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Life and Ministry with Alistair Begg

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

If you ever wanted to be in the room as two minister friends talk about preaching and pastoral ministry, this is the episode for you. Kevin asks Alistair about his “ordinary” preaching style, about whether he ever thought about leaving Parkside, and about whether he’s an American or a Scotsman. Plus lots of other questions about books, the state of the church today, and the shaping influence of Cleveland.

Books & Everything:

The Christian Manifesto: Jesus' Life-Changing Words from the Sermon on the Plain

Truth for Life: 365 Daily Devotions

Truth for Life: 365 Daily Devotions (Volume 2)

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Ask Pastor John: 750 Bible Answers to Life's Most Important Questions

Ask Pastor John Podcast

All the Light We Cannot See: A Novel

A Change of Affection: A Gay Man's Incredible Story of Redemption

Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol 1: The Claims of Truth

Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol 2: Systematic Theology

Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol 3: Life, Sermons, Reviews

Transcript

Greetings and salutations. Welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin Deitung, senior pastor at Christ's Covenant church in Matthew's North Carolina.

Today, I'm joined by Alistair Begg. Alistair, I am honored. You're a hard man to get to talk to.

I appreciate you guarding your time. I've very much been much do. So I'm honored that you would come.

Thanks for joining us. It's a privilege actually. If it was in any way difficult for us to achieve this is I think because of both of our commitments on either side.

That is true. Yeah. So we're going to talk about as this podcast is some life and some books and some everything.

I think I've shared this with you before Alistair that I first came across you by radio. You probably get that from a lot of people way back. When did you start doing the truth for life programs? Late nineties? Yeah.

Maybe 95, 1995 on a fairly limited basis at that time, I think. So one of the stations in Grand Rapids, Michigan, you probably you probably went there first to Jerusalem to make sure you have some programs because Colorado Springs air Colorado Springs. Yeah.

So it was the late nineties or thereabouts the end of my college years and then the beginning of seminary. So I grew up in the church and then in college, I had friends introduced me to Lloyd Jones and I got all these banner of truth books and reading Calvin and one of the things that that implanted in me, which was kind of bad, but sort of served me well as I was I was very snobbish about anything current, meaning I went into a Christian bookstore and I assumed these books are all probably terrible. A bit snobbish, but actually, you know, served me somewhat well.

So when I came across a radio preacher, my first instinct was this is probably going to be going to be no good. But I was driving, I was commuting at the time one summer and I heard yours and of course, I'm sure you get this all the time, but people in America are wow, an accent and and so I just I just kept listening and I would start to time my and at the time, I think you were on in the morning and in the afternoon and I would time my commute, which was about, you know, 25 minutes or a half hour just to fit perfectly with truth for life. And then I started, you know, buying the tapes.

You came out to Gordon Conwell in Boston one year when I was a student there. So long time listener and first time podcaster. So thank you for all of that.

How did that start? Because radio even today is really big part of what you do. And I now know, you know, you can get truth for life on the app or the podcast. But how did you start in radio and have there been times over these years you thought in nobody does radio anymore, we're going to do something else? Well, first of all, you made me feel very old by telling that.

But that's okay, because I am getting very old. Well, interesting that your response to sort of contemporary stuff was for me, my response initially to Christian radio when I came to the States, I came here in 83. And of course, I came out of an environment that was very, very different from one in which, you know, you could turn on the radio at any point in the day and there would be something.

And I wasn't, I wasn't immediately drawn to the thing I must say, not because of any negative dimension in the material, but just, I was just my doer Scottish attitude, I think, was very doer. The advantage doer. And also, I think I probably made certain assumptions about why somebody would be doing that kind of thing, which was, you know, wrong to do and prove wrong in the end.

And actually, the way we came to it, what I came to it by somewhat reluctantly, a young fellow in our church who is now in his 50s and a grandfather was working at Moody radio at that time. And he actually was the instigator of things because he went to Joe Stolle, who was the president at that time. And basically, without any, without letting me know, I just began to annoy Stolle about the fact that he thought that his pastor might be worth being on the radio and Stolle eventually relented and put us on in three stations.

And on a Sunday night, there was no obvious response to that. And, you know, the story developed from there. But as to the question of the radio, it's fascinating to me to recognize the interface that there is between standard radio and the internet itself.

And the figures for standard radio are different from what they once were, but they remain very, very solid. And it probably has a lot to do with the demographic of the listeners as well, although. Right.

So let me start by, let's talk about preaching for a moment because we're talking about your preaching on the radio, which of course is just, you know, you're preaching at your church. How did you come to your, your preaching style? Because I'm going to say this in the, it sounds like a backwards compliment, but I mean it in the best possible way. I would say your preaching style is, is very ordinary, meaning there's, I don't detect someone's homiletical method.

So I was taught by Haddon Robinson, who has a very distinctive, and he was very good at what he did. And I learned things from him. I've never preached anything like him.

You know, Piper, John is a friend of ours, he has a very distinctive style. Tim Keller had a very distinctive style. And you do in your, in the day, and I say simple and ordinary in the best possible way, because I often think, I listen, I've listened to a lot of your sermons.

And I think, oh, he took us through the text. He explained the verses. He had some good illustrations at the end, and throughout he applied it.

I couldn't quite tell you what the homiletical method was, but it, it worked, and it gave us

the Bible and led us to Jesus. How do you think about it? Who are your influences? And how do you think about your own preaching style? That is a fascinating little run there from you, Kevin. I, what was it you said? I don't detect the influence of any particular homiletic style, which is a short step from, I don't think you have any particular homiletic style.

Yeah. Well, actually, I do take that as a genuine encouragement. I must say that, first of all, I meant it as such.

Yeah. And on a Monday as pastors, we need encouragement. Yeah.

But I haven't met anybody who is overly encouraged slightly. The influences on my life are probably in some ways similar to your own, at least if you go far enough back. I mean, I had the privilege of meeting Dick Lucas in, in Austria in 1972 when I was 20.

Oh, very good. How are you at Astur? Yes, exactly. Not a good preaching, yes.

And the ordinary way in which he went about things in his own distinctive sort of upper-class English style has always been heavily influential on me. The fact that he had no histrionics, that he had no huge dramatic intro, that he wasn't driven by anything at all, except his genuine desire to try and make sure that the big picture of the text was clear. I had the opportunity to listen to Lloyd Jones preach in real terms.

And of course, in London, yes, in London, and in Scotland, and in your, and in Yorkshire. Really? But same everywhere he went? Yeah, the same everywhere he went. The passage to which I would like to draw your attention is.

And so he may, he said, is stall it. I'm going to draw your attention to a passage of scripture. That's what I'm going to do.

That was his introduction. That was his introduction, almost standard introduction. And I guess I made a mental note of that.

That's all right. That sets the stage. Then Eric Alexander, a very good man in Buckinghamshire called the Reverend James Graham, another Scott, who was expository in his style.

The man that I became assistant to, Derek Prime, who was originally a history teacher and a very detailed guy. All of these were influences on me, but I was greatly helped by a visit from the fellow who was my New Testament teacher, Donald Guthrie at LBC. And Donald came to Edinburgh in the very early days, probably, '76 to give a lecture at the Theological Society at Edinburgh University.

And he sat with us as we were having something to eat. And he said, and how is it going with Derek? And I said, oh, I think it's absolutely wonderful. I said, you would like Derek

very, very much.

And I told how he had a study that had a huge desk. And on the one side of his desk, he had everything set up for his evening sermons. And on the other side of the desk, he had it all set up for his morning sermons.

And he was able to give two hours to the morning, have a coffee, walk around to the other side of the desk and start on the evening material. And as I outlined this for him, I expected Guthrie, who had written the New Testament introduction and so on, to say, oh, my, my, yeah, that's terrific. And he said, he said, oh, Alistair, I would not like that at all.

And I said, what do you mean? He said, well, I couldn't possibly do that. And then he said to me, he said, listen, all the influences upon you, you must learn from every one of them, but don't try and copy anyone. You must, you could never be what he is.

You're not put together that way. Just go at it in your own way. And I was his assistant at that point.

I hadn't really had any opportunity to do expository preaching. But those kinds of things have marked me and continue to mark me. I mean, I still, I was quoting John Stark last night.

I mean, these men were masters at the craft. And yet they were owned uniquely by the Holy Spirit. I mean, there was a divine, a divine inflatus that accompanied what he did, whatever their style or approach.

Do you found, I thought you were about to say the word unction, which is a, which is a, I used, I used a flatus instead. I know, even a more obscure word. But it's a good word.

Do you think that, you know, when I've been to Scotland, one of the things I love about it is they'll, you know, someone will say, could you, could you speak to our ministers fraternal? Could you speak on the unction? So I appreciate that emphasis. And yet I don't, I don't hear a lot about it. And I know there's an exegetical case, you know, is, you know, somebody kind of called me up on it.

And they were, they were being nice, but they said, you know, where's your exegetical warrant for saying there's a particular anointing? Isn't the anointing in 1 John, the anointing that all Christians have? Like, yeah, but, but there's, there's, I think still a right way to speak about a Holy Spirit, unction that comes upon us in preaching. Do you find that that's missing in emphasis and or in reality in most preaching today? Yes, I would say with you that I, apart from our conversation right now, I don't think I've from my mind. Interestingly, in mentioning Derek, in mentioning Dick, I was speaking at his conference a long time ago, or the EMA or whatever they call it.

And we were having coffee in the evening before of the before the event. And he said, so what are you giving us tomorrow, brother? And I said, well, I'm doing a passage in Thessalonians where he says that the word came, not the gospel came not simply in word, but in the, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And he paused and he said, well, just as long as you're not giving us any of that unction stuff.

Okay. Yeah, I know. I think I've had a conversation.

That knocked me sideways. But subsequent to that, he and I were sitting together in, in St. Helens listening to another man from another part of the world preaching in the evening service. And it was, it was standard, standard material in terms of proclamation trust.

I mean, there's the text and the one and the two and the three. And there we are. And let's just get on with life.

And so we're walking back across London Bridge and we're not speaking. Dick is completely silent. And then he says to me, what are we going to do about that, brother? I said about what? He said, well, it was just like a Bible study.

He said, he just, he just said, look at this, look at this, look at this. I said, Oh, Dick, you're not suggesting that we need. Yeah.

But in actual truth, when you listen to Dick with those hundreds of men on Tuesdays, delivering one of those 22 minute addresses, I don't care how clever he is. I don't know what he's saying in Scotland. The whole notion is better felt than felt.

And so we don't, I don't personally give any thought to it in the front of my brain when I'm actually preaching or even anticipating of preaching. But I think we all know that there are times when somehow the wind is lifted up, some things are picked up beyond us. I think almost every Sunday, so I probably like you do, I gather with some of my elders before the service and we pray.

And I'm always, you know, they always let Pastor Kevin into the time. So I'm always the last person to pray. I think more weeks than not that prayer there with the elders, I say the word function.

I'll say, would you send the Holy Spirit? And people in our church know one of my lines is, and I've used this in the prayer of illumination as well, I will say, God, would you send your Holy Spirit to preach a better message than the one I'm about to preach? Yeah, that's good. Yeah, meaning I'm, I've studied and hopefully I'm prepared, but there needs to be a supernatural interaction. And in fact, you know, years ago, I'm sort of, you know, embarrassed to say this, though it's not a mortal sin.

We have brothers who, who do this, but our church, we had a very kind of small

sanctuary and we were really looking seriously at doing a multi-site video kind of model. We've had, you know, friends who have done that, though I think most of them now are moving away from that and saying, you know, these are really churches and we'll plant them as churches. But what finally dissuaded me and us from, from going too far down that road was something that I read in Lloyd Jones talking about that preaching moment, even if you're in a big room, did you preach in a big room, you can still see faces and you can see some eyeballs and there's a, you can, you can sense, slow down, speed up, get loud, get soft.

It's not, it's not acting. It's not, you know, Lloyd Jones abomination, yeah, kind of preaching. It is, I think, in the best way, at the best times, the Holy Spirit working to give a sense of there, there is a communication transaction happening here that you can't have if, you know, it's recorded on Zoom or you're watching it live stream.

You need to have their, there's a preaching moment in there. How do you think about that with all the thousands of sermons you've given? And do you still, do you still feel that when you get in the pulpit? Oh, yes, I do. And I want to.

I mean, I don't ever want to not feel that, that sense of immediate dependency and, and seeking on a human level to bring people back from the second stages of anesthesia that they apparently have dropped into. Or, you know, Luther said, you know, I have, I have my regard, my congregation is full of lawyers and people, but I have regard for the servant made. And I want to speak in such a way that it has engaged her.

And so to that, to that point, yes, absolutely. And it also raises for me a question, I'd be interested to get your response on, although you're answering the questions. Lloyd Jones's commitment to that, the notion of the existential reality of that preaching moment was part of the reason why he did not like recordings, and he did not like his stuff being used on tape, because he said it's not the same.

And this then raises a very interesting question about, you know, what, what happens in the transactional moment of that preaching event, in comparison to what, what God chooses to do with a plastic version of it, that has now found its way via the internet and beyond. So our conviction is not about the existential reality of it, but it, it is about that the entrance of God's word brings light, that the word of God does the work of God, you know, by the power of the Spirit of God. And so he can do it in different ways.

Yeah. Yeah, I know. And everyone who everyone, every preacher needs to read Lloyd Jones preaching and preachers and reread it.

And it's one of those books, you can't possibly agree with everything he says, because he has so many abominations, and he just had strong opinions. I think in the Ian Murray, two volume biography that he, you know, he quotes Lloyd Jones talking about, you know, how, how despicable it was that Englishmen were now insisting on taking baths once a

week. And so such luxury.

So some things do change, but he gets at, you know, yeah, my my sermons are on the internet, yours are on the internet and the clips go around, at least yours do. So I think there's the the benefit outweighs the danger. And yet, it's probably not spoken enough.

It's not a danger, at least a reality, you know, the same thing with Whitfield, of course, we don't have Whitfield's recordings. And his sermons are good, but you read Whitfield's sermons and you you have to go, yeah, that's that's true. But even in his day, you know, kind of with some bravado, and he say, well, if you can find a way to print the thunder and the lightning, you know, then you can print my sermons, you think this is good.

But you just know, we don't have any idea. I mean, we we kind of have to imagine what was that actual preaching event. And I think that's even you can go and listen to, you know, hundreds of Lloyd Jones sermons.

But to realize there was something happening, you know, Jim Packard would say is like that electric shock therapy in the room. I never, of course, had the benefit of hearing him preach in person. He died when I was four years old.

What what was that like for you when you heard him in person? Well, it's only after I heard him in person that people would say, or I heard people say, you know, it's fascinating that Lloyd Jones can preach for an hour and four minutes and you will never once look at your watch. And when they said that, I realized that that was exactly what had happened. I think that the and incidentally, parenthetically, they say that he was far better in his native language of Welsh than he was in English.

So you think about that idea of the whole as the Welsh think about it. His his approach to things, I often list him when I'm walking in the park. And and his his his beginning is always the same.

I like to draw your attention as we've said. But then he sets out the the presenting problem. And he approaches it like a doctor.

He says, this is a one way to diagnose this. This is the second way. This is the third way.

And then he strips all of those away. And then he moves to the heart of it. And the very logical progression of his thought without being in any way of streuze is is is compelling.

And I find myself, I can I am walk for an hour and and and never never miss a beat because because of the the logic and and the delivery. He's not huge on illustration. He's not taking you along in that way.

He's not Robinson. He's far more fiery than John Stark was. It's fascinating that that somebody like Packer would who has much more was much more stoical and cerebral

benefit it's so immensely from the ministry of Lloyd Jones.

And what you don't realize because Lloyd Jones doesn't do a lot of illustrations and he might think, you know, he rarely gets the end and says, now three points of application. The whole sermon is application because it's just it's brought to the heart. Our our staff here, we read every other week, we meet our senior staff and we read a book and I get to pick the book that we read.

So we get through about two or three a year and I've I've picked some real duds that they didn't that they didn't like very much. And so I finally just went, well, let's do this one. I've read it a couple of times that we did Lloyd Jones spiritual depression, which are just sermons.

It's not really about depression is just kind of spiritual life. I mean, our staff just loved every bit of it. Just I mean, and who knows 60 years ago he gave those sermons and they still speak because they're biblical.

And one of the things that does for me and it can be convicting because I do have, you know, there's a part of me that likes to comment on things and likes to, you know, I stir up some controversy sometimes. I don't mean to, but you've heard that. And I think there's a place for that.

But you and I both know that the people whose whose ministries long outlive them are the ones that are steep are telling you about the Bible and are teaching you about Bible things and doctrine things. And yes, you need people in the moment to speak into this thing that just happened this week. But that that quickly becomes ephemeral.

I wonder, Alistair, can you talk, say a little bit about how you've set ministry priorities, parameters, because I've really respected you in that. And I mean it sincerely you, you know, you do some conferences, but you don't, you must say no to 95% of the invitations that you, you get, you have a lot of books. I want to encourage people to look out and look for your new book on the Sermon on the Mount, your two volumes of Truth for Life Devotionals.

That might be a great gift to get as people come into the new year. So you have a number of books, but I sense that most of them or almost all of them are drawn from your sermons. So how did you set priorities? Because it seems like you very intentionally said, I'm, I'm preaching at my local church.

I'm here at my local church. And you said no to a lot of other things that other men might have done and could have done, you know, wouldn't have been sinful because I do some of those things. I hope I'm not sinning, but I've really respected you for those priorities.

Well, you know, at the very essence of things, I, well, first of all, I'm a Christian and then

secondly, I'm a pastor. So a good Christian is going to be committed to the local church to read in their Bible, to prayer, to all those things. And so we had to, we had to be doing that because of God's grace in our lives.

But my calling to the local church is something that I felt very deeply. I mean, when I was ordained, it was a, it was a dreadful moment for me. I mean that it was an awful moment for me.

That's better. And because although I felt myself willing, perhaps to serve Jesus in some capacity, I thought there were ways that it could be done where I wouldn't lose any credibility with all my friends in the football team or whatever it was, you know, so you could do student ministry, you could do music ministry, you could do sports ministry. But whatever you do, you don't want to become one of those pastor people.

And it's a long story, but we've been going to it. But so when I finally bowed my knee to that, it was, it was, it was like marriage. I mean, it was almost, it was almost, we can almost define it in Roman Catholic terms, you know, that sense of oblation, that sense of, you know, I say to people that because in those days, 76 at Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh, we still wore clerical collars.

And so even the Baptists. Even the Baptists. Yeah.

And, and we, so, you know, for the first time in my life, I put on one of those collars. And, and when I showed it to my wife, she just laughed uncontrollably. You're not one of those people.

Yeah. And so anyway, so there you go. And that's, that's it.

Along the journey, I've had various opportunities to consider other ways of going about the business, not to my credit, but just reality. I've just never given them consideration because I feel very strongly the, the call and also the privilege of doing what I'm doing. And, you know, also Sunday by Sunday is what keeps me, it keeps me honest.

It keeps me accountable. It keeps, because my congregation, no, you can't skirt, you can't skirt those middle verses of John six. You're going to have to deal with election.

I mean, and, and they know, and so I have to. And that sense and the joy of, of preaching regularly to a group of people that you couldn't impress if you tried and you, and only by dreadful sin could you dishearten them because we're together in that. And that, I think, is not so much a reason for not doing other things as it is a safeguard for my own soul.

Yeah, I, I sometimes say and mean it. There's no place I'd rather preach. Yeah.

Then my own church Sunday by Sunday. And it's not that some men, you know, might

have a more itinerant kind of ministry, but I would take that as something changing or something off in my heart, if I felt like, Oh, Sunday here at Christ Covenant. Yeah, we'll get through it.

But you know what? In two weeks, I'm flying here to do this conference. That's the easier work. Oh, yes.

But it's, it's really not the better work. No, I think, you know, I come home from events and I say to our congregation, you know, this is a good church. It's not a great church, but it's a good church.

And I love being here. And they, and they know that. And so that has allowed me a measure of freedom because I'm not absent from some of the things you're mentioning and neither are you.

But to your point, those are not the drivers. Those those are supplemental. They're not fundamental to what we're doing.

In fact, there is no truth for life without Sunday by Sunday faithful work. There is no invitation for you or I to go to conference X in, you know, Brazil, apart from the faithfulness that you have shown to your people through the word on a consistent basis. That's why they want you.

I hope that's why right. Right. Right.

All right. I have to do a LBE ad. So grateful for Crossway sponsoring life and books and everything.

And today I want to mention this is a is a good book. And there's a second edition by Scott Clusendorf, the case for life, equipping Christians to engage the culture. I think I could say if you're a Christian out there and you want to be strengthened and you're apologetic in understanding of a pro life position, this is probably the best one volume out there.

That's that's my ad copy, not there. So Scott Clusendorf's book, the case for life. Alistair, I was in Scotland in May.

I was speaking at with with our mutual friend Sinclair or Sinclair. He just says don't even try to say my name, how it's really pronounced. So I'll just do the American Sinclair Ferguson at the Scottish Reformation Conference with a lovely pastor up there who organizes it.

David Carmichael from Abbey Green and Les Mihago outside of Glasgow. So we're there at Hamilton College. This is right around the corner from where you are pastoring.

Right. Yeah, I don't know what I have driven by your church. Where is it relative to

Hamilton College? Well, it's Hamilton College is on that main road that that runs in and out of Hamilton.

If you had gone past the college on your left hand side and down to a set of traffic lights and turned right within within a mile, you would have come to our church building, which sits actually above the railway track and the railway station of Hamilton taking people into Glasgow. So you would have been very, very close. Oh, I should have gone and done the Alistair bag pilgrimage.

You know who's there now is Craig Dyer. Do you know the name of Craig Dyer? Yeah. Well Craig was a little boy in short.

She was a five or six year old when I was the minister. Really? And through all the many dangerous toils and snares, he has now arrived back. They are a nice folk actually with an older member of the congregation last week who was in Canada and wanted to talk.

And she was saying what a wonderful thing it is that he is there and that the congregation is thriving under his ministry, which is no surprise. Now you've been in Parkside for 40 years. It's amazing.

40 years. It's a long time. Yeah.

Well, it's amazing. And that must have been a very hard decision to come. And when you came, not only to a new church, I know your wife's American, a great Michigander like myself, but did you ever think that you would be there for 40 years? No, I was saying, would they have called you if they knew? No, no.

No, I was on a very short leash. I'm sure at the beginning. But no, I could only see three years ahead of me at that time.

And I say that because I had seen some friends accept invitations to America. And for whatever reason, they came back again to the UK. And I thought to myself, if I'm going to accept this call and go out there, I don't want to fall foul of some godless homesickness or something.

So I determined that I wouldn't go home all things being equal for three years, that I would commit myself to make sure that I am there for three years. Not even visiting back home. Not even visiting back home.

No, I've gone to boats for three years. Yeah, I'm going to, I came out of one way ticket. I won't get a return for a while.

And I'm glad that I did that because it took out all the questions of, well, do you think I should go back for a visit or anything? No, you can't do that. Why? Well, you made a covenant with yourself. You're not going back.

And so that allowed me to set my shoulder to the, to the wheel as it were. And no, even after three years, after three years when I went home for the first time, I had an opportunity to assess things. And the way I put it is this, I felt that whatever I was endeavoring to do, by and large, it didn't, it wasn't really gaining any traction at all.

That I was pulling the rope, but the bell wasn't ringing. And I suddenly realized that in many areas, the bell was not attached to the rope. And so there had been just general encouragements with an increase of attendance and engagement with younger families and all those things for which we could be thankful.

But in terms of actually changing or developing a biblical understanding and framework of the nature of the church itself and of leadership and everything else, that had not, that had not begun to take place. And so when I came back into the beginning of year four, that was very much a focus. How are we going to do this to make sure? And funnily enough, and there's a name that I hardly mentioned ever, but you remember Al Martin? Yes.

Yeah. It was just talk. Yeah, it was just, and I met Al years ago when I was preaching in Michigan and was just talking to one of our pastors about him this morning.

Yeah. Well, a fascinating man that I went to visit after I'd come back at the beginning of year four, and I went to his house in New Jersey. And his wife was unwell and he was making tea and stuff.

And his persona on the tapes was sort of devastatingly strong and forceful. He said, said outrageous things. I mean, by any standards.

And so I felt perhaps when I met him, it would be, you know, like meeting a lion. But in actual fact, it was not like that at all until I began to lay out for him the problems or the conditions that I had encountered in this place. And at one point, his explosions.

And he said, boy, he says, the only hope you'll have in that places that you must see that church reconstituted under the framework of a New Testament structure. Otherwise, it will never happen. And so I went there, got in the plane, I came home, I said, well, at least I had clarity from the fellow, right? And how this unfolds, I don't know.

But in the goodness of God, and not what not in any exceptional way, but just again in ordinary ways, God has blessed us in that regard, because we are in many ways a hybrid of a church, aren't we? I mean, I have, I have deep theological convictions about the doctrine of scripture and salvation and everything, which are all shared by my people. And my roots are Presbyterian in their form of church governments. So we have an elder rule church, but baptistic in our mode of baptism.

So not everybody can cope with that kind of thing. And not every church can be developed under that kind of leadership. And so it's been essential that I've been able

point by point to make sure that at least what we're trying to do is unfold the scriptures as we follow this track.

Now there are certain pastors that I think of, and it's hard to think of them apart from the place where they ministered. And maybe most well known in our day is you just, Tim Keller's ministry was just so much about New York City. And he was shaped by it and, you know, a different, not as much of a model, but like Rick Warren just seems very Southern California, Orange County, even John Piper, I think John needs to, he needed to be in someplace that was very, that had, you know, coldness, suffering, you know, Minneapolis or something.

Otherwise, how could he, how could he wear a tweed jacket if that wasn't? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Even though he's from South Carolina, but it is, you know, do you feel like you're shaped by Cleveland? I know Parkside's in the suburbs. It's not, you know, downtown Cleveland, but or the Midwest or Ohio, you know, how have you thought about this place or has it been more just, you know, Parkside? Well, that's an interesting question because, you know, I came from Glasgow, which was at one point the second city of the British Empire.

So I love cities. And so I came to Cleveland in the awareness of what kind of city it was. That's what he's got, was saying, you're going to Cleveland? Exactly.

Exactly. I've always wanted to visit Cleveland. No, I think maybe this thing comes almost full circle.

You started up by saying your approach is fairly simple, fairly ordinary. And I think it's good for me to be in a place like Cleveland, where when your feet touch the pavement, it's not like Southern California, you know, getting up brings you down. And I love going to all those places.

But I think I fit in this kind of essential Midwestern, four seasons, basic kind of context, because Glasgow is not Edinburgh. It's not Aberdeen either. It's an extraordinary place.

And so yeah, we for a long time did events in downtown Cleveland until the Presbyterian Church we were using decided that what we were saying was far too true to scripture. So they removed us. But yeah, but you know, I'm a mess because when Michigan play Ohio State, I support Michigan and the people hate me for that.

People gave me Cleveland Browns jerseys in the early time when I came here. And I told them I don't like the colors and I'm not sure I like the team for 40 years. They've never won anything.

So I have fun with that. But deep down inside, I love the fact that, you know, any good thing come out of Cleveland or Cleveland? Yes. Yeah.

Yeah. So again, God's word does its work. Yeah.

I'm not asking you to bear any secrets you don't want to bear. But I would imagine over 40 years there, there must have been times where people came knocking to this other church and other place. Maybe people in Scotland, Alistair, once you come home, schools, Christian colleges, seminaries.

I remember I don't think this is telling anything out of turn. I remember talking to John Piper about this. And you know, he said over his years at Bethlehem, you know, it just never intersected.

If he was feeling sort of, huh, maybe I maybe I should go somewhere. There were no opportunities. And when the opportunities came, he just was feeling like, no, with my family or what's going on in the church.

How was that for you? I mean, there must have been some thought over 40 years of maybe my season of ministry is done here. Well, one of the one of the most to come back to this three year thing, the first three years, one of the most staggering things that happened to us was that we received a call from Charlotte Chapel where I'd be the assistant because Derek had retired, which was at that time, you know, the number one evangelical church in the capital of Scotland. And it wasn't simply somebody phoned out and said, if you're any interest in this, no.

The elders had got together and called the meeting of the church. The church had voted and they sent to me, they sent to me a large envelope that was came from Ian Balfour, who was the secretary of the church and a lawyer. And it contained language in it that was quite staggering.

Under God, the elders of Charlotte Chapel believe that you are the man that God designed and desires for this opportunity. And then it followed from there that they laid out the package of how they would bring me all down to the details of salary and housing and purchasing and everything else. And I was completely bowled over by it.

And I remember soon I sat together in a little coffee shop in Chagrin with this in front of us. And she said, what are you going to do? And I said, and this is an indication of how long ago it was, I said, well, I'm going to send off. I'm not even going to write a reply.

I'm going to fax a reply. And I'm going to say, no. And she said, really? I said, yes, really.

I said, if I accepted this call, I'd have to believe that the call that came to me to come to Cleveland was some exercise in who knows what? I said, I can't believe that I came here on a fool's errand. And I would love to be in my own country. I'd love to be in Edinburgh where our marriage began and everything.

But I'm not going to do it. That was a first big one. That closed the door for me and

anything else that would ever come from the UK as it subsequently did.

Because if I said no to that, I wasn't going to say it. Yeah, that was good. At one point, our good friend Don Carson got in touch with me and said, you know, I think you would be terrific if you came here to Trinity and did practical theology for us.

And I said to him, what a kind invitation. But I couldn't do that. He said, why not? I said, well, number one, I'm a pastor and number two, I would only have like about one lecture.

And he says, oh, come now. I said, no, there's no come now. I said, I'm telling you, well, I know about that, I could give in about a 45 minute talk.

And he says, well, I think you're being self-deprecating. I said, well, thanks for the encouragement. But and thanks for the invitation.

But no, thank you. And the other things that came, because we were seven and a half years in using a church in using a high school facility after we sold our building. And then people would call up and say, hello, are you still in that school? Are you still still got quotes? Nothing going there.

You know, we've got, we've got this and we have that and and we've got the next thing. And I suddenly realized if I could and then it came, then it started and I don't want to throw you under the bus with this. But then it started, well, I believe you love to play golf.

You know, if you came down to the Carolinas here, right, then you know, like, and I hang up the phone and say, Lord, would, I mean, I do love to play golf, but do people really think that that that's enough for me to that's the way to dislodge me? Yeah, well, yeah, what I'm doing here. So to to John Piper's point, I always say that to people, I say the same thing. To make a move like that, there needs to be, there needs to be two things, a strong pool and an unsettling of the roots.

And if the roots are unsettled with no pool, you're still there and vice versa, which is the same point that John was making. I don't say that in any heroic way at all. It is an immense privilege to be doing what I'm doing, where I'm doing it.

The church does offers me affection and thank God they don't offer me adulation. And in that context, you're my friend, relationships have extended throughout the nation, gospel relationships that may never ever have been a part of my life. We're enough of the fight that I had come to this place.

And I'm daily, Monday morning, I'm daily thankful for it. I remember the illustration that you've, I heard you maybe you've shared it multiple times. Usually, if we find a good illustration, we do share it multiple times.

But the little boy who had the man that said compliments are like perfume. Yeah, sniff it, don't swallow it. Yeah, yeah, that's it.

I mean, that really is it. I told our guys the other day at our team meeting, I said, you know, you follow us are really, really good. You're really, really good.

But I don't want you thinking that you're really, really good. Yeah, yeah. Sometimes though, I will, you know, people from my church, I'll laugh.

They'll start a conversation or they'll start an email with, now, pastor, I don't want you to get a big head. So they're going to say something nice. And I want to say, um, tempt me, you know, you might not, you might not think that I'm, I'm as writing high as, as you expect.

So go ahead and tempt me with your encouragement. So parishioners out there, we do appreciate your encouragement. Okay, one, one more ad.

And then if you can stay on for a few more minutes and a few more questions, ask pastor John podcast from Desiring God. Well, I encourage you to check that out. Grateful to Crossway and to Desiring God to sponsor LBE.

And Tony Ranky has done, I read through it and I admit I plowed through it because it's really long. So I didn't read word for word, but he's put together 750 Bible answers to life's most important questions. And that's Tony's effort to put, to give kind of a written synopsis of John's like 2000 hours of ask pastor John podcast.

So John says there he's, you could think of it as him making up for not having application in like 30 years of sermons or something. It's, here's all of the application. And he's just really so thoughtful on those questions.

So check that out and grateful for Desiring God. You mentioned Alistair, you know, your homeland, Scotland, you became an American citizen, I think about 10 years ago. So is it both, you know, do you feel American now? I imagine there must be some sense in which, I mean, you're always Scottish, of course.

How do you do this, this dual ethnicity? Yeah. Well, I hope that I'm doing it. I hope that I'm doing it well, both for the folks that I've left behind who don't think that I have forsaken them.

And I hope that I'm doing it well so that the people here know how much I love this place and love American people. American people taught me campus crusade people taught me how to share my faith when I was 16 years old. So the influence of America in Scotland, Second World War, influence at Navy, soldiers, there's a wonderful thing there.

And also in terms of, you know, the Open Championship in golf, the Scottish people are

able, in a non-jingoistic way, are able to embrace the winners from whatever part of the world they come in a way that isn't necessarily the case. I'll illustrate it two ways perhaps. In the early years when I was here, I would say to Sue, whatever happens to me, honey, if I die prematurely, make sure that you take my body home.

I cannot be buried here. I just emotionally, you've got to tell me that you'll do that. Okay.

That is long since in the background. This is my home. My children, although they were born in Scotland, have grown up here.

They have married here. My grandchildren are here. The people church-wise and relationship-wise are all embedded here.

But as soon as it comes to the Ryder Cup, it is absolutely really difficult that my heart, I've even tried. I tried one year when it was played in Wales to support America. I just couldn't do it.

My default has to go to my homeland. So in that respect, I'm a happy privileged citizen of the United States. But when I land in Glasgow or Edinburgh, I say to myself this little poem, this is the country, the land that begat me.

And these windy spaces are surely my own. And these who hear toil in the sweat of their faces are flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. And so that can't be removed.

But it is transcended by the gospel and by the nature of what it means to be in Christ. Yeah, that's wonderful. It prompts another question with you just quoting that.

Yeah, well, that's what I do. If you can go for 10 more minutes or so. No, no, I'm enjoying the chat.

We never get to talk. I know. So usually I write out lots of questions.

I just thought, well, this is my friend, Alistair. I'll just ask him things I want to. You're very good at memorization.

So you just did that. I've heard you do Shakespeare, of course, Beatles songs, Bible, most importantly. In fact, if you've ever looked at your Wikipedia page, and I don't go looking at mine either, but I just was looking at it.

It's actually quite funny because it gets to the end and it says theological views or something. And it's like, Alistair believes in an erancy. And his oratory is known for often quoting the Bible.

Like, well, okay. Yeah, that's that is true. But you memorize things.

Is this is this a habit? Is this something you've always been very good at? I mean, it

seems like you you can drop down a file folder and have a lot of hymns in Bible and scripture and little poems memorize. Where'd that come from? Well, I think you're what is it talking says, the praise of the it's a it's a product of a number of things, I think. For example, we never had a television in our house until I was 12 years of age.

Therefore, books were always books were my thing. I mean, I just I just devoured books. I love books.

People gave me books. I joined the library without my parents permission and got in trouble for doing so. And then the structure of schooling in Scotland in those days was very much by memorization of things, learning things, being able to recall them and so on.

So that sort of that wired my brain in a certain way. And then what I discovered was that the other side of my brain or whatever part of your brain is that is supposed to be good at science and mathematics. That was virtually that I'm not showing up.

Yeah, that was that was a separate category altogether. And so I suppose it drove me further in the direction of the arts of history and and so on. And so both by capacity and by incapacity, it turned me in that direction.

And I've never really found things that are easily, easily remembered. I've always found them easy to remember because especially if there's, I mean, just just lines, you know, I listened to something on the radio a hundred years ago. And there's a country Western song and the line went, and you've been rearranging chairs on a ship that's going down.

You know, that was just lost. That's a great, that's a great line. And and again, because of British education, when you get to 16, you can determine in going to university which channel you're going down.

And so unlike American education, where even when you go to college, you still have to keep a mathematics course or something else. That all goes away at 16. So now I'm doing economics.

I'm doing history. I'm doing English. And so I've cooked my goose as it were.

I mean, nobody's going to sign me up as a paramedic. And so that's that's that's really the that's the background to do you I'm putting you on the spot because it's hard when you love books, like you do and I do. And somebody says, what's a great book you've read recently? I've read a lot of books, but do you have anything at the front burner Christian or not Christian book that you've read in the last year that you think I want to that was I that was a great read.

I loved reading that book. Well, I'm always wary of moving into the realm of secular authors, especially in a context like this, as if in case I'm giving endorsement to

something that if somebody went to it. But I just finished reading.

I started on Thanksgiving Day to read all the light we cannot see. And having begun it because of the way I'm wired, I kept going until I finished all the way through the book. And I found that a quite fascinating piece of work on the part of the author.

In terms of a book that has impacted me from a Christian perspective, in the last five or six weeks, a book by a fellow called Beckett Cook called *A Change of Affection*, which I read with great care and was struck by the clarity with which he addressed that issue. I found that wonderfully helpful. Anything that is that is at the moment, I found myself wanting to read theology.

I want to actually read theology and a new book or new to me at least that I have begun is from the Bishop, the Archbishop out in Sydney. Well, you know his name. The Jensen? Yes.

And Jensen has just done, they've done, I guess, from some of his talks a book on theology. And it's fairly is down there. It's very very accessible.

But I'm reading that. I'm also reading up my bedside. I'm reading the book that they put out of Jim Packer's *Christianity Today* pieces, supplemented.

And I gave up on it just two nights ago, but I was reading his treatment of why he signed the Roman Catholic ECT, a chord. And so I haven't finished it. But I remember being disappointed by the fact that he did.

And then he signed the other one that was against ECT. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. But watching you, four of my favorite books are immediately over your right hand shoulder. And that is the collected writings of John Murray.

Yeah. Yeah. I see.

And Murray, I was showing Sue just yesterday that she because she wanted to know where somewhere was on the map in Scotland. And as I guided her route up into the Highlands, I said, and right here in Bonner Bridge, that is where Murray was born and buried. And yeah, we thank God for him.

Goodness, do we stand on the shoulders of such amazing shoulders? There's a I wish banner of truth if anyone's listening would publish it as a separate thing. In one of those volumes there is Ian Murray's did a biography. It's about 130 pages or so in one of those.

And really fascinating. Like I didn't realize that he married a student of his. Yeah.

I mean, they didn't start dating till after she was done as a student. But there was a big age gap. You see the picture there, which you think is a grand kid, but it's his child.

I think when he was in his 60s, maybe? Yeah. Yeah. And really a always wanted to be a pastor, always wanted to be a pastor.

And I think here's a couple of things in all of this that just as you think about all these people we've mentioned, the essential humanity of them, the sort of that the down to earthness of Lloyd Jones, actually, if you talk to his daughters, as I've had occasion to do and ask them, what was he like on Sunday night when he came home from church? Or I think in that little biography to which you refer, you have the story. If it's not there, it's somewhere else of Murray bidding farewell to his brother, who was leaving for the war. And again, you get this insight into the heart of the man.

Yeah. It's a real person. Let me ask you this as we come to a close.

I don't think you and I have how do you make sense? And maybe we can't of what seems to have be happening in let's just call conservative evangelicalism in the past six or seven years. Now, I think there's a lot to go good things. And I'm going to end by asking you for some encouragement, not for me, but just for our listeners.

But I guess what I'm saying in this question is it seemed like there was a season. You even look at the names of these organizations, which, you know, the two of us are familiar with or we're a part of in different ways, together for the gospel that says togetherness gospel coalition that's coming together, even before that alliance of confess. It seemed like there was a season of finding friends and coming together.

And I don't think anyone would accuse this particular moment in church history here of being of having that same kind of it seems like things have become more more fractious, more factional. I think some of that is just there were there were maybe alliances that weren't as deep as as people thought they were. Some of it, I think history will show.

Oh, you guys didn't need to be fighting over that. But some things are just the product of people focusing in different directions. I guess that's a roundabout way to say how have you thought about, you know, what's happened over the last six, seven years from everything from, you know, Trump's a part of it, riots are a part of it, COVID's a part of it.

Christian nationalism discussions are a part of it. Zionism is a part of it. Zion is so what is it? Yeah, right.

So I think a lot of people have looked around and said, I thought I thought I knew what the teams were. And now I'm not sure. Maybe they're not on my team.

And maybe they are on my team. How have you made sense of it? What's encouraging or discouraging you as you look out both across the pond and here? Well, here is where here is where one sense of calling to a local church is so vitally important. Because I'm not called to a coalition, I'm not called to a to an organization.

I'm actually called to this. And this is not only what gives me makes me honest, but it gives me a sense of security. I know that that this is what I'm doing.

When I look across the horizon, I distinguish between issues that are of secondary value. And so I look, I look beyond somebody's particular emphasis on that to see where they stand really in terms of the verities of the gospel that and so I might be prepared to give them a pass. Well, okay, if you want to get excited about that, that's up to you.

Where I get alarmed though is where those other issues, the kind of things we've just issued, appear to take on a primary emphasis. They become a rallying point or they become a unifying factor. And as soon as anything other than the gospel itself becomes that, then we're all in danger.

We don't want to extol the value of Cinther Ferguson beyond the value of all that he is to as in the gospel. But he stands out for me as somebody who although people try desperately to drag him into those environments, he can sit silent in a group discussion and only say what would be valuable in being said and relieve himself of being sucked into the vortex that is created by some of those things. And so in that regard, I think he's a model.

I was talking last night just about how the framework of an understanding of humanity both in well essentially in terms of Ecclesiastes 12, 7 and the body turns to the earth and the spirit returns to God who made it. This was a fundamental underlying notion of Western civilization if you like. People weren't talking to one another in those terms when they met in the marketplace but for for at least for a while, there was a sense in which there was that there.

When that goes, it doesn't leave a vacuum because the vacuum is then filled by all kinds of notions about death, about the afterlife and everything else. And so what needs to happen is that we have to be grounded again in these essential truths about God, about being made in the image of God, about the linear progression of time towards a meeting with God. And so in the same way, we didn't give up on those fundamentals of gospel conviction and expect that our preoccupation with some of these other matters which are not irrelevant matters can become transcendent.

I think in short order, we're very close to where the UK was when SCM, the press, had gone liberal because of its convictions about social welfare and caused a group of evangelical scholars to set university fellowship in place. And IVF then began to publish start and began to publish some of these other places. I didn't wear any danger of that in this present climate.

And so in positive terms, I say to all my colleagues in ministry, let's remember that we were called to a local church, let's do the work of the local church and believe that there will be a harvest because the harvest has been promised to us. And don't become weary

and well doing. Don't go down those rabbit trails.

Don't let the people suck you into that. Don't take sides over these issues, keep quiet. And where the gospel demands it, then speak up loudly.

But in the rest of it, I say, just leave it all on somebody actually wrote into truth for life not long ago saying, and this sounds very self-aggrandizing. I don't mean it to, and I can't quote it properly, but the person wrote in to say, Alistair Begg somehow or another does not seem to get caught up in the contemporary debates about A, B, and C. He does not get caught up, but does not give up any conviction concerning the gospel. And the person, it was just a dash.

And the person said, maybe he's on to something. Maybe, maybe. And I mean, I wouldn't have said it out of myself, but when I looked at it, I said, well, I hope I am doing that because I'm not fearful of those things.

I've got an opinion on absolutely everything. And most of them are not really for anybody other than myself. But I've got strong political convictions.

I've got huge concerns about many of the things that are out there. I'm not unafraid of the challenge of addressing them, but I don't feel that I either have the voice or the position to insert myself in the dialogue. And that's a great final thought.

And it's so important, and I know lots of our listeners are not just pastors, but for pastors out there, it's not that I mean, we need Christians in politics, we need Christians doing punditry commentary, all of the things we need Christians in medical policy, all of that. But the pastor is not the one to do all of that. And you can't, yes, if I see somebody in the grocery store, am I the pastor, if they see me mowing the lawn, hear these stories about our friends.

I don't know if they're true, like Ligon or Sinclair, they mow their lawn in a suit or something. I don't know. I certainly don't.

So I'm a very ordinary looking person, but yet you never can really take off. You can't say, well, I'm a pastor, now I'm going to speak to you over here on this other issue, not as a pastor. You carry that office and you carry that with you.

And I just want to end by commending you, Alistair, I didn't invite you on here to give you compliments. So sniff them, don't swallow them. But I've benefited from your preaching for a really long time.

My mother-in-law would be angry with me. She listens to all of this and you're one of her very favorite preachers. So she would want me to thank you personally for ministering to her and to lots of other people.

And as long as God gives you energy and strength in whatever season of ministry, thank you for doing that. And check out truth for life, check out Alistair's new book, The Christian Man of Feste, Jesus' Life Changing Words from the Sermon on the Plain, a book about which I asked you nothing but still go and check out the book. So Alistair, thank you for your preaching.

Thank you for your friendship. Thank you for being here. Thank you.

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