

OpenTheo

#82 Disappointed by church

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom comments on the Jonathan Fletcher scandal and answers questions from people disappointed by their church response to Covid and a new Christian who has struggled to find a welcome. Support the show – give from the USA or Rest of the world (and get the show e-book) · 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

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome back to the show. This is Justin Briely, Premier's Theology and Apologetics Editor, bringing you the program where you get to ask the questions of NT Wright, Renown New Testament, Scholar, Theologian, and really nice guy as well as you'll hear on each show. The program is brought to you with SBCK, Tom's UK Publisher and NT Wright Online who put out Tom's online video teaching courses.

Today we'll be tackling your questions on abuse scandals in the church and people who are disappointed with church. We frequently hear from those who enjoy the show who have been finding really helpful in their own journey. If that's you and if you'd like to rate and review the podcast, that'll help other people to discover it as well.

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That's Ask NT Wright.com and if you do subscribe there to our regular email updates then you'll get access to bonus content all the latest from the show and of course the chance to ask a question yourself as well. Also really appreciate those who take the time to support the show as well financially. It makes a big difference to us.

These shows do cost to get out there and we've got lots of plans for the future as well. There's an exclusive show ebook that'll come as a thank you as well. 12 questions that Tom responds to.

So again that's Ask NT Wright.com if you'd like to get involved that way. For now on to today's show. Welcome back to another edition of the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

Great to be joined by Tom again. But dealing with some difficult questions that potentially have a pastoral nature today specifically when church goes wrong really. People who fall out with their church have difficulties with their church, individuals in church who abuse their authority and so on.

These are difficult questions again. We'll be giving them a very brief treatment and there are many other places we could recommend to go for more detailed descriptions and treatment of these particular issues. But our first person wants to ask today about the Jonathan Fletcher scandal.

Tom this is Judson in Gig Harbor Washington and simply ask do you have any comments on the Jonathan Fletcher scandal now for those who may not be familiar with that and it may not be well known outside the UK in all honesty. Fletcher was one of the ministers at a large evangelical Anglican church in London who it was revealed in relatively recently was involved in emotional spiritual and physical abuse of some of the young men that he was mentoring at the church and has overtones and shades as well of another abuse major abuse scandal in the evangelical Anglican church. John Smythe who was a leader back in the 70s and 80s at Bible camps and it emerged that he was also involved in awful physical and spiritual abuse of young boys and young men.

So these have really shaken I think these parts of the church haven't they Tom some of these abuse scandals that have come out. I'm happy for you to just start where you want to on these stories. Yes it's very difficult I didn't know John Smythe I have known Jonathan Fletcher not well but on and off we've met and several of my friends were part of the movement of these particular boys camps which were ultimately under the umbrella of the scripture union but a very kind of niche market within that for originally designed quite in a quite elitist fashion for boys from top independent schools and so on though it then broadened out and included even people like me that I went to the Scottish variety of the same camps and I have to say had there been the slightest suggestion of anything as this has come out about Smythe with these violent beatings and so on and Fletcher with the rather odd things that he seems to have got up to.

We would have all been horrified and this was not something where the whole movement had this side and we all kind of knew about it or joked about it or whatever it was just not on the radar at all. So when something like this does come on the radar one of the things I want to say is sadly church history suggests that this is not uncommon but particularly when people become very intense in their spirituality which in itself can be a

very good thing then that can and sometimes does stir up all sorts of emotions which then easily can spill over into other areas and especially when people have been through difficult times themselves or whatever. A generation ago a leading theologian Donald McKinnon wrote an article about two great German theologians from the 30s, 40s, 50s Gerhard Kittle who edited the massive theological word book and who in his own public life and private life was an impenitent Nazi and lectured in Cambridge wearing Nazi armbands and never announced that and then also Paul Tillich a great systematic theologian who went from Germany and taught in America for many years who was in McKinnon's words an impenitent seducer who made very free with colleagues wives with students wives with all sorts of younger women and there are other tales which have come out subsequently in similar ways.

So this is not it's not the case in other words that here is one particular evangelical movement that ODEA has gone off terribly off the rails whereas nobody else of course ever does that. This has been sadly a feature of many parts of the church both in the high Catholic church and rumours that come out from Roman Catholic circles and high Anglican circles some of which I know to be true etc and certainly within liberal theology as with Tillich and even as with the great Karl Barth who is still revered but who for much of his sort of most productive part of his life had a mistress an assistant with whom he used to go and spend a month or two each summer working on his projects and they were basically living together even though he had a wife and children back home. The question for me is how can somebody who is practicing theologian teaching the faith allow themselves to get to this position it's a question that as a pastor I have asked one or two clergy who have found themselves in serious trouble of this and related sorts how did you even think for a moment that this might be okay or were you sort of living a double life or what and sometimes the answer has been that it happened by little steps something which seemed quite innocent led to something a bit more and nobody seemed to mind or seemed to be okay and gradually it takes over and so I don't want to probe the psychology of it but that as a pastor is something which people have said to me and I thought oh my goodness and then one has to say there but for the grace of God go I Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 let the person who thinks that they are standing take heed lest they fall and that's so for individuals it's also so for whole movements because for years for generations that movement from which these scandals have emerged is has prided itself pride maybe the wrong word on producing great Christian leaders people like John Stott came from that movement John would have been horrified appalled to hear of and know of the things that have happened and in honoring him and the movement that produced him and the movement that's produced many many faithful wise biblically rooted pastors and teachers and I know several of them then one shouldn't pull down that whole movement because of that one should say no rather every bit of the church every branch of the church has the capacity to go horribly wrong and it doesn't take much to step off the straight and narrow and to fool yourself that it's okay when in fact you're going down the wrong line and I say that to myself as much as

to anyone else I think that's probably all that I can really say at the moment unless you bought an office of ministry.

I won't really because we have covered these issues elsewhere and there are many other sadly notable examples outside the Anglican church in the last couple of years the Raviz Acarias scandal which we've spoken about as well Tom and others and I think the church is learning lessons you know hard lessons about what needs to happen the kind of sometimes cult of personality that often feeds into these kinds of scenarios where people are given too much too much authority in a sense and not not there is no oversight so people sort of assume the best when actually they should have been asking harder questions. That's one of the critical things isn't it accountability and I know some Christian movements including some in the free churches in North America which are always in danger of going in that route to the personality cults where leaders will very intentionally belong to groups of three or four who will look each other in the eye and say how are you actually doing what's actually going on and trying to be open and honest with one another that in principle is a very wise thing as is the whole tradition of spiritual formation of spiritual direction and so on though that too can of course be abused as can anything. Let's talk about some other problems people have been having with church and some of these are inevitably pastoral as much as theological Elizabeth in Michigan asks my husband and I have been disappointed and heartbroken by our church's lack of precautions during the pandemic now that we are going to be fully vaccinated soon we're looking forward to going back to church in person again but are really struggling with whether or not to go back to our church we have loved our church but we're wondering if this indicates a serious indifference between how we and the church leadership apply the command to love our neighbors any advice would be so appreciated now we don't go down the full details of what exactly Elizabeth's churches approach to the pandemic has been and and so on but they obviously she feels they're their particular way of dealing with it lacks the caution that she thinks is necessary how should she respond yeah it's very difficult and I don't want to come on heavy on this yesterday I had emails from two very old friends almost exactly simultaneously one from the southern states of America lamenting the careless way in which many people in that part of America seemed to be treating the whole thing regarding vaccines and masks as a silly left wing irrelevance which of course they should not need and so on and so forth and this friend of mine saying that he probably wasn't going to go to a big conference which is happening in a couple of months time because of that attitude simultaneously a friend from Canada saying the rate of Covid cases in Canada is right down to almost rock bottom and yet our prime minister is now offering major inducements to states that introduce vaccine passports and that sort of thing and constructing a whole sort of theology of what was going on in terms of state control in terms of us all being reduced to a QR code or whatever and seeing this is really scary a manipulative and so on so I'm faced with good and wise friends both of whom I love and pray with and for taking diametrically opposite positions my own position has been much more like the first of

those that I've had friends who've suffered from Covid nobody that I actually personally know has died from it though one member of our extended family now in his 80s was in hospital with Covid a few weeks ago and was firmly told by doctors and nurses if you hadn't had the double jab you would be dead by now and fortunately he has come through and is making a good recovery but when you see that then it seems to me it's like seat belts in cars I remember in the 1970s I think it was or 70s possibly early 80s when Maggie Thatcher was prime minister a lot of people were saying we should make seat belts in cars compulsory and Thatcher and other libertarians were saying no no this is a restriction on our liberty and suppose you're in a blazing car and you can't undo your seat belts how terrible etc etc then somebody did the statistics and pointed out what it was costing the national health service per annum to patch up people who had been in accidents and had not been wearing seat belts and once you see the numbers game over seat belts became compulsory and it seems to me when the doctors are saying as they have been across a wide spectrum and I know there are counter narratives and I know there are conspiracy theories and so on when the doctors are saying doctors that I respect and trust look masks may not be perfect but there are a lot better than no masks the vaccines may not be perfect but there are a lot better than no vaccines then I think it's like seat belts for goodness sake if you're driving up the highway get your belt on for goodness sake if you're going to church make sure that you're vaccinated and that as and when it's appropriate you keep a mask on we have been wrestling with how much to loosen the mask restriction in churches here in Oxford certainly in in recent weeks but those those are the that's where I would start and I really worry about the way in which these conspiracy narratives have got a hold of people's imaginations and they feed off one another and people and social media of course blows all that up and I don't want to say that the conspiracy theories are always wrong but it seems to me there's a wide swathe of doctors around the world and certainly in this country who are not in the pay of some dark conspiracy at all they are simply trying to stop people from dying and I'm all in favor of that and so what about Elizabeth's question should we should she go back to church I mean what what might be a starting point for Elizabeth I think she should I I always grieve when somebody says because of A or B or C I can't attend this church anymore it seems to me church is always full of potential disagreements on everything from the color of flowers that you have at the front to the the kind of songs that you're seeing and certainly to policies about health and safety and so on and the way to deal with that is prayerfully to engage with the leadership and to work with them and to say look we've got a problem please can we talk about it please can we pray about it sooner or later you may meet a brick wall where you just don't feel welcome anymore that is always a tragedy that the danger in today's western world in our pick and mix world is that one disagreement and we're off we're going to go somewhere else and and I don't hear that in the question but that is a danger and I think we ought to work with church leadership wherever possible to try to find ways forward speaking of difficulties with church and potentially I'm welcoming churches as well James in Georgia in the US has a fairly long question here so I'll read it in its entirety but this is obviously something that

James is struggling with he says I've decided to give this Christian thing a try Tom alas it doesn't seem like any church I go to seems particularly interested in having me as a member I've got no money I don't know any important people having me as a friend or as a member of a church doesn't seem to have any apparent benefit to anyone else so I spend some time trying to connect to the church and then after a month or two of not being able to find anyone interested in getting to know me I'm despair and move on while reading Dallas Willard's book *The Divine Conspiracy* and I've got some people Christian so don't be jealous that's James Mr Willard mentions that most churches have a focus of making converts and letting discipleship happen whereas it should be focusing on training disciples and letting converts happen I've been trying to find a church where I can connect with a mentor having no real Christian examples of a mature follower of Jesus or walk alongside some other people as well as we try to figure it out I've read Seus Lewis Willard Murray Nowan Manning etc and the solitary reading is getting stale I've no idea what I'm doing and theology Bible and God is all I ever really think about these days to the point where I'd be interested in even possibly attending seminary but should I is there a special clear calling one has to receive before that I have no idea parambulating in a spiritual London fog in the deep south says James so maybe just at least starting with this problem James has been apparently having of not feeling like anyone's really bothered to get to know him perhaps he apparently doesn't feel like he has the right connection somehow for people to take an interest in him when he goes to church I mean if this is true and you know a face value we will accept James's account of this it's well it doesn't speak well if the church James has walked into at this point does it Tom? No it really doesn't and it's sad I mean if somebody came and knocked on my door asked to see me here in Oxford and told this story I would want to sit down with them and have a long cup of coffee and find out who they were etc etc and as you say taking it at a face value it sounds to me rather odd in that when I've been to churches as a guest in Britain in America in Australia elsewhere one sees all over the place welcome signs welcoming groups little notices in the pews saying if you're new here please fill in this form and give it to somebody let us know your email we'd like to get to know you that's been something that many many churches have done in a way that never used to be the case and has grown over the years and so it's really sad if this good brother doesn't feel that anyone is welcoming and particularly from the New Testament point of view I think of the letter of James where it's very very explicit that if you find yourself in the place where somebody rich comes into church you say oh how nice to see you please come and sit here and somebody poor comes in you say oh well you can go over there that's terrible that's a denial of the gospel and the poor and the disadvantaged and the the people that nobody else really wanted are precisely the people that the early church welcomed and celebrated and in one of the early fathers I can't now remember the reference there's a thing which says that if an insider comes into the service late then the deacons should welcome them and seat them somewhere but if an outsider somebody who doesn't belong to the church arrives for the worship service and then the bishop himself should go to the door and welcome them and make it clear and I've seen

that done not by a bishop but by by a vicar of a parish stopping in the middle of a service and going to the back and welcoming somebody rather strange looking who had just come in it was a wonderful example that's how things ought to be sadly it doesn't work out like so so what to do for somebody like this I think first to look around in the locality and and prayerfully see who there might be out there and actually to take a bit of initiative and to maybe send an email to somebody in the church leadership to say look I've been to your church two or three times nobody seems to want to know me could we meet or could I meet somebody on your pastoral staff and and talk about how I might actually find a community in which I could be mentored and could learn and have a sense of what it might mean to grow in faith at the moment of course there are many online church communities in some quarters more people have been attending church electronically than have actually been used to going in person on a Sunday morning and it may be that this person could start attending like that and then through that means find some real life human beings with whom he could actually go and share some sort of fellowship it seems to me that he needs to probe like that but my heart goes out to him because it's a very sad story and it is an indictment on churches that do get closed in and and church is not only of the like-minded but of the look-alike and that that's been a problem in some church growth patterns over the last years that people have said we grow churches by making more of the same sort of people come together whereas the whole point of the church is supposed to be a multi-colored multi-fariest assembly of all nations and races and tribes and tongues where everyone would in principle be welcome and and the only thing that counts is the desire to follow Jesus and and believe in him well I hope that's pointed you somewhat in the right direction James as to your other questions can I recommend you go and listen to some of the previous podcast where we have talked about calling and vocation and that might help to to point you in the right direction as to whether you let me just say in America people do sometimes go to seminary not because they want to become ministers in the church but they simply see this as a way of finding out more about what they're supposed to believe in Britain seminaries tend to be for clergy training and the universities are the places you would or colleges the places you'd go to get a degree in theology or religious studies but in America that does tend to be seminary so there's a bit of a difference there yeah well prayers for you James as you as you embark on that I hope you won't give up on church it is no we're much of Christian life it's not meant to be done on your own or just simply listening to podcasts like this one it is meant to be done in community so yeah we wish you the well on your journey there that's all for this week thank you very much Tom for being with us and we will see you next time thank you thank you for listening to today's show next time we'll be looking at your questions on feelings and the Christian life someone who says that they just don't feel the presence of God at all and asks can you help Tom that'll be your next week's show just a reminder that one of our show partners NT Right online are offering a free ebook from Tom on the book of acts to podcast listeners if you'd like access to that links are in the show notes with today's program find out more about the show generally at our website ask NT Right dot com if you're able to

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