting the vaccine? Yes, I've been astonished really by the way in which the anti-vaccine movement has spread within some styles of evangelical worship. I'm in regular touch with a couple I know where the wife is actually quite seriously ill. But the husband has been looking at all these websites which say that the vaccines are of the devil, etc, etc.

He won't get vaccinated and she's seriously worried that she might be hospitalised because of her own residual illness but that he wouldn't be allowed to visit her in hospital or in the hospice if she was dying because he hasn't been vaccinated and absolutely refuses to. So I'm aware this is a very sensitive and difficult and grief inducing pastoral situation right now. So it's not a trivial or light thing at all.

But it seems to me that there's in the American culture of certain types of American evangelicalism there is a kind of fear of big government telling us what to do and there's also a decades long resistance to quote science, unquote. I've sometimes been speaking at meetings in America and I've referred to scientists saying this or that and people have said to me, "Do you realise you lost half your audience?" Because they assume that that means you're really an atheist at heart because you believe in science so you don't believe in the Bible and God and so on. I really want to say that whole trunch is so out of line with biblical Christianity, with faith in God, the Creator, etc, etc.

that it's hard to know where to break into that circle. But that's I think what's going on. We have very little of that in Britain except where people spend their time looking at sadly American websites and social media and so on.

So it's a very odd thing. One would not have predicted at the beginning of the pandemic that some large bits of evangelical Christianity, particularly in America, would take this particular line. We didn't know we were going to get a vaccine.

We were all hoping there would be and then loon behold, a vaccine comes along and lots of people say, "No, no, we can't have that. We shouldn't go near it." Now, I understand up to a point the libertarian ethic that says, "I'm not going to have the government tell me what I should and shouldn't put into my body." At the same time, we went through a similar argument. I think I've said this to you before, Justin, with seat belts.

When car seat belts were introduced and people said we should make these compulsory and, "Oh, no, the libertarians didn't want that at all." And then somebody pointed out the statistics of if you're in an accident, the likelihood of getting seriously injured or killed if you're not wearing a seat belt. And when those stats came out and in Britain, because we have a health service which is paid for by taxpayers' money, it was a question, "Well, okay, we're all going to buckle up. And now it's the law in most parts of the world that you have to wear a seat belt." And the libertarians, I'm sorry, guys, but you just have to live with that.

And now we all take it for granted. You wear seat belts. And I see it as actually a very similar thing.

And the kind of spooky stories about this is somebody trying to put some electronic messages into your system. This is just crazy. There was a thing on our news last night where a reporter was going around a hospital and the doctor was pointing out the COVID cases that they've got people hospitalized on ventilators, et cetera.

And all but one in the ward that we were introduced to were people who had not been vaccinated. It seems to me that's just irresponsible. And it does us no credit as Christians of any sort to say, "No, no, no, because we're Christians, we don't need that." Of course, there are many, many things which as Christians we are grateful under God to the doctors who have worked to produce cures for many ills that we suffer from.

I suppose it's that old sort of dynamic of your freedom versus your responsibility and that sometimes you have to look at the responsibility over this kind of... Yes, of course. But I mean, I am free to walk down the middle of the street out here. But actually it's sensible if I look to see if there are any cars or bicycles coming, et cetera, et cetera.

So this is a proper exercise of responsibility, both to myself and to my neighbours. Related questions, I'm going to skip to a couple that we're putting together actually, two questions that came in, one from Rachel in Kentucky, USA, and one from Chainham in Sydney, Australia. And these are both about our sort of, to what extent we are required to obey the government or when is there a case for civil disobedience.

So Rachel in Kentucky says, "What is our duty to obey governing authorities? I've been pondering this a lot during the past year because of governmental mandates in response to the pandemic." There's a state mandate in Kentucky to wear masks around those who are not in your household, among other measures, for isolating provided by the CDC. "I've struggled watching many Christians disobey these mandates because scripture, for example, Romans 13 commands believers to obey governing authorities. By not fulfilling social distancing guidelines, are we disobeying God because we're disobeying the government? What about when we disobey the speed limit while driving? At what point do we deny obeying governing authorities for all the sake of Christ?" And then in a similar way, Chainham asks from Australia, in Romans 13, "We're called to submit to authority," for God has put it there.

"What sort of Christ-shaped framework is there for determining when we should legitimately resist or rebel?" So there you go. And this very much obviously plays into what we've just been talking about. So what's your feeling on where that line lies in terms of when we shouldn't, shouldn't obey the government? Yes.

I will, as I always do, just gently correct the word "feeling." What I feel about it is neither him or that. I think you want to know what I think about it. I do, I do, yes.

It's actually quite an important distinction, as I know you know well. I do, yes. But Romans 13 is really important.

And of course, Paul is writing Romans in the mid-50s when Nero has just become emperor. And okay, the early days of Nero, people didn't quite realize what a monster he was going to turn out to be in the next decade. But Paul knows perfectly well how the Roman system operates.

It's operates by violence. It operates by bullying, et cetera, et cetera. Paul is not saying that the Roman system is the perfect form of government.

But the answer is that actually anarchy is always even worse than tyranny. Ask anyone who is in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. And the anarchy which follows when you remove a tyrant but don't have a stable government to put in place is pretty terrifying.

And that's not to say that tyranny is good or that we should always submit to everything a tyrant wants to do not so. I go back to a moment where I learned this when I was a teenager and was with a wise Christian friend who I think must have been his 30s at the time, who was actually obeying the speed limit in a way that on the drive we were doing seemed to me more or less unnecessary. It was a fine day.

There were no other cars around. And he said that he had always been struck by that line in the book of Daniel where Daniel's opponents say the only way we're going to catch this guy is something to do with his allegiance to his God. And Daniel was very clear that the only things he would be guilty of would be if the king, the emperor told him to do something which was in flagrant contradiction to what his allegiance to the God of Israel was all about.

So that's a matter of when governments tell you basically to worship an idol when they ask you to be to become idolatists. This was of course faced very starkly in the 1930s and we all use the 1930s as the kind of moral yardstick. But this was Karl Bartz protest against Hitler that one of the Nazi authorities said to Bart what we need today is the Ten Commandments law and order and all that.

And Bartz said yes especially the first one because if you put God first then actually you will relativize everything else. But having said that it is clear from scripture and this is very much a Jewish position as well as a Christian position that God the Creator wants there to be good stable government. Now governments are creaky and unstable but insofar as they're there and they are basically holding onto what can be a rather fragile civic piece etc.

It is wise for God's people to say this is the structure that God has put me in. I don't particularly like this law. I don't particularly like the rates of tax I sometimes have to pay but this is what the law says.

Romans 13 says go ahead and pay the tax which I'm sure was much steeper in Paul's Roman day than it would be here for us. And so you do that for the sake of God's present government of the present world. Recognizing this is not yet the perfect world it is not yet the fully fledged kingdom of God but in this interim period we are called to be wise and good citizens.

Until and unless there is something which is flagrantly in opposition to the will of God which we are enlightened by in Scripture. Now different Christians will cut that cake differently. Some will say here it is I'm just going to for instance under apartheid in South Africa.

Some will say I am simply going to meet with my friends from a different ethnic group. In order to show my contempt for this law others will say well we need to campaign and do that wisely otherwise it's going to be chaos and anarchic. Those are important debates to be had.

Very few Christians actually face those difficulties that much of the time. For most of us it's actually pretty clear most of the time. Final question then and this one sort of relates to a specific issue where there might be an area where our freedom of conscience might butt up against the state.

Certainly has been the case in previous eras and during the world wars and so on where we are looking at pacifism. Now Nathan from Nottingham asks and it's quite a long question but I'll ask you in full. How are we to apply the teachings of Christ in regards to non-violence? I'm involved in law enforcement and we have the ethos of the minimum use of force necessary.

However Christ's teachings in regards to turning the other cheek not resisting the evil person are hard teachings to apply to my vocation. I'm called to train and prepare for violence to defend the public. My colleagues from people made in the image of God who nevertheless commit violent acts often self destructively.

In witness to my colleagues many of whom have served in the armed forces this topic often comes up and I honestly don't know where I stand. Is it ever justifiable for a Christian in whom the spirit of Christ dwells to use violence in defence and at times in preemptive offence against evil and disorder. Any violent act comes with the risk of taking a life.

To be a pacifist whilst genuinely admirable leaves the weak and the vulnerable defenceless. The Anabaptist can only live out there non-violent ethic under the protection of a superpower with a stable society and law enforcement. And yet the New Testament and the witness of the earliest church seems to support non-violence in the face of violence.

We'd love to hear your thoughts and recommendations for nuanced reading. Thank you. Wow that's a tough one isn't it Tom? It's a tough one.

It's a well known one and of course there have been many many books and articles written on it. There's many sermons preached on this. I can't possibly summarise all the different nuances in a quick soundbite now as it were.

At the same time I very much understand this. One of my best friends the scholar Richard Hayes in America has maintained a consistent pacifistic stance and has argued for that and he and I have from time to time returned to that in conversation. I take the view that just as I have a lock on the front door and especially if we have grandchildren staying in the house I make sure that the door is double locked overnight etc because there may be crazy or violent people out there and I have a job, a duty to protect my family.

At least I assume I do. I assume I shouldn't leave the front door wide open for anyone to come in. In the same way the government of a city, of a society, of a country has a duty to protect the weak and the vulnerable.

One of the key things in the Messianic vision in Psalm 72 and similar passages is protecting the weak and the vulnerable and if that means saying to the rich and powerful and the arrogant and the despotic you push off where these are the priority and if you push off means actually pushing them off and saying I'm going to stop you doing this then so be it and it seems to me that comes with the turf. Again of living between the times we believe that through Jesus God's new age has been inaugurated. It has not yet come to its fulfillment.

We are living in a very awkward gap where there are things which have to be done at present which are not how things will be in the ultimate new creation in the Isaiah 11 world when the wolf will lie down with the lamb and so on. It seems to me that the vocation which Nathan from Nottingham has to be a law enforcer is hugely important. It's part of what the rest of us need and we are grateful to people who do that job because if it were known that there were no law enforcement then pretty soon people would start to take advantage of the weak and defenceless as they do anyway through a thousand different ways and the internet of course is full of people taking advantage of the unsuspecting but people doing so physically and violently and brutally that would be happening all over the place if there were no police force and yes police sometimes have to restrain people and they I like that idea of the ethos of the minimum use of force necessary but who is to say what that minimum is in the time and in the heat of the moment I think we most of us fully understand that that's a difficult decision to be made and that sometimes people do get it wrong and sometimes as we saw was it a year ago with George Floyd business in America sometimes it appears that people have no thought of the minimum use of force necessary they are just going to

say we are going to bully you into submission and so these are things which we hope and pray that the forces of law and order will be well trained in and that's really difficult and it seems to be the job of being a police chaplain like the job of being an army chaplain is to be with people while they are facing and making very difficult decisions like that.

I was interested in the comment about the animaptists I am not sure that I would like to say exactly that to my animaptist friends you can only do this because you have got a superpower looking after you but I think in a way it's a fair comment but of course these debates go way back to if an axe murderer comes to the door and asks is so and so in the house do you tell a lie and say no they are not here or do you say because I believe in telling the truth actually yes they are in the second room on the right and then we are complicit in murder so those are the kind of standard test cases but I think for the normal run of things we as a society rely on law enforcement because there are people who sadly will very much take advantage of the weak and defenseless otherwise and I honor those who have to make those difficult vocational choices and will pray for them and with them as they seek to do what is necessary for the rest of us. Yeah well thank you Nathan for getting in touch and thank you for being a witness and wanting to really think this through and you know have that real sense that not simply going along with things but putting your Christian faith into practice in your job. Thanks for all the questions today we'll be back with another edition of the show next week but for now thank you very much for being with us and I'll see you next time Tom.

Yes indeed thank you. Thank you for being with us next time works and work. Are you doing good as a sign of our salvation? Is that something Tom endorses or not? What about showing off our good deeds on social media? Plus the question of work itself as in a career what's a healthy attitude to that kind of work? Those and more issues we'll get discussed on next week's show just a reminder though that our show partner SBCK, Tom's UK publisher have some special deals on Tom's books if you want to look at that it's with the show notes today and you can receive more from the show by registering at our webpage askntwrite.com you can even ask a question too when you get your introductory email until next time have a good week.

(buzzing)