

OpenTheo

#50 Icons, praying to saints & dividing over sexuality

January 7, 2021



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions around whether shrines are pagan, infant baptism is biblical and how we can live in unity with theological differences around sexuality.

* Support the show and receive NT Wright's brand new E-book '12 Answers to questions about the Bible, Life and Faith' <https://resources.premier.org.uk/supportntwright/>

* For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com

* Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via PodBean, iTunes or RSS Feed

Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and Happy New Year, albeit one still being lived in the shadow of the present pandemic here in early 2021. But I'm Justin Brierley, Premiastheology and Apologetics Editor welcoming you to another edition of the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast brought to you by Premiastheology, Spck and NT Wright Online. And down the show we're looking at questions you've sent in on ecclesiology, the local church and denominations.

And this is of course the first episode of 2021, also our 50th episode of the podcast, a bit of a special occasion. Thank you so much for being part of the listening community and for the well hundreds of questions now that we've been able to tackle over the last couple of years. We've also had some lovely comments and reviews of the podcast as we've approached this 50th episode to some of the ones recently posted.

Big Tommy said, especially during these times when churches are closed because of the pandemic, the gentle and wise words of Tom Wright are so welcome and needed. With many episodes I find discussion is on questions I myself have been pondering but haven't gotten around to asking aloud. Andy said, "I've really enjoyed listening to this podcast."

The hosts are great. The responses to questions are thoughtful and respectful. Wonderful show for working through common questions about the Bible, theology, God and Christianity." And Lumina Gen said, "As someone raised in the church in the American South, the notion that the kingdom is both here, God's domination of present reality and is yet to come, the no-tears place is a radical and new to me.

In a year when death has been hitting very close to home, I've been wrestling with old ideas and theology. I've taken at face value all my life. I've read and listened to a lot and Tom Wright has done a beautiful job of tying these expanded ideas to scripture where all of my hope is pinned.

Very grateful for his voice being introduced to me in 2020 or whether you're a long time or new listener. Welcome along to our 50th episode of the show. And to celebrate 50 episodes, we invited you to subscribe to our fortnightly newsletter and everybody on that list would get entered into the prize draw for three sets of two of Tom's books, God and the Pandemic and Broken Signpost.

Well, we have drawn the winners, the randomly drawn winners for those two sets of books are Jan Pettermoburg, Sharon Ricketts and Paul Friedland. So well done, the three of you, and we'll be in touch to arrange getting those out to you. And if you want to be automatically entered for things like prize draws and of course, to receive our fortnightly newsletter, do go over to askentyrite.com. You can get yourself registered.

Plus, of course, you get the link to send a question in yourself for future podcasts. Also, if you'd like to support the show with a gift in 2021, we'll send a thank you of Tom's show ebook, 12 answers to questions on the Bible, life and faith. Again, that's askentyrite.com and click on give.

Hope you enjoy today's show. Well, Tom, welcome along to the 50th episode of our podcast. Seems unbelievable, doesn't it? It does.

It does. Just over two years ago, really, that we began this and whether we've been doing it as we have been for the last, you know, little while over Zoom, because of the pandemic or together, I can say that I have thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed this. It's been an absolute treat for me to be able to sit down with you so regularly and just take all these questions.

Thank you. Well, it's been kind of fun for me too. I'm sorry, we've not been able to do it in the studio because it's always been good to meet up, but I think it's gone all right.

It's gone very well. In fact, we're approaching two million downloads of the podcast as I speak. It's extraordinary.

It's phenomenal. Considering it only goes out, you know, fortnightly as well, you're amazing. And I now receive so many messages.

I was reading some earlier of people who benefited from, you know, discovered you for the first time and the thinking's got you, got them reading your books and so on. I mean, obviously, your influence and writing and ministry predates this podcast by a long way. But I suppose you must be constantly amazed at bumping into people all over the world who have been impacted by your thinking and writing, Tom.

Yes. I mean, as a scholar, I'm equally aware of the many people, and you can see some of their books on the shelves behind me, who would strongly disagree with my interpretation of this parable or this passage in Paul or whatever, so that I never think of myself as somebody who, as it were, has the world at my feet listening to and agreeing with everything I say, I see myself rather as somebody who's in the midst of all kinds of debates and discussions. Some of them microscopic about a detail here and there, which doesn't make that much difference.

Others much bigger about the whole question of what are we trying to do in doing historical and theological study at all. So I'm aware of those sorts of discussions and debates much more than I'm aware of people who are tuning in just to hear what anti-writer is going to say next. Though I do gather that there are a lot of them, which is, is it gratifying in a way it is because I've set myself to do this rather odd task of devoting one's life to studying the Bible and trying to teach it on the grounds that I've always believed that's what the church needed.

So if then one gets feedback and people saying, yes, this has been helpful, then, oh, few. You know, like St Paul sometimes finds himself saying, I worried that I was wasting my time, but the fact that you in Philippi and you in Thessalonica, you're still absolutely on target. This makes me think my ministry has not been in vain.

And so I do have that sort of sense too when I allow myself to stop and think about. Obviously, we've been doing this in partnership with SBCK, your UK publisher and anti-write online throughout. And there's always great resources that we're able to mention from week to week in the shows.

I think you had some extraordinary news that how many countries is it that people are actually receiving the material from anti-write online? I find it hard to even imagine this, sorry for the split infinitive. But I gather that we have students in 191 countries now. And since there are only 197 countries in the world, that means pretty well worldwide coverage.

Now, obviously most of the students that do the anti-write online courses are in America, Canada, Britain, probably Australia and South Africa, I think. But clearly, it's spread much more widely. And we do occasionally get messages from people in places that I've barely heard of and could hardly locate on a map, whether it's Kyrgyzstan or wherever.

And I know that there are people in Norway and Sweden and Finland who listen to my

stuff because they sometimes send me emails. Their English is much better than my Norwegian or Swedish or Finnish would have been. And so on and so on.

And I hope and pray that where people can access the internet in parts of Africa and Southeast Asia and so on, then this is helpful to them too. That's great. You may remember, Justin, there's a line when Karl Bart is talking about his Roman's commentary and how it had a huge effect in theological and pastoral thinking.

And he said it was like when he was a small boy. And once naughtily, he crept into the church and was climbing inside the church tower in the dark. He wasn't supposed to.

And he found what he thought was a handrail and he lent on it. And it turned out to be the bell rope. And suddenly, dong, dong, dong, everybody in the village knew that there was somebody in the church tower who shouldn't be there.

And he said that was like what he said, I was trying to find my way by reading Paul. And suddenly, it had this effect. Now, for me, that's been pretty much the same thing.

I've been trying to find my way as a Christian than as somebody who knew he was called to be ordained and be a preacher by reading the gospels and Paul. And as I have been feeling my way forwards, a lot of people from very different backgrounds have said, Oh my goodness, that's helpful. Please tell us more.

And so, oh, okay, fine. Let's do what we can. That's that's how it's been for me, rather than a great agenda, which I've had from the beginning.

No, it's it's evolved over time. But I know many, many people who have that same sense that that things came together in a really helpful way when they discovered you, Tom. So, well, and I can't myself among them.

Anyway, questions today for our 50th episode on perhaps suitably ecclesiology in the church in general, because I know that people who listen, listen from all kinds of different denominations and church backgrounds, as well as coming from all over the world. So let's go to a specific part of the world, Bulgaria. And Vanja asks this question.

My question has to do with Greek Orthodox traditions of placing icons, so images of Jesus Mary and the saints, as things to pray to in church and at home. I've not seen any reference in the Bible to having such shrines, neither in the old nor in the New Testament. I personally take this as a pagan tradition.

But what do you think, Tom? Yeah, it's a good question. The first time I ran into icons and that sort of thing, I was really worried as well. And of course, there is a there is a sub question there, because part of the distinction, as I understand it, it's not my field between the Eastern Orthodox traditions and the Roman Catholic traditions is that the Eastern Orthodox have icons, which are a kind of painting, a very specialized kind of

painting, but they don't have statues.

They don't have anything that has body to it. Whereas in the Roman Catholic tradition, they have gone all the way into statuary, etc. And this spills over into the Anglican church, because many Anglican churches started off, of course, as medieval churches in the great Western tradition, what we would now call Roman Catholic.

So there are lots of sub questions in there as well. But here's the thing about icons, that icons are not actually things you're supposed to pray to. Their things are supposed to pray through.

And that may be a kind of refinement, which the average worshipper isn't thinking of. But the senses that and this comes out with the aesthetics of how an icon is painted, or as they actually call it writing an icon, which is a itself a spiritual process that the the writer of an icon, we would say the painter of an icon, if for him, I assume they're mostly male, it's an act of prayer to do this and praying that this will be something through which people will have access to the larger world of God and Jesus and and the saints and the angels and so on. And those who are in God's dimension now in the heavenly realm now, and this goes with the Greek Orthodox or Eastern Orthodox architecture, where the church is divided into this bit, which represents earth, and that bit, which represents heaven, and the icons are on an iconostasis, an icon screen, so that you're looking through the icons into the heavenly realm, and you're praying with the saints to God.

And now, of course, for a popular worshipper, this may well mean I'm actually praying to this saint, and that may be how people see it. I think that's another question which we'll come to later. I don't believe that there is any justification for praying to a saint if we are given, according to some Paul, access to God the Father himself through the Son in the power of the Spirit.

If we have an open invitation to go to the very top, why would we mess around putting trivial requests or not so trivial requests to somebody who was, as it were, lower down the food chain, if that's even the right image to use? So I want to get quite clear that in what I understand it is appropriate orthodox theology, the icons are not things you pray to, they're things that you pray through. And I would see that, and I think the East Orthodox teachers would see this, as having to do with the belief that with the resurrection of Jesus, a new creation has come to earth, so that whereas for the Jews, they were forbidden to make representations of anything in the heavens or the earth, they actually did in some ways laterly, but that's another story. For the Eastern Orthodox, they say God has made this new creation with the resurrection of Jesus.

And so in this new world, we too are to be co-creators, so we can paint these icons, not in order that they be idols like pagan idolatry, but that they be expressions of beauty which we create through which we see God's beauty, and which help us then when we

look at the world, the sun and the moon and the stars and the mountains and the rivers and all the rest of it and the animals, we don't worship them, but we worship God the Creator whose life and love we see reflected in them. And at the center of the picture, of course, we worship in and through Jesus himself, who is the new creation. So we need to see that there's a larger thing going on there, even if it can degenerate into a little bit of popular idolatry on the side, which I think in many of the sadly Western traditions it has done and did.

So I would want to re-inhabit the icon tradition, even though I think for many people that may be rather a rarefied way of moving at it. I have a feeling Rowan Williams is written on icons. I think he probably has.

So there's probably a good book out there if you search. Well actually Rowan had a book called *Lost icons* which was about things like childhood, which used to be a special thing which we valued and treated specially and now it's been lost. So these were not icons in the Greek sense, so Rowan was piggybacking on his deep lifelong knowledge of the Eastern Orthodox tradition on which he is an authority.

Absolutely. From Bulgaria to Alabama, Stephen, if you'll forgive my impersonation, Stephen, I've no idea what your accent is. Stephen says, "I've come to Anglicanism from a more evangelical Protestant background and I'm struggling with what to do with the doctrine of the communion of saints.

Specifically, I have lots of Catholic friends who seem like they take this doctrine too far, especially as it applies to Mary. So what's a sensible Anglican?" That's obviously a category of Anglican that Stephen would like to fall into. "What's a sensible Anglican to make of praying for saints intercession, perpetual virginity of Mary, the immaculate conception and the like?" Okay, thanks Stephen.

Yes, this is for many people a murky area and particularly if you've had a good experience within a broadly Catholic tradition, whether Roman Catholic or Anglican Catholic, where a certain amount of veneration of the saints and invocation or veneration of Mary seems to be simply part of the deal, part of what you do. And for many people that is a valuable and important part of their spirituality, I struggle, I confess, to understand that. I remember once having a conversation with a dear friend who is a Roman Catholic bishop who I've got to know well through ecumenical work and we shared so much and we got on so well and we agreed on so many things.

And then I asked him about Mary and I can't even remember what he said, but I just remember thinking, "Oh my goodness, suddenly like a great gulf had opened up between us." And at the same time I have asked other equally good friends within the Roman tradition, what does the whole Mary thing mean for you? And I've had the sense that they want to say, "Actually, that's not where I am." And there are many in the Roman Catholic tradition who won't speak against it, but who will say, "I think we'll imply

I think that was a false trail and we should stick with the rest of you, the Protestants' trend." But this is not the communion of saints. The communion of saints, the *Coινωνia Hagiorum* or the *Communio Sanctorum* in Latin is a phrase in the creed which means that all God's people living and departed are part of the same fellowship. For me this is very practical as a pastor.

I remember vividly when I was in pastoral ministry and there was a couple in the congregation who I got to know very well, we'd had some distant family connection even with them. And then they were getting on in years and then he got ill and died. And I remember the first time she came back to a communion service after her husband had died.

When I gave her communion, I used the words which I often use in giving people communion. "The body of Christ, the bread of heaven," which is a great phrase to use in giving someone the bread. And I had the sense that she was sharing in the same meal as her husband was.

That for me is the communion of saints. It's not that we're in touch with them, it's not that necessarily we don't know. I think we are not allowed to know whether they know what we are up to, whether they have an awareness or concern for us.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the saints are praying for us and we pray for them too because we're all on the way to the eventual new creation of the resurrection and the whole renewal of all things as it says in Acts 3. So the communion of saints is different from them. The specific beliefs about invocation of particular saints, I have friends who will pray to St. Anthony when they lose something. That for me does seem to be dangerously sliding down the slope towards a form of paganism.

Here's the God who deals with lost objects or whatever it may be. I just find that very difficult. If it works for them, I'm not going to say anything particularly more against it, but I find it very worrying, theologically, that the place of Mary, obviously in the Bible, Mary is hugely special.

She is the one in whose womb the incarnate God lodged for nine months. This is an unbelievable privilege, but to push beyond that and to say for instance, that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life, including through the process of Jesus being born and including through. It looks as though in the New Testament she was a mother of other children.

I know that traditional Roman Catholics read the beginning of Mark chapter 6 differently where it lists Jesus brothers and sisters. There must be Joseph's children by a former wife or something. I don't think there's any hint of that in the New Testament.

I think that Joseph and Mary lived an ordinary married life after the birth of Jesus.

Matthew 1 makes it clear that they didn't sleep together until after Jesus was born. So the idea of perpetual virginity and then pushing it back, and it's a way of doing theology which I find very troubling, which says that because Jesus was the Son of God, therefore Mary must have been kept totally pure.

How could she be kept totally pure? Well, when she herself was conceived and born, this was without the taint of original sin. And some early traditions even talk about Mary's parents being kept from. Yes, where do you sort of stop that? Where do you draw? So that I would say, I understand something of where that came from, but I think it's a false trail, but they shouldn't stop us believing for all the saints from their labors rest.

And this is all of those who have gone before us in the faith, whether we know their names or not, whether they're the great ones or the little ones who is to say who in God's world is great and who is least. Jesus had some sharp words to say about that, so that we share fellowship with all of them and being aware of that. It's Hebrews 12, isn't it? Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight.

And let's run with perseverance, the racists. They're around us and cheering us on, whether or not they know about our particular immediate struggles. And that's what we should celebrate.

Well, I hope that's helped, Stephen, who is such to be a sensible Anglican when it comes to thinking about the saints intercession community and of saints and so on. Today's show is brought to you in partnership with SBCK, the UK publisher of Tom's Material, and two new books you may be interested in, *The New Testament in its World*, an introduction to the history literature and theology of the first Christians in which Enthirite and Mike Bird provide a thorough overview of the New Testament for students, church leaders, and indeed everyday Christians. And another brand new book from Tom, *History and Eschatology, Jesus and the promise of natural theology*.

It's the book version of Tom's Gifford Lectures, of which Miraslav Volf said, "A creative and arresting contribution to natural theology." This book argues for the plausibility of the Christian vision and the relation between God and the world by taking seriously the history of Jesus Christ. Both books available at sbckpublishing.co.uk, just search for Enthirite. Harry in Southport sort of has a related question, which is again about the way different traditions have grown up in different churches.

How are we to hold intention, the traditions that the church has built up and what we see in the Bible, for instance, the practice of baptizing infants and confirmation when there doesn't appear to be any biblical precedent for this? So I'm assuming Harry, the way he reads his Bible, doesn't see a tradition of infant baptism, but rather that it was adult baptism and that confirmation, which is obviously part of the tradition, especially in Anglicanism, to sort of confirm those promises made on behalf of the child. That for him

is in particularly biblical. It should be something that happens at his imbecimeably.

Hi Harry, and Southport always has a good ring for me. That's where my wife's parents lived when we got married and we actually got married in the church on Lord Street, Christ Church, Southport. So if you know that, give it away, although I'm afraid they probably do baptize infants and have people in terms of but so good memories of Southport.

This is of course a question which goes back and back and back over the last few centuries and it came to the fore particularly after the Reformation, when the emphasis in post-Rennison's Europe was very much on the individual and on what the different traditions and so on meant for the individual, so that if somebody had just grown up in a church context where they've been baptized as an infant without thinking about it and then suddenly had an experience of faith later on. They would look back and say, I don't know what that early thing was that happened to me as a child. This is much more important now and so we get the rise of the Anabaptist movements, particularly in the 16th and 17th century, which become then the forerunners of what we now know as the Baptist churches and of course there are many many different varieties and branches of Baptist churches.

For me as an Anglican, I grew up in a church which baptized infants. I was baptized myself as an infant. I was then confirmed on my 15th birthday actually.

I remember it well. It was a time when I was very conscious of this. People had made promises in relation to me and they'd been around me.

My grandparents, my godparents, my parents themselves, they had been praying for me and I know I'm very lucky in this respect because an awful lot of people who have baptized as children didn't have that kind of surrounding support as they should have done so that when I then stood up on my 15th birthday and said, yes, this is for me too. I knew what I was doing. I meant every syllable of it and that for me was a great moment of being welcomed into adult membership of the family.

I do want to say as an aside but an important one that people who say we must only baptize adults, it then tends to be that within a Baptist church, they tend to bring for baptism young teenagers, people who are 12, 13, 14, 15 at the same sort of time that in my tradition those people get confirmed and they then have exactly the same problem that we have with confirmation that people get confirmed but then they drift away and through their teens they find that someone other than mother can cook half decently literally metaphorically but it's just the same in Baptist churches. In other words, you don't solve the problem of lapsed membership by saying we will only baptize adults rather if you look at Romans 6 and if you look at 1 Corinthians 10, Paul seems to assume that people come into the church, they get baptized and then they have to be told, don't you realize what just happened to you, now you've got to make real for yourself what it

was that that was all about, dying and rising with Christ using the Exodus narrative in 1 Corinthians 10, you have come out of Egypt, now watch out because some of the people who came out of Egypt were grumblers, they were immoral and God was not pleased with them, they died in the wilderness so you may have been baptized, you may have shared in the family meal but watch out, you too couldn't be tempted and fall and so I think we need to wrestle with these issues in a more biblical way actually than just saying oh there's nothing in the New Testament about child baptism, the answer is there that actually in the New Testament there are passages like Colossians 2 where Paul links baptism very closely with circumcision and almost he's saying that baptism is the Christian version of circumcision, obviously baptism is for women as well as men whereas circumcision for the Jews was just for boys but Paul seems to be saying baptism is the right of entry and you come in as a family when the Philippian jailer is told by Paul believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and all your household, Paul doesn't say and by the way anyone under the age of 12 will have to wait a bit, they just baptize them all and I know that we can't prove that they had infants in the household though it's quite likely but there doesn't seem to be that worry in the early church at all because they are thinking more corporately, I wonder Harry if you've read a book which I would recommend you strongly, it's by and you may not like this by a Catholic priest called Vincent Donovan and it's called Christianity Rediscovered, Vincent Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered, Donovan went out as a missionary to a tribe in East Africa who had never heard of Jesus, never heard the gospel and as he lived among them demonstrated the love of God to them and told them about God and Jesus when eventually they decided this was the time they were going to get baptized, he wanted to say well some of you I know do now believe but others don't quite and the chief said no you don't understand we are going to get baptized, we now believe and we will help the people who don't yet quite figure it all out and Donovan describes this as rediscovering something about the early church, now that may not convince everybody and please read the book don't just take it on my say so but there's all sorts of things like that, the other thing to say is that the church has always believed that God is active by the Holy Spirit leading the church forward into clearer visions of all truth, now I'm a great believer in the Bible being the Bible, the Bible is the basis and I'm always worried when people say oh the Holy Spirit has now told us this and this and this which there seems to be miles away from the Bible, however there is something about has the church totally got it wrong all these years, well the Baptists have said so so we must make up our minds about that but I think particularly the question of how we move forward goes back to the book of Acts that there we see, famously this is where confirmation comes from, that in Acts 8 some people in Samaria believe and receive the Spirit but the church in Jerusalem is worried that this is going to be a breakaway, a different sort of group which won't have anything to do with them, so Peter and the others go and they lay hands on those who had believed and this kind of completes the whole thing and that's why though I think most Anglicans today would say that actually a sacramental initiation is complete in baptism but that's why then there has been this break and confirmation becomes almost like a

sort of young adults lay ordination, a way of saying we now recognize you as a member of this family to go out into the world and live as our representative in the wider world wherever God takes you, so yes there are many questions to address but that's where I would start and that's how I would be moving in towards them. Well in my experience issues around differences around baptism are less pronounced now than they perhaps were at one time that obviously caused different denominations to go different directions, the big issues that tend to divide denominations, subtly often within denominations tend to inevitably center or around issues perhaps around gender but obviously sexuality now without going into the specifics of that debate Mark in I think it's pronounced Westasquin, Canada, or Tascowin, wants to ask about how we live in unity despite profound theological and ethical differences as Christians, his context, my denomination is currently struggling with how to handle a church which is actively working beyond the denominations communally discerned position, in this case regarding human sexuality, those who support that church claim both that they see scripture as authoritative but read it through a different hermeneutical lens, the centrality of scripture is one of our denomination's six core affirmations and that this is a matter of freedom in Christ, another one of our affirmations which allows room for disagreement on non-essential matters, historically we've done relatively well living together in disagreement but this one seems to be a different matter, one side says it's a non-essential matter that we can disagree on, the other says that while not salvific this is nevertheless a significant question of whether or not we will affirm sim, of course there's a whole spectrum in between the two, so how does church unity work in this context? I ask you not least because you are a priest and a bishop or former bishop in a church that is increasingly affirming if not entirely already when it comes to human sexuality while holding a more traditional view yourself, so yes I mean so I'm assuming Mark isn't coming from an Anglican Episcopal tradition himself because he doesn't seem he seems to suggest it's a different possible denomination here but evidently his denomination is experiencing the same kinds of issues that so many denominations are in this regard and yeah so where would you begin with this one from? Yes as you say we can't get into the substantivist view at all, if I was going to do that it would take several podcasts and I probably wouldn't want to do it as a podcast, I want to write it out carefully inch by inch rather than just talking to camera but let me just fill in a footnote, Mark suggests that my church is quote increasingly affirming, I don't like the use of that language of affirming, I know that it's shorthand for something, I don't find that very helpful because it's a way of saying oh we like saying the word yes rather than the word no or whatever, in fact the Anglican communion as a whole has not changed its mainstream traditional view, the Anglican communion has very creaky systems for how it changes its mind on things though it has done on say the ordination of women famously over the last two generations and we have the Lamb of Conference which used to meet every ten years because of various things like the pandemic it's been delayed but we have the meeting of the primates of the Anglican communion and we have the Anglican Consultative Council and then there is the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, those are the four kind

of anchors or instruments of unity if you like which we've held on to and so far all four of them have said again and again and again we are not at the moment changing, now I know that within the church some like the Anglican Church of Canada like the Episcopal Church in the United States has said well we're not going to wait for that we're just going ahead anyway but that then raises the question which is the substantive question of how you do unity which is what Mark's question is all about and that's where I want to say two or three things the question of how you tell the difference between the differences that make a difference and the differences that don't make a difference that is one of the key questions of our time interestingly it was one of the key questions that St Paul faced in 1 Corinthians and if we would only pay attention to what's actually going on in 1 Corinthians instead of simply going in and grabbing a verse here and a paragraph there and hoping that they will stick within our questions then we might get a lot further because in 1 Corinthians 8, 9 and 10 he is wrestling with a question which seems very foreign to us of whether Christians can eat meat that has been offered to idols, now it looks as though the Jerusalem agreement in Acts 15 had said please don't do that and it looks as though in Revelation 2 and 3 some of the churches in then western Turkey were worried about the question of whether people should eat meat that have been offered to idols.

Paul is quite clear that this is something you are allowed to do he described it as the strong position namely that we believe that God is one that God has made the whole world therefore all meat in the world belongs to God and nothing is to be rejected if it's received with thanksgiving. He actually quotes from Psalm 24 the earth is the Lord, the Lord's and all that there it is and that's ultimately his answer it's a robust Jewish monotheism it all belongs to God therefore if you say thank you to God since the idols are not gods they don't actually own it but then Paul draws a different line and he says what you mustn't do is to go into the idol temple and eat there because even though the idols don't exist there are demons, demonia or demoness and they hang out in these great echoing idol temples and demons are seriously bad for your health they can mess with you in all sorts of ways and if you go into the place they've made their territory watch out it's a dark place and dark things happen there and dark things will happen to you that's a very fine line to tread so then he deals with his use of conscience he knows perfectly well as a pastor that some people in the church share his view God is God this is simply meat I'm going to thank God for it cook it properly and who's to care but he also knows that there are other people who are regular idol worshipers who've given all that up because they're Christians and the very smell of the sort of meat that they used to eat in the idol temple gives them the feel of all the idolatry and all the murky world that went with that and the very strange things that would happen around the back of the temple whatever it was and so they just can't stand it and I've met people give you a modern example I grew up in a family that regularly played with playing cards and played all sorts of games like snap and pegaman neighbor and rummy and spoof and goodness knows what we never ever ever gambled it was not even something we ever

thought of doing I know other people whose families have been decimated by gambling by the addiction that's got hold of one or more family members who won't touch playing cards because they are tainted that was never an issue in my family it's the same kind of thing so then Paul navigates in first printings eight nine and ten and says yes you are free but do not let your freedom be at the expense of the person with the wounded conscience and so because a brother or sister may be offended by what you eat you must abstain that is the principle that many churches have completely ignored when they've said first this is something which we shouldn't divide over and then second therefore we're going to go ahead then they've said and if you've got a bad conscience about it well deal with it grow up join us that is precisely what Paul rules out you must respect the conscience of those who say actually no this is not something I can do that's perhaps the most important thing to say there there are other huge issues and if you read the rest of first printings particularly chapters five and six there are issues about which Paul doesn't say that this is the difference between the issues the differences that shouldn't make a difference and the differences that do make a difference in chapter five there's somebody who's been committing incest who's been sleeping with his father's wife Paul doesn't say well some of us believe in incest and some of us don't so let not the one judge the other and vice versa he says no this is a scandal the person must be ejected from the christian fellowship because a little leaven leavens the whole lump in other words first printings five and six deal with things where the difference does make a difference and what is required is discipline first printings eight nine and ten deal with differences which shouldn't make a difference but here's the rule for how to handle the consciences of those who've got problems now footnote often in my church circles it especially in American Anglicanism of Episcopalianism it is said Queen Elizabeth the first one of the great founders as it were of the Anglican movement famously said she didn't want to wait make windows into men's souls so she was going to allow liberty of conscience that was specifically about the what you say about the Eucharist about the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine that that was the thing which people had fought each other about and have burnt each other at the stake she said you can believe what you like about the presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine is it a representation is it literal is it symbolic what he said we're not going there many people have taken that as though it was saying therefore we're going to have complete liberty of conscience on everything else I once heard a sermon in an Episcopal church which said the great thing about being an Anglican is you can believe what you like some some of us believe in the resurrection of Jesus and some of us don't it doesn't matter and I sat there thinking no Queen Elizabeth was very clear she had bishops working on articles of belief which were quite specific about what exactly you should believe about all sorts of other things it was purely on the Eucharistic presence that they were allowed latitude so that's a footnote but it's an important one because that is often cited and misunderstood so the question is we need to tell the difference between the differences that make a difference the differences that don't make a difference and Paul can help us if we'll only read him okay well I asked one just one follow-up question though which is that the heart of this and

then we'll draw a close to today's podcast but how does church unity work in this context when you're having disagreements about which where the differences lie obviously in this particular case one church is saying we think this is one of those conscience issues and the other church saying no it's one of those that really does matter how do you do unity then well it that is very very difficult and that is where different churches have been and still are obviously right now it is something of a kind of an arrogant coup d'etat to say we are deciding ahead of time that this isn't a communion destroying issue as it were and so we're going to go ahead because that says to the other people you may have strong views about this but actually we know we're right so we're going ahead it sounds tolerant but it isn't tolerant because what you then do is you create a church in which now the new behavior is instantiated and you're kind of saying to the other people in the time-honored American phrase it's my way or the highway you know and sadly that is what's happened again and again as these debates have worked out when we look and see what Paul is doing go back to Paul in first Corinthians but also in Romans 14 and 15 we see a way of lovingly navigating these things which isn't about saying we know we're right so we're going to go ahead the question then really comes down to discipline and we none of us in today's world like discipline partly because we've all probably got horror stories in the back of our minds about church leaders who have bullied people into submission whether they want it or not but ultimately the church from the beginning has always had some form of discipline of discipline in belief and of discipline in behavior and there are forms of behavior which right from the beginning the church has known were were not appropriate for those who named the name of Jesus those who'd been baptized Paul lists quite a lot of them in terms of of bullying of people doing shady business deals of all sorts of things we've tended to elevate sexual misdemeanors but actually in the early church there's lots of other things going on as well and the absolute obligation towards kindness generosity charity of patience humility these are the big things chastity is in there as well yes but let's try and get a sense of proportion not to downplay the importance of chastity but to upplay the importance of all the other things as well and then let's say how does the leadership in your church handle it when this sort of thing seems to be going wrong and how does the leadership do that handling without itself becoming bullying and overbearing and so on ideal the churches have leadership structures which enable a proper wise loving discipline that's a very difficult thing it's very counter-cultural right now but without that we just become a kind of amoeba kind of a jellyfish without a backbone and sadly that's a very real and present danger we are going to have to leave it there on that note Tom thank you very much for the time it's a really hard one actually to yes to sensitively handle because these are real live issues in many church communities and so we appreciate the questions and thank you for the time you're given and thank you for you listening who are listening to our 50th episode great to be able to say that we've we've had our 50th now and here's to the next 50 but for now thank you very much Tom for being with me this time thank you thanks for being with us today we'll be back with more from Tom next time returning actually to your pastoral questions particularly around the topic of suffering and evil now

you can find out more about the show of course at askentiwright.com and if you feel able to support the show and help us to bring Tom's thought and theology to many more people we'd be delighted to send you the exclusive show ebook 12 answers to questions about the bible life and faith again that's askentiwright.com and click on give for now thanks for listening and see you next time you've been listening to the askentiwright anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcasts from premiere visit premiere.org.uk/podcasts