

OpenTheo

#163 Theology of worship, church and unity

March 30, 2023



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Do you have to go to church to be a Christian? What should our theology of worship be? How do we know we are in the 'correct' denomination? Tom Wright answers these and more questions from listeners about Christian unity. An archive show first broadcast in 2019.

- Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192>
- More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com>
- For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live>
- For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/training>
- Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow>
- Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

Hello there, before we leap into today's show I want to share a powerful free resource with you. We often hear from listeners looking for answers to share with a friend or loved one who claims God can't exist for a variety of scientific reasons. But science actually supports the existence of God which is why I want to offer you a free download called God's Not Dead.

It explores scientifically how our own cosmos points to a creator in three clear areas. Again this powerful resource is yours absolutely free. So download God's Not Dead for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. That's premierinsight.org/resources. Great to have you with me.

I'm Justin Briley, Head of Theology and Apologetics for premier unbelievable, bringing you of course the thought and theology of New Testament scholar Enthei Wright and today another gem from our show archives on the theology of worship, church and unity. Questions coming up include do you have to go to church to be a Christian? What should our theology of worship be? How do we know we're in the correct denomination? I'm answering these and more questions from listeners including some conversation with me about Christian unity. This show from the archives was first broadcast in 2019.

And with lots of material new and old from premier unbelievable at our website premierunbelievable.com Register for our newsletter there will send you a huge amount of bonus material from our shows including 12 subscriber only videos from our big conversation series, access to high-fifty ebooks as well, loads of reasons to get yourself subscribed at premierunbelievable.com. The link is with today's show. Today the theme that we've gathered the questions under is around the church and worship and unity and those sorts of issues. Lots of different questions coming in on this.

Would you say you've seen in your lifetime a lot of movement in the whole area of church unity churches willing to work together a different denomination? Yes, actually I have and it's been very exciting and encouraging. I grew up in a market town in central Northumberland where there were two or three Anglican church buildings but it was one parish but then there were two quite different Methodist churches which eventually they joined together and people, oh they're getting together now, there was a URC church which then was a congregational church and then there was a Presbyterian church they finally got together. Now some would say cynically well that's because they were all shrinking and they could only afford one building between them but I think there's more to it than that.

I think as people were mobile and as broadcasting happened and people sort of bumped into each other whether in the shop or in the golf club or whatever, why are we different from them? And a lot of those differences went back 100 or 200 years certainly the different types of Methodism did and people were saying sorry we're all seeing the same things we're having basically the same stuff what's this all about? And also some of the old prejudices have simply gone out of the window that when I was a boy I remember I had a good friend at school who was a Roman Catholic and he came with me once from school back to my home and one of my natural ways of walking home from school was through a large Anglican churchyard and he courteously excused himself and explained that his mother had said that he shouldn't walk through an Anglican churchyard because he was Roman Catholic. Hard to imagine that happening today. Exactly.

Exactly and likewise we had virtually nothing to do with the big Catholic church on the other side of town didn't know the name of the priest or anything. Now that is almost unthinkable and this had to not quite unthinkable but you know when I was Bishop of Durham my two closest ecumenical partners really were the Roman Catholic Bishop on

the one hand and the leader of the House Church movement on the other and that was wonderful and then we had very good relations with the Methodists and with the URCs and with the Baptists and there's even a small contingent of Syrian Orthodox in one corner of the Dases and there was a strong sense that we're all about the same thing and that out there there's a secular world which doesn't like us and doesn't understand us and we just need each other and particularly the way that some of the Roman Catholic leaders have embraced the ecumenical movement I think of Cardinal Walter Casper a great theologian in his own right written some wonderful books about Jesus about mercy etc. He led for many years the Roman office that was dealing with other churches and he proceeded to produce a book called Harvesting the Fruits when he retired which is a collection of all the agreements the Roman Methodist agreements the Roman Orthodox agreements the Roman Anglican agreements discussing the issues basically including come on guys we all believe in the Trinity we all do this we all believe that and then it's a matter of so why are we still in our separate silos and I think that's where we've now got yes we've come a long way and I often find in my experience that very often people who are choosing say if they go to a new town which church will I attend they're not really looking at the denominational label they're simply looking at the the flavor if you like it does this sort of do I prefer to go to a more lively sort of church but you might find that equally within an Anglican churches within somewhere else and whatever it is and I know this happens particularly in America I have a lot of American friends who oh well you know we moved from Chicago to somewhere else and so we really liked the preaching at the Presbyterian Church who went there and and actually it's not a big deal right well let's turn to some of the questions that have come in from from listeners one one in Oakley asks this very simple question first of all says I'm finding the program so helpful thank you well thank you and now this person says people say I don't have to go to church to be a Christian how would you reply to this well if somebody on a desert island finds a Bible reads it discovers that Jesus is a living presence and that he or she wants to worship this Jesus I guess that can happen you don't have to go to church to have a living I have heard a wonderful joke on that front you've probably heard it see yeah yeah yeah you end up with church two churches the one he goes to the one he only go I know I know there are variants on that I've heard it where Jonathan's hacks tells a similar thing about synagogue I okay yeah every religion has it yes yes I think so but there's so much about very early Christianity which is what I basically study in the New Testament which makes it clear that Christianity is a team sport interestingly when you contrast Christian virtue with pagan virtue say Aristotle Aristotle's virtues are all for the individual I'm going to be courageous I'm going to be noble I'm going to be just etc etc I'm going to be a leader of my community the Christian virtues things like humility charity generosity etc you require a community to practice these and so there's a sense in which when the spirit of Jesus takes somebody over and when they are responding to the spirit of Jesus this will naturally become a common all thing now so it isn't the case that here's this organization and wouldn't it be better if you as a lonely and enlightenment individual stay the roof from it that's a caricature

obviously it does some don't feel like that but actually we all need one another we are none of us complete hence Paul's amazing image of the body of Christ yes that we are none of us anything like sufficient that's why I mean for me as a scholar when I write something about a passage in the New Testament I want my fellow scholars to look at it and say Tom you've missed this text or you've misinterpreted this word we need one another I don't think I'm getting it all right I need that feedback likewise in the church and often when I've lectured on what the kingdom of God might mean in the world tomorrow that sort of thing young people will come up to me and say I see this amazing vision of the kingdom of God what should I be doing and I say well you cannot possibly do more than a tiny fraction of the tasks that need to be done you need to be part of a fellowship in which the fellowship as a whole is saying okay prayerfully we are committed to all these different things who is going to be good at this one who is going to be called to that one etc and that should be something that's happening worldwide as well and then you see the church as this body with many limbs and organs out there in the world doing its thing imperfect obviously as it does that but that I often find when I meet people who have let's say given up on church because they got hurt they you know didn't didn't suit them it you know I often think well that's part of perhaps the challenge is to learn patience or gracious yes how to get along with people who who annoy us of course that is part of the very idea of the whole thing it's not simply there for for our personal enjoyment quite and I remember when I was a student all sorts of sermons with the usual slogan you know if you find a perfect church don't join it because you spoil it but yes I think with the wisdom of old age I sometimes think that God gives us churches in order to teach us patience certainly as a priest and as a bishop certainly sometimes I'd feel equally there are so many times as a priest and as a bishop when you come away from a meeting or from hearing what somebody's doing in the drug rehab or whatever it might be or from a great service and just think I am so richly blessed to be part of a community that's doing all this stuff which I could never begin to do by myself.

Christian in Timisouara I think I pronounce that correctly in Romania asks what should be the undergirding theology of worship that shapes any one particular church's worship life and practice regardless of your Anglican heritage if you were to embrace a particular Christian liturgical expression or tradition which one would it be and why so two questions that it is. It's good question and coming from Romania I mean I remain is one of the last Eastern European countries I visited not that long ago and was friends just fleetingly with one of the bishops there delightful man and it seems to me there is a rapprochement again across different liturgical styles that Anglicans are more appreciative of orthodox styles and orthodox are often quite appreciative of Anglican styles and so I think we are learning from one another and so I wouldn't want to answer the question in a way which implied that it's going to be either this or that and never the train shall meet but I do sense and I've observed this over the years that different temperaments naturally go for different styles of worship some people want more words more intellectual content more rational explanation other people really want and need to

be given the space for some stillness for some meditative music and possibilities for times of silence and then it's a question of okay so are you just looking for somewhere to be cosseted in your own personality type and actually maturity would say well yes that's good but then I also need to be juggled out of that and to share with my brothers and sisters who are different from me Stephen Sykes the late lamented Bishop of Ely who I knew very well Stephen said that unless everybody in church is a bit cross at some of the musical literature whatever we're not doing it right in other words the church ought to try I'm not sure about that I'm being inclined to say that a service ought to have its own integrity and then maybe at another time on the Sunday you should have a service with a different integrity but then you should have those different music groups working together in case they start to get a sort of inverter and I would say my experience of church you know if I only had ever had access to the type of worship that I grew up in yeah I would have been very you know missed out on so much I'm not sure I'm not then experiencing it however occasionally uncomfortable I might have felt it was the process of doing that that maybe suddenly realized there's a whole world of different expression out there absolutely and I think one of the things that we've realized from the Protestant side or many have is that the fear of ritualism is one thing and there is a ritualism but there is also a Protestant there's a charismatic ritualism everyone has to raise their hands at a certain point and that is just as legalistic as a Catholic or high Anglican crossing themselves but actually what again keep on quoting CSB what we do with our bodies affects everything which is why kneeling is important now here's the thing how many churches do you know now where they actually kneel regularly there's not that many that's true it went out about 20 years ago quite suddenly I think in the 90s and suddenly even though there were still kneelers people would just sit instead yes and I want to say actually we've lost something there again the late lamented Colin's leave was Dean of Sotheke and I used to join hands on this we didn't always agree about other things but but we both agreed that actually kneeling was good for you and that if you're in the presence of God Almighty then actually kneeling is the easy alternative getting flat on your face and simply slouching in a seat yes just or doing the crouch or some people are doing the crouch but yeah yeah a crouch maybe better than sort of sitting back and feet up but because because you know even in my in my private prayers day by day there are certain moments when if I find that I'm sitting with my legs crossed I just think actually that's inappropriate yeah in the presence of God here perhaps you've noticed that culture is becoming increasingly antagonistic to Christian faith especially in the public square and as Christians you and I can struggle with how to live out our faith in a society that is so hostile to it that's why John Lennox is incredibly relevant book against the flow is truly a work for our times it explores the story of Daniel and how four Hebrew boys maintain their faith in an age of relativism I'm excited to say that this month against the flow is our special thanks to you for your gift to help keep this program and so many other resources coming to you with brilliant content from apologists like John Lennox it's true that this program is only made possible by the generosity of listeners like you so I encourage you to give by going to premiere.insight.org/nt/write

that's premiere insight dot org slash nt write and please do remember to request your copy of against the flow thank you for your generosity. Playing Cambridge says something that troubles me and no one seems to know the answer to is how do we know we're in the right church or denomination learning the right teachings from the word with Jehovah's Witnesses Catholics Anglican C.A.V. and every other denomination or varying in opinion how do we decipher if we're in the right place I'm not sure what feels like the right place really cuts it my faith was so simple when young girls play I love God he loves me but as I'm older and you try to learn and understand more you realize all the splits and we all agree we love God but we got it right so we're all divided in our terms anyway so lots going on there plays obviously he puts a whole group of denominations together and says how do you know you're in the right way.

Yes and put like that there is no way of knowing but then knowing is such a funny concept anyway and the question almost sounds as though there ought to be a scientific test where you could put a coin in the slot and it would say this is where you should be and then you won't have to think about it anymore and I suspect that with our present denominational chaos we ought to feel uncomfortable because after I read my big book on Paul some years ago I was going the rounds doing conferences and so on and people kept asking me if some Paul could come back today what would he be most keen to say to us and I unhesitatingly say he would be horrified not just that we are disunited but that we don't care because for Paul the unity of the church is absolutely if you're not united why would Caesar take any notice of you if you're not united why would anyone believe that there really is a new creation and so he battles for church unity across some very difficult divides all the time in every single letter when when the easy thing would have probably been just to let people do their different thing and not really communicate with each other but the whole part of the whole point of Romans not the whole point but part of the whole point coming together in Romans 14 and 15 is that you may with one heart and mind and voice glorify the God and Father of Jesus yes you come from this tradition yes you come from that synagogue community so you're worried about this and now but here's how you learn the humility of Christ to come together and worship together and that's the sign to Caesar that Jesus is Lord and he isn't it really really is so I want to say we ought to be uncomfortable and that probably the right thing to do is to start where you are and as you pray about where you are if you feel increasingly uncomfortable as people sometimes do then pray look around see what the alternatives are now this is easy if you live in a big town with lots of different churches it's quite difficult if you live in a smaller town 15 miles away from anywhere else with only one real active church where if you then get somebody who's preaching really drives you up the wall are you going to drive 15 miles well that might depend whether you have children who need to go to Sunday school some people will choose to go to a church that they feel they'd really rather not but they feel if everyone doesn't go then it'll be all the worse so these are these are hard choices that people make and you know when I retire which please God won't be too long coming there will be a question and what do you do on

Sunday morning yes absolutely I mean it's interesting just to come back quickly to that question that Clay does here mention at the beginning of that list you have his witnesses now yes yes are there some sort of doctrinal issues e.g. the trinitarians being a Trinitarian church that would say I wasn't I wasn't going to comment on that but yes it was rather odd to have Jews at the front there but of course many people looking from the outside with C. Joe's written as Mormons yeah one and the same and often in America I've seen people lining up Catholics Protestants and Jews as though these are three of the same sorts of things and most Jewish people would say no that's not how it is but so the different public perceptions are very odd and so yes I would say please make sure it's Trinitarian please make sure that the Bible is read and taught please make sure that it has the Eucharist the bread breaking call it what you will somewhere in the center of its life now that might be once a year it might be once a week but yeah that that's there are some distinctives which which kind of have to be in place sure yes and coming back to the sort of idea of ecumenism and especially on a global level Anna in Brazil asks many Christian leaders have been talking about a potential revival in Christianity around the world bringing Episcopalian's Catholics and Reformed Christians together so what is the balance between striving for unity and a critical attitude towards the limitations of each denomination or theological tradition and Anna says wouldn't it be quite insensitive to overlook deep differences for the sake of common goals what's the effort it would it would but this is where the crucial thing is what is the common core and it Ron will him still lecture in Rome some years ago think of 2009 where he as it were laid down this challenge we know we agree on the Trinity the resurrection incarnation atonement we all invoke the Holy Spirit so what's to stop us getting together and if I think his point was then about the doctrines concerning Mary that if you say well you can't give up your Mary and things and we don't want to take them on is that is that a difference we could live with because within some Catholic teaching it wouldn't be a difference you can live with you've got to take the whole package although many Roman Catholics will say privately that actually they'd be happy if that wasn't a necessary thing so I think we come back to those same questions how do you tell the differences the difference between the differences that make a difference and the differences that don't make a difference but we ought to those are not easy questions but if we were at least working at them raising those questions in that way we might get somewhere and so I want to say yeah there was a theologian taught at Kings London and before that in Oxford Eric Maskell in a previous generation and somebody said we in the Church of England don't know why we have deacons because it's just the first year of somebody being ordained so why do we just make them all pre-straight away and Maskell quoted and this is apropos the different bits that we don't quite understand he said he wants talk to a Swiss doctor who said to him your English doctors don't know what tonsils are for and so they take them out I do not know what tonsils are for and so I leave them in and that's a great line yeah you know that maybe there was a reason for that maybe there wasn't but maybe there was and maybe it's the path of humility to say let's learn from each other let's finish with a final sort of pastoral sort of question someone someone who's just at

the beginning I suppose of looking ahead to pastoring Christians in churches Matt in Durham North Carolina says what encouragement would you have for a first year seminarian I assume that is Matt himself who is grasped by a vision of the kingdom come but is wrestling with what that vision will look like in predominantly rural churches in the American South that can be resistant to change and I suspect there are similar churches in the UK that might be of the same sort of matter if you want some examples of churches that are resistant to change I could introduce you to several famously it was in one of the books about John Habgood sometime Archbishop of York when he arrived at some parish and met the church warden discovered the church warden had been there for sort of 35 years and said you must have seen a lot of changes during your time yes he said and I opposed them all and yeah and I understand that I can from a very traditional church and my father was a church warden and he didn't oppose all the changes but there's a sense of this is where we're at home like if you introduce a new liturgy suddenly then people feel as though they're not wearing the right clothes and that's a cruel thing to do to people when they've come in humility to worship God and so if you're going to make changes you have to have a strategy for how to do that so if it was for instance a new style of liturgy modern words or whatever you might want to have a whole lent course where for six weeks you'd have people on Wednesday evenings looking at here are some options this is how some people elsewhere do it this is what we think now and make sure that the key movers and shakers in the church are part of that and not is it not standing aloof that's really difficult but it's why for instance the Cosea movement which my wife and I met when we were in Montreal insisted that people could only come from a parish when the bishop of the diocese is sort of already been to a Cosea so it wouldn't be a breakaway movement and that lay people in a parish could only go if the parish priest had already been etc etc and in the traditional form wives would only go if you mentioned this in the previous podcast you did yeah but no it's fine but no it illustrates the point well it illustrates the point that change can happen but if it's ran through without explanation this can be very cruel yes and I think that's good to take people with you it's vital to take people with you yes I've seen churches I must confess where I've seen good examples where changes happen and bad examples and in the difference for me has been the ability of that leader to bring people with the people long worth yes yes and that means the slow prayerful work of getting to know the people and it probably happening on a longer time scale than you would prefer yeah that's right parish priest comes in or no minister comes in and says okay a couple of weeks time we're gonna be doing this this this excuse me and there is such a thing as leadership but I think I may have said this to you in a previous podcast in that case the Thomas the Tank Engine principle no you haven't tell us the Thomas the Tank Engine principle because my name is Tom and I when I was a little boy it was when the first Thomas the Tank Engine books were coming out like 40s early 50s and one of the stories which naturally I remember vividly is Thomas being very excited and steaming away out to the station getting a mile to down the road thinking this is fun and then the driver looks back and the carriages weren't coupled on and they're still in the station he has to go back

and get them and so that's always been for me quite an important yes Thomas story written by a minister note of course yes and I'm sure I mean quite a lot of his stuff was rather quaint allegories from pastoral life I'm sure it was hope that's helped in some way Matt in Durham and all the very best with your forthcoming ministry Tom thank you very much as well for sharing time with us to talk through church issues unity worship and and such like look forward to another edition of the program in a couple of weeks time and we will meet again soon yes indeed thank you thank you for being with us today there's more from Tom same time next week and for all your other needs do go to our website premier unbelievable dot com for now much love god bless and see you next time you. .

(gentle music)