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#31 Jean Vanier and when leaders let us down

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In the wake of the news that L'Arche founder Jean Vanier was responsible for sexual abuse of women during his ministry, Tom Wright respond to questions from listeners let down by leaders and the church.

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Transcript

Premier Podcasts. The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello and welcome I'm Justin Briele, theology and apologetics editor for Premier.

Sitting down with Tom Wright to ask your questions once again and the show brought to you as ever in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright Online. Today's show deals with some sensitive subject matter questions sent in by listeners about what to do when we let down by leaders and the church. You can ask your own question of course by registering at our website [AskNT Wright.com](https://askntwright.com) and registering also gets you news updates on the show, bonus content and more and you get automatically entered into competitions and we have a couple more signed copies of Tom's acclaimed book Paul a Biography to give away to show listeners.

Just make sure you're registered at our website by the end of April to be entered. That's

AskNT Wright.com and if you're able to support the show while you're there we'll send you Tom's exclusive ebook from the show that's 12 answers to questions about the Bible, life and faith and thanks to everyone who has supported the show so far. Just a couple of things to remind you about coming up soon.

Tom's going to be speaking on Jesus Paul and the question of God at Westminster Chapel. That's on the evening of Thursday the 12th of March in London and I'll be sitting down afterwards to interview him about the themes raised in the talk and you'll be able to ask questions there. There's a link from today's show if you'd like to go along and of course not the only date for your diary we're going to be enjoying a whole day of Tom's thought and theology at Unbelievable the Conference 2020 on Saturday the 9th of May in London.

Our theme is how to tell the greatest story ever told and it'll include a live audience edition of this very show. Westminster Central Hall Saturday the 9th of May Unbelievable.live is the place to book your seat. An early bird prices finish soon excited that we'll be getting both Tom Wright and Tom Holland together on stage for a chat as part of that.

Tom Holland is among the various other guests who are speaking at this year's conference and we'll be releasing the live streaming details in March as well but do book your seat at Unbelievable.live if you can that's all the housekeeping out of the way here's today's show. Well welcome back to the show it's myself Justin and Tom sitting down together for another round of your questions and Tom we've got the breakfast things laid out again we're looking forward to another session of looking at people's questions got some serious issues on today's show but just a quick recap what you've been up to over the last few months because I see you here there and everywhere you've been to America a couple of times. It was in America a couple of times in November and then my wife and I've been moving house again this is the 16th time in 48 years and the saga of the house in Canada Maggie is wondering which clause it was in the marriage vows that said she was committed to moving out every few years we actually were in Scotland for 10 years so this is as the longest we've been anywhere so this has been quite traumatic from some points of view and Oxford where we've moved to is wonderful from some points of view but it's far too far from the sea.

Far too far south we've become very much Scottish in our outlook on things. You've got this new post at Wycliffe of course. I'm doing some part-time work at Wycliffe all the glorying in the title of senior research fellow which means I'm an old guy who's around the place and getting to know the graduates particularly and doing some preaching and teaching which is delightful.

Is it nice to be back obviously you spent a number of years in Oxford? Absolutely no it is it's very strange it's like going back to the house you were born in I mean for us this is

Oxford 3.0 I mean we had our student time and then when we were first married then seamlessly one into the other then we were back for seven and a half years in the late 80s early 90s and so now it's nearly 30 years since we lived there but some of the same people are still around looking a little older but I mean given you've got that long length of time academically and of course pastorally you've had positions there as well as Chapman so on. What's changed would you say in terms of the student population the kind of feel of the university I mean the buildings don't change much but the buildings don't change much you know that's true I mean of course one of the things you notice is it's trivial and obvious but in the late 80s early 90s hardly anyone was carrying a mobile phone hardly anyone was walking down the street apparently talking to themselves only when you got close did you realize that they had a little thing you know that is weird there are if anything even more bicycles than there were you know you take your life in your hands if you step off the pavement to Oxford swoosh as a bike coming and to my horror and Maggie's astonishment I have actually bought a bike myself. Wow in my 70s I'm relearning the cycling around well it's the way to get around.

You might bump into Richard Dawkins he's my he likes a good cycle. One might quite literally bump into and we shall see we shall see. Anyway as I said we've got a series to tuck on today's program we're talking about people who feel let down by Christian leaders sometimes hurt by the church and some other pastoral issues that we'll try and get to but this particularly comes in the wake of a very sad story that came to light recently of Jean Vanier the founder of the Lage community and I'll read out the question from Michelle in Guilford to get us started on this.

Michelle says I am reeling from the recent revelations that the late Jean Vanier founder of the Lage community has been found to have been guilty of sexual abuse towards several women during his ministry while he was alive. Lage which provides a loving Christian community for those with and without physical and learning disabilities has been a huge inspiration to me alongside the writing of Vanier who has written so profoundly on Christian community and discipleship. I felt sick to my stomach when Lage published its report and to give them credit they have not sought to cover anything up.

During his life Vanier was regularly described as a living saint I never knew him but this feels like a betrayal as I held him in such high regard. How should I respond when a spiritual hero like Vanier suddenly viewed so differently? Yeah that's a huge question and actually until you sent me this question I hadn't heard that bit of news. And the time of recording it's only recently come to life.

Yeah I've been very busy the last few weeks and just hadn't crossed my radar screen and I have a kind of a disconnect with this. Like many people I imagine one has known of Jean Vanier I mean I never met him I never went to Lage and I haven't actually read very much of his stuff I think maybe one book but I know of his work and I know people who've worked there with him and so on. I mean I think one of the things that the great

Christian spiritual tradition teaches you is that the people who are recognised as great as saints are the ones who are most in fact conscious of their own weakness and sin.

There's a line in a hymn which says and they who feyn would serve the best are conscious most of wrong within. I don't know the detail of this I just saw one report which is online which said that Vanier and apparently his his own mentor had actually either excused or explained sexual abuse of women who they were close to by saying that this was a different level of mystical experience or something. Now that is very warped and diseased really.

At the same time rather like the Pope when asked a similar question said who am I to judge? I mean there's sort of a sense that everybody all leaders not least when people are in the public eye they have weak spots I've often said to Ortonands and so on whatever your particular weakness watch out because when you're in the public eye when you're in ministry that'll be one of the places where an attack comes and you need to be especially conscious of that. I simply don't know the detail of this. Does it undermine everything he didn't said? No it casts a shadow on it but maybe that's a way of saying that there's no human being other than Jesus himself who we should look at and say they are the absolute model that's what we have to do.

We're so frequently put people on pedestals don't we? That they're so easily toppled from. Well that's right and of course this happens to come the same time as we've had the Me Too movement and Harvey Weinstein and all the rest of it so we're horribly aware and rightly aware that for generations men have quote had their way with women who seemed to be vulnerable and impressionable to them particularly and that's a warning and I would sort of hold this in the face of the next generation of male Ortonands and so on and say now watch out because this can happen to you too. Obviously not the first and probably not the last sadly person of a significant stature and responsibility and there have been numerous sort of falls from grace of major church leaders over the last several years and even significant scholars so you know when it came to light that John Howard Yoda for instance had you know sort of been guilty of similar stuff.

A lot of people it led them to someone who they greatly admired in terms of their theological work. Great obviously pacifist writer but then left the question well how does that leave me when I then go back to his work does it lose its value or something what's your feeling on that? I don't think if an argument is a good argument it doesn't lose its value if the arguer has some shadows in their personal life. St Paul would be the first to say yes I have all this incredible shadow in my own personal life as I was the chief of sinners I persecuted the church etc but at least in that case there was repentance I mean that's quite a difference between somebody who says oh I behaved like this and that was terrible and I have apologized I'm sorry to God and I've accepted forgiveness and I'm ashamed of this.

There's a difference between that and somebody who says well it was trivial or well it was you know like a consensual or yeah quite quite better to say no this is absolutely wrong because we all do things of which were ashamed and the idea that we're all aspiring to be 100% saints well from one point of view who we are but from another point of view we're realistic or we should be and yeah there is a reason why forgive us our trespasses is in the daily prayer that we as Christians pray and just again just to wrap this one up in terms of the emotional point there which is simply that almost even though this person didn't know him I've seen this repeated by many people on my social media feeds saying they just feel betrayed personally almost because they held him in such high esteem he was such a valuable spiritual writer mentor in that way I mean I would feel that if say something similar came to light about CS Lewis because I learned so much from him I tend to disagree with him but if there had been a shadow side like this in his life and of course some people have tried to say well as a young man this and that and the other but that was before his conversion etc etc so so yes and people that I know now who I hold in really high regard in the church if something suddenly came to light I think oh my goodness have I been betrayed by this and I think it's to do with something in our culture that either wants people on pedestals or wants them crashing down on the floor and isn't prepared to live with the real all a mixture of Satan's in the real complexity of life but but it also is a warning that you know Jean Vanier was a visionary he saw that something needed to be done and my goodness it was a hugely self sacrificial thing and the emotional cost of what he did I imagine was eating away at him and was emerging in other unhealthy ways and that's the point where one needs to say we need structures of accountability and one of the odd things about the creaky old Anglican system that I've worked in is that we do have structures of accountability we don't always fond them we don't always get them right but I think particularly of people who launch independent church movements they often can be the great I am within their own system and they're accountable to nobody and that's a very dangerous that's always dangerous yeah put not your trust in princes well well well quite it um this is an anonymous person from Memphis Tennessee and again this is coming from a personal point of view and it's a little lengthy but I'll read it out in full um this person says recently Professor Wright made a comment about Christian virtue as opposed to pagan virtue and I wonder if he could talk more about the differences between the two this is the context of this question they say I often wonder based on the teaching I have received and indeed the brand I received what really is distinctly Christian and what have we claimed as distinct to reinforce our brand there are lots of good and decent people out there who practice some virtues much better than we Christians and they have no real affiliation with the faith at all and those same Christians who ardently teach the virtues as distinctly Christian as if we've cornered the market on goodness have no idea what to do when faced with a case of sexual abuse for example my personal example comes from choosing to confront a past pastor slash abuser and having the church first sweep it under the rug then secondly sorted out only in ways that favored the protection of their assets and insurance benefits congregation who had shaped our entire lives spiritually

evaporated after all the years of Sunday morning fanfare singing and Baptist preaching here we were in crisis and no one had anything to say pastorally speaking we found solidarity with our local child advocacy center which turned out to be led served and funded mainly by the homosexual and Jewish communities in our city so what's the Christian distinction and adds adds adds as an addendum here personal stories actually my husband's abuser faith has never been the same for us since we confronted that darkness and your podcast has been one of the very few things he has been able to hear and receive we usually listen together on a Sunday wow that's that's a real tragedy and my heart goes out to the ladies written that and the husband there there are so many layers to this and I think when I've written about Christian virtue and and pagan virtue obviously there are all sorts of crossover points because part of the New Testament vision of being a Christian is being a genuine human being and affirming and celebrating and living out the things that all human beings know in their bones they're called to do and be and it doesn't surprise me at all that sometimes the Christians who are supposed to be doing that actually fall way short and ordinary human communities without a particular faith commitment or with a different faith commitment actually are pegging away and doing the caring and the concern and so on but I mean the distinction that I made in my book after you believe or the English title was some virtue reborn was that there are some things which emerge in first century Christianity as distinct Christian virtues including patience and chastity interestingly and the whole business of forgiveness and kindness which comes out very strongly in the early Christian teachings in ways that you wouldn't know from a lot of regular teaching and preaching and people have sometimes said do we have to obey early Christian morality and I say well kindness generosity etc etc these seem pretty important to me and nobody much in the ancient world was doing that stuff except for interesting to the Jewish community within their own number trying to live as an extended family so when the early Christians tried to live as an extended family my goodness you need patience you need a very clear rule of chastity because as we saw in another in another question that's one of the places where if you try to live as extended family all sorts of emotions can come bubbling up and bad things can happen and I think particularly the ecclesial context this person writes about particularly the way that the business has tried to be hushed up etc that is so tragic and again however bad it is the Anglican or Catholic system of accountability of layers of accountability ought to work in such a way that when something like that happens there is a larger structure in which people can be held on to now of course as we all know in the last generation the Catholic Church has been caught out very badly on this one and has done exactly what's described here and sometimes my own denomination too but I would rather have some sort of structures of accountability than no structures because then you just get that vacuum which this person so tragically describes and I think then it's also to do with the fact that so much modern western Protestantism hasn't really known about how virtue happens that there's been this sense that you hear the gospel you say a prayer so now you are quote going to heaven so that's all right and then there's a sort of general assumption that you're supposed to kind

of keep your nose clean while you're waiting for heaven but it's well you've already been forgiven and if you doubt that then you're doubting the gospel so you know the kind of the heat is off in terms of moral effort and I want to say no sorry the heat is on because the Holy Spirit is the heat of God within you and that's got to do some burning up of stuff which is there and and Jesus says it's out of the harp that they're flow all these wicked things and that's it in in mark seven when he's talking about clean and unclean foods he's actually the real unclean this is what comes from inside and much modern western evangelical and Protestant teaching hasn't really addressed that but yes you are a Christian you have come to faith in Christ and now there's all that stuff which is bubbling up within you and we need to figure out what to do about that and that's why the practice and learning of virtue is like learning a musical instrument or learning how to play you know tennis or something when you're not a natural ballplayer and you're going to have to practice it and you'll get it wrong but practice it more and it'll gradually come naturally whereas we have thought that oh if i'm a Christian the Holy Spirit is working in me then obviously whatever I want to do must be the will of God and that's been the cause of some moral disasters not just recently but over the last century or two and and it's time we actually got a more nuanced view of the role of the Holy Spirit and the aspiration to Christian virtue and because otherwise as this person says the children of this world sometimes wiser in their generation the children of light and in a sense I would say well no Christians don't have the corner on being the most moral people yeah there are many good non-believers I know people of other faiths sure who and so on and I think the question seems to be and I've seen it in other questions that have come through as well for us shouldn't Christian somehow be doing better in general than the rest of the life yes yes I mean yes yes we faced this question years ago and he said yes when you see some Christians you think oh my goodness that what a mess and then he says you have to say to yourself just think how much even worse this person will be if they want a Christian because actually Christianity was always designed for sinners right and was always aimed at picking up people who were in a total mess and rescuing them so don't be surprised if they've still got some way to go because we actually all have likewise even if somebody is doing wonderfully well but without Christian faith think of the extra dimensions that will be added to that person's life if they did have a Christian faith and I think inevitably from the non-Christian point of view it's understandable that if someone claims to be a Christian and then fails to act in a Christian way then obviously there's a sense of hypocrisy that might not be leveled against yes another sort of person yeah I mean this continues really with with Eric's question Eric is in California and says given the theological importance of the church as the bride of Christ and as the collective body of God's agents in the world how does one respond to believers who have been wounded by other Christians and are therefore hesitant to integrate into a church body or even identify themselves as Christians as a result thanks for your time yeah I totally get this and I know several people including some quite close to me who would exactly be where this person is and who've seen as it were the same inside of the church and have said Christians no please don't give me that stuff um I've been fortunate in

that in my work as a bishop I went round parish after parish after parish in the dioceses of Durham and I saw so many churches being real churches welcoming people being communities of healing and hope being communities that the local city council or government officials would look at and say at least there's somebody here who's helping us deal with drug abuse deal with youth unemployment whatever it is and there are many many communities which are beacons of light and it's tragic when some people only have seen the manipulative the abusive the bullying etc and I want to say that is not the norm yeah but it's it's again part of the problem that if people think that by saying a prayer by making a commitment they are now okay there's no nothing more to work at and you know many Christians today don't have anybody in the form of a spiritual director or a counselor who they regularly check in with and I've often said to to clergy you're seeing people partially you yourself need regularly to check in and and like going to the dentist every six months whether you need or not yeah you need to go and have a once over and wait a minute there's something going on here let's look in the mirror and see how you're doing with this issue and I think the failure of so many Christians to do that results in the kind of thing wounding and bullying and manipulative stuff it's the difficulty of the way that church is because it is obviously a human institution at one level sure and it's but it's the kind of institution where at its best it's encouraging you to open yourself up and be vulnerable to other people in a community of love and friendship and sacrifice but of course by the same token when things go awry it can be terribly hurtful yes yes and I think that's where a lot of people are coming from you know I've met so many people who have been turned off church because of some bad experience and and I think the question here is what do you do with someone like that how what advice can you give to someone who's saying I just don't feel I can trust people anymore in the church context because of such and such experience well I do I do understand that and I wouldn't want just to rush in and say never mind you have to swallow hard say your prayers and go anyway I mean there's some people whom that's the right advice but there may be others for whom a previous questioner said that she and her husband listened to the podcast on Sundays and rather implies that that's almost the closest they can get to church now and and I think you know if that's where people can get to that's where they have to start but it shouldn't be oh well now we're here that's where we're going to stay because there are in fact many many good Christian fellowships probably within easy reach of most of our listeners viewers and I think if one prays for the right Christian fellowship God Canada does provide that it may not come in the form you expect but to have people with whom one is worshipping because because the danger of then isolating oneself so I'm just going to say my prayers at home and that's good enough is that you're not then getting the stimulus and the affirmation and the acceptance and the and the friendship which ideally the church ought to be providing it's tough today's show is brought to you in partnership with nt right online and sbck tom's uk publisher and Tom will be speaking for sbck on Jesus Paul and the question of God at an event at Westminster Chapel London on the evening of Thursday the 12th of March he'll be leading you into the lives and times of Jesus and Paul

and show how a better understanding the world of the first century can lead to a better understanding of what they said and did with special reference to his three most recent works the new testament in its world paul a biography and history and eschatology i'll also be sitting down with tom afterwards to interview him about the themes raised in his talk and you can submit questions as audience members so if you want to get along links from today's show at asknt.org let's move on to some slightly different questions uh so we start to close up today's show um this was a rather interesting one um they've said i'll try and keep it brief uh and well it was briefish uh they say uh this is an anonymous one but say this is almost a continuation of the recent question from a doubting pastor that was several episodes ago now um this one says i am the son of a respected mega church pastor in the american south and over the last few years i've slowly moved towards judism and away from my christian upbringing recently went through a rather jarring and sudden total conversion in the face of my attempts to double down on my christianity i'm trying to figure out how to tell my family about what for them will be a painful new stage of my life i worry that my parents will have feelings of failure and disappointment in themselves and with me everything inside me wants to embrace and celebrate my new faith but i can't escape feelings of betrayal self-doubt and uncomfortable changes in dynamic that will happen where my family and many longtime family friends find out about my conversion and seem overwhelming as minister and parents how would you want to see a child of yours deal with a tradition like this if it came to that yeah i mean as a minister and as a parent um one watches one's children and one's grandchildren go through different stages and phases and um however much you try to say wouldn't it be good if we did this or had you thought about doing that they are themselves they will go on their own journeys and and so they should um and there were many stages in my teenage life when my parents were deeply worried about the directions i was taking particularly when i started to play the guitar um but uh well quite absolutely absolutely that was a form of teenage rebellion right there um and and i think take the long view but the idea of conversion to Judaism i take it that's what he's saying yes yes i think i mean when he says a sudden and total conversion in the face of my attempts to double down on my christianity i wasn't quite sure what that meant i think he was trying to trying to embrace his christian faith at a new level and found himself yanked into into the jewish yeah i i i assume so yeah i mean and that's why this is a slightly different sort of question to one we might expect you might expect someone to be writing to say i become a christian and now my parents also want to having trouble with that yeah but obviously in this case asking and and knowing that we're both christians and therefore are going to be in a sense not not if you like incomplete agreement with his choice to become i mean they're coming through it there they're all sorts of difficulties here and without knowing the person without being able to hear the full story i'm not sure what's got him to this place i'm not sure what's going on in his life i'm not sure what he's rejecting what he's accepting because i really do want to say there's a huge danger in and this is very much a post-enlightenment western problem of seeing something called christianity and something else called judaism and comparing

and contrasting them and that's a very modern perception which doesn't do justice to the first century reality or the biblical reality the biblical reality is was Jesus or is Jesus or is he not Israel's messiah now if you say well actually yes God raised him from the dead validating his pre-death messianic claims um you're king of the Jews above his head and the resurrection says actually this this was true then if he is wasn't Israel's messiah then however we feel about that that is the reality and any first century Jew would tell you that if God reveals his messiah then this is where Israel is now being reconstituted that's a Jewish perception it's not in that sense a Christian perception over against Judaism so the idea of Judaism Christianity is two separate isms yes it's very Victorian and and I'm interested to I mean obviously we don't have enough information here to know exactly what form this this Judaism takes now if it is some form of effectively fulfilled Judaism um well and and I have heard of a number of Christians who retain their belief that Jesus is that the right the messiah but but kind of have moved into a much more culturally Jewish expression of that because they feel somehow that's more yes yes I think I think often the church has de-Judeized itself so much that then when people suddenly discover the riches of the Jewish tradition and particularly when they discover um the the the very meaningful round of festivals and fast days and so on and how this can give shape and color and balance and so on to one's life I can well understand how that's so attractive and particularly within a free church context where you don't keep the Christian year where you don't do Advent and Christmas and Lent and Holy Week and Easter and Ascension and all the rest of it which is what I grew up with then I know many in free church context who have none of that have none of the traditional Christian shaping and then when they discover the Jewish shaping wow this is great you have passed over you have the high holy days and you have the the domestic um uh routines which say that all of life has become a prayer and and you know that that's a wonderfully attractive thing but I suppose you're you're vice ultimately to this this man if if he has if you like rejected the the fulfillment in Jesus well absolutely is to look again I would just say please read the Gospels as first century Jewish texts a good friend of mine Danny Brian who's a famous um rabbinic and Jewish scholar um author *Ox Jew* um he and I met once when we were both curiously in roeAM teaching on sabbatical at the Gregorian and I said Danny what you're teaching he said they asked me to teach some first century Jewish texts he said so I'm doing Matthew and James and I thought good okay so I want to say to this man please read Matthew as a thoroughly Jewish book and just see what that means yeah as a Jew and go on from there just as we as we close this out I mean just on the practical dimension of this as he asks as ministers and parents how would you want to see a child of yours deal with a transition like this if it came to that I I suppose this this could be generalized into any sort of transition as you say and most frequently of course what is often happening in our culture is people who were raised in a Christian context of losing their faith yes yes and ultimately rejecting it yes and what what's your vice both to the child and the parents in that situation where there may be distress on both sides it's tough you just have to hang in there and go on offering love and acceptance and forgiveness and and and and doing everything you can together that you still can do

together and making sure they're a good festival times and they're a good days out at a purely secular level times and you can really enjoy and love one another and that imperative within family life remains whatever they actually do and that doesn't mean that you are agreeing with or condoning everything that they're doing or saying or believing but that they are still your person you are still their person you'll they have for them i mean i've always tried to tell my kids that you know that anytime they need to phone me they can yeah yeah and that that's kind of basic it seems yeah thanks so much for the time some tough questions today and as ever with anything where we do deal with things of a pastoral nature as as tom always says he's not your pastor via podcast do seek wise counsel christians you can trust to speak to but thanks very much for being with me thank you thanks for being with us next time we're answering more of your pastoral questions bit of a theme at the moment before we get into some more theological issues in the run up to easter but for more info on seeing tom in london on thursday the 12th of march and booking your place for his appearance at unbelievable the conference in may do check the show notes and info at [ask nt right dot com](http://askntright.com) of course while you're there you can ask a question by registering with us and the giving links are there too to receive the free ebook from the show plus get subscribed for the regular newsletter bonus content and be automatically entered into our prize draw to an assigned copy of paul our biography that's all from me for now and we'll see you next time you've been listening to the ask nt right anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcasts from premiere visit [premiere dot org dot uk slash podcasts](http://premiere.org.uk/podcasts) [Silence]