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Conversations in a Crisis: Part V: Trust, Suspicion, and Authority (with Rev Benjamin Miller)

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Faced with our challenge of remaining faithful within and addressing our various contemporary societal crises with wisdom, Christians and churches are fracturing over our differing approaches and postures. My friend Ben Miller suggested that we have a series of conversations, to help us to pursue greater clarity on the principles, virtues, duties, and practices that can equip Christians to meet such difficult times with prudence, insight, and courage.

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Transcript

The following is one of a series of conversations that I'm having with my friend, the Reverend Ben Miller. Ben is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on Long Island, and he suggested in the context of current divisions within the church over political and other issues that we have a wide-ranging series of conversations about issues of Christian ethical reflection, epistemology, charity, obedience, trust, community, and conscience in this context. While our conversations are occasioned by issues such as COVID, on which Ben and I have different opinions, our conversations will not be narrowly about it, but will be a broader exploration of issues of Christian faithfulness in any sort of crisis, some of the principles that should guide us, and some of the practices and virtues that we need to pursue.

Through our conversations, we're hoping to arrive at more accurate and charitable understandings of each other, a better grasp of responsible processes of Christian

reasoning and deliberation, and a clearer apprehension of principles that we hold in common. We invite you to join us for these conversations, to listen to our discussions, and then to share your own thoughts in the comments and elsewhere. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

We are back with another installment in this conversation about Christians and government, Christians and science, issues of authority and submission, and not just authority in the political sense, but authority in the realm of knowledge and how Christians should navigate all of that, prompted, of course, by some of the specifics of our time in the COVID context. Last time, Alisher, we were talking about submission to governmental authorities, and we've wanted to have a conversation on the other side of that coin about what it might look like to have a posture at times of faithful resistance to certain powers. But there's an issue that I have encountered, and I'm sure you have too, maybe upstream a bit from the question of resistance, and that is, can we trust government authorities? It's one thing to say that we ought to submit to them, as the scripture does say, but can we trust them? And this might be a place to explore a little about what you have called narratives of what's going on.

Because what I have found as I've talked to people about the whole matter of submitting to government authorities is there is, I've found a lot of times a sense that even if government itself is legitimate, even if political order and even a particular people in power, they have lawful authority, there's still a sense that governmental institutions and forms and processes have been captured by really malevolent forces who want to destroy the political order even. In other words, it's a bit like a cancer. It actually wants to destroy the host.

In my context, these are anti-American ideologies and forces and so on. Now, there's a story of how this came about. There's a story of the capture.

It might be helpful to even have a conversation about how we think about history, like whose histories do you trust? And I know I'm immediately throwing a bunch of stuff out on the table, but that's just, I can say much more about the details, but that narrative, that account of capture that we are dealing with a government held hostage, political forms held hostage. I think that that really creates some difficulties for a lot of people when they begin to think about submitting to or possibly resisting powers. That's all in the background.

Have you encountered anything like that? Yes, I think that's very much the case. Maybe just stepping back and looking at the things that we're discussing here, trust, authority, narrative, these are fundamental means by which we make sense of and act within our world. When there's a failure on those fronts, everything else starts to be shaken.

I think you see this sort of thing when there's a betrayal of trust by authorities, and that can occur in all sorts of different areas. It can occur within a family, it can occur within a

church, it can occur within society. There are certain experts that people feel that they have betrayed our trust.

And we look to them for advice or counsel or insight. And they were proven to be quite wrong, or they were proven to be fraudulent, whatever it is. So there's trust and authority bound up together.

And if we're trying to act in just about any single way within our lives, there's trust bound into it, and authority bound into it. So you think about just driving over a bridge, you presume that there's some authority that's managing the weight load that that bridge can bear, and that that trustworthy is authority, that it's an authority that actually can exert power over the people who are building the bridge, and that there is some mechanism of trust by which the standards will be adhered to. And so you're doing all of that, within the background of your mind, you're not even thinking about it, it's all tacit.

And you have the same thing, I think, when you're eating food, you have some expectation that we live in a society of trust. And we can't manage the whole supply chain, we can't manage all the processes by which this food is made for us, if it's processed food, but we can eat it, we can use our various products that we have around the house without feeling that we're in incredible risk of some toxic reaction. And all of these things require a society of trust.

And in societies where there is low trust, where there aren't standards, where there aren't effective authorities, where people see themselves very much in opposition to each other, and there's not an underlying level of trust. Those sorts of basic activities that we devote almost no mental attention to, suddenly become matters of great concern, can you actually drink this water? Yeah, that's coming out of your tap. And that sort of question is one that people in various parts of the world have to worry about in ways that we don't, because we've had the privilege of society where there are effective authorities, high trust, but then there are levels where we see that trust being broken from one side or other.

And often from both sides, we see situations where there is a betrayal of trust standards have not been maintained, or there's been some exercise of authority that is clearly, or seems clearly contrary to the common good. And there are other situations where it's very hard to see what the purpose of this authority is. And so it becomes opaque, and people stop, stop trusting it.

It's one thing, when you're dealing with the standards by which a bridge is constructed, it's fairly clear. And when a bridge is breaking down, when there's a failure of your infrastructure, it's slightly more complicated when you're dealing with medication, for instance, yes. And so things like the opioid crisis have led to an extreme loss of trust in big pharma in the government regulation.

And in those sorts of areas, I think there is greater purchase for sort of distrust and suspicion to to come in. And that occurs in part because things aren't as clear cut. It's not as easy to have the sort of standards that you'd have in the area of bridge construction in the area of pharmaceuticals.

But it's also, there are maybe some stronger interests at play. And so those sorts of questions, I think, always entangled together, because knowledge depends in large part upon trust. If we do not have reliable authorities, it's very hard to know things.

A lot of the things that we think we know are on the basis of trusting the people who have told those things to us. I mean, you find this sort of thing when you talk to someone who's a flat earther. How would you actually argue against them without actually depending upon your trust of all these different facts that have been told to you by the scientific establishment and by other textbooks that you have read, etc.

So I think this is something Christians need to be very clear about. We have faith at the very heart of our understanding of knowledge. And that's not something that's exclusive to Christian faith.

This is something that's just standard within the way that we know anything. Yes, very much dependent upon trust, upon the people who keep their word about the functioning of trust in terms of a deeper commitment of truth. I think this is maybe one area where I'd be interested to hear your thoughts.

When we think about authorities being true, it's not just about them giving factually accurate advice. There's a sense you need to feel that they are concerned about you, that you're good at heart. And there's something about a good authority like a parent that you trust them with things that you don't know or can't verify, in part because you know that they have your best interests.

They have a track record of proving true. There's a sense of personal commitment there that allows for communication of truth to occur, which would never occur were there not that foundation of trust. And so it seems, unless you have some establishment of trust, knowledge breaks down.

Well, that's the complicated thing, right? I mean, I don't think it's particularly difficult unless you're just extremely self-absorbed. I don't think it's too difficult to see that there are very significant knowledge differentials in the world. There are all kinds of people who know so much more than I do.

But then the question becomes, are they using that differential for me or against me? I think that's often the thing that troubles people quite a lot. Is there a greater experience? Is that something that they're using for us or are they using it for them? And there's just kind of this, I've actually been helped quite a lot over the years by that

postmodern phrase, the hermeneutics of suspicion. And it's funny.

Well, it's not funny. It's actually tragic. When that really kind of gets, that worm kind of gets into your head, how much you can't sort of unsee that once you've seen it, and the trouble is it becomes sort of self-reinforcing because the more you wonder what's really going on, am I really being told the whole story? The more anything that then seems like it is offered as reassurance that yes, we're working for you becomes quite possibly just another layer of the conspiracy, another layer of the deception, another layer to be sort of torn back so you can see what's really going on.

So that at that point, even evidence that confirms what the authorities are saying is just further proof of how deep this malevolent project really goes. And so you find yourself sort of trapped almost in your own suspicion. And I do think that that's what I have seen a lot throughout, say, the COVID time has been it becomes difficult to even really talk about the facts of the case or what the evidence, which direction the evidence points, because there's this sense that it's all being, whatever evidence is being presented, it's all part of somebody's agenda.

And it's an interesting thing. I've reflected quite a lot on this as a pastor, because I think that at a very local level, that is a place where local authority figures like parents and pastors really need to minister spiritually to that hermeneutic. Because it, I mean, how, you know, I think we would both agree, the trouble with these sort of somewhat conspiratorial views of the world or this sense that knowledge is in the hands of power, it's not completely bogus.

I mean, it's not like in the history of the 20th century, for example, we have not seen knowledge used in the hands of power for all kinds of awful purposes. I mean, if you read George Orwell, you know, Tolkien, Lewis, et cetera, you know, Hannah Arendt and, you know, Simone Weil, and I mean, you just go on and on. I mean, these, they write in ways that really kind of make you think, wow, we need to be paying attention.

But I think that sometimes at smaller, in smaller local context, parents and pastors being two examples, there are, and also those with great knowledge, just those who are very knowledgeable in local communities can minister spiritually to that hermeneutic to help people begin to step back from their own doubts and begin to learn new ways of thinking that are not naive or gullible, but are wise. I mean, I've had to work and I'm not saying I've done a good job, but I've had to work so hard in the last two years to relate even to those who ultimately disagreed with me, and in some cases just parted fellowship with me, but as a pastor to minister to them in ways where I believe they still trust me, even if we just couldn't walk together anymore. I think that I was able to establish a certain level of real trust with them where they would still be able to have a conversation with me and not feel that I'm just part of the, I'm just complicit in this whole thing that's going on.

That's a little bit long-winded, I guess, but maybe that is a starting place to answer your question. Yes, I think we need to push against the idea that we should just trust authorities. Trust is, and belief, I think, again, as Christians, we need to be clear about this.

It's a responsible act. It's not just something that's passively accepting whatever is told to There is something responsible there. Part of it is actually being tractable to persuasion, so listening and hearing arguments out and actually being prepared to receive them, but trying to think as carefully as possible about the case that's being presented to you, because one of the things that I think about our submission to authority and the functioning of good authority is that good authority gives reasons.

It gives you a reason to act by obligation, but also communicates reasons that give you an ability to go along with those actions that have been laid upon you by obligation, willingly, to say, I'm not just doing this because I've been told to do it. I'm doing it because I know it is good, and I've been told to do it, and having been told to do it, I've actually looked into it a bit more, and I want to see why am I acting in this particular way. So ideally, if you're trying to be submissive to authority, that's one of the things that you're trying to do.

It doesn't mean you can always achieve it. Sometimes the reasons are bad reasons, but yet there is that concern to get to a point where you're not just having this external authority telling you what to do. There's that movement, the willing commitment of your own understanding that you concur with what's being told to you to do.

Can I ask a question about that? Certainly. If I could just break in real quick. So how would you counsel perhaps someone who doesn't want to just be sort of a lemming following the other lemmings, just doing what you're told dutifully, but also doesn't want, on the other hand, to fall into this, well, I'm going to cross-check everything that every authority tells me on Google, which you just... Actually, I wish more people understood.

That's actually not a particularly sound approach to knowledge, because sometimes you need to know a fair bit to even know what you need to know. But how do we walk that line of responsible responses to authorities and their directives, but not end up practically in that place where Ben and his internet connection will figure it all out? I mean, getting back to some of the issues of your water supply. I mean, if you really were paranoid about your water supply, wanting to check everything, you'd end up in a very bad place, because there'll be so many different unknowns that you'd have to look into.

And the more that you looked into it, the more you'd realize there are all sorts of different opinions out there. My local water authority is not an uncontroversial entity. There are all sorts of economic questions, all sorts of environmental questions, all sorts of infrastructural questions.

And there are rabbit holes like that all over the place, just about any area you look into, particularly as someone who doesn't have a sense of the wider lay of the land. And there, I think it's important to consider some of the ways in which these things can be framed as sort of difference between class interests. And as you say, there's something definitely true there.

There's definitely a sense in which I think COVID is a great example of this, where there are differences between the interests of various classes relative to the crisis. So if you're someone of the knowledge class, who's working in a sort of office job, who's maybe got ties to the academy, you will have different instincts that you bring to it, in part because, I mean, it feels different when you have a job that you can work from home, than when you're being prevented from doing your livelihood as a result. And there are far more pressures placed upon you from without.

There are also things where in most crises, you can have a sense of the crisis without some expert understanding of background in statistics or virology. Whereas if you're talking about something like COVID, you actually need quite a lot of scientific and mathematical background, and just to be able to process some of the information that's being given to you. And then that information, the more you look into it, the more you think, what standards are being followed here? What are the criteria for putting one person in this class rather than another? All these sorts of questions, each one of them can open out into 1000 more.

And you begin to realize there are very clearly class interests here, which leads certain people to be more open to certain positions than others. And so part of what you need to do, I think, if you're going to move beyond that instinctive distrust, is to establish connections, healthy connections between people of these different groups. And to recognize the importance of bonds of goodwill and trust that go both and mutual concern that go both ways.

Because if people see this distant knowledge class, a distant political class who are not invested in or who don't care about them, telling them what to do, that hermeneutic suspicion will very naturally kick in. And it can lead to conspiracy theories. But one of the things that conspiracy theories do, I think, it's like there's a black box.

And that black box is the class of experts and political authorities, etc. And there are certain inputs that happen. And then there are certain outputs.

And those outputs, just fairly universally seem to be bad for people of your class. And so you think, there's obviously that black box, there's a conspiracy here, there's an intention to actually go against my class. And there are ways to break down that conspiracy narrative, without missing the fact that those outputs are consistently negative, or fairly consistently negative for your class.

And there are class interests at play there. And so I think the sort of Marxist approach, which takes a very class emphasis is increasingly something you'll see in all quarters now, under different names, but people recognize that truth and power cannot be tidally separated from each other, because authority, and trust, and knowledge are all bound up together. And unless you have some way of actually tackling that and reducing some of those tensions, I think that's primarily through trust and love and mutual concern established across different classes.

And I think the church is one of the best places where this can be done. And it's going to be very hard for people who feel that they are the receiving end of knowledge that is very oppressive, and ends up restricting them and in ways that seem capricious and unclear and very contrary to their understanding, it will be very hard for them to accept that without jumping to suspicion. And that's not an entirely unreasonable move to make.

Yeah, there are reasons for suspicion and questions and a measure of distrust. Well, of course, it doesn't just stop with suspicion, because, you know, as you're pointing out, so if you're in one of those, let's say, kind of lower classes where you're being told things that you don't have the expertise to really analyze well, so you are in a dependent place, informationally, and decisions are being made based on this information. And this knowledge that are touching parts of your life, that really kind of go to the core of your life.

I'm about to lose my job and my pension. And I was two years away from retirement. Because of let's say these policies.

I mean, nobody just says, well, you know, black box, you know, I just have to roll with that. I mean, you know, you're talking about your livelihood, you're talking about your children's inheritance, you know, these things touch on a lot of anger that begins to erupt. And so, you know, one of the things I've just struggled with, I agree with you entirely, that there is a need for a reestablishment of goodwill.

And I think in the context of the church, we can actually work on that and must. It is somewhat more challenging to know how to minister to a saint who is suffering the effects of an edict, maybe a very necessary one that's come down that they don't understand, they fiercely disagree with. It is potentially going to change their life permanently and leave a sort of an incurable wound.

I mean, if you lose your pension 25 years into your career, that's irremediable, right? And they would look at me and say, well, you know, it's all fine and well to say that these ruling, more the ruling class, the knowledge class should be building goodwill with us, but the people in Albany or the people in Washington, they just don't care. And they're not going to care. And by the time anyone could get them to care, the crisis has already sort of come and gone and the damage is done.

So it's just, I've just become more aware as a pastor of the challenge of ministering spiritually to people to sort of navigate through something like that. So I, you know, I've just, I'm always very interested in, I agree with your statement of what the work needs to be, just how do we help people with that? And this sort of circles back to the sense of capture and the sense of urgency that I've often noticed in speaking with people is, you know, they will look at me and I can feel their frustration with what feels like an ivory tower conversation about how society ought to work. When they're in the teeth of how it's actually working at the time.

And I've just, you know, it's been a real learning curve for me and just knowing how to talk with God's people, people who trust in the Lord and not using trust in the Lord as sort of a, you know, a way of just glossing over the realities of what they're dealing with, but helping them to think about what it means to be, have a proper posture toward government authorities and toward knowledge authorities in the midst of tremendous personal loss. It's that has, that's been, I'm still learning. I'll just leave it like that.

I think this sort of conversation can seem like an ivory tower conversation and there's always the danger of it actually becoming that. I don't think it is. I just want to be clear about that, but yeah.

But I think part of what I would, the response to that is we need to establish a healthy dynamic. We're going to have to trust and we can't know all these things ourselves. And so we have to establish somehow a healthy dynamic and that approach of trust with, where we can establish ways in which we can hold our suspicions, we can have our distrust without comprehensive suspicion and distrust and resistance.

That I think is actually a platform upon which healthy resistance that can actually make a difference can take place. And that's one of the things that we're hoping to get to in this conversation, or maybe not this specific one, but next one, that we actually need some sort of healthy dynamic to go beyond the unhealthy dynamics that are being offered. So on the one hand, the unhealthy dynamic of just trust, the authorities know best.

And it's very clear that what the authorities are doing can be incredibly detrimental to people in these ways that impact upon some of the most important aspects of their lives, their family, their own bodies and their health, their livelihood, all these sorts of questions are obviously people are going to react very strongly to people that they distrust, forcing them to act in particular ways or imposing things upon them in those areas of their lives. And yet the problem remains, we have to have some healthy mechanism of trust in a situation like this, we need to arrive at knowledge. And so how do we do that? And on the other hand, to recognise what things lie within our power, and what things don't.

I mean, in many of these situations, it feels like we can be caught, like, old man shakes fist at cloud. I mean, there's not that much that we can do to change some of the things

that we're facing. And so the question is, how can we find purchase upon the situation to actually make changes that do make a difference.

And that dynamic of a healthy trust that is not mere trust, that establishes as many bonds of trust that we can, upon which actual healthy communication can occur. And it gives a context within which our areas of distrust and suspicion can be broken down to an appropriate size, and tackled in a more focused way. And that would be my concern.

Because I think that so often, what we have is a binary choice between mere trust or distrust. And neither of those are healthy. Yeah, a situation of radical suspicion will just end up with you being paranoid, because there's no way by knowing everything that will be enough for you to make informed decisions.

On the other hand, if you're just merely trusting authorities, you're being a bit naive, because they have their own interests, they have their interests as institutions and authorities and offices, etc. But also as the individuals operating within those, they are individuals with their own class, prejudices, loyalties, instincts, ideologies, and all these sorts of things. And part of what we need, I think, is a breaking down of the really big narratives into something a bit more complex and recognizing the gray areas where there should be a lot of healthy distrust.

And then how a measure of bounded distrust, as Scott Alexander has recently talked about, can be provided by a more careful sifting through of these, these claims that are being made. And once you've got some level of trust, you can actually build a relationship upon which some degree of protest, some degree of resistance, some degree of disobedience can occur without leading to a total collapse of the order of knowledge and the order of authority. And so that is, for me, what I want to aim towards a situation that recognizes also that you can have authorities that aren't necessarily malicious in ways that they are acting, but they are bringing very detrimental effects, which they're fairly oblivious to, where they're creating a dangerous environment where things can occur that are deeply oppressive, or they're laying the foundation for things that would be very dangerous for our civil liberties, whatever it is, and dealing with those in a way that does not presume malice on the part of those authorities.

Yes. But nor on the other hand, is naive and saying there's no malice on their part, these things aren't dangerous. What, what I think we need is that healthy, spreading out of trust, that establishing clear lines of trust, within which we can deal with our areas of distrust, suspicion, and our sense of concern, without that becoming just a generalized distrust or paranoia.

Yes, I profoundly agree with what you just laid out there. And I think that is the way forward. And I think we just needed a lot more thinking about it, because I've realized there, there is a difference between having, and I think we should have, intelligent questions about what we're being told, or what we're being commanded to do, and a

kind of skepticism about the whole thing.

You know, suspicion can become an acid that just eats through everything, where you just have now reached a place where there is, you have, in your own mind at least, you've delegitimized all of the knowledge authorities, and all of the ruling authorities, and what, I mean, that is actually the biblical definition of being a fool. That the hub of truth and authority has been moved from the status quo to your own mind. He who trusts in his own mind is a fool, right? So, you end up being in this place where the only person you can trust is yourself.

Like, that's sort of the end game of that kind of acid suspicion, where it's all lies, it's all power. You know, it's why deconstruction, the idea of postmodern deconstruction, it just, everything it meets it can deconstruct. And eventually... Although, on the other side of that, you do get a sort of credulity that is the flip side of that radical distrust.

Indeed. Like, yeah, there's a kind of simple mindedness, that kind of folly. And I, that's just so important what you just said.

I mean, I've been struck sometimes by people who follow this trail of suspicion and into some, you know, very strange conspiracy theories. There's a kind of credulity, gullibility about stories that now... And I want to say, on balance, if I had to believe those people you're listening to versus the people that supposedly are lying to us, at least the people lying to us have credentials, you know? Anyway, but that's a separate conversation. But back to this point about, like, responsible questions, intelligent questions, being thoughtful about things, but in a way that then enables you to be constructive and not just a revolutionary.

And I do think that two different forms of resistance flow out of these two postures of, you know, questioning versus suspicion, because I think the only end of radical suspicion can be revolution and rebellion. I mean, if it's all that rotten, then burn it down. And I think that's where things almost have to end up.

Whereas the more reformatory, reflective, judicious questioning is holding on to the good, even as it is asking some very hard questions about whether this is the right approach. It's able to hold on to the importance of this relationship, even as it's asking questions about that dynamics in the relationship. So my children, for example, there are times when they call me out on my sin as a dad.

They push back hard on how I'm speaking or acting, and I invite that. But they do it because the relationship is important, because they value the father-child relationship, you know, and I have to do the same for them, you know, kind of going the other way as an authority. And so it builds trust.

We know we can speak to one another, but if you're not holding on to the good of the

relationship, in other words, if our relationship with our civil order is not even a good we're holding on to anymore, it's just rotten to the core, let's destroy it all. We're just now in a very, very different place at the level of action. And you can't demand trust.

You have to earn trust. Trust has to be given, but it's something that is given on the basis of some... I mean, there is a duty, I think, to be the sort of people who are prepared to give trust. But that being prepared to give trust is not the same thing as just surrendering trust to anyone who demands it of you.

There's a sense in which there needs to be a number of things for people to prove themselves to be trustworthy. And that doesn't... they can be absolutely right. But I think this is one of the things that we can often forget.

There's one thing to be right. It's another thing to give people justification to act on the basis of your right judgments. And so what you need in many respects is a respect for their sound judgment.

And they need to have a sense that actually holding your position is an exercise of their own good judgment. And so there can be stepping stones of reasoning by which they can cross from their position to your position without having to take a leap across the abyss, without actually knowing where they're going to land. And so what we need to do very often is give people the means by which they can take those steps so that they are responsibly exercising trust.

And this is one of the things that I think, again, as Christians, we need to consider. This is... there are many ways in which we are trusting the message of the Gospels. We're trusting Christ.

We're trusting all sorts of different things as part of our faith. But that trust is not an irresponsible trust. It's not a trust that's just a blind trust.

It's a trust that's based upon proofs, a trust that's based upon proven character, a trust that's based upon sure witness. And when you put those things together, you see a healthy dynamic where you don't feel that something's being compelled or forced upon you. And when that is not existing as a healthy dynamic, I think, for instance, of the example of someone like King Saul, at a certain point, we tend to think of the tyrant as an extreme form of authority.

It's actually very weak authority. The tyrant lacks that dynamic of authority. And so they have to impose their will by force.

Whereas the person who's developed a healthy dynamic of trust, they barely need to say anything for people to follow them. They can set the tone by their behavior. They can set a model that people want to follow.

And in that respect, that's the sort of authority that we're looking for. And of course, we're always going to fall short, partly because there are some areas where we'll always struggle to convey all the reasons. As a parent, there'll be many situations where you have to say to your kids, I can't explain why now, trust me, and or maybe I'll explain to you one day when you're old enough to understand.

But for now, just do what I say. And there are times for that. But usually those things are contextualized by an extensive display of your concern for them over many years, and the experience of actually following your word and that leading to good places.

And when you've got that, you can make those strong commands without them being seen as cruel impositions or as things that elicit naturally this resistance of distrust. Does it ever amaze you that God himself rules us that way? I mean, I sometimes when I'm reading through the Bible, I'm just taken aback by how much God explains himself. If it was one authority, you would think it just say, this is it.

I say it, it's, you know, that's just how it is. And yet there is that invitation, come let us reason together. And God so often does not just tell us what's right, but explains why it's good.

And really even constantly appeals to our self-interest. It's just a, it's such a fatherly way of ruling. I would actually maybe qualify that a bit and say that I think this is a redemptive historical development.

So at the very beginning of redemptive history, a more legal period, and people are told what to do, do this, don't do that. And then the response is the Amen. And the Lord has said this, we will obey.

And yet there is as part of that the call to meditate upon this. And don't just take these commands, obey them, but meditate upon them, think about them, try and understand why they're good. And then moving towards that position that you see, for instance, in the Psalms, where there is no longer just this second person imperative, you must do this.

But there's this first person declaration of the goodness of God's command, commands that we or I delight in your truth, and I meditate upon your commandments. I'm wiser than all my teachers, because I meditate upon your law. And you see that again, in the wisdom literature, there's no longer just this word coming from without, but meditation and reflection upon the world, giving the ability to actually act with wisdom from reasons that have been internalized.

And then the New Covenant, I think we see this even further. And in the prophets, that word is internalized. And the prophet speaks from themselves with a word that's been placed upon their lips or written in their hearts.

And in the New Covenant, we have that as well. The law in the New Covenant is written upon our hearts were addressed by the Apostle Paul again and again with a reminder of why we are doing particular things. So he persuades he does not just command.

And that feature of scripture, I think that you bring out, does develop over redemptive history. And it's the same thing with any healthy authority, particularly when you're with more commands. And then you're moving from those commands quite organically towards a position where those have become internalized as reasons within the person who is formally just being commanded from without.

Well, and I was just that's just excellent. And I was just reflecting on how that ties back into something we spoke about in the last episode, which is perhaps that's why submission is an act of authority, even when you are under a ruling power, a ruling authority that is not giving reasons and is not ruling justly. This is very interesting as I'm just thinking about this.

So if the mature sonship as Paul describes it in the New Covenant is that there is this internalization of the good. I'm not doing things now only because they are commanded. I love these things.

Your law is within my heart by the Holy Spirit. Maybe that is why Paul can speak about submitting to the powers in the same chapter where he talks about love being the fulfillment of the law, that there is this internal commitment to the good, even if that which is being commanded is incoherent and unreasonable and unjust, because I'm going to be committed to the common good, even if the authorities and powers are not. I'm a son of God acting in his name, even in the context of tremendous injustice.

So I'm not just going to be a revolutionary meeting evil with evil, power with power. I'm not a Nietzschean. I'm a Christian, right? And that's an enormous difference.

And that then, as you were pointing out earlier about a proper skepticism, enables me then to speak truth, even to ruling authorities. There is a resistance here, but it's a resistance that is measured by love and measured by a common good. I think you see this with, we talked about David under Saul.

I think Abigail and her response to Nabal, her husband, you spoke about some of that. There's a pursuing the right and the good, and that is itself an act of resistance to evil authorities and their whatever agendas they're working out. And so it's not revolutionary rebellion.

It's a sort of radical assertion of good order against the perversion of that. I think at certain points, we see that sort of thing in the civil rights movement or the certain practice of civil disobedience can be a protest, protestation of the law against the sort of disorder of inappropriate authorities or authorities that are just breaking their own laws

or being capricious or being tyrannical. There is the ability of the person who's in that position of submission to actually argue for the law's best self, not just resisting the law in its current distorted guise, but actually arguing, maintaining the law in its best form.

That's yeah, that's exactly. And I think that's where trust in the Lord does matter, because it is trust in the Lord, trust in the fact that he has ordained this situation and is working in this situation. And so I'm ultimately putting my trust in him and remaining committed to his agenda, if I can put it that way, his goodness, his just, I'm committed to justice for God's sake, as a citizen of God's kingdom on earth.

And I'm confident in the triumph of goodness and justice and peace under the reign of Christ, which then enables me to continue to operate in very, very deficient, unjust, even oppressive contexts without ever joining in with, again, without trying to overcome evil with evil. And that is what Paul talks about in that very context, where he speaks about submitting to the powers and Romans. And I think also once we've got a clear sense of the good and are really pursuing that, we can actually be relieved from a lot of the sense of paranoia and fear and these other things that would otherwise afflict us in part, because we're not just taking the authority that we're opposed to as the foil for our understanding of everything.

Rather, we're taking a clear understanding of the good and trying to maintain that as much as possible. And the authority that's dysfunctioning, we can deal with that on the side without actually having it becoming our preoccupation, that everything is about attacking or resisting that authority. And we can recognise there are ways in which that authority is bound up within it is something of the good.

It's maintaining some sort of order, and we don't want to reject order, but we also want to reform the disorder that has crept into it and become entangled. So the only all-controlling narrative is the narrative of the Kingdom of God. That's the only all-consuming narrative.

That's the only narrative that fits the whole thing. And I agree with you. I think that's something I've begun to sort of watch for is, I don't mind people pondering possible narratives as long as they hold them somewhat tentatively, but when they become all-consuming and now everything in life must respond to this that is happening, I think the only thing that fits that description is the Kingdom of God.

That should be the thing that no matter where we are, what we're doing, that's the overarching reality in which we understand we're operating. And that helps us get back to something you said a So much of what's going on in the world, only God. It's just God's work.

It's God's concern, but He's given me some things to do, and I can do those with my whole heart, even in situations where I'm suffering terribly, but I still have real agency

because I serve the King. I'm never just helpless before injustice. I do think one of our problems there is just our dependence upon and the amount of time that we devote to mass and social media.

Oh my. Because those realms make sense in terms of big narratives. Many people talk about the narrative with a capital N, thinking about particular parts and narrative playing on one side or another.

And that's very important. But within those realms, it's very difficult to find some sort of unity of all this different information that's being thrown away. And also the social unity between different people with different interests, without trying to fit things all together in a big narrative.

And narratives work according to certain criteria. And it's not just the degree to which they're a fit for reality. There are certain criteria that we look for in narratives themselves.

So we want a narrative to have a sense of clear characters. We want heroes and villains. We want a sense of clear agency that we can exercise.

It's one of the reasons we don't have very good stories about pandemics, because pandemics just don't give us the narrative material in the same way as a war would. Because in a war, you have bad guys and you have good guys, you have heroes, and you have the ability to achieve a resolution. You have all these different things that you'd look for, for interesting, stimulating story.

Pandemic doesn't offer that. And so often we can try and force a narrative framework upon it in ways that just distort the reality. So when we're looking for a way of making sense of reality, it's not just finding something that fits, it's finding something that feels narratively satisfying to us.

That's often what we're looking for. And we're looking for something that gives us a shared narrative. And so there are lots of these big narratives.

I think you have it with the ideologies, the narrative of the patriarchy, or the narrative of white supremacy, or the narrative of liberalism, whatever it is, there are all these different narratives going around. And those narratives tend to distort and hide a lot more than they reveal. But they provide ways for people to figure their own experience into this common symbolic reality.

And then there will be certain events that occur that are symbolic flashpoints, within which we see one of the heads of that Hydra breach the surface of the waters, and we can all focus on that. And here, I think, it's going to be very difficult for people to act in a healthy way, without taking some step back from the news and from social media, and to actually think about what are the ways in which I can have a narrative that makes

sense of my own immediate life, recognizing also that there are ways in which the wider world is just chaotic, there are many different things at play. There's no tidy narrative that will bundle all these things together.

Yet, in the Christian faith, we do have a clear narrative that gives us a sense of the whole, but without helping us to understand every single part within it. It gives us a sense of the big picture. And within that, we can figure our own agency, without feeling on the one hand, and this is one of the things that I think the loss or the breakdown of a narrative, narrative collapse, which I think is an important issue within our time, that can lead people feeling paranoid, and paralyzed.

Yes. And in a situation where they're grappling for something else. And many people, they'll find this, I think, when they've experienced extreme betrayal, when they've been in a situation and they're moving away from the faith, for instance, or they're in a context where they've experienced a collapse of their world, let's say through serious illness, the loss of their job, the breakdown of their family, whatever it is, that narrative collapse is a sort of vacuum that invites other things to come in.

And the Christian faith is in many ways competing with mass media, competing with social media, and these other agencies that are offering narratives within which we make sense of our world and our place within it. Well, and there's sort of a perverse twist on that too, because on one hand, and one response to what you've just said would be that the gospel could bring such healing to those other really anxiety producing narratives or anxiety driven narratives that often come from places like, as you were pointing out, of trauma, or grasping for a narrative, because otherwise the world just feels completely out of control and broken. And you would think the gospel would bring a lot of healing to that, and it should.

But I have noticed there's a little bit of a perverse twist sometimes where certain readings of the Bible lead people to take the good guys and bad guys as they see it on the earthly scene, and now those are representatives of the good guys and bad guys on the cosmic scene. So this particular ruler is obviously with Jesus, and this ruler is obviously an agent of Satan, and it's actually almost that explicit sometimes. And so I think one of the things that maybe we as Christian ministers and leaders in local context can do is speak about something along the lines of that moment in Joshua where Joshua encounters the angel of the Lord, are you for us or our enemies? And the angel of the Lord essentially says, I come representing the Lord of hosts, and just showing people how the gospel relativizes all these earthly narratives and characters and actors.

And it's never as simple as there are the evil people and here are the good people. That line of good and evil runs through every human heart. There is goodness to be maintained even in the most corrupt people and institutions.

I think there's a way of showing how the gospel just cuts through all of the tidy binaries.

Otherwise you end up with the Bible almost being used to reinforce the binaries. And you find this I think throughout scripture where it does present the heroes in very unflattering light sometimes.

They're definitely warts and all. And what that does I think is enable us to trust and see goodness, but also to do that according to a measure. You're not actually putting all your weight upon any such figure.

And that is one of the things that I think is really healthy, that we have a wide network of highly distributed trust. And yet that trust does not put too much weight on anyone. And one of the dangers that I think people have is this highly consolidated trust where everything is focusing upon a small range of persons that are trusted implicitly.

And so often I think what we're seeing for instance in people leaving the faith, when that trust is betrayed there is a sort of switch that goes. And that switch of implicit trust in one Christian community or one religious leader or one figure who's a wise counsellor, whatever it is, once that switch goes they just turn to the other side and everything is a matter of distrust. And yet if we can recognize the feet play of our heroes, if we can recognize the limitations of any human figure, and if we can have broad networks where we're listening to many different voices alongside each other, and breaking some of our certainties down to a more moderate size, and modest size, I think we'll find that we are not caught up in these cycles of extreme distrust and suspicion to the same degree.

There's not this lurch to delegitimization the moment that we see something go wrong. Rather we're thinking, okay there's something amiss here, what are some of the ways that we can deal with this without throwing the baby out with the bathwater? That's excellent and I actually think that segues almost perfectly into what we want to talk about next which is okay then with that posture of sort of moderated, you know, intelligent questions, you know, certainly not being gullible and credulous, but also in no way whatsoever yielding to that just hermeneutics of suspicion that just eats through everything. Now we're ready to act.

Now we can think about what to do.