

OpenTheo

#109 Am I guilty of my friend's suicide?

March 17, 2022



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

NT Wright responds to a variety of pastoral questions around ethical dilemmas and regrets: Should I boycott the Qatar world cup? What do about the fact my job involves working on the cell line of an aborted baby? Was I responsible for my friend's suicide after I rejected his romantic advances?

· Support the show – give from the USA or UK & Rest of the world · For Premier Unbelievable? live events & conference: www.unbelievable.live · 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

(upbeat music) - The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

(upbeat music) - Well hello and welcome back. It's Justin Briley with the show brought to you in partnership with NT Wright online, SBCK and Premier Unbelievable.

I'm head of theology and apologetics at Premier. Great to have you with us and today. NT Wright responding to a variety of pastoral questions around ethical dilemmas and regrets.

Should I boycott the Qatar World Cup? What do I do about the fact my job involves working on the cell line of an aborted baby? Was I responsible for my friend's suicide after I rejected his romantic advances? Some big tough dilemmas and pastoral concerns coming up on today's show. Hope you find it helpful. Just want to say as well before we get into the show that we've got some wonderful new podcasts that are launching at the moment from Premier Unbelievable, including Matters of Life and Death.

It's a new podcast with bioethicist John Wyatt and his journalist son, Tim, as they look at some of the big issues that confront Christian ethics around biology, medicine, technology, beginning and end of life issues. Essential listening for anyone who's

interested in tackling and thinking through those issues. You just need to search up the Matters of Life and Death podcast wherever you get your podcasts from.

And we love it when people leave reviews of this podcast too. Linda out in Colorado Springs said, I love the podcast, have it playing regularly with my two small kids in tow. I find so much thoughtful and respectful wisdom given that I try and tuck away for future conversations.

I find it's not only what Dr. Tom Wright says, but how he says it so wonderfully respectful and engaging. In some ways though differently, I think of C.S. Lewis when I hear of how Tom thinks about the world. I find that I have more confidence on how I might engage and discuss things with my children someday as they grow an age in what seems like a tumultuous time because of this podcast and the topics covered.

Bless you Linda, thank you very much for getting in touch and please do rate and review us in your podcast provider. It helps others to find out more about the show. And you can find us also at our webpage, askentiright.com. And just before we leap into your questions today, you can book in for unbelievable the conference 2022 where you'll get more opportunity to quiz brilliant minds on all aspects of thinking, faith.

Saturday the 14th of May is when it's happening. Live from the British Library in London, but you can attend from anywhere in the world online. It's good and especially good time for listeners in the USA as well because we're doing it 2 p.m. UK, that's 9 a.m. Eastern.

So we'd love you to be with us. Loads of brilliant speakers and you can even get a ticket for our live evening event, the big conversation live with Dr. Ian McGill-Christ and Christian neuroscientist Sharon Dierichs as well as part of the package. So unbelievable.live, the place to register for that.

The link is with today's podcast right now in to today's show.

(upbeat music) Well, as we often say on this show, and as I think we said in last week's episode, Tom is certainly not anyone's pastor via podcast, but we do try to answer some ethical and pastoral questions that people struggle with with what we know of, you know, that comes through the questions, but we always do advise people to seek wise counsel in their own situation as well. So we're gonna tackle a few ethical questions, pastoral questions around regrets and remorse and so on on today's show.

Tom, let's leap straight in with Frank in Portland who says, "I'm a big world soccer fan "and my wife is a big American football fan. "We love watching the athletes compete "as image bearers of God at the highest level. "The Qatar World Cup is coming up soon, "but I'm aware of many of the human rights issues "that have occurred during the building "of the infrastructure for the tournament, "modern slavery, horrible work conditions, deaths and so on.

"I'm also aware of how the largest day of human sex traffic "in America is sadly the day of the Super Bowl." Now, how are we as Christians who are called to not be of the world to respond to the way sin has infected these big worldwide events, which would otherwise be or should be at least fine to participate in? What do you think of this one, Tom? - Yeah, it's a toughy. Sin has infected in some ways everything that is around us. So that when I go across the street to one of my favorite places of worship and listen to the choir making wonderful music, when in time passed I have got to know people in such choirs.

I see that there are all sorts of ways in which sin creeps in even to that wonderful and apparently spiritual exercise. How much more perhaps when it's about football or whatever, but it's probably pretty much the same actually. And just as when the pandemic began and somebody was quoted as saying, "I don't need to wear a mask when I go to church "because the God is in the church and he will protect me." And my response to that, which I think I said in my little book on the pandemic, was listen, I'm a bishop.

I know that actually the devil can find his way into church just as much as anybody else can. So I want to say things like the Super Bowl and that horrible statistic about the largest day of human sex traffic in America, et cetera. Yes, these throw into sharp relief, questions which actually we ought to be engaging with all the time because when you walk down the street, there is no safe space, there is nowhere which is pure from which you could then go to somewhere which is totally impure.

Of course, there are degrees, there are places of prayer, places of holiness which really do have that quality. There are other places which are thoroughly wicked where people are exploited, where really bad things happen and sometimes you can almost smell that when you go by and there is a sort of discernment there. So I'm not saying everything's on the level but it's all on a continuum.

Having said that then, I think if it turns out that there are major, major ethical issues in how some great event like the Cata World Cup has been put together and it's notorious that the reason that that was located in Cata in the first place was very dodgy according to all the newspaper reports that I've read. Then I think there would be a case for boycotting it just like I know at the moment we're coming up when we're recording this and people are starting to talk about the Winter Olympics which are coming up and some people are saying we cannot possibly take part in an event organized by the Chinese for obvious reasons. And this gets very political and I remember in the 70s and 80s when Russia and its satellites boycotted an American Olympics and America and its satellites boycotted a Russian one and so on.

But those are symbolic of what we as Christians ought to be thinking about anyway actually. Is it wise, is it good for us to take part in this? For me for instance, if supposing I

had a friend who is heavily into professional wrestling or something like that or said, "Tom it's such far might into come and watch it with me." I actually would be sickened by watching people slugging the daylights out of each other. Now I know that some of that stuff is staged and it's not real and they all have a good time and they get well paid but it still seems to me that actually staged violence like that is not something I would like to be party to.

And you could come back at me and say, "But you like watching rugby matches, don't you?" The answer is usually yes, sometimes it gets too much. But so we are all involved in this. But I think in other words, it's a problem of world culture as a whole and perhaps not the event itself although the event may have some things there.

But it's then a matter of spiritual discernment. Should I actually go to this? I mean, my wife and I have often enjoyed theater, we've enjoyed live music, we've once or twice been taken by friends to comedy evenings. And I remember once being taken by friends and it was a sort of a dinner and a show, et cetera, et cetera.

The comedian came on and about halfway through, he started saying very unpleasant things about Christianity and about Jesus. And I felt decidedly uncomfortable and the friends who'd invited me, knowing who I was, they felt uncomfortable as well. Had we known in advance that was gonna be like that, we would not have gone.

So I think those are the kinds of decisions we have to wrestle with. And at every point in human life anyway, we rightly say week by week, day by day, God have mercy on me as sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me as sinner.

And that isn't then a license to go and sin because we know we're going to ask for mercy. But we realize that as we walk through this world, it's a messy world and we get our feet dirty. That's why Jesus washed his disciples feet.

He said, you don't need to wash all of you, but regularly your feet need washing. And that may be a piece of advice, not to walk where there is rather obvious mud waiting for you. - And who knows, perhaps, Frank, if you are a huge sports fan, you can be part of what it is to be a redeeming force within that and be able to campaign for proper standards or whatever it might be at sporting textures.

- I was going to say something about campaigning with the later question, but that's exactly right. If you get the chance, I mean, best of luck when it comes to the catar world cup, it's a bit late for that. - Well, sure, sure.

- But point taken. - Well, let's move on to some more questions, Tom. This one is another sort of very personal ethical dilemma here that's come in from Paul in Shraveport, Louisiana.

It says, I'm dead, Dr. Wright, I recently started work in a research lab and have been set

to work on tissue cultures. I was working with a culture for a couple of weeks when I decided to look into the background of the cell line. I found that it had come from a child aborted in the 1970s.

I felt sick to my stomach since I even volunteered a Christian crisis pregnancy center dedicated to womb to tomb pro-life stance. But I came to think that I shouldn't take a stand at work. My working or not working with this cell line is not going to affect whether any more children lose their lives.

But I still remember that it was a girl it came from and sometimes feels sick all over again. I'd really appreciate your advice in this situation. Thank you, Paul.

Okay, Tom, yeah, this is quite a, yeah, start. - Wow, that's a real, real toughy. And I'm not a medic, I'm not a scientific researcher, but I've heard tales like this before.

And it seems to me it's completely right to be horrified and repelled at the thought of working with tissue that has come from a little life that somebody decided to terminate. And I'm basically with you, Paul, on what you clearly believe about the life in the womb. And the more we know about life in the womb, the more it seems to me that is the God-given life already there.

You can't see it, but I have a picture on the side of the wall over there of my youngest grandson when he was about minus four months old. And I've been praying with that picture, praying for him before he was born, like I pray with him and for him now that he's running around. And that's hugely important.

And our society has neglected that and it's shameful. And I think at quite a deep level, spiritually, psychologically, individually and corporately, there are really bad things happening in that way. I think the question then is what you do with that sense of revulsion.

Because I think it's completely okay to feel revolted and horrified. But I think you need to find a way of appropriately lamenting for that little girl who was aborted. You need to pray for her, assuming that she is loved by God and somehow looked after by him because he is the God of generous love.

And Jesus loved little children. And it seems to me ridiculous to say that and then say, but he doesn't care about this one. But if that's so, then out of that lament, then I think you can perfectly reasonably, perhaps with others from your church, in a wise, creative, not an angry and violent way, of course, you can ask questions.

Why in this laboratory do we work in this way? What's at stake here? What would happen if we stopped using tissues from children who'd been aborted? And as one prays with others into that situation and working with the church and with the scientific community, then campaigning might be appropriate. And there are all sorts of campaigns that have

alerted people to issues that they didn't know about. Like you didn't know about this cell until you traced its background.

I didn't even know you could do that with cell lines, by the way. So it seems to me, yes, lament is appropriate, but lament then should lead to leaving the issue in the hands of God. You can lament it, bring it to God, use the Psalms, bring that little child to God, and sigh of relief.

She is his child, not yours. And then ask, coolly, calmly, prayerfully, what can we do about this? And if that leads to some sort of a campaign, then good for you, go for it. But as I say, it's not my world, so I couldn't advise you as to what precise line to take from then on.

- It's another one though, like the first question where it reminds you of the complex way in which sin is all entangled with all different ways, which the things we celebrate, because I'm sure what the work that Paul is doing, I'm sure is for a good cause, you know. Yet it's got this sort of dark shadow side of where that tissue culture has come from. And these are not easy things, because we live in a world which is broken, and we sort of live in the midst of the brokenness and have to sort of also try and redeem it where we can.

And I can understand why Paul would say, well, at least I can do something that is positive, even if it has this sort of shadow side. - And I think there's a problem there in that as Christians, we naturally want to get things right. We want to do the right thing.

But there are many, many issues in life where it's a choice between two second-bests or between a third-best and fifth-best or whatever. And then we have to think prayerfully, maybe discuss with friends, make a decision, and then maybe say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner, but I really do think this is what we have to do in this case." And life, ordinary life, real life, Christian life, is made up of many such moments, not that we are careless, but precisely because we are careful about these issues, the more careful we are, the more we will realize just how ambiguous a lot of things we do are and how we cry to God, finally to put his world right. We can't do it ourselves here.

We can produce signs of that putting right and say campaign for better ways of doing things, but we won't necessarily be able to solve them all here and now. We'll finish with another really difficult, personal, pastoral question, really heart-rending sort of question, really, from Addie in Oklahoma. Addie is a young woman who says almost two years ago when I was 18, a good friend of mine killed himself at a party.

I'd known him for nearly two years before that happened, and we'd had lots of conversations about faith. He was clearly struggling mentally and with drinking, but he was a wonderful person deep down and always had a passion for God. Days before he killed himself, he had confessed long-time feelings for me and I did not acknowledge

them as I should have.

His death wrecked me and my faith took a big beating. I still find myself carrying guilt for his death, thinking that if I perhaps had said something differently, he would still be here. It's very hard to come to terms with the fact that this was God's plan because I'm not sure if it was.

Was God counting on this to happen or was there something I could have done to prevent it? Is suicide ever in God's plans for one's life? And did my friend killing himself damn him to hell despite his love for God? My faith has come a long way since then, but I still miss this friend so dearly and I pray constantly for his soul. Well, there's a number of questions there and I don't know which you want to start with, Tom, or just to simply reflect on this whole situation. - I start with grieving with poor Addie.

This is a real toughie and I do want to say, I don't believe suicide is ever in God's plan for somebody's life. In my family, five or six years ago now, there was a family member who took their own life and anyone who's ever been near that sort of thing knows that there's a ripple effect and everybody involved feels a measure of guilt. Was there something I could have done? So obviously in Addie's case, there's something very personal going on there.

She wonders if she didn't respond in the way that maybe would have changed things but actually that is the normal feeling whenever somebody takes their own life. Everyone who has anything to do with them thinks, maybe there was something I could have said. What to do with feelings like that? I think in prayer, one has to lay them before God.

Lord, I really wonder if there's something I should have said. I'm feeling guilty about it. Please help.

And this is a case where a classic case where pastoral assistance is, I would say, more or less vital. That if there was something wrong, I don't hear from what Addie said that there was anything wrong because in the ordinary course of relationships, if somebody says, "I have strong feelings for you," that puts you in an awkward position if you don't at the moment reciprocate them and you don't want to say something which will immediately encourage it in a wrong way. So maybe the right thing to do is to say, "Well, thank you, but not now at the moment actually," not realizing what that may then result, especially if somebody's been in a drink culture and so on.

So then I would say in some traditions, that the practice of confession and absolution is enormously pastorally wise, to go and pour out a sense of, if there was any guilt, this is how it feels anyway, and to receive from somebody in the name of God and through the love of Jesus, assurance of God's forgiveness and absolution and healing from that, that sometimes can provide a platform on which a new, healthier awareness of the whole situation can stand. We are not told, and in the Bible, there is very little about whether it

is, in Addie's phrase, did my friend killing himself, damn him to hell, despite his love for God. We are not told that about, I mean, the church has often taught that suicide means that you are no longer going to be part of God's ultimate future.

I don't believe that. The people that I know who tragically have killed themselves, I don't find myself needing to say, biblically about them, that therefore they will not be part of God's final new creation. It is a great sorrow, there's no question about that, but I don't think we know what God actually thinks about that, but especially because people who do take their own lives are so deeply distressed and disturbed, and it seems to me punishing them here after for that as well is simply adding more injury, one on top of another.

So, but I think then in terms of moving on, it's not a terribly good phrase that, but being able to say, yes, this is now part of who I am, that sad memory, but I have laid it at the foot of the cross, which is the only place where it can be dealt with. And as I look at the cross and see Jesus himself taking upon himself the pain and horror of the world, I need day by day, week by week, month by month, to leave that pain there as best I can. Some days that'll be easier than others, and to be able to go out, sadder but perhaps wiser, to be a person of love and sensitivity and wisdom in God's world.

But it's a tough row, and, to ho, and Addy, you must seek a local pastoral help for that. Yes, yes, we do encourage you to do that, Addy. Talk it through, with someone who can help you to bring that before God and just to receive God's assurance of forgiveness and so on.

And God will do right by your friend. Yes. It's always hard to know what to say in any situation like that, but our prayers and thoughts are with you, Addy.

God bless you. Thanks for all of the questions that have come in today. A really interesting variety of ethical and pastoral issues.

If you've got more, you can, of course, get in touch with the show and send your questions in. You're welcome to do that. We'll tell you how to do that at the end of the show.

But for now, thanks again for joining me, Tom. And I'll see you next time. Thank you.

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music) Thank you for being with us on today's program. Next time, we're going to be tackling questions about feeling guilty, about evangelism and outreach, how far should Christians, for instance, seek to impose their moral beliefs on a largely secular society? Can we do evangelism without Bible bashing? Someone who's been made to feel guilty about evangelism. How do we fulfill the Great Commission? Lots of practical questions there on outreach and evangelism.

On next week's program. Just a reminder that our show partner, NT Right Online, have a free ebook from Tom on the Book of Acts for podcast listeners. If you want to get access to that, the links are with the show notes today.

You can also receive news from the show by registering at our webpage, askNT Right.com. You can even ask a question too, and we'll be doing another Q&A session with Tom soon, creating some new episodes of the show. So this is a good moment to get registered and ask your question. And just a final reminder that unbelievable.live is your place to register for this year's unbelievable conference in May, helping you take God off mute in your life.

Speaking with grace and truth into today's troubled and divided culture. Links are with today's show. Thanks for being with us.

See you next time.

[MUSIC PLAYING] (gentle guitar music)

[BLANK_AUDIO]