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#130 Do I need to tithe? Church rules, covenants and leadership

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Should I always tithe 10% to my church? What do you think of signing church covenants? I don't agree with my church leadership on complementarianism, but I love the members - should I stay? Tom answers listener questions on church practise and rules.

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello and welcome to the podcast that brings you the thought and theology of New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright. I'm Justin Briley, Head of Theology and Apologetics for Premier Unbelievable and the show has ever brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NT-Rite Online.

And today on the show we're asking, "Do I need to tithe?" We're talking about church rules, governance and leadership. Questions like, "Should I always tithe 10% to my church? What do you think of signing church governance?" And, "I don't agree with my church leadership on complementarianism, but I love the members. Should I stay?" Tom's going to be answering your questions on church practice and rules.

By the way, we've got another great opportunity coming up soon to join Unbelievable Live. On Tuesday, the 13th of September, I'll be hosting a conversation online on church abuse and leadership scandals. It's been a couple of years since the revelations started to surface about Ravi Zachariah.

In that time, we've also seen the fall of numerous other leaders from Hillsong Church. And of course, that top-rated podcast, The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill detailing another high-profile ministry implosion. Well, we've got a really significant panel leading this webinar, Amy O'Ewing, formerly of ASEM.

Rachel Den Hollander, one of Larry Nassar's young victims and an advocate of abuse victims herself. Mike Cossba, the presenter and producer of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, and church trauma and abuse specialist Diane Langberg. This is a very significant panel for a very significant issue.

So, if you want to be part of this and it's free to attend, you can register today. There'll be time for Q&A or with the panel. You can be part of the whole show by registering at unbelievable.live. That's for Tuesday, the 13th of September and the link is with today's show.

For now, let's get into your questions. Well, today Tom, we're looking at some of the policies and guidance and governance of churches and the different things that churches insist upon, sometimes from their membership and the types of leadership we find there. I've had a few interesting questions here from two people in Sydney.

Also Barry out in Lynchburg, Virginia and another person in Virginia, Kelly as well. So, the first two though, both from people in Sydney is on tithing. Tom and Stephen asking similar sorts of questions.

Tom, first of all, says, "I attend a church that regularly teaches that tithing is important and the first 10% of your income belongs to God. Also a teaching that the more you give, you'll... you will somewhat be given back more as sort of prosperity gospel." Now, I'm not sure of that anymore. I believe regular giving is important to ensure we're becoming generous people.

But I still find myself guilty if I don't give the quote unquote "tithing." Your wisdom will be most helpful. And Stephen, similarly, is it a biblical principle that if you give a tenth of your income, the rest will be blessed. My church has taught this and after listening to a lot of Tom Wright's teaching, I'll be interested in hearing his thoughts on this subject.

So, by a tithe, as Tom in Sydney says there, people generally assume that means a sort of 10% sort of offering of your earnings to the church and so on. And obviously, a lot of churches pretty much insist on this. They see it as mandatory almost if you're a Christian to be giving at this level.

And sometimes tithe, as we've heard, to the idea that God will bless you in return if you sort of do this. So first of all, the concept of the tithe, and then perhaps this additional sort of thing that you'll be blessed if you do it, what your thoughts? Yes. I mean, there's several different issues which are kind of flowing in and out of one another there and they need to be separated out.

The idea of tithing is, of course, an Old Testament idea. It was carried over particularly in the medieval church where, to this day in England, there are some villages where there's a nice old building often with a pitched roof called a tithe barn because that's where, when the agricultural community were making their offerings, they would make a tenth of their produce available and put it in this barn for the use of the clergy. And the clergy would be living in the priest's house and the tithe barn would be where people would come and bring their produce so that the clergy had something to live on for the next year.

And so that kind of settlement went quite deep into popular consciousness. And I think then when society became less agriculturally based and more open in terms of other forms of activity in industry and money earning potential, it got translated into this sense of obligation to give a tenth of your earnings to the church. And there are questions about, should that be a tenth before tax or after tax? And now that most societies have quite punitive income tax levels compared with how things were three or four or five hundred years ago, remember, income tax was introduced as a temporary measure in the UK.

So the politicians at the time said, some reason they've never rescinded it and rather just increased it, not mostly. So that all those questions are on the table. But I think that the wisest teaching that I know from the New Testament perspective on money is that the tithe is not actually mandated as such in the New Testament.

Jesus refers to tithing of mint and dill and come in and then he basically says, there are other bigger things which need to be done, which rather implies that, well, yes, of course you will be giving to God's work, but the tithe is simply a pointer towards the generosity which is expected of you. In other words, you are free to give more. And when you see Paul dealing with the issues of raising funds to help the poor church in Jerusalem, and we see this in 1 Corinthians 16 when he says, make sure on the first day of the week, each of you put aside what you can so that when I come, it'll all be there and in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is two big fundraising chapters.

He never mentions tithing, although you might have thought that if it was that important, he'd have said out of this tithe, et cetera, et cetera, that he does insist on generosity. This is the big principle which comes across is that freely you have received freely give, as Jesus says in the Matthew's gospel and Matthew Luke. And if that is so, then the point of tithing is to say that's a pointer to what we all ought to be doing

because the best thing to do with money is to give it away.

And God's generosity is to be reflected in our generosity, not in a foolish or silly way if you've got obligations. And you see this sometimes in the New Testament where Paul has to warn that if anyone doesn't look after their own family first, then they are being foolish and are worse than unbelievers. In other words, don't leave it to the church to look after your family.

You've got the obligation to do that. And of course, there are checks and balances to be built into all of this. So in and through it all, I think in the New Testament we have a release from a kind of legalistic, it's got to be a tenth, there it is, but that release doesn't mean therefore you don't have to give that much or it could only be two percent or five percent or whatever.

It's rather, it's assumed that you will be giving and then please give some more. And please, as Jesus says, let not your right hand know what your left is doing. Make sure your generosity is flowing out.

Now from that to the second question, does that mean God will automatically bless you? Well, you can quote from say the book of Malachi, bring the full tithes into the storehouse and then I will open the windows of heaven, pour out upon you a great blessing, etc. Well, yes, God can and does do that. But at the moment when it seems to become a transaction, I'm going to do this and then God will do that as though it's like putting a coin in a slot and the machine will produce a can of Coke or whatever it is.

As soon as we get into that mentality, something has gone horribly wrong because that is not generosity, that is transactional and that's not, seems to me, the way that God works. Likewise, it's very dangerous because it plays into the glorification of Mammon, of money, which Western society has been so massively invested in. And the fact that I use that phrase invested in tells its own story.

We talk about people having bought into such and such a system. We use these financial metaphors and they get into our heads and our hearts and that's simply not how God, the generous creator acts. Look at the seminal amount where Jesus talks about God makes his son rise on the just and on the unjust and sends rain upon all people alike, etc.

And we've got to be generous hearted like that. So if in and through our generosity, if God then chooses to bless us in particular ways, well, wonderful. God has all sorts of things in store, but that's likely to come when people are humble and trusting God, not when people are saying, "Okay, I've given a tenth year, so God has got now to do this and that and the other." That just degenerates into the old song, "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?" No, it's just not like that.

Thank you, thank you. Let's move on to another question about church rules and the way things are put across. This is from Barry and Lynchburg in Virginia in the US.

Says recently, "After a long tenure at a Presbyterian church, we found ourselves in search of a new local church home. We took vows to our former church when we became members. I honestly didn't think much of it then.

And as we've explored where we should be rooted next, it appears that many churches now require signing a so-called church covenant, in some cases the documents seem to be limited to simple affirmations of commonly held Christian beliefs along with a commitment to support and serve the local body. Others seem to add commitments to very particular theological or moral imperatives. Moreover, some seem to suggest that participation in communion or being baptized are conditions upon signing these documents or taking vows reflecting the same.

I think I understand the practical reason for church covenants and vows for discipline and efficiency. But are these biblical? I suppose this varies from place to place and different churches will have different forms of this, Tom. You might want to comment on what typically it looks like in an average Anglican church.

But obviously there's questions here from Barry around how much should you sign up to in order to become a communicative member of a local church? Yes, it does vary enormously from denomination to denomination and within denominations across continents and so on, so that the practice of a particular church in, say, Central Africa might be very different from the similar church in Europe, very different again from somebody in Southeast Asia or in North America or wherever. So one can't generalize. I have always been wary of local churches making more and more and more rules as though to try to corral people and keep them in and make them all conform.

Because actually the preaching of Scripture and of the gospel ought itself to be doing that. Of course that needs to be applied and of course if there are controversies, if people in the church say we think we ought to do X and other people say no you can't do that, well this has to be addressed. But the more you make the rules which say in this church we all behave like this and nobody does X, Y and Z, then beware because that can be elevating one's own local church and people desire for control really above the way that Scripture itself works.

Because Scripture itself remarkably, or maybe not remarkably works very much as God the Creator works. It says come and live within this story, come and be people who tell the Jesus story with us and as we tell the Jesus story together and pray to the God who we see revealed in Jesus, then we find that all sorts of things in our common life will make sense in new ways. And when we pull back from that and say well we basically know what the Bible says, so that's the gospel and doctrine and now we need our local church rules which must be thus and so.

Then we are in slightly dangerous territory. I'm speaking as an Anglican inevitably because that's what I am. We have these things called the 39 articles which go back to the 16th century when at the time of the Reformation people said we need to know where we stand on particular topics because there's so much confusion.

We've broken away from the Roman Catholic Church but there are other different people pulling and pushing this way in that. So we need some articles to keep us on the straight and narrow as it were. But those articles, the 39 articles were never designed to be like say the Westminster Confession was designed to be in the 17th century, a complete account of Christian doctrine.

They were ways of saying these are ancillary local house rules which send us back again and again to the Bible and the early fathers, the creeds and so on. They are where we basically sit. And I remember one time when I was Bishop of Durham and there were various groups pushing for we've got to have a statement about this and the House of Bishops needs to make our position clear on that and this and that and the other.

And one of my wise colleagues said that when we're talking about the authoritative statements, we're talking about God's authoritative statement of himself in and as Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. We're then talking about that as reflected in, embodied in and encapsulated in the Holy Scriptures. We're then talking about how that works out in the great creeds and the formularies of the early, very early centuries.

When you go on and on and on down that line and last and least is something that the House of Bishops said last week, that's not that that's unimportant. It's that we have to remind ourselves where the center is. Now of course, we live in a world of enormous confusion on ethical issues, on doctrinal issues, on ecclesial issues, on whether you should have presbyters or congregationalism or whatever.

At the moment with different churches being planted in different worlds, in different areas and different doctrinal traditions, it's very, very, very confusing. And I think it's partly to regulate that confusion that people are wanting to make these tighter structures. And yes, baptism matters.

Yes, the Eucharist matters, the breaking of bread. These are among the marks of the church, but we need to be careful lest we set up structures which then become so restrictive, so brittle then that people then have to break out of them in order to go and do their own thing again. And so I hope that what I'm saying is reasonably clear that the foundational authority is God in Christ in Scripture by the Holy Spirit.

Beware of setting up anything which appears to be on a level with that. Very helpful. Thank you.

I suppose that will be down to each individual's consciences to whether they're being

presented with, you know, as a sort of, you have to sign on this dotted line. It sort of seems to be more than simply, you know, that kind of level. Interesting question that we'll conclude with here from Kelly in Virginia who asked, "To what extent does the leadership of the church matter? I lead a nonprofit and have been in ministry in different ways for almost two decades.

Over the last five years though, I've struggled with the church we attend. It's large with all the negatives and positives that come with that. This focuses the presentation on Sunday.

The leadership believes in complimentarianism. And sometimes I feel like there are subtle racist aspects. Now if it were down to me, I'd leave the church, but I don't want my kids to grow up believing some of what the church teaches.

But my husband and I too feel like the body of Christ is not the leadership, but the people who follow Christ. And therefore we should stay because of some of the amazing people of faith in our local church. Now I know you can't solve this tension for us, Tom, but I didn't know what you felt about the significance of the leadership in a local church.

How much should it matter? So this is a really interesting question I think from Kelly, is to what extent we sort of identify the church with the leadership and the things they specifically believe and teach from the front. And how much we say, "Well actually, I'm more interested in the local body." And quite frequently frankly, Tom, there is more variety sometimes of doctrinal kind of persuasion in the local congregation than sometimes there is up on stage. So what do you think for Kelly though, should she sort of persist and stick with it? Because ultimately it's more about the people in the pews than the people on the stage.

It's very difficult and it's become more difficult with the freedom of movement. Time was when most Christians in the world, comparatively recently, just a few hundred years ago, couldn't move on a Sunday away from their locality. They didn't have the time, the energy, the resources to go to a different church from the one church which was in their town or village.

And so this is quite a new question really. Of course in the ancient world, people did travel. They went from place to place and when they went to another place, they looked for the group of Jesus worshipers who were there.

And sometimes, like when Phoebe went to Rome with Paul's letter, she found different groups of Jesus believers who were a bit suspicious of one another because they did things somewhat differently. You can see that in Romans 14 and 15. But then the question comes, how do you know and how can you tell and yes, what sort of leadership do we have? And the early church was quite clear about needing to be hooked in, as it were, to the original apostles, to Paul, Peter and the rest, and the early church from very

early on saw local leadership which was Episcopoi, which we roughly translate as bishops, and then Diaconae with Presbiteroy, presbiters, somewhere in the middle of that, and there are different theories about how all that worked.

But the idea was that these were the people who the church under God had prayed for and received as ministers, not that they were therefore infallible, but that they were the ones who you should stick with because to break away from them was to court disunity in fracturing the body of Christ. Now we are in a totally different position today and have been ever since the 16th century, where the vociferousness of post-16th century Christianity has been a scandal, to be honest. Paul and the others would be horrified to see the way in which in any given town there are dozens of different churches all trying to be the true church, as it were, not all actually claiming that, but there's often that implicit claim, thus leaving many people in the position that your correspondent is in.

And of course I would say, yes, it's the body of Christ, the whole body of Christ, which is the actual community, and the leadership is in a sense a function of that. That might sound like a congregation-list position. I don't intend it as that because it seems to me there's a mysterious synergy between God's calling of somebody, and I've worked with many people wrestling with issues of vocation for many years now.

God's call of somebody, often from quite early on in their life, to be a leader or teacher in the church, with them the need for the church to receive that call and to say, yes, we recognize that God is calling you, now we will help shape you and train you so that you can fulfil that call. All right, so it isn't a top-down thing where some people just get plonked down, these are your leaders, and that's the end of it, and whatever they say goes, nor is it simply a bottom-up thing that there are some people within our group who we rather like and rather respect, etc. It's a curious mixture of the two, which I think has something of the fingerprints of the way in which the God we know in Jesus tends to work, if I can put it like that.

So then when you're in a regular worshipping community and you find yourself in fellowship with your brothers and sisters and enjoying that fellowship and feeling it, building you up and feeling them, giving you the space to make your contribution as well, then it is awkward if the leaders, the official leaders, the people who are preaching on Sunday mornings or at other times, don't quite seem to be meshing with that, and that's something which then has to be dealt with prayerfully and sensitively. But I would say much wider than that, we should be looking at and praying for the larger scene in which all those who name the name of Jesus in a particular locality would be looking out for one another and be praying with and for one another across ethnic lines, across traditional lines. The unity of the church ought to be our great imperative, even though it appears impossible and difficult.

We should be looking out for it. I'm sure if Paul were to come and see our churches in

Britain, churches in Africa, churches in America, that's what he would say. Why are you not celebrating together? Read Romans 14 and 15 again and see.

That's how we should be so that the smaller issues of what do we do about the leadership in this church and should we leave and find another one? Well, it's tricky. You may take some of the problems with you. That sadly often happens.

But those need to be contextualized within that larger imperative. And we ought to be looking for signs of that larger imperative towards a greater unity and of ways in which prayerfully we can make contributions towards that, not simply helping out with our local community. Though, of course, we all have our different vocations and we can't all do it all, all the time.

Yeah, well, really helpful. Thank you, Tom. I hope it's helped you as well, Kelly, I understand it's... As you said, you weren't expecting us to solve this tension for you, but I hope that some of that has helped as you think through what the best thing is for you and your family.

But Tom, thank you very much for being with me again and look forward to talking with you again on other subjects. But for now, we'll see you next time. Yes, indeed.

Thank you very much.

[Music] Hey, thanks for being with us today and speaking of the question of tithing, if you are feeling generous, then you can support this show and Premier Unbelievable in its mission to bring thinking faith to many more people, both skeptics and Christians. That's from PremierUnbelievable.com. Also a reminder, we've got that important live event coming online next month, a four-person panel featuring Amy O'Ewing, Rachel Den Hollander, Mike Cossper and Diane Langberg on church leadership and church abuse.

Go to Unbelievable.live to be part of that and ask your questions live as well. For now, thanks for being with us and see you next time.

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