

# OpenTheo

## #53 US politics, conspiracy theories and prophecy

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions on the prevalence of conspiracy theories, US church support for Trump and the failed prophecies of his returning to power.

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### Transcript

????? Well hello and welcome back, I'm Justin Brale, Premier's Theology and Apologetics Editor and the show is brought to you by Premier, SBCK and NT Wright Online. Very exciting news for you today because from today the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast is going to be weekly. Yes, I'm glad we get to bring you more content and it's only possible because people have generously supported the show.

And by the way, if you're a US listener then do listen out later for more details of how you can support the show in a new way from this episode onwards. Well before we leap into today's episode which actually revisits recent political upheavals in the US. I want to give a shout out to a listener whose question we actually read out at the end of the last podcast which was on pain and suffering.

It was very sad and desperate plea really from someone for whom their life circumstances had led them to a point where they actually said I wish I didn't exist anymore. Anyway, that person heard the show, got in touch soon after to actually say this. They say you addressed my question on your most recent episode with NT Wright

on pain and suffering.

I sent in that question some months ago and it was surreal hearing it read back to me through the podcast. I'm so grateful and honoured for your time and advice. I thought that maybe you'd like an update on where I am today.

I stopped drinking shortly after I wrote you that question and started seeing a therapist about two months ago. Through tragic events of a loved one passing away, it made me realise that I need to be more present with my family and get my life in order. You and NT Wright's advice was very wise and much appreciated.

In a way it was confirmation for me that what I had already implemented was a good step forward. I can absolutely make this email a lot longer than it should be but I think all in all what I wanted to let you and NT Wright know is that I'm doing well and your advice was very timely. Thank you, thank you, thank you and please let Tom know that I have taken his advice to heart and have started to memorise Isaiah 54.

Thank you so much for your time and your work. There's more I could say but I'll leave it at that. Well I can only say it was really great to receive that message.

I won't reveal the name of the person but to know you're doing better and also to know that your story and the question you asked and indeed the response will have helped many other people as well I'm sure. So thanks for getting in touch. Well you can find out more about the show and how to ask a question yourself plus get other resources over at our website.

As usual it's askNT Wright dot com and I hope you enjoy today's episode. Tom welcome back to the show. It's lovely to be sitting down with you again to record some more of your thoughts on all of the questions that have come in and today we're looking at questions around the USA culture and society conspiracy theories.

Seems like we come back to this every so often. Many many listeners in the US who are interested in your thoughts on these issues. But speaking of conspiracy theories one thing that obviously has been in the news is the coronavirus vaccine and there's even been a certain amount of speculation in some communities as to its efficacy and certain conspiracy theories that have been doing the rounds and so on.

I understand you and Maggie have both been vaccinated recently though. Yes we've got a note on our phones from our GP saying you're on the schedule for it was last Saturday actually from the time I'm speaking now. And so we were mightily glad and we went along and queued not a very long queue but it was very efficiently done and we were asked various questions where we sure we wanted to do this etc.

Say we say yes please let's do it. So we were vaccinated told there might be side effects. We both felt slightly woozy the next day like mild flu symptoms which is exactly what

they said would probably happen and then we've just been going on from there.

Who knows whether this vaccine is totally effective against all variants or partially effective against some variants but it seems to me it's a very good thing. We were praying for the last year for God to find ways through and forward etc. And something like this seems to me in principle a gift from God and we ought to accept it as such.

We are hearing worrying stories here in the UK at least of BAME communities that are skeptical and buying into a certain number of conspiracy theories around the virus which is worrying isn't it? It is worrying and I think there's all sorts of levels of misunderstanding there in terms of how God works in the world and how God works to rescue and save people. And the example which came readily to my mind was if I'm going to drive to the other end of the country for whatever reason I will pray to God for a safe journey does that mean I shouldn't wear my seatbelt. 40 years or so ago there were some people who said we shouldn't wear seatbelts because it restricts our freedom.

Why should we be told to strap ourselves into these cars? Then they looked at the statistics about the number of road accidents where people were badly hurt when they weren't wearing seatbelts versus when they were and they became compulsory. Now I know it's not exactly the same but I believe the seatbelt is a gift from God among other things and I believe these vaccines are in principle a gift from God. I say in principle because the scientists have been having to go very fast.

We don't know yet what new strains of the virus will be but the scientists are doing this for our health and not in order to give us some nasty diabolical life altering substance whatever and I think we really really have to grow up and go with it. Well having said all that perhaps this is a good question to begin with then. This is Marieka I think it's pronounced in Utrecht in the Netherlands and says "Dear Tom my question is about Christianity and conspiracy theories.

Over the past year my family has become super suspicious of the media started to believe conspiracy theories about Covid, vaccines, Bill Gates, agenda 21, Deep State, Trump etc. Very much linked to their devout faith in God and their conviction that we live in the end times. It's become a struggle to talk to them on a meaningful level because it's nearly impossible to avoid contentious issues.

Furthermore they believe it's important to be vocal about these opinions. They have become conspiracy theory missionaries. This is difficult for me as I share their faith but not their convictions.

Do you think Christians are more prone to believing conspiracy theories because of something intrinsic in Christianity and do you have any advice on how to stay sane when your close relatives seem to go astray and if there is a crisis like a approach to this situation we feel your pain Marieka. So yeah Tom where do you begin on this one? Yeah I

Marieka I very much resonate with what you say I have several friends in America who have said more or less exactly the same thing to me. People who simply don't know how to talk with their family or with close friends because suddenly this great divide has opened up.

I suppose the closest thing we've had to that in Britain has been the Brexit controversy that's people discovering that close friends and family members were on the other side on Brexit and felt it very passionately and strongly. Certain dinner parties that you had to be very careful what you said. I think it is important to say that the media are never neutral and have never been neutral and this is well known going way back that the people who run newspapers etc have their own agendas.

I have been a London Times reader for most of my life and I have watched the times be pulled this way and that by various bosses and suddenly realized they seem to be giving us a lot of stories about this right now. I wonder why and then you discover that some politicians lent on them and said could we really get a message out about this. So it does happen.

I'm not saying the media are always squeaky clean and neutral. They select the stories to put out and they select the spin they want to give them. We all do that.

That's why it's important to watch different channels and to read different newspapers and I try to be sure as well as reading the Times I read the Guardian online and so on and try to get different angles on things and that's really important. Just because they're none of them neutral and neutral it doesn't mean that they're all in some great big fat plot together and of course there are all these huge conspiracy theories which are out there now and yes they have got bundled up with End Times speculation. This is a feature particularly of American culture over many years now.

I remember all 30 years or so ago there was a book by a guy called Frank Piretti called This Present Darkness and that was one of a string of books by other people that go way back to the 1920s and beyond which were telling in a novelistic way stories about some poor little American town that was taken over by some strange group and it turned out that it was all demonically inspired and bound up with battles in the heavenlies and then you've had the the left behind series as well. I was about to say the left behind thing comes in on that and that picks up other things about flying saucer cults and goodness knows what and there's been a lot of that in other countries as well but for whatever reason particularly in America I think partly because it's a vast country and you know that things are going on all over the place but you don't know what they are and and these all fuel this sense that we the Christians have an inside track a special insight on what's really going on and that these people are trying to deceive us etc and the fact that in Christ we do have insight we do have the mind of Christ we are given fresh wisdom doesn't mean that we can now decode everything that's going on in the public

domain and construct these great theories so it's really really difficult and I think therefore there are some Christians who are more prone to believing conspiracy theories because we are told that God will reveal things to us etc but we are also told Paul says very emphatically in Philippians that your public life and behavior ought to be worthy of the gospel of Christ and he says let all people know your forbearance you have to be the kind of community the kind of good neighbors that the world around likes to have on their street as it were and that's a pretty central early Christian imperative read Romans 12 down the same line so it's very difficult when people in your family or among your friends really are taken over with these ideas and interpret everything that happens in the light of them it's a form of paranoia I'm afraid and the trouble with paranoia is that if you hint at somebody that they're paranoid they're likely to get even more paranoid and think that you have joined the dark side as well my friends the only way through this is prayer and we have to be prayerful people we have to be humble people we have to get on calmly and quietly as best we can with loving and serving our neighbors our family our friends so that they see in us a gentleness and hopefully a wisdom which might just make them say wait a minute so and so actually seems to be quite calm about this quite prayerful quite wise about this maybe we're getting a bit extreme I can't say that's going to happen but that would be my hope the prayer and wisdom and love and gentleness has to be the baseline and then to learn as much as we can from as many sources as we can so if a conversation happens where we can put something wise in we are able to do so but it's a tough time we're in yeah I suppose I look at the early church sometimes and think well they were not immune either to conspiracy theories Paul was sometimes having to quash you know rumors of this and rumors of that has the end come and you know no no no precisely and in the ancient world where you've got your news by somebody coming from a distant city it might have taken them four or five days or a week or whatever you hear of wars and rumors of wars and people on the street so did you hear that Caesar has fallen or whatever and oh no that was just a rumor so so it's frustrating that in the information age we are still subject to that but that's part of the trouble we have too much information especially on social media exactly yes and we no longer seem to trust any particular sources do we yeah we'll come back to the issue of prophecy as well which has been swirling around in in this sort of whole area but inevitably there has also been questions around the political situation of late in the US a couple of questions here i'll roll into one one from Thomas in Austin Texas says I was greatly disturbed to see crosses and Jesus saved signs at those US Capitol riots in January and I'm having difficulty understanding the appeal of Christian nationalism today is there a genuine theological misunderstanding such as believing the kingdom of God refers to a political government or do you think Christian language and symbolism has become a smoke screen for political ends and and a similar sort of question from Laura Endor said who says what are we to make of American evangelicals who sometimes have extremely vocal um uh vocally equated hit Trump with Jesus this problem's been worrying me for some time and was brought to a head by BBC4 documentary Till Kingdom Come um I'm aware that evangelicalism in the US is rather different from that

in the UK but I find it hard to understand how any Christians could have supported Trump now obviously this is somewhat in the back mirror with uh you know Joe Biden now as the president but um yeah I feel these are all part of the same sorts of questions Tom yeah yeah and I fear that those questions aren't going away I mean yes Biden has been sworn in has been inaugurated etc and is now handling things um but there are a lot of people out there who still believe that it was all fake and that in fact the riots were caused by Antifa demonstrators in disguise and all that sort of thing um let me just say before I say anything else um it's very difficult for a Brit to be in any way seen to be criticizing America and Americans naturally don't like that just like I wouldn't like it if Americans even friends started criticizing Britain but to think wisely about what's going on there is not criticism it's an attempt to understand and after all since America is both Britain's um biggest ally really on the world stage but also the most powerful nation supposedly on earth we all of us as global citizens and Christians have a responsibility to be thinking through it so I see the roots of this way way back the American Constitution split apart church and state but actually that's an artificial divide because as all Christians know if Jesus is not Lord of all he's not Lord at all and so Christians have always tried to say well actually we're one nation under God and then there's a debate about prayer in schools and all that sort of thing um but the American Constitution did not really allow for what that might look like I know the British Constitution has a big muddle on this as well with an established church that both is and isn't in that position um but the trouble is that then like with a vacuum things rush back in and people get the wrong end of the stick and of course the kingdom of God refers to God being in charge through Jesus himself in the world but what that ought to look like or to be like the Sermon on the Mount not like military or quasi-paramilitary gangs going around and beating people up and so on and yes it's very important to realize that the word evangelical has become very slippery and defaced and deformed and it means something quite different in Britain from what it has meant in the USA and there are many Americans who want to call themselves by the word evangelical who are just as horrified as I am if you read Pete Wainer W.E.H. N.E.R. in the Atlantic he he's a Republican worked in the Bush administration and for other Republican presidents but he right through has been deeply critical of Trump precisely as an evangelical Christian he's been deeply critical of Trump and there are others um like the um has representatives man from Illinois Adam Kinzinger who was in the Sunday Times this last weekend though the Sunday Times didn't mention that he is a devout evangelical who says in other places not in the Sunday times that when he stands before Jesus as his judge he wants to be able to say yes I told the truth and he cannot do that if he's supporting Trump so life is more complicated but yes evangelicalism has by and large in the person of Billy Graham son of Jerry Falwell Jr etc etc it has slid in the direction of right-wing American politics in various I think deeply unhealthy ways and I see this deep rooted in as I say several aspects of American culture so it was it was very disturbing and distressing to me to see those Jesus saved signs and to hear the rhetoric there was somebody one of the writers in the Capitol who was standing there praying for angels to

come and intervene to stop Biden um being confirmed and you see sorry what what is going on here um and and that is that is really very very concerning and again the main answer is prayer we need to be praying for the health of the world because the world is in a mess right now in all sorts of political terms but also for wise discourse in America and among particularly Republicans who are worried about this whole thing and for the Democrats to realize that just because Joe Biden is now elected that doesn't mean that everything that the Democratic Party has ever wanted to do must now be done again as a matter of God must be telling them to do it and the binaries in America like elsewhere are not healthy and not helpful and people need to realize that all the issues that they face whether it's gun control or abortion or war against Iran or whatever it might be these are all separate issues and have to be thought through wisely on their merits at the time and I hope and pray for a new generation of wise leadership to come through all of this and to say we need better ways of not going there again. Let's finally talk about um prophecy now this has been in my timeline quite a bit um in the run up to the elections afterwards and during the inauguration time.

Dryden in Vancouver, Canada says um I was raised in a very charismatic Christian tradition which believes strongly in the gift of prophecy but over the last few years I've grown quite discouraged by seeing so many people in the church label themselves prophets and preach things which turn out to be false or are at least things which I find troubling or not aligned with the character of God. I'm thinking especially of several prophets around North America who prophesied that Donald Trump would win a second term as president which as we all know turned out to be false. I know that Jesus said that there would always be false prophets among us but I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater as I still believe that prophecy is a real gift that can be glorifying to God so I'm curious to hear your thoughts what's the proper use of prophecy as a spiritual gift in today's church and how may the average Christian reliably discern between genuine and false prophets.

I don't know if you heard of any of these stories of well-known names in the sort of charismatic church in the USA who did make these these grand claims about Donald Trump winning a second term which I did I did hear a bit about that and again that gets bound up with some of the things that we were just talking about before that people are coming on a sort of incoming tide of a sense that somebody said to me four years ago and Trump was first inaugurated that he's like Cyrus in the Old Testament he may not be a believer himself but he will enable a new wise generation to come up and that was about appointing a new Supreme Court judges and that sort of thing. And it's all very shallow it's all very either or it's all very binary and that's not actually how the real world works. Now in the Old Testament there are people who seem to be wise prophets and whose prophecies sometimes do come true but then get deceived and say things which are misleading.

We see that if you read through first and second kings you'll see that sort of thing going

on and sometimes it's very hard to discern. At the end of first kings there's that great battle and the king says I want the prophets to come and tell me and they all say go up and triumph the Lord is with you except for one and he says no it's all going to go horribly wrong and the king says I never liked this guy put him in prison and he says well if you come back safely then the Lord didn't send me. So that's going on among the people of God and in the New Testament as well when Paul is making his way to Jerusalem there are prophets in the church at the various places he calls who say please don't go up to Jerusalem it'll be the worst for you and Paul says well if I'm going to be killed I'm going to be killed and that's God's will and he goes to Jerusalem against their prophetic advice and as it turns out he is rescued and he gets to Rome etc.

So it looks as though this has been a problem that's always been with us but equally there were prophets who said there was going to be a great famine and there was and that enabled people to get ready and to send money to the people who are going to need it. So in every generation it seems to me we should expect this kind of phenomenon and it calls for wise prayerful discernment again and if the prophets are saying something which actually does go against what a larger wisdom might say then I think the church ought to say well we just need to hold on to this to pray about it and to wait and not think and act rashly because even people who in other circumstances are wise and truth telling can be mistaken and sometimes are and I would say that about myself as a pastor I don't see myself as a prophet in the sense you're talking about but sometimes as a pastor I find that I can in fact discern listening to somebody prayerfully what's actually going on in their life and the ways they should go and you say it rather trembling can this be right and then they do it and it works out you thank you Lord I had prayed for that and now it works other times I may think I have an idea but it may just not be right so the part of the problem is this binary of either it's totally right and it's supernatural and it's God given therefore get out of the way we're coming through or it's totally wrong that is simply not how the kingdom of God actually works and we have to be grown up and wise about it. Well we'll leave that one there thank you very much for the question Dryden and yes don't throw out the baby with the bath or to obviously exercise you know test all things as it says in scripture but yeah we're living through interesting times times when lots of things are being mixed up it would appear and people almost are being called to work out where their allegiance really stands ultimately but it's been great to have your thoughts on these issues Tom thanks for joining me and we'll see you again next week.

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