

# OpenTheo

## #55 Ravi, Carl Lentz & the fall of Christian leaders

March 4, 2021



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom responds to listeners concerned about recent scandals among Christian leaders. Is restoration possible or appropriate? What does the Bible tell us about leadership, authority and accountability?

- Book for the Unbelievable? & Ask NT Wright Anything conference on Sat 15 May <http://www.unbelievable.live>
- Support the show and receive NT Wright's show E-book '12 Answers to questions about the Bible, Life and Faith'

USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/ntwright>

REST OF THE WORLD: <https://resources.premier.org.uk/supportntwright/>

- For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at [www.askntwright.com](http://www.askntwright.com)
- Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

### Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome back, I'm Justin Brylee, Premier's Theology and Apologetics Editor and today's show is brought to you as ever by Premier SBCK and NT Wright Online. Got some exciting news to share about our upcoming unbelievable conference with NT Wright. Listen out for that shortly and how you can attend wherever you are in the world.

Before that, today's episode addresses the issue of leaders who make moral failures. Today's show was recorded shortly before the full report on the Ravi Zachariah scandal was released detailing a litany of sexual and spiritual abuse against women by the late apologist. If you'd like to listen to an in-depth response featuring myself and Ruth Jackson speaking to trauma specialist Diane Lambert and evangelist Glen Scrivener, then

do go and check out our recent unbelievable podcast on the Ravi scandal.

But for now, some very good news, our unbelievable and Ask NT Wright Anything is going global on Saturday 15 May for our online 2021 conference. The place to book your seat is unbelievable.live but your seat will be wherever you are in the world. How to tell the greatest story ever told is our theme.

Looking at the story of Jesus that shaped the modern world and how we can tell it afresh to a new generation that has in some ways forgotten it. So this will be hosted by myself and my colleague Ruth Jackson and will of course feature Tom Wright, Tom Holland as well, the well-known historian and brilliant speakers and apologists Claire Williams, Sean and Josh McDowell. And this isn't just another Zoom conference, there's going to be an interactive 3D resource hub as part of it.

And also a live edition of this Ask NT Wright Anything show featuring your questions and a conversation with Tom Holland alongside that as well. So we've got a range of ticket options, there's premium tickets with lots of bonus stuff thrown in but for the first time, a pay what you want option because we don't want finance to stop anyone being able to attend. So that's Saturday the 15th of May and we've specially made the time hopefully accessible for folk who are living out in the US or North America.

2pm to 8pm UK time but that'll mean 9am Eastern time or if you're an early bird 6am Pacific time. Do go and book your place now at unbelievable dot live. And of course if you'd like more about this show, if you'd like to ask a question yourself and access our resources, do check out the show page at ask NT Wright dot com.

Well today on the programme we're looking at the issues around when church leaders fall and issues around leadership and authority in the church. Hard to believe but probably about a year ago Tom that we were talking about the sad case of John Vanier and posthumous revelations about him coming out which tarnished his reputation and the very good work that Larsh has done over many years but it feels like in the last year or so there have been multiple other stories coming through probably the biggest of which has been credible allegations around Ravi Zacharias and sexual impropriety. A very huge figure really in the world of Christian apologetics especially Ravi and a large ministry.

Again these aren't people that you knew personally or have a great deal to say about the specifics of these situations but people have been writing in with questions on that and again someone else you may not be familiar with the name of but Carl Lentz of Hillsong Church in New York. He was fired recently often seen as a celebrity pastor, a pastor to some of the stars in the music business and so on. And Joel in London says the response by the evangelical community has been largely supportive of Carl Lentz showing him much love and grace but also encouraging him with words like God can still use you, God restores and that the gospel is bigger than the failings of man.

So where do you stand on church leaders and moral failings? Should they be allowed to return to ministry again after a time of repentance or do we need to hold our leaders to a higher standard and allow them to face the full consequences of their actions? What are the implications of allowing leaders to fall from the standards required by Paul and then subsequently pick up the mantle of leadership again? And again I'm not expecting you to know the specifics of this Carl Lentz case but essentially it was again sexual impropriety that was at the root of him being dismissed from his church. So yeah without naming particular cases what's your feeling on the consequences for people in those positions? I think the first thing to say is to contextualize it to say it's been made much more difficult because churches in the last generation or so have not actually been wise about how they've done discipline. My own church has done very little discipline except in extremities where something totally shocking happens then we can call on oh yeah in this situation we do thus and so and this person will never be in public formal accredited ministry again etc and I've had to do that on one occasion particularly it was very unpleasant basically to say somebody who was ordained is now not only not ordained but they must never be in a position of public trust again they simply won't be able to do that and there are some times when that which somebody has done is such a brings such shame on the church that actually for reputational reasons as much as anything else it's just not going to work to have this person in public ministry but it's more of course for the sake of the victims and I know that many churches and the Roman Catholic Church always get sick for this but actually it's happened in many many other situations and in non-church situations as well where somebody has done something pretty bad and is quietly moved to the side and with a wrap over the knuckles oh well please don't do it again just go and start over there and then of course it does happen again and then then you get the second order problem of the people who were in authority whether bishops or other leaders who allowed that to happen on their watch and they are now being criticized very fiercely case in point and I don't mind naming him as he's a friend at John Ortberg in California had a family member who was working in his church and it was the family member that was in trouble but the accusation was that John hadn't actually dealt sufficiently rigorously or whatever and so he was asked to leave his his appointment not himself having done anything wrong so far as we know and it's like a disease and so rather like we were saying in a different podcast about lockdown faced with this horrible disease some people are saying no no no we must be rigorous we must never come back into ministry etc and so I think it does depend on what it is we're talking about because particularly in matters of sexual behavior and misbehavior is it goes very very deeply into the personality and somebody who is accustomed to be shall we say a seducer of vulnerable people is simply not likely to get over that just because they've repented and the church has said God gives you absolution so therefore they should not be put in that position it's like somebody who has come off in alcohol after being an alcoholic fine they can be brought back into the community they probably shouldn't be then given a job running apart or standing behind a bar it might work but it might well not and it might be pretty disastrous and awful and

that's and likewise somebody who has been convicted of financial mismanagement maybe they can be rehabilitated maybe they can be given a new position but probably not as a church treasurer because actually it might just eat away at them and they might think oh perhaps nobody will notice etc etc so I think there is a wisdom there and we have to err on the side particularly of protecting victims and of course people say oh poor man yes he's forgiven he must know God's forgiveness well excuse me let's deal first with the victims let's make absolutely sure that the church is looking after those who have been deeply hurt those who might be on the edge of being deeply hurt and that's part of the thing that the perpetrator has to face that they come second in this are behind the care for the victims I think that's probably all I know I mean obviously we hope and pray that in most church situations there's a network of accountability in the Anglican church that there are systems in place whereby things where there are issues that they get spotted and they get dealt with rather than being allowed to fester I suppose my fear is that very often some of the people who have come into the limelight and have had these very large forms of grace have if you like been at the center of very large ministries and that are predominantly centered around them and I suppose the fear is that people will turn a blind eye to perhaps questionable behavior when if you like everything is centered upon that person and that person is if you like it this is sadly the church imitating what goes on in the world if you think of the Jimin Savile case or the Harvey Weinstein case actually after the fact lots and lots of people said oh well it was pretty obvious and why didn't you bother with so then well you know and why didn't the BBC do something about it because sure people knew about Jimin Savile or some people did and there were jokes in private eye about him years before and a thing actually came officially to light so it isn't just the church you know it's the army it's law firms it's it's it's shop organized it it happens all over the place but in the church it's particularly scandalous because the church is supposed to be modelling the new way of being human which is the wise creative and deeply chased way of being human and the fact that the churches has gone soft on chastity or seen it as oh well it's one of those fussy old rules that we don't need to worry about too much well g thanks to the 1960s and 1970s supposedly moral revolution that's what we're seeing the results of the generation down the track people who thought oh well we you know I sort of believe in that but it doesn't really matter quite as much and then people get badly hurt you know Paul Tilly was notorious great theologian in America come from Germany he was a repeat offender seducing people etc and others as well and when somebody challenged Tilly about it how can you as a Christian as a preacher do this he said well I never preach about adultery as though that well that makes it all right doesn't it no it doesn't make it all right sorry there is an integrity question here and we all have to say you know God have mercy on me a sinner we are all vulnerable but in this one the church has some catching up to do them let's turn to the the issues of what the you know Paul and the scriptures have to say on this in particular Tyrone in Phoenix Arizona says thank you for your voice and wisdom in the church at large today Tom you truly are a gift I'm a pastor in Phoenix deeply want our church to disciple people well and my question centers around the

church and Ephesus it appears to me that Paul had a significant discipleship and leadership training ministry there in Ephesus and I think it can teach us a lot today in the church regarding those things as well as providing a model for us I'd love to hear your insight and all that Paul did there in Ephesus and what we could or should learn from it for the church today so so I suppose moving on from when leaders fall to how how do we raise up good leaders disciple Christians in the church what advice do you think Tyrone has seen here in in the example of Ephesus I'm sorry that I can't actually ask Tyrone straight off which passages he's talking about because Paul's ministry in Ephesus which is mostly in Acts 19 is about God working unusual works of power through Paul's hand and some remarkable healings and exorcisms and so on and then of course the great riot with the the people chanting in the in the theatre great is Ephesian Artemis etc and then we get an insight into Paul's relationship with the church leaders in Ephesus when he's on his way back from Corinth back to the Middle East and he stops off at my leaders he doesn't actually want to go into Ephesus himself itself because he doesn't want to be delayed and I suspect he doesn't want that to be another riot but he calls them to come to him and Acts 20 has this long speech to the elders and it's not really about his discipleship and leadership training except when he says in verse 28 watch out for yourselves and the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as guardians to feed the church of God which he purchased with his very own blood and then he warns I know that after I'm gone fierce wolves will come in and they won't spare the flock and even from among yourselves people will arise distorting the truth and drawing away disciples so keep watch so I don't think we get from that exactly a picture of what had gone on in the three years he was in Ephesus because we know of course in Ephesus that there were wonderful times acts 19 is full of you know Paul is just going around the town doing stuff and everybody knows something amazing is happening but also terrible times in two Corinthians one he says I want you to know that we just we suffered so much in Ephesus that we despair of life itself and I think he was in prison for a while and I think he was in really really bad shape so I don't know what to draw from that about his discipleship and leadership training ministry except that he was a model of what it's like to be a teacher an apostle teaching other people what it means to follow Jesus invoking the power of the spirit to heal to rebuke to warn etc he was obviously doing that all the time night and day and he would go round from house to house warning people with tears that they needed to live this new way that he was modeling so that's what I think was going on I'm not sure that that tells us anything out you know I yes I suppose I wondered whether Tyrone might be equally referring to Ephesians and so Paul's later letters to the church in Ephesus and obviously you do have passages there where he's he's advising you know that you know Ephesians 4 I suppose where he's talking about how people should act and think putting away falsehood letters all speak the truth to our neighbors we all know as one of another be angry but do not sin and so on I don't know if that might have been the yes I didn't hear that in what Tyrone said although of course I do think that Ephesians what the letter we call Ephesians I do think it's a circular written from prison in Ephesus yes through the churches in the region and it's called it's called

Ephesians because that's probably where copies turned up and so yes Ephesians 4 and 5 is really striking I had a message the other day from somebody who's on a commission trying to advise the Anglican bishops as what the priorities are for the church and the next generation and they sent it to me to say what were my comments and I looked at it and I wrote back and said well as far as I can see in the New Testament the major imperatives coming out of say Paul in Ephesus are unity and holiness and the spiritual battles which will arise when you're trying to do unity and holiness Ephesians 4 is all about many ministries but unity please and the second half of Ephesians 4 and into Ephesians 5 is all about holiness and some very practical stuff and those are the things which stand out unity is easy if you don't care about holiness because you just accept anyone doesn't matter holiness is comparatively easy if you don't care about unity because every time you decide you're going to be especially pure you just split off from everybody else who isn't doing the two together is tough and those I think are the priorities that Paul is emphasizing there and my goodness we need them right now and I think both of them have been a bit discounted in the last few generations and we need to put them back at the heart of who we are.

Just as we finish this one Tom coming back to that original question about when church leaders fall and what would you say was Paul's specific advice in this area what do you think he advised when it came to the appropriateness of people being charged with this ministry and be are there indications of what his suggestion was for those who had messed up? It's very difficult because in the pastoral passages in 1 Corinthians for instance where really bad things have happened in the church we're not sure those are church leaders in fact they probably aren't but in 1 Corinthians 5 where there's a case of incest he says expulsion from the church is the only solution at this point doesn't say well some of us approve of incest and some of us don't so let's not judge each other he says no this is out of line of this person must leave and maybe that will result in them being brought back and in 2 Corinthians we can see the possibility of that the whole community has rejected this person and has said this is out of line and Paul says okay he's suffered enough now is the time for reconciliation but reconciliation mustn't mean oh it was alright really it didn't matter because it did matter. Maristiov-Volff's book, Exclusion and Embrace is so good on this but you see there are other times like in Antioch when Paul confronts Peter Galatians 2 and says Peter you are out of line here is how the gospel works and you're going in a different direction and then even Barnabas gets pulled away with that and I suspect that that lies behind the moment the very sad moment in Acts 15 when Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them on the next trip and Paul says absolutely not he let us down last time he's too much of a risk and Barnabas wants to take him so they go their separate ways and so we see the real issues there of who can you trust and how do you confront when something drastically wrong is happening even if it's somebody quite senior in leadership like Peter in Antioch how can Paul say you're wrong answer Paul says here's why Barnabum Galatians 2 11 to 21 and we need to be aware of these moments we in English aren't good at confrontation we

Anglicans are especially not good at confrontation but we need to be able to do it. Tom thanks for being with me we'll see you again next time.

Thank you so much for listening today next time we'll be looking at your questions on Christian practices like fasting and Sabbath and worship and don't forget to check out our show Partners 2 Tom's UK publisher SBCK and NT Right online for Tom's video teaching courses more about this show at ask NT Right dot com and do head over to another website unbelievable dot live to register for our upcoming conference with Tom right you can attend from wherever you are in the world and be part of that live edition of this very show on Saturday the 15th of May again that's unbelievable dot live for now have a good week and we'll see you next time. You've been listening to the ask NT Right anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcasts from Premier visit premier dot org dot uk slash podcasts. [ Silence ]