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## #171 Tom answers Personal Qs on favourite preachers, authors and his own faith (replay)

May 25, 2023



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From 2019. Listeners want to know about Tom - Who are his favourite authors? If he could have dinner with anyone from the 20th Century who would it be? Why is he an Anglican? Has he ever struggled with his own faith?

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## Transcript

Hello, Ruth Jackson here from Premier Insight. Before we begin today's programme, did you know that you can receive ongoing encouragement from Premier Insight right into your inbox? When you sign up for email updates from Premier, you will receive resources and content to help you stand strong in your faith and live for Christ in your everyday life. Plus, you'll have the chance to win an amazing bundle of five books, which includes mere Christianity, Reason for God, Surprised by Hope, He is there and he is not silent, and the road to daybreak.

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That's [premierinsight.org/giveaway](http://premierinsight.org/giveaway). The Ask NT-Rite Anything podcast. Welcome to Ask NT-Rite Anything. I'm Ruth Jackson, and today we're going back to 2019, where Tom answered questions on his personal favourite preachers and authors.

Who, from the 20th century, would he want to have dinner with? Has he ever struggled with his own faith? And why is Tom an Anglican? Let's join them now. It's great to have you in the studio again, Tom. And today, we've brought together a number of questions that came in around yourself.

I know you're a very humble person. You don't like talking about yourself all that much, but people do want to know about Tom Wright himself. So, are you okay with that? Sure, yes.

I have a friend who's writing a book on humility, and we tease him that it's going to be called "humility and how I achieved it." Let me go actually to a question I was going to leave to the end, but actually, I think I'll ask you at the beginning. Jim in Davis, California, says, "Are you planning to write your autobiography or memoirs in the future?" My publishers have muttered to me that a theological autobiography might be fun, because I happened to have been, as it were, a guilty bystander in major shifts in the study of Jesus and Paul and various other things as well, and resurrection and new creation. And so, I've found that on the odd occasions, I mentioned how I came into all that in lectures and so on.

People are actually quite interested in that, so it may be that that will happen sooner or later. I doubt if a real autobiographical memoir would work. The trouble is that there's a huge temptation to settle old scores, and that does not read well.

Yes, yes. Of course, of course, I'm an thriller. So, write a biography of Paul, you know, 2000 years later, for people who are still with us, that's slightly different from mentoring.

Well, yes. One person that they mentioned, actually, Jim specifically, says, "I'm especially interested in reading about your time at Oxford with George Cadd." I'm afraid the name doesn't mean a lot to me, but... Okay. George Cadd, who died sadly young, he was younger when he died than I am now, he was 67, and just about Trata.

He was the principal of Mansfield College. He was a great non-conformist preacher, lecturer, theologian, basically a biblical scholar, been a pupil of CH Dodd, among others. He was from Scottish Shroots originally, from the Dundee area.

There is a Cadd Hall in Dundee, not named after him, but it's a famous name up there. George was a brilliant classicist who studied in Cambridge, then came to Oxford to do his theology, and then did a doctorate. And he did doctorate on glory in the New Testament,

a wonderful piece of work, which has never been published.

There were aiming now to get it published at last. And he ran Mansfield College, he preached widely, he lectured. He was a brilliant New Testament lecturer, and he would come in, sweep into the room, one wore gowns in those days, and the Greek Testament would be on the thing, and as Henry Chadwick once said, it's probably upside down because he knew it by heart anyway.

And it was a theatrical performance. And we'd be sitting there, absolutely spellbound. And then he'd finished the lecture, snap the books shut, and shush out of the door.

No surprises, one of his sons is one of the most famous theatre directors of our time, John Cadd, who was one of the producers for Les Mis and all that. But he, four children, another of whom was a concerto boest, I mean, a very, very talented family. And George was my supervisor all through my doctoral thesis.

So the second half of the 1970s, I would go in fear and trembling to him every few weeks with something I'd written. And he would say, well, now, there's very interesting, I'm not sure I agree with it, but let's have a cup of tea, and we'll talk about it, off we go. And I think we both changed our views, but probably me more than him, certainly me more than him.

But what I'm most grateful to him for was the historical approach, which then came up particularly in his famous book, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, which is one of those life-saving books, which actually explains what apocalyptic language is all about, that when the Bible says the sun and the moon will be darkened and the stars will be falling from heaven, this is not a weather forecast, that this is language about empires and great power games going on. George understood that he was a hebreist, he translated some of the apocrypha for the New English Bible. I mean, he knew those texts intimately and knew how they worked and would slice through the nonsense that was going on a bit of scholarship.

So he's a great role model, and I was privileged to co-edit a volume of essays in his memory after he died. But we, how much we wished he'd lived to have them presented him. Let's keep on the theme of people who have influenced you.

Paul in California asks, "Who have been the top two or three preachers that you have loved to listen to on a regular or semi-regular basis?" One of the funny things about being ordained, and then particularly being a bishop, is that wherever you go, you're doing the preaching. So for years, I haven't actually listened regularly to very many preachers. The church I go to now has had a succession of different clergy in the years that I've been going there, including along into regnant, where we would just get different people.

So I haven't been regularly going to one person. Can I say, I would be terrified of being the minister of the church that Tom writes it. Unfortunately, it's a tiny church.

The church I attend is not much bigger than this space we're in here, and there's a congregation about 20. And there's another retired theological professor also in the congregation, Stuart Hall, who's a fortress expeller. Well, that will arise and to be terrified.

But the church wardens and people always tell visiting professors, you know, these two are harmless, they won't bite. Because, I mean, it's a very serious point. When I go to church on Sunday, I'm an ordinary Christian needing to hear that God is God of grace, and he is for me and Jesus, and please come, and that I'm welcome to, despite everything.

I need that just as much as everyone else, possibly more. If my wife is here, she'd snort and say, certainly more. So, you know, that's where we are.

However, when I was young, I was very fortunate in Oxford to hear Keith Weston, who died not that many years ago. KAA Weston was rector of St. Ebb's church. Keith was a wonderful preacher, a warm-hearted, good speaker.

He'd done his homework. He loved exegesis. He got us to open the Bibles, but not in a dry, wooden way, brought it to life week after week.

I also was privileged to hear some Bible expositions, and I used to get tapes of them from Alec Mater, who was at one stage principal of Trinity College, Bristol, an Old Testament scholar. And Alec opened the Old Testament. He once did a series of Bible readings in Cambridge on the whole of the Book of Isaiah in, I think, six or seven hour-long lectures, which opened my eyes to ways of seeing the whole flow of Scripture, which I've always been grateful for and always tried myself to reproduce.

I did hear John Start and Dick Lucas and people like that when I was young, great preachers with their own particular styles, but always with that sense of the detailed attention to the text. You know, the text is the text is the text. And we're not just using it as a springboard to jump off into fairyland.

But then, nor is it just a mathematical exercise, it's got to translate out. And so that's what I learned from them, and I'm really, really great for them. I've been just sticking with the idea of you sitting in an average church congregation and listening and being able to be fed yourself.

I mean, do you have to sort of turn down the academic in you in order to receive, in a sense, the spiritual side of that? Yes, no, one never knows. I mean, part of the joy of listening to a sermon in the context of a worship service is that the words may be comparatively trivial, comparatively, you know, yes, that's the sort of thing that the

average preacher would say. But when it's hedged about with Psalms and hymns and Bible readings, and when you're coming to the Lord's Table in and through it all, even ordinary words can mean more than they mean by themselves.

Preaching is funny like that. And yes, for me, it's no trouble because the academic bit of me is the academic bit of me. But the person I am is an ordinary Christian who reads the Bible every day and tries to hear what God is saying.

I seem to remember some words from C.S. Lewis that I can't quote exactly, but I can't remember exactly where they were either, but where he talked about the importance of his Christians, he'd mean obviously a brilliant Christian thinker, but sitting next to the charwoman, I think, was how it used it in a church. And accepting that God is just as much present in that service for her as he is for the great academic. Absolutely.

And I mean, one of the sort of negative blessings of having been an academic for half of my working life when I was in Oxford and then in now in St. Andrews is that certainly, let's say looking back 30 or 40 years to my young days as an academic, some of the most dysfunctional human beings I've ever known have been Oxford Jackinevix. And some of the most highly functional, loving, shrewd, sensitive people I've ever met left school at 14. So that I have no academic snotberry, whatever wisdom and knowledge are not the same thing.

Absolutely. Absolutely. But yes, exuber stuff.

People want to know the sort of people who are in influences as well, outside of the people you've specifically met. Mario in Croatia says, what do you think about another big British giant in the literary scene, JK Chesterton, in his work? Oh, yes. I haven't read everything of Chesterton's, but obviously he's a great novelist and very funny and quirky.

And his great book, *The Everlasting Man* and other things like that, were attempts 100 or so years ago to explore the world in ways that at the end of the 19th and 20th century people just weren't doing. Obviously he comes from a very traditional Roman Catholic perspective and was kind of exuberant in his delight at being able to say the opposite of what everyone was expecting. And I think sometimes he overdid that and it was just his personality.

I'm not an expert on him, but I have always enjoyed reading him. And he's one of those figures like Lewis himself, to whom I go back from time to time. And like Lewis, where you can read some of the things they were writing 18, 90 years ago and think, gosh, that makes perfect sense today.

So much that. Yes, I mean, of course, in a sense, the human condition hasn't changed. In another sense, it has things moved on.

But yes, if you, the great thinkers, it's why Plato and Aristotle is still important today. The great thinkers put their fingers on key things about being human, which don't change that much. And if they're using wonderful imagery to do that, like Lewis's stories or indeed Tolkien, then we can relate from all sorts of points of view, lots of ways in.

And another writer more recently departed, that someone wants to ask about, and this is Ryan in Nebraska saying, Dr. Wright's emphasis on the kingdom shares many points of contact with some of the spiritual formation teachings of Dallas Willard is right familiar with Willard. And if so, what are his thoughts? What authors does he find to be most insightful on the topic specifically of spiritual growth? Yes, it's interesting. I have tried to read Dallas Willard, and I suspect precisely because he and I are really quite close.

It's a funny thing. I've found it with some other writers as well, that when somebody is saying similar things to me, I want to edit it. I want to sort of fiddle around with it and say, well, could we move this bit over here? And surely we're now going to need a section on such and such.

That's not a good way to receive a book. So I have tried to read Willard, and certainly I have a lot of friends who have told me exactly this. And indeed, when I was at that Missy of Alliance conference, to my astonishment, they presented me with something called the Dallas Willard Award for my work, which I was very proud of and have up on a mantelpiece somewhere.

So yes, I accept that, but sadly I haven't actually made great inroads. So in terms of spiritual growth and development, I find two quite different sorts of sources. One, the Bible itself, especially the Psalms, is simply there all the time and constantly refreshing.

And two, poetry, and especially I'm thinking of some of the great English Christian poets like George Herbert or John Donne. Some of the more recent ones as well, Manly Hopkins and so on. And I find that when I go to them, there's a sort of sense of, ah, yes, of course, thank you for putting it like that.

I'd forgotten and I need that, you know, and it switches on the sort of the imaginative of course. Of course. And that is vital.

I mean, so much in our contemporary culture has treated imagination, music, metaphor, etc. as a dispensable bit of decoration around the edge. Whereas I passionately believe that is one of the highways to the very center.

Now in terms of personality, I would say that I'm an ENFJ and the F is reasonably strong. But for those who may not know, this is Myers Briggs language. And if you don't know what he means, never mind.

But whereas of course, people who read my academic works perceive me as a thinker rather than an intuitive, a feeler. But for me, the intuitive remains enormously important,

hence music as well. Hello, Ruth Jackson here from Premier Insight.

I want to pause for a moment to tell you about a powerful resource that we have put together called biblical sexuality. With gender being such a hot topic today, this special resource is designed to help you to understand sexuality from a biblical perspective and confidently engage in conversation on these issues with those who hold a different view. This valuable resource is our thanks to you for your financial support of Premier Insight today as your support is vital to keep Premier Insight's resources and programmes coming to you each week.

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And one more if you'll indulge us, Michael also in California, says if you could have dinner with any person from the 20th century, whom would you choose and why? It's one of those classic dinner party questions. Yes, absolutely, absolutely. It's a funny thing.

My oldest son, who's a historian, edits a history journal, the journal of modern French history, and they did a feature on him in a recent issue, and they asked him these rapid fire questions. And one of the questions was if you could go back to a particular point and meet somebody, what would it be? And he unhesitatingly said it would be in early 1940 in Normandy so that he could walk into captivity with his grandfather. My father was captured at the age of 19 and spent five years as a POW.

And my son, as a modern historian, has tuned into that because when you said that question, my reaction was I would love to go and spend a day with my grandfather. Actually, my mother's father, who was an Archdeacon in rural Northumberland, and had been around the Church of England and was brother-in-law of an Archbishop and had cousins who had masters and goodness knows what. And I just love to find out from him what life was really like in the 30s and so on and what the key issues for the church were.

In terms of public figures, it mightn't be very good because we probably don't speak the same language, but my great musical hero from early 20th century is Sebelius, the Finnish composer. But I suspect he'd be far too busy, you know, out in the dark woods, north of Helsinki, dreaming up some wonderful whatever. Well, at least you can appreciate the music he did create.

Oh yes. Oh yes. Let's talk about your own churchmanship.

Gavin Sautlek City says, "What keeps you in the Anglican tradition?" After all these years, Tom, you're still an Anglican. That feels like saying, why are you still wearing the

same skin? Isn't it wearing out now? And the answer is, yeah, it actually is, but it's still my skin. I mean, I was born and bred up and brought in bread and Anglican and parents and family on both sides of the family, all Anglicans, lots of clergy, lots of active lay folk.

My sort of deep DNA folk memory is of reasonably good, middle-day Anglican things, certainly not Anglican Catholics, certainly not Evangelical, simply people who were reading their Bible, saying their prayers, singing the hymns, and thinking, now, there's all Mr. Jones down the road who needs some help with such and such, now that we've got some spare time, should we be doing meals on wheels? In other words, people just quietly being kingdom people in their communities. And though for myself, I prefer styles of worship a bit more vibrant in various ways than what I grew up with. The basic Anglican liturgy is Bible and Bible.

I mean, you have older New Testament readings, which is really, really important. If you just have one, you forget that these readings are not abstract things, they're a narrative. How do you prepare for them, and how do you thank God for those readings? Why? By singing more bits of Bible or Canticles close up like the T.D.M. Particularly in the Psalms.

So the most common or garden Anglican worship has Psalms, Bible readings, and Canticles, most of which are biblical themselves. And then when you turn to prayer, you are coming into God's presence as somebody who has been living in that story again. I think that I sort of took that for granted, growing up.

When I move around in other church circles, I find sometimes there are some bits of that missing. I mean, why now have we got to the point where a large swathe of contemporary Christians don't use the Psalms at all? That's never happened before in the history of the church. It's very dangerous.

And so... I think there's something of a movement. We'll probably address it a bit when we talk in another podcast about the church generally and ecclesiology and so on. But I think there is a bit of a movement in churches that have gone very, if you like, informal, contemporary sort of sense back towards something that's more structured.

I think that's so now. I think that's so because, as in Willow Creek in Chicago a few years ago, and somebody said to me there, "You realize this isn't I've been going for a generation?" And we're having to start to think about continuity and liturgy to which I said, "Hmm, I come from a church that has so much continuity and liturgy at hurts and we could do with a bit of what you've got." So, you know, could we do a deal on this? Do you find yourself at home in either setting, whether it be a sort of fairly exuberant praise, guitars, drums, or quite a formal, you know, set liturgy type of call for an even song? I would like the best of both. I love Corleven's song.

I've lived with that system for a long time and I'm aware that it can go stale and that it can become just a formality. But because of the actual content, it always has a capacity



to regenerate itself. The danger with the informal liturgy is that actually you rotate around the same 10 songs, quite extraordinary.

You go to the other side of the world and they're seeing the exact same stuff they were in the charismatic fellowship down the road. I think, well, we do a bit better than that. And I worry about my grandchildren growing up not knowing the great hymns from Wesley and Watts and so on that have sustained some of us throughout our lives.

And so, you know, it is partly the liturgy, which is central to being an Anglican. But it's also the sense that Anglican as a met its best doesn't say we are the only pebbles on the beach. It says we are kind of sitting in the middle here.

And if we can help with everything else, one of my favorite moments when I was Bishop of Durham was working on a big project where I introduced the local Roman Catholic bishop to the leader of the local house church movement. And I remember thinking, I think this is my job, actually, to make this sort of connection. Making introductions.

You've never been seriously tempted to jump ship? No, when my second year, I think as an undergraduate at Oxford, the ones who fire a preacher I heard in the Christian Union who were urging us to get out of our corrupt structures and something different and the Lord is doing a new thing, etc, etc. And the frustrating thing for me is that I remember feeling that as a very strong pull and I do not now know what it was that stopped me from doing it. I simply can't remember.

It was the sort of debate between John Stott and Martin Jones. That's absolutely right. And it was in the backwash of that.

I simply don't know, but because there were plenty of Anglicans who would say, well, at least it's the best boat to fish from. And I never really liked that as an argument. It was a pragmatism of it still.

OK, time for one more. Samuel, who's a student at Copenhagen University, says, "Dear Professor Wright, have you ever struggled with a suspicion towards your own faith thinking I probably just believe in this because I've already bettered so much of my life, meaning and identity on this horse? If so, how do you deal with that?" Yeah, that has never troubled me because I know so many people from similar backgrounds to me who went and have stayed right away from the faith. I mean, when I was at school, a lot of the boys that I was with, I was single-sex school, had church-going parents.

There was chapel day by day, week by week at school. And most of the people that I knew were going right away from it. So I was never tempted to think, oh, I only believe this because it's what we do here.

I was one of the odd ones who actually didn't. Who actually sort of, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

But and by the same token, I have lots and lots of good Christian friends who have come into the Christian faith from right outside, having done with the student yesterday who was describing coming into the faith from a totally non-church background, sort of mid-twenties. And so it happens both ways. So I don't worry too much about that.

I think, of course, there are lots of bits and pieces of the faith as I have received it, which are as I have received it. And when you go to other parts of the world and other traditions, you think, "Oh, that's how they do this, my goodness." And why are they doing that? And no doubt they would think that in my church as well. And that's when you just learn to lighten up and think, "Right.

This is this question." I sometimes get this myself, you know, in the sense I'm in a different way involved in Christian ministry and the broadcasting world. And so people do challenge me sometimes, especially the atheists and agnostics who listen to my other show, say, "Well, look, you're sort of invested in it just in it. So of course you're going to always be biased to sort of see the arguments for God and to see that there is evidence for this." And so on.

And in a way, I can't deny it. Of course I'm invested. None of us come to these things with a totally neutral point of view.

That's the implicit lie underneath the implication of the question as it were. It is that every day you should start with a blank slate, and now I'm going to believe it today. It's a very post-modern approach to life, by the way.

I'm going to invent myself again today, watch what I do. I mean, nobody in the legal profession would say, "Am I going to think like a lawyer today?" No, of course you are. You've learned how to do it.

You're doing it. You've got this job. That might go dead on you.

And there are some people, some clergy, some bishops, whose faith for whatever reason does go dead. And then there is a problem because is this a dark night of the soul that I have to work through? Or have I actually totally lost the plot? And is it going to be like that forever? And I'm one of those odd people that I wonder about. I do the wrong thing.

I think the wrong thing. I say the wrong thing. And I come back and I say, "Sorry," and we start again.

And God is amazingly gracious. And I never really remember a time of not being aware of the presence of God. So it's not been a case of, "Do I really believe this?" It's like, "Well, do I breathe?" Well, yes, I do.

That's how things are. It's fascinating. Thank you so much for spending a bit of time answering questions on yourself.

Well, always the easiest thing to do. Strange, yes, yes. Anyway, I appreciate that.

If you've got more questions, perhaps in a future podcast, we'll ask a few more of Tom's personal questions and see what we can dig out from the past. But it's been great to have you again for this week's podcast. Don't forget you can send your questions in as well.

Askentiright.com is the place to go. Do tell other people about the podcast as well. Do rate and review us.

And we look forward to seeing you again next time. Thank you. Well, I hope you enjoyed that replay of Ask, Entiright, Anything.

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