

# OpenTheo

## #89 Audience Q&A on Paul: A Biography

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright takes audience questions on the person of Paul and is theologian in part 3 of an event by SPCK to mark the publication of Paul: A Biography in 2018.

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## Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome back to the show. It's Justin Briley, Premiers, Theology and Apologetics Editor and this is the program where we sit down with renowned New Testament scholar NT Wright, also known as Tom Wright, to discover his thought and theology and answer the questions that you're asking. But we've been doing something a little bit different this week and in previous weeks, bringing you a special evening that was put on by SBCK to mark the launch of Paul a biography at a London launch event a few years ago.

The program is brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online and SBCK, Tom's UK publisher. If you'd like more from the show, do sign up at [askntwright.com](http://askntwright.com) and in part three today, he continues his sit down with broadcaster Martin Bashir to take audience questions. If you do enjoy this podcast, why not rate and review us, it helps others to discover the show for now.

Enjoy today's program. Okay, well we have some far more intelligent questions now from the floor and the first one that's asked, I'm afraid I don't have the names of anybody who's put these but I will just put them to you. Why has the church concentrated more

on the teachings of Paul than the teachings of Jesus? Great question because... Is it true? Yes it is, yes it is.

The teachings of Jesus tend to be reduced to short snippets which are then recontextualized into a different framework because Jesus was announcing that this is what it looks like when God's kingdom is coming on earth as in heaven and much of the Western church has forgotten that. This is a gross overstatement because many haven't but many have and have imagined that the whole gospel is about how we leave earth and go to heaven and then Jesus' teaching is reduced to fragments of how we know that and what happens en route. But when you actually understand the gospels as the description of how Jesus launched the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven, then you'll not any read the gospels differently.

You'll read Paul differently as well. Paul is implementing what Jesus achieved. Friend of mine said that so many Western churches treat the gospels like the chips and dips before you go in the sort of ante room before you go through to the dining room to have the red meat of the Pauline gospel.

There's something deeply wrong about that and I think Paul himself would rebuke us for that. What was the thorn in the flesh? I have no idea. What? I think I said... Why we've invited you here? Sorry.

It's maybe the thorn in my flesh is that I don't know what the thorn in Paul's flesh was. But there have been all sorts of ideas. It might be a particular temptation that kept coming back.

It may be a recurring illness. Some people have suggested that it was his recurring nightmare of the fact that he had stood by and held people's coats while they were stoning Stephen, you know, that he just couldn't shake that. There's no way of knowing.

People have tried to do some fancy footwork with Galatians 4 and so on about tear out your eyes and give them to me as though maybe he's got a problem with his eyes. That might be so. I just don't think we have enough information.

This may be surprising. I sometimes get accused of over-exerting things, but here I'm being cautious. What does this book tell us that Paul and the faithfulness of God doesn't cover? Everything obviously, because we want people to buy the book.

But setting that aside, is this repetitious? There are, of course, overlaps, but I was worried about that to begin with. And then when I got going, I thought, I actually don't need to worry about this because I'm talking about Paul the man. I'm trying to get inside his skin.

I'm trying to use the same sort of evidence, of course, because that's the evidence we've got. But in order to ask different kinds of questions, particularly about biographical

development, I mean, obvious example, I start the body of the book after quite a long introduction with the story of Phineas. Phineas in the book of Numbers, ancient tale of sex and violence.

It was a good way to start the book. And it's Phineas who does the redemptive violence and becomes the model of zeal right through to rabbinic Judaism. In 1st Maccabees, Phineas is one of the models of zeal along with Elijah.

These are people who do violent things to stop Israel going to the bad and to stop the pagan nonsense happening. Paul is role modeling Phineas. And it's Phineas, of whom Psalm 106 says, Phineas did that, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness to all generations.

Now, every other passage he talks about Phineas, the Bible talks, it's about God establishing a covenant with him. That tells you what that phrase means. It was reckoned to him as righteousness.

It's one of the key phrases for Paul, Romans 4, Galatians 3, Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. I think Paul had that phrase in his head from early on. I didn't explore this in Paul and the faithfulness of God, but I make it front and center.

This is a driving force of them. When the great thing happens, Paul rereads his scriptures and lo and behold, there is a different way of doing covenantal zeal. Another question that's asked, how do we tell the difference between those parts of Paul's teaching which are timeless and those parts which are culturally specific? I imagine somebody, for example, may be referring to head coverings and women and men and so on.

How do you distinguish between what Paul is asserting as something that modern or at any period of Christian living people should embrace and those things which were so culturally specific we can dismiss. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's a good question, but there's a level underneath the question because people often used to say that some parts of the Bible are timelessly true and others are merely culturally conditioned.

To that, I want to say all the Bible is culturally conditioned. All the New Testament is written in 1st century Greek. The doctrine of justification means what it means within the world of second temple Judaism, within the world of fourth Ezra, within the world of the Red Sea Scrolls, et cetera.

Until you've thought your way through that, you're not in a position to understand. So justification is true, but it's not timeless. The quest for timeless truths has an uncomfortably platonic sound to it.

God's truth is incarnate truth. I am not a timeless person nor are you. What good would a timeless? I want a truth that will come real in my life and you get that from stuff that was

coming real in the 1st century.

Even though Paul himself refers to God's word being truthful itself. Yes. He imputes.

Yes, but true, I mean, but well, this is a philosophical discussion we perhaps shouldn't get into. But take an obvious example. In 1st Corinthians 8, 8 through 10, it's about food offered to idols.

This is not a problem that most modern Christians have. And actually, the Galatian problem, should you or shouldn't you get circumcised, is not a, I've never ministered in a congregation where that's been an issue. And yet, there are some.

If you were ministering to a mixed Jew and Gentile congregation, say in the Middle East, that might be an issue and you might have to do some work on that. However, the question of how to live as a faithful, monotheistic Christian in a polytheistic society, where there's all sorts of stuff which goes with idolatry and how to navigate that. That is a huge and important question in our society.

Even though it doesn't consist of people offering sacrifices at pagan altars where the meat that then gets sold on into the market down the road. So that's something which there may be areas where that still goes on and where you have to navigate it. But for most of us, we can, I think, make the translation reasonably easily.

For the women's head covering, it's interesting because the arguments Paul uses are harder to understand than the command itself. It seems to me clear that he wants women when leading in worship to look like women and not like fake men. He doesn't want, in other words, a kind of androgynous sense of who they are.

He's celebrating being female and in that society you wear head covering. Now, I grew up in churches where most of the women still wore hats, which were not at all like the sort of head coverings Paul had in mind. Didn't fulfill the same function but be that as it may.

Now that's more or less gone out of the window in most churches. So we are navigating it again and part of our problem with that is that Western society at the moment has got very, very confused about what male and female actually mean and what roles mean and do a stereotype or don't we. So we're not in a position to look back at Paul and say we've got it right and you didn't.

However, it's important to, I was going to use the word distill, which is a difficult word because that implies this sort of boiling off of timeless truths which I'm a bit worried about. I don't want to get into difficulties but what do you say to some writers, some theologians even, who would impute a form of appalling sexism to the apostle Paul? Yeah, and we would say that here is a man who is paternalistic macho and dismissive of you. I would tell them to go and read Romans 16.

Of course the trouble with Romans 16 is if you ever go to a lecture course on Romans, people get so excited about the first eight chapters that they barely get to 9 to 11, let alone 12 to 16. But chapter 16 begins by saying I commend to you Phoebe who's a deacon at the church in Ken Kretai. Paul is giving this lady Phoebe who seems to be an independent businesswoman traveling.

He doesn't say I'm giving it to Phoebe's husband. He's giving it to Phoebe for goodness sake. She's coming to Rome and the high probability is that Paul was expecting Phoebe to be the one who would go around the different house churches in Rome reading this letter out and quite possibly explaining it.

Now that's a hypothesis you can't prove it but that is one custom which seems likely in that world. That means that it's quite probable that the first person ever to do a Bible exposition of Romans was a woman from who was a deacon in the church Ken Kretai. And if you read on through Romans 16, there's lots of other women including Junia who's an apostle and so on who are in leadership roles in the church.

Paul accepts this as the norm. And yet you know that Paul also says that women should be subject to their husbands in his written epistles in explicit terms. In 1 Timothy 2 and of course there is a debate as to whether 1 Timothy is Pauline or not but even supposing it is.

Two of the hardest verbs to translate in Paul are there where he says I do not allow a woman to usurp authority. Look up how authentic in a Greek dictionary it includes all sorts of meanings including murder. Paul can't mean that but what's going on? I think it's usurping authority.

It's one hypothesis. This is only a hypothesis but it's not a bad one. First Timothy has written to a church in Ephesus what do you know about Ephesus? The main religion in Ephesus, great is Artemis of the Ephesians, is a female cult where you've got women only in authority.

It's possible that some in Ephesus were thinking that if we've got a new sort of religious expression we better have women running it so if there's any men in leadership here, sorry you'll have to make room. Now I don't know that I can't prove it. I've explored that and some other options.

In other words it's not as easy as the King James Version would make it sound and it's been very interesting to me to see over the course of my lifetime the way in which some people have clung to 1 Timothy 2 as though that's clear as day and enables us to override 1 Corinthians 11, Romans 16, etc. I'd rather do it the other way. You talked earlier about Paul being concerned about holiness and unity and how combining those two is the challenge for every pastoral minister, male or female, everywhere in the world.

Question is asked what would Paul say about the multi-denominational and fractious nature of the modern expression of church? I think he would hang his head and say you know you need to go back to square one and start again. Really? After I wrote Paul in the Faithfulness of God I was on the road doing various lectures and so on and again and again people said what's the big thing that Paul would say if he could see us today and I said not only that we are disunited but that we don't care about it or if we do we go to an ecumenical meeting once a month and kind of solve our consciences that we've shaken hands with our Christian brothers sisters down the road. Well that's better than not.

I mean a hundred years ago Anglican bishops were sending angry letters to any of their clergy who dared to preach in a Methodist church and where are we now tonight? You know this would have been unthinkable. We've come a long way and let's enjoy that but there's a long way still to go. Now I think the tragedy is this in the 16th century the Reformers rightly insisted on worship and scripture in their own language but once you say okay have it in your own language then you get the Germans worshipping in German and the Dutch and Dutch and the French and French and the English and English and then as theological divisions emerge those churches embrace different ways and then they say oh they're heretics down the road whereas in fact they were just speaking a different language and it may turn out there are theological differences.

I'm not saying theological differences aren't important believe me I they're hugely important but if we remain disunited and don't even care then the principalities and powers are still running the show. Ephesians 3 Paul says that through the church the the multiplex wisdom of God, it's a lovely phrase in Greek a polypochoylosophia toothaeo, the many colored many splendid wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and powers and this is the point Caesar would have loved to have had an empire in which people of all sorts were happy in one big family it never worked he tried to impose it as a a Roman uniformity. Paul is saying the glorious multi-colored variety of the church is supposed to be united and when that happens Caesar will know that God has called time on his oppressive empire.

What is the importance of Paul's citizenship, his Roman citizenship? You've talked earlier about Paul being saturated in the Jewish scriptures but what about his citizenship? Paul's Rome does that play out. Yeah Paul's Roman citizenship enables him to do things and get out of jail free at one point in a way which wouldn't have been possible without and I think Paul kind of relishes that that he is a Roman citizen he's born into Roman citizenship we're not sure why possibly his father or grandfather had served in the army and been given citizenship as or something but some scholars today have rather has entered that because they want Paul to be so counter-imperial and so counter-cultural that he would never have had Romans. I think that mistakes the complexity of Paul's mind and life I think he relishes the fact that when the time had fully come God sent forth his son so we've got splendid roads and he can get about we've got a splendid postal system and he can do stuff with that we've got magistrates to whom he can

appeal and he knows the laws well as they do he can tell them when they're getting it wrong and so Paul uses his citizenship that's why when he goes on his second missionary journey the person he chooses is his chief partner Silas the Sylvanus he's a Roman citizen as well and so they are both in this very interesting position so that you know when he's when he's beaten and thrown into jail in Philippi and the next day the magistrates say tell those men to get out of town Paul can play his trump card he says excuse me you know beaten without trial imprisoned without charge Roman citizens sounds like a public apology and he gets it because they've all heard about Cicero's speech in Verem and know perfectly well that actually they could be in deep trouble here and so Paul has got them of course one of the interesting things is how could he prove it because if you claimed to be a citizen and couldn't prove it you'd be in deep trouble if they thought you were telling a lie Roman citizens had a thing called a diploma which was like a passport which they might keep on a string around their body or something like that and I'm not sure how Paul would have managed with that if he's being stripped and beaten and so on but that seems to be part of the deal and so then later on in Jerusalem he says to the centurion who's about to have him tortured I think this is illegal don't you and oh my goodness yeah we nearly got into severe trouble here so I think he kind of rel and then of course the appeal to Caesar that that's that's a stroke of of great Khutzpah and I think Paul knows it's heavily ironic but back of that he knows that he's fulfilling Isaiah 52 verses 13 14 and 15 that kings sure shut their mouths because of him you know that here is the servant preaching the gospel of the servant and he expects the nations of the world to be shocked even if it means they they kill him or root well that's a great moment for me to shut my mouth ladies and gentlemen professor mt right thank you for listening to today's bonus episode of the show we'll be back again same time next week this was a special set of episodes bringing you a special evening with nt right that marked the launch of paul a biography in london a few years ago and don't forget that sbc k who organized it our tom's uk publisher they've got some special deals on tom's books for podcast listeners there's a link in today's show notes and you can find a link as well to the video of the event with today's podcast if you'd like more from this podcast go to ask nt right dot com where you can sign up to make sure you're entered into any giveaways you get updates and bonus stuff too and if you haven't heard we'll be launching an nt right channel soon on youtube and ask nt right anything youtube channel and another thing you may not be aware of is our new confident christianity apologetics course from premiere unbelievable it's over four hours of video teaching from some brilliant christian thinkers uh all kinds of aspects of evidence for the christian faith that they cover science and faith suffering evidence for god atheism and christianity the life death and resurrection of jesus christ we've got a special offer on it until the end of october 30 off you can get it by going to premiere dot org dot uk slash get confident there's a link to that with today's show as well thanks for being with us and see you next time

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