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#198 Veganism, ethics and activism (Replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From the archives: Tom answers listener questions around if we should eat meat, whether we'll all be vegan in the new creation and if violent protest is ever acceptable • 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

Before we dive into today's podcast, I need to tell you about an urgent year-end need that's facing premier insight. While our number of listeners and supporters has grown massively in recent months, inflation has taken its toll on this ministry, leaving an \$120,000 funding gap that must be closed before the year is out. The great news is that generous friends, knowing how critical it is to close the gap, have offered to double your year-end gift today, but we only have until December 31st.

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Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions submitted by you, the listener. You can find more episodes, as well as many more resources for exploring faith at premierunbelievable.com, and registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos and e-books.

That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. Welcome back to today's show, and today we're looking at topics around ethics and

activism. Quite a few people often ask in the politically charged times that we live in, and the fact that obviously we also live in lots of times of activism, whether it be political or environmental or ethical activism or one sort or another, how Christians should engage these issues.

If you ever consider becoming a vegetarian in your life, Tom? I have never considered becoming a vegetarian. No, I've had several friends who've been vegetarians and I've had discussions with them, but it's never seems to me a necessary part of my discipleship. Okay, well, I've got a couple of questions, particularly, I think, keying in on a real trend we've seen in culture in the last few years around veganism that's really grown and blown up.

That sort of particular view. Here's Eric in Byrne in Switzerland, who says, I've recently been confronted with a question of ethics regarding animals, namely our use and consumption of them. The activism of veganism presents an array of discussion points, and I think dedication research can help us manoeuvre the issues of the environment and our health.

However, as a Christian, the concerns of morality are difficult to nail down. I'm convinced that the original blueprints of Eden and the kingdom in its fullness don't include killing. Of any kind in the light of the kingdom being now, but not yet.

So what's a biblical approach we can take towards our stewardship of animals? And I think a rather similar question from Parker in Chapel Hill, North Carolina says, following Christ's return, will we eat meat? And if not, shouldn't Christians as resurrection people forego eating meat in the present age? It's my understanding that death in any form is a product of the fall and won't exist in the new creation. And if we are to live in this new creation, as if this new creation has arrived, isn't it unethical to contribute to the deliberate destruction of anything? Obviously, there must be some level of triage or else we'd have to cease using paper or living in houses. So two similar questions about whether, if you like, eating of meat is a sort of product of the fall and whether we should therefore be living differently as Christians of looking towards the new creation, Tom.

Yes, it is a question, I think, of living between the times, of being people of the new creation while still living in the old creation, in the present creation. And of course, there are many, many ethical issues which are caught in that what seems sometimes like a trap, though it is actually a vocation. That's where we are called to live.

It's very interesting thinking about if the kingdom in its fullness won't include killing of any kind. Some of the early rabbis said that the Sabbath is an anticipation of the age to come. And since the age to come is pictured in Isaiah 11, where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, et cetera.

Therefore, on the Sabbath, we shouldn't even kill a fly or a mosquito because all species

will live together as one. But you can be sure that the same rabbis come the day after the Sabbath. If you've got a mosquito about to attack you, we'll quite happily kill it.

In other words, maybe there are times, maybe there are some people who are called to live in this way. Like in 1st, Print, and 7, Paul says marriage is fine, but actually, singleness is also fine. Both can point in different ways.

This was quite shocking in the ancient world where particularly women were expected to be married. Both singleness and marriage can point to the kingdom in different ways. And I think I want to say that God's provision of meat for people to eat is there in Genesis.

It's there right through the Old Testament, but often within a cultic context in the sense of giving thanks to God for this provision. And hence, a certain humility. That's what we've lacked in the last two or three hundred years.

And I think that's what some vegetarianism and veganism is reacting against. The kind of ruthless exploitation. I mean, we had chicken for dinner last night.

And it did cross my mind as I was putting the first forkful of this very nice meal into my mouth. I wonder what sort of a life this chicken had. And I suspect I know the answer probably a nasty and short one.

It's sufficient to get fattened up for my table, but not very pleasant in other ways. Should I care about that? Should I campaign? Should I stop buying from that producers? Should I only go to healthy farms? At the moment, those aren't choices I can really make or not very easily. Maybe I should, but it seems to me there is a between-the-timesness about this.

We have in the modern world been exploiting God's resources. There's some wise recent books about farming saying that the whole agribusiness model, which came in in the 60s and 70s, particularly flattening old hedgerows and making everything more industrial scale has actually been hugely damaging for us, for the environment, for the animals, for everything. So there are big questions to ask there.

I'm not myself convinced that either vegetarianism or veganism is something that should be mandatory on all Christians, though I respect those who, for whatever reason, go that route. And do you think in the new creation we won't be eating meat, which is one of their sort of assumptions here? I think, yes, it's interesting that Jesus, I seem to recall when raised from the dead, is given a piece of broiled fish and eats that. Does fish not count? There are several oddities there.

And the loaf of bread that he breaks at Emmaus were not told that he eats it, but that loaf was grown from ordinary wheat or whatever. So there are overlap issues, and I think we should be aware of getting drawn down into some of the fiddly bits of this. All our

language, I said this many times, all our language about the ultimate future is a set of signposts pointing into a fog.

We don't actually know what it'll be like. The idea of streets paved with gold and so on. These are glorious symbolic signposts to something which we don't have good language for yet.

So I think at the moment we are still in a world where, as we see in the New Testament, wise animal husbandry, wise fishing policies, et cetera, go for it. Just moving on from that particular specific ethical issue to activism in general. There's been the rise, obviously, in the last couple of years of sort of particularly sort of out there on the streets, forms of activism, whether it be the activism of the climate lobby and the extinction rebellion sort of protesters in the summer in the US, particularly, there was quite a bit of rioting around the Black Lives Matter issue, but also generally in areas like Portland, so-called the Antifa rioting and so on.

Now, Ben in London has a question saying that he's noticing more and more of my generally theologically orthodox friends and even a fairly large Christian organization, either equivocating or supporting the so-called anti-fascist or anti-for rioting. And they cite Jesus turning over the tables quite a lot. It's a real sea change though in my friend's attitude.

What do you think, what do you make of the so-called cleansing the temple argument about violent protest and does Jesus in the New Testament have any other key pointers? I remember back in 1975, I was a young delegate at the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, and one of the big issues at the WCC then was a policy they had which they put some money into, not very much, called the program to combat racism. And this was particularly aimed at the old regime in South Africa and they were trying to support groups that were finding ways of combating racism. And they tried to make it clear that this was supposed to be nonviolent, but one very learned and fine African speaker stood up and said, we have to be careful about saying only non-violence because God himself used violence in the New Testament.

And he cited Jesus' actions and then going to the cross in support of this. I remember being very uncomfortable about that at the time, but then I realized talking with friends there, how it looks when comfortable white people say to oppressed black people, no, no, we shouldn't have a new violence, just walk up and down the street with black cards, that'll be fine. And they say, look, we've been doing that kind of thing for generations and we're still being beaten up and put in jail and all the rest of it.

And so there are real problems about the way in which white Christians are perceived in this sort of debate. And indeed, I would say I've done just a little bit of work on this over the last few months. The very word white, I may have said this on a previous podcast, I'm not sure, the very word white as applied to people like you and me, you know, I'm

looking at you on a screen, you don't look white.

That's what white looks like. And Tom, for the benefit of listeners is holding up a white piece of paper. Sorry.

If you look like that piece of paper, I would say, please go to the doctor, you're deeply sick. I mean, the word white was constructed into an ethnic appellation, two or three hundred years ago, three or four hundred years ago, by people who wanted to make this binary between black and white in a way which is totally alien to the New Testament. The New Testament does not distinguish and Paul says firmly in Athens that God made from one source, all nations of people to dwell on the face of the earth.

And this is the thing that the Black Lives Matter stuff, particularly, the Christians should always have been leading the way on this. Black Lives Matter shouldn't have been necessary because the church ought to have been witnessing to the fact that in Christ God has made a multicolored, multi ethnic, multi everything people. The secular multiculturalism has tried to get the results of the Christian gospel without the gospel.

And if the churches haven't been noticing that, it's no surprise that other people take to the streets to make their protest. Just like in Jesus day, he said, the kingdom of God is breaking in and the men of violence are trying to break in on the act. So it's a very confused situation, but part of it is the fader of the church to bear witness to wise multi, as I say, multi ethnic community and how it's done.

We, of all people ought to know that. And if we haven't been doing it, it's not surprising if stuff comes up. And sometimes we feel ourselves saying, actually, do you know what? I'm basically with these people, even though there are some of their methods, maybe, maybe ones I wouldn't share or whatever.

Yes. So it's understandable, in a sense, when people do resort to violence. I mean, overall, though, do you believe that's not the model that Jesus taught us? I mean, you've spoken before at the time that these riots were happening about the way Martin Luther King obviously approached this and the fact that perhaps a younger generation is even finding his methodology difficult to stomach in the light of.

No, I think Martin Luther King on this, at least, was absolutely right. And he paid the price for it because the more extreme black power leaders after Martin Luther King's death said, oh, well, he had it coming to him. He was trying to be a softy and a lot of us felt, no, actually he was right because violent revolution only breeds more violence.

And if you fight fire with fire, fire always wins. That's the problem. I'm not saying that we in Western society with our wars and rumors of wars have done it any better.

Seems to me we haven't the mess with both Iraq Wars, et cetera, et cetera. We have learned it seems very little over recent generations. But the cleansing of the temple

action was a very specific thing.

It wasn't saying, OK, there are times when we have to have a riot. Let's have one now. It was a specific prophetic action which anyone at the time would see as being like Jeremiah smashing his pot.

It was a way of saying this whole system is under God's judgment. And all Jesus did was to stop the regular flow of daily sacrifices for a short time. But that was enough to say prophetically that actually this whole system, which is about the regular daily worship of God, is under God's judgment.

And that goes with what Jesus then did in the upper room, which was kind of the positive half of the same thing. So it wasn't, let's go and do some violence. It was a prophetic sign at that moment.

And we shouldn't generalize out of that into other possibilities. And ultimately the example of Jesus as I see it is a one to whom violence was done rather than that. And in the New Testament granted that there's no chance of the early Christians getting together a riot mob to take over Corinth or whatever.

But even if they had, that clearly wasn't the way. And we need to soak ourselves again in the Sermon on the Mount, which is the way forward in all of these things. One last question, Sam in South Yorkshire says, I've discovered your podcast and it really thought provoking in the past year.

If you're enjoying this episode of Ask, Enty, Write, Anything, then let me remind you about an important opportunity for you to help keep content like this coming from Premier Insight. As I mentioned at the start of the show, it's been another financially tough year for all of us. We fought the impact in inflation, but Premier Insight is facing an \$120,000 funding gap.

This gap must be closed before December 31st in order to step into 2024 on strong footing. The great news is that generous friends have already offered to double your gift today to close this funding gap, but this opportunity ends on December 31st. So please give generously now by visiting [premier insight.org slash donate](https://premierinsight.org/donate).

Your gift will help keep podcasts like Ask, Enty, Write, Anything on the air in 2024. That address again, [premier insight.org slash donate](https://premierinsight.org/donate). Thank you for your support.

Pandemic, you've addressed several issues to do with worship, faith and fellowship under the restrictions we find ourselves. I've really struggled though to come to terms with the restrictions on our daily lives because I do question the evidence they're based on and the ethical basis for lockdown. I sincerely believe that lockdown is actually more damaging to our health, livelihoods and happiness than the virus itself.

It's also severely impinged on the life of the church, forbidding group worship, restricting Christian fellowship by law. And the Bible tells us to submit to the governing authorities and not to rest on our own wisdom. However, if we disagree fundamentally with something in society that we believe is harmful, shouldn't we question it or even protest? Jesus, again, breaking up what we said in the last question was in some ways a revolutionary who challenged the governing authorities of his day and subsequent Christians have campaigned against what they believed to be unjust, the abolitionist movement, for instance.

What is the dividing line between righteous submission and harmful compliance or even complicity in this or any such situation would appreciate any guidance you can provide Tom. The thing which I'm now starting with on this question, which comes back again and again, is that on the television last night at the time I'm recording this I think it said that in the UK there had so far been something like 112,000 deaths from COVID. And we know how COVID is spread.

Basically, it's spread by people breathing droplets or leaving tiny fractions of it on surfaces that they touch or where they've breathed or let alone sneezed or coughed. We know all that. And the only way to stop that happening and to stop that 112,000 turning into 500,000 is precisely to draw back and restrict our social contact.

And I haven't enjoyed that any more than the next person. I've lived under it for much of the last year like we all have and I find it hugely restrictive, etc. But I cannot persuade myself that saying, Oh, well, come on, this is just stopping my liberty.

Let's throw away the masks and go down to the pub, whatever. I cannot persuade myself that that's a good thing. When we've talked about this in the family, should we meet with these family members who aren't in our immediate bubble.

I have said, I would love to get together with them, but I do not want in six weeks time to be standing there at somebody's funeral saying you thought it would be all right. You know, that is almost manslaughter or colluding with manslaughter. And I just don't think we have the right to do that.

That's not to say that the government calls it right, but then I don't know any government that knew how to do it. We didn't have a big what to do in a pandemic unit ready in place. And even if we had this one has been moving so fast that I'm sorry for the governments that are trying to keep up with it in Europe, in Russia, in China, in South Africa, in America.

They're all flailing around trying to make sense of it. And when that's going on, just like supposing, again, to use a similar illustration to want to use another podcast, if you're driving up the motorway and suddenly there's an ice storm comes through, you don't say, well, this is going to restrict my freedom. I really need to get to Edinburgh quite

quickly.

So I'm just going to bash on. Or do you say, Oh my goodness, we need to slow down to five miles an hour and go into the slow lane with our lights flashing. And somebody says, but I want to get to Edinburgh.

Sorry, guys. If you're going to be sliding around the road and bashing into people, you may just have to restrict your liberty. Now, it's possible that, in fact, the government has overstated things, but I don't know that I'm not a doctor.

I'm not a scientist. And simply to say, I think lockdown is damaging to our health. Therefore, of course it is.

We all know that. My wife and I have been helping to homeschool our grandchildren. We see what this is doing for them and for us.

But, and likewise, the life of the church is restricted. Although in other ways, it's been helped by people going online and finding out how to do things and bringing in people who wouldn't be getting to church in other ways. Obviously, the normal rule is to do what the government tells you to.

If you're in Myanmar at the moment, what does that mean if the military have now imposed a new law? Those are very difficult times. Christians have always wrestled with problems under certain things. But to line up a medical emergency with things like that seems to be actually pushing your luck more than I would want to do.

As ever, it's about finding a wise way through, isn't it? And in this case, obviously, at least here in the UK, the situation as we see it here in the UK, you would say the best thing Christians can do is to submit to the law and to the advice that's being given. But obviously, I suppose you would always be open to wanting to be careful of what that might look like in the future. If under normal circumstances, we wouldn't expect the government to be saying when and where Christians can meet and that sort of thing.

No, of course. And I mean, there have been people, the journalist Peter Hitchens, who lives in Oxford, as I know, do, he's been ranting on about this. This is the government taking away our liberties and watch out.

They'll never give them back. And I think actually in Britain, I don't think that's a legit problem. I think there are some countries where that has been and might be again a problem and we have to watch out for it.

And there are councils to civil liberties that will be looking out for that. So yes, that could be a danger. But when life is at stake, we use the phrase casually, is it a matter of life and death? If the answer is yes, it jolly well is.

So let's be wise and err on the side of caution right now. Tom, thanks again for being with me on this week's edition of the podcast. Thank you very much.

We'll see you again next time. Yes, indeed.