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#80 Live audience Q&A on evangelism

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

NT Wright answers audience questions on evangelism and the gospel.

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Transcript

[♪] The Ask NTY Anything podcast. [♪] Welcome back to the Ask NTY Anything show with me Justin Briley. I'm Premier's Theology and Apologetics editor and bring you the show in partnership with SBCK and NTY Right Online.

Today, we're going to be hearing the second part of Tom's address to the unbelievable conference in which he takes a number of listener and viewer questions on all sorts of issues around evangelism. So, look out for that. That's what you're going to be hearing on the podcast today.

If you want more of Tom's teaching from that conference, you can get the whole of the digital download by going to askNTRight.com and clicking on the link there. It'll take you through to our shop where you can purchase the entire digital download for yourself. That's also the place to go for our fortnightly newsletter as well, our webpage, AskNTRight.com. You'll also receive the link when you sign up to ask a question yourself and we're going to be recording some fresh shows with Tom very soon.

So, this is a great time to be asking a question yourself. Plus, one of the great reasons to get involved on our mailing list right now is that we're going to be drawing from all of our subscribers. Five people who will win a signed copy of Tom's recent book, *Broken Signpost*.

Tom's kindly signed five of those and we will be drawing five from our mailing list. It's a book on how Christianity makes sense of the world. It's a really excellent read.

So, if you'd like to be in the with the running to to win a copy of that, one of those five signed copies, then do make sure you're subscribed at askNTRight.com. We'll be drawing the winners in September. Hope you enjoy today's show as Tom takes on the questions that were asked of him in his opening address at Unbelievable for Conference.

[Music] Let's jump right in.

I thought this was a good one to start with. Natalie asks, "Have you always been a Christian and if not, when did that begin and could you tell us about that?" Yes, I'm one of those fortunate and in these days rather strange people who grew up in a Christian home, a very unostentatious middle of the road going to church on Sunday's sort of home, where Christian standards and behavior, etc. were taken more or less for granted.

I don't remember any sermons from my first 10 or 12 years of life, but somewhere along the way, some time when I was about seven or eight, I remember a very vivid experience of being overwhelmed by the fact that God loved me enough for Jesus to die for me. And the trouble is I've told the story once or twice, and I'm not sure which bits are genuine memory and which bits are memory of things I've said before, but I do know that that was a very important moment. And then when as a teenager, I started to read the Bible for myself and particularly to hear people expounding it in different ways and from different angles.

So many things made sense. Of course, every time something makes sense, you're given more questions to address, but that's gone on ever since. I was rather cheekily going to ask, you didn't have a Luke to write it down three times for you, your story.

That is an interesting one. This is coming from James, who says Dr. Alice Roberts, who's a prominent humanist, in fact, she's the head of the British Humanists, mocked Christians on her Twitter account on Good Friday. And I remember this because I saw it myself.

I think she said essentially, just a reminder, dead people don't come back to life. And James asks, how do we engage with someone who belittles people of faith? And are people like Alice Roberts really interested in finding out whether the story of Jesus is true? Yes, I don't know, Alice Roberts. I think you alerted me actually to that sort of thing on Good Right.

So I was aware of that incident, but of course, all the only disciples knew that dead people don't come back to life. Jews of the time mostly believe, not all, but mostly believe that at the end, God would renew His whole creation and raise all His people from the dead, but they certainly weren't expecting one person to be raised as a kind of

anticipation of that. So the story they told about Jesus was not the sort of story that you would come up with if you were a devout Jew whose great leader had just died.

I've written about this at Langfield Square. In other words, there are very good historical arguments for saying that even though we all know that this is the norm, dead people do not come back. It's not that, oh yeah, this might happen at any time and it just happened to Jesus.

If this was anything, it must be some kind of act of radical new creation. And of course, that is what the church has always said, it's best said it was. I mean, sticking with the theme of those who perhaps have been turned off Christianity for one reason or another, Roy asks, "Any suggestions about telling this story in context such as Ireland? Perhaps that's where Roy is watching, where Christianity has been bad news for a lot of people." Yeah, Christianity sadly has been bad news again and again during the last 2000 years for many people.

One of the things we have to remind ourselves of, and maybe we'll come back to this later on today, is the number of places really below the radar where Christianity has been incredibly good news for many, many people around the world and still is being, and things which don't hit the headlines. So you've got to have a balance. And who represents Christianity to say Christianity is bad news.

Often it's people who have turned Christianity into some sort of a power system or a controlling system instead of a life-giving system. Now that begs all sorts of questions. But you have to start where different people are, and if somebody is in that position, then I would want them and encourage them to look again at, say, Mark's Gospel and say, "Does that look like the sort of thing that you're worried about, or does it look different? Because I could show you how that difference might play out," and so on.

Or indeed to look at the many times in history when Christianity has been amazingly good news and has transformed society and social attitudes and so on. Yeah. John has a bit of a theological question really, and it's in regard to the whole idea of the New Heaven, New Earth.

"Doesn't 2 Peter 3, 10 to 11, talk about this world being destroyed, and then there being a New Heaven and Earth?" It's a complicated passage I've written about it at length in a couple of books. Sorry to give you the footnotes, but the resurrection of the Son of God has, I think, four or five pages on that. I cannot possibly reproduce all that now, nor should I try.

There's a little snippet in "Surprise by Hope" as well. Part of the problem is that that passage in 2 Peter 3 has one of the most difficult textual histories of anywhere in the New Testament, which makes it look as though through the second and third and fourth centuries when people were writing, transcribing the New Testament. People were

genuinely puzzled by what this was saying, and I think the most likely original reading is a Greek phrase, which means that the reality of God's heaven and earth will be disclosed, will be found.

You need to look at the original and wrestle with it, but the popular interpretation, which is of God destroying the present world and doing something totally different, doesn't fit with, for instance, Romans 8, which is such a classic passage, where the new world is, as it were, to be born out of the womb of the old, where creation is groaning in travail, waiting for the new thing to be born. So in many passages in the New Testament, there is continuity between old and new. As there was with Jesus' own resurrection body, in other words, Jesus' body didn't stay in the tomb, and then he grew a new body.

No, this is the same body as witnessed by the mark of the nails. When you chase that through into what story you tell about heaven and earth, that is actually profoundly important. Really interesting question here from Cody, who says, "Tom, I'm discipling a person who recently accepted the existence of God.

However, while I'm teaching him about Jesus from an orthodox Christian perspective, his wife's family are pulling him towards a Jehovah's Witness point of view, and his mother is luring him towards a Jesus-alien cult of all things." So these are the realities of the kinds of influences people have around them, aren't they? And Cody asks, "How do I differentiate from my friend the real Jesus from these other versions?" Oh goodness, I would anchor the story back in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, because again and again, and I'm not an expert on Jesus-alien cults, and I don't know that much about Jehovah's Witnesses' alas either, but Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, again and again, earth the story in nothing like that, but in the first century Jewish world where all these things meant what they meant. And of course we have to face questions and possible distortions, and are we getting it right, but go back to those texts, there is no substitute. As soon as you think that you've got this figure called Jesus and then try to invent context and meaning from somewhere else, you're likely to spin off in all kinds of different directions.

But in the process, again, to reiterate what I said, God is good. I mean, it isn't that we have to get all the answers by this weekend or the whole world is going to come to a shuddering halt. Pray about it, work at it, be cheerful about it.

We may not get it all right this week, but let's keep working and let's keep friendly and let's be joyful about that first. Yeah. Another very interesting one from Jeraton, who says, "I'm from India." So how do you tell this story of Jesus to Hindus who perhaps believe in many gods, a god-man cycle of birth and rebirth and indeed a very pluralistic approach to religion? Part of our problem here is precisely the word religion.

Justin and I have had this conversation many times before, I think, that our modern word religion doesn't correspond to anything in the ancient world, because when in the

ancient world they talked about religion they meant something very different from what we meant. And that too doesn't correspond to what Jesus was doing. It's about a totality of society, not just here's ordinary society and then we have this religion on the side.

Indeed, when Western explorers went to India and told the Indian people that they had a religion called Hinduism, I'm told that the Indian population was surprised. They didn't think of it like that at all. This was simply a total part of their culture.

I have to say as well that some of the oldest Christianity in the world is in India. The Thomas Christians trace their history. It's not certain that they do go back to the Apostle Thomas, but they go back very, very early.

And so it isn't that Christianity is a Western faith which has only recently made its way into other parts of the world. It took root and takes root wherever it goes. And it does quite rightly, I believe, challenge all sorts of aspects of other world views.

And again one has to sit down and look at them and not simply see it as a package. Here is this thing called Christianity. There is this thing called Hinduism.

There are convergences and there are divergences and it's important to map them out wisely and sensitively. I suppose then the natural question I'm left with, and I think a lot of people have been asking it anyway, I'll give Peter's example of this. An objection I have encountered is this exclusivity of Jesus as saviour.

Any suggestions on how to deal with that? And I know that in my interactions with Hindus, that's often been the stumbling block. Surely it's, you know, why can't I say that Jesus is another way to God just as I have? Yes, it's very difficult, isn't it? In the present Indian context, and I'm very much aware that the pandemic is wreaking havoc in India at the moment. And I've had friends, I've had emails from Christian friends in India who have been in despair because of the attitudes that they see in some of their Hindu politicians.

Now I can't comment on that myself, but they are aware that there are actually different ways of approaching all the life questions and they're really worried about points where Christianity, where followers of Jesus should be critiquing aspects of contemporary Indian culture. Is that exclusive? Well, in a sense yes it is, but Hinduism itself is radically exclusive. It tolerates everything except intolerance, if you like.

I had a colleague when I was teaching in Montreal who was a practicing Hindu and was teaching Hinduism, and we used to laugh about this frequently. But it's a matter of all worldviews make certain totalising claims, and the idea that some are simply going to tolerate everything is simply wrong. We've seen that in post-modernity and in the new moralisms of post-modernity.

They are deeply intolerant, even when they're saying that we must tolerate this and

that. That's a major confusion of our times, and this perhaps isn't the moment to go into particularly detail. Perhaps linking into that in the sense that there's this particularity of Christianity.

Katie asks, "What do you mean by God incarnate?" So this idea that God came into a time, place, person, what does that mean and how would we express that to someone who might be thinking, "Gosh, how where do you even begin?" I was scratching my head the other day thinking about how I might line up a course of maybe 16 lectures on precisely this day. So it's not going to be easy to do it very quickly, but part of the problem is that in the Jewish scriptures, in what Christians call the Old Testament, there are all sorts of hints and guesses about what God intends to do in the world, and I mentioned that in my talk. They are not specific, easy one-on-one predictions of one day there will be somebody who will be God incarnate.

They are rather this extraordinary picture of God who is greater than the world and yet dares to act in and through his chosen people, Israel. Now that is, of course, a scandal of particularity right there, but for the benefit of the whole world. And that gets mixed in with promises about God saying, "I'm looking and seeing that nobody can sort out this mess and I'm going to come and sort it out myself." And those promises are sort of hovering in the air, and then when the early Christians are telling the story of Jesus, they are saying those are the promises that have been fulfilled.

But then the question is, you can't start with a view of God and figure, "Okay, I now believe in God, I've got God sorted." Now, I'm required to say that God and Jesus are somehow linked because in the New Testament, we are told that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. In other words, we don't start off with a God who we can analyze and say, "Okay, Jesus is that." Rather, when we look at Jesus then and only then, we discover who God is. I mean, nobody would have imagined, and people still find it very difficult to imagine God dying on a cross and shouting out, "My God, why did you abandon me?" Some of the greatest theologians of the last generation, I'm thinking of Jorgen Moltmann, for instance, have made that the centerpiece after the very dark 20th century with so much evil.

Moltmann realized that those passages in the Gospels are absolutely vital for understanding who God is. And ultimately, this is about the love of God. It's not enough to say, "I love you so much.

I'm going to send somebody else to do the dirty work." Paul says that the death of Jesus reveals the love of God, and that must be personal, and that must be present. So any theology of incarnation of God incarnate really needs to start at that point and work out. I think that's the real challenge, isn't it? It's stopping it just being a story in the past that was for people then, and what differences it makes today.

I mean, Colin has a question of this. He says, "My experience of students in schools is

that they're not being taught how stories work, but that facts and knowledge are preeminent." The result is Jesus and His story is seen as just history. And I don't believe in that, they say.

But what can we say to reprioritize story over simply knowledge? Yes, I mean, there are different levels, different types of story, of course. And even in the Gospels, you can see this very clearly when Jesus tells stories about a man sowing seed in the field or about a father who had two sons and dot, dot, dot. Nobody with any grain of understanding thinks that it makes sense to say, "Well, where was this farmer? And where was the field? And I need to see the path where the seed didn't grow and so on." That's not the point.

And many stories are like that. Like, for instance, the great stories of Tolkien and people like that. No wise reader of Tolkien says, "Please will you take me to Middle Earth?" I mean, I know people go to New Zealand where it was filmed and say, "Oh, now we're actually in..." Yeah, well, they'll go to a theme park and where they recreate it.

But because the story means so much more than just did it happen or didn't it? But we have to distinguish that from the way that Jewish people in the first century believed that God, the Creator, was going to be active within His world. And so that when Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are telling the story of Jesus, they are building in layers of meaning. It's not just fact or no fact.

But part of the meaning is this is the Creator God coming in person to sort out the mess. And if that didn't happen, if that was just a cleverly devised myth, back to 2 Peter who says that it wasn't that, then I'm wasting my time and so we all. So the wager of Christianity is that this actually is about stuff that happened, but which is so stuffed full of layers of meaning that it's hard to map them all out.

Yeah. I was going to say one way in which people sometimes do feel they can somehow enter into that story. And I don't want to compare it to going to a theme park, but it's sort of the equipment is going to the place where these things happened to Israel, to Jerusalem and so on.

Does that make a difference to you when you've stood in those places to know this is where things happened? Absolutely. And it's a strange thing. And many, many people who have been to the Holy Land have had experiences like this.

I remember the first time that I was in Nazareth, and I was staying in Little Pilgrim Hostel on the side of the hill, and I got up early a lovely Sunday morning in the spring, and I walked up behind where I was staying and sat down under some very old olive trees. Now think about olive trees is if you don't cut them down or burn them, they stay there forever. And it suddenly overwhelmed me, the thought that maybe there was a young boy called Jesus 2000 years ago, who had played with his friends around these very

same olive trees.

Oh my goodness. And likewise in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and I know people worry because it's full of strange religions stuff and incense and blah, blah, blah, blah. But for me, being at the very place where the high probability is, this is where Jesus was crucified, or at least pretty close to here within a few hundred yards, I found that absolutely overwhelming.

And there's something about Jerusalem itself, which, and it's still a very darkened and sad place, of course, for all sorts of contemporary political reasons, but something there which makes sense to say, as the hymn says, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in these ways. You know, this is, there is something, and we modern Western Europeans, etc, are so imbued with 18th century ideals about if it's going to be true, it's got to be true for everybody all the time in the same way that we miss. Now actually, you find the big picture in the specific, and you find the full meaning in these unique events.

It's got time for one more. It's quite a big question, so forgive me, this is Bridget, and says, listening to you reframe the story and the way we tell that to people. How would you reframe the other ways that people often learnt of sharing the gospel? She gives the example of the four spiritual laws.

God loves you, humankind is sinful and separated from God, Jesus is God's provision for sin, and we must each individually receive Jesus as Savior. So, you know, a sort of packaged version. Is there a problem with that? Would you reframe it? There is a problem with that.

That way, I have to say, I'd much rather people believe those four spiritual laws, than they're believed in Epicureanism or Platonism or Sparesism or whatever, because at least they're getting on the map. Right. But as you explore more of the map, it's a very slanted and sloped off version, which really belongs with a particular Western Protestant tradition, particularly, which focuses on the problem of sin.

And as soon as you critique that, people say, "Oh, there you are, anti-right going soft on sin." No, not at all. But that is part of the larger picture, which is about God's good creative purposes for the whole creation, rather than simply rescuing. Of course, we need rescuing from sin.

Of course, that is part of the whole. But that is part of a larger whole, which is the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth as in Heaven. Otherwise, the thing collapses into a post-reformational form of Platonism, which is to say, "I have a soul which needs saving so it can go back to Heaven where it belongs." Which, as I've said, often enough, I find that in various early Platonic writers, and not in the New Testament itself, which curiously never talks about souls going back to Heaven when they die.

Look, it's been wonderful to manage to squeeze in so many questions with you, Tom. Thanks for being with us on today's edition of The Ask N T Right Anything podcast. Back to the usual format of the show next week when I'm sitting down with Tom to ask your questions.

And you can ask a question yourself. All you need to do is be signed up via our webpage. That's AskNtRight.com. The link is with today's podcast.

If you sign up and get onto our mailing list, you'll also receive the link to ask a question yourself. And there's a really good further reason to do that right now because we are running this competition. Five signed copies of Tom's book Broke and Signpost to be won by anyone who is on our mailing list and will be drawing the winners at random in September.

So as long as you're signed up before the end of August, you'll be in with a chance to win one of those five signed copies. If you enjoyed today's show, then you might want to get more of the teaching from Tom at this year's Unbelievable Conference. It's all available as a digital download.

Again, there's a link from the AskNtRight show page that's AskNtRight.com or indeed with today's show. So do click through to find out more about that for now. Thanks for being with us and see you next time.

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