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Conversations in a Crisis: Part IX: The Experts and the Rulers (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've titled this series, *Conversations in a Crisis*, Alistair, and I don't think we could leave the conversations without exploring the science, to use the beloved expression, the realm of knowledge and how authority functions in the realm of knowledge, particularly technical knowledge, related to things like viruses and medicine and vaccines and so on. So, I wonder if you might tell me some of the things that you have observed in your context in the UK, and I can certainly offer some observations here about why, I mean you would think on one level that we would be glad to have experts who can tell us what's going on and how we ought to respond. I mean, I'm so glad I don't have to be an auto mechanic for my car and I'm glad I don't have to, I'm glad I can take my MacBook to the Apple store and have somebody else think about it.

I'm honestly glad if I have a serious life threatening disease or you know a limb that needs to be mended or a joint that needs to be replaced, we can go to the doctor and we're not having to do these things for ourselves, this is all wonderful. Why has there been so much reaction to quote unquote the science in the COVID situation, or have you not seen that so much in the UK, we've talked about the differences between maybe a bit more reactivity here in the States to authority in general than in your context but why has expertise been such a problem. I do think there's been a difference in the reactions in the UK and the US, and there's certainly been a lot less hostility towards the so called experts in the UK.

On the other hand, I think that there is a difference between the sort of expertise involved in fixing your car, and the sort of expertise that comes into play in situations where there are a great many unknowns, where certain key scientific questions are not settled, and where there are significant differences among people who are genuine experts. And so distinguishing between those sorts of cases I think is important. The other thing is that your mechanic, he's going to fix your car he's maybe going to charge you a bit too much for it, but he's not going to have quite as much of a potential impact upon your life.

As some of the experts that have made help to inform decisions over the last couple of years. So I think there are initially some differences that we need to take very much into account. The other thing is that your mechanic will often give you some sort of explanation, and he will be able to give you some degree of understanding of what needs to be fixed, why it's a problem, etc.

If you wanted to know, you could have an informed judgment about your car. The other thing is you have a choice. You can go to different mechanics and you can go to one who

will say that this part needs to be fixed, the other is maybe going to agree with him but say, there's a far cheaper way to deal with this problem than to go to this supplier, and that this mechanic is pointing you towards.

So there's a way to negotiate those questions of trust and expertise that we do not have the same degree in the case of many of the decisions concerning COVID. In large part because we do not enjoy the executive power to exercise decisions on the basis of the expert input. We've been subjected to an executive power that is taking certain experts opinions and judgments as more guiding than those of other experts.

They may be listening to those other experts, but the ones that are actually deciding the policies are a particular range of experts that maybe we disagree with. For those reasons, I think there are differences to be observed. There are questions that are raised in these sorts of contexts of dealing with experts that we might not have in some of the daily interactions that we might have with experts in a very specific field in our lives.

Well, I think you put your finger on something there that I very much see this creating the point of tension here in my context in the States, and that is in some of the examples that I just gave, I'm really the authority whom the expert is advising. Right. And I actually think that that is something that's come up quite a lot in the medical context.

It's one thing if a doctor is advising an expert a doctor is advising me on decisions to make with regard to my body but I'm still sort of comfortably in the position of making the decision. It's a radically different thing fundamentally different thing from experts are talking to an authority way up above me where I this authority doesn't maybe even know who I am, I don't necessarily feel a lot of personal connection to this authority, but that authority is making as you said decisions that are affecting my life and the lives of those I love. And so all of a sudden, I care about what that expert is saying because I care about what that authority is doing.

And I'm not that authority. And that authority can make my life very uncomfortable. And so I don't think it's really possible to talk about the quote unquote problem of the science, say in the COVID situation without really talking about the problem of executive power.

Right, that it's, it's a sense of, it's not even so much a distrust of expertise, it's distrust of that expertise wedded to that executive power that really creates the really panic or tremendous anger that you do see that's come out against figures such as Anthony Fauci or what have you. And there I think it is interesting. The differences between some of the ways that these things have played out in the US and UK, we do not have basis of policy to the same extent as someone like Anthony Fauci would be within the US.

And so it becomes a lot less, it's a lot less personalized. And there's also I think more generally a different relationship between medical authority in the UK and in the US. My

impression is that within the US, there's certainly you see this in terms of pharmaceutical adverts, we just don't have those same extent in the UK.

The idea of going to your doctor and asking to be prescribed a particular thing is not so common within the UK, there is a lot more of a sense of the doctors and authority, who is going to tell you what to do on the basis of their expertise, and less of a sense of you having agency over against them. Now, there are good and bad things about that. I think this is the sort of thing that maybe plays into the very different ways that something like the opioid crisis has played out in the US, we haven't had the same sort of thing in the UK.

And so the ways authorities relate to people, and the ways that people have agency over against experts, differ in these different contexts. Now, I think another thing to consider is the way in which, when you have an executive power, and you have experts, the executive power can settle prematurely debates between experts, where there are clear differences, and it can give the impression that the science is settled, or whatever the issue is, is settled in a way that's not necessarily settled, there are differences among people who genuinely have expertise. Now, that question of whether someone has genuine expertise is a critical one, I think, within our current context, because there are a lot of people who do not have the relevant expertise, or are behaving in a way that is antagonistic to the proper functioning of expertise.

And that, I think, is something that we need to get into what does it look like when expertise is working? Well, it's not necessarily a situation where everyone is on board with the same opinion. I think we know this in our different contexts. I mean, the sort of authority that you exercise has a lot more executive power to it, you have to make decisions for church policies on a range of different issues.

Whereas the sort of thing that I'm doing, I'm dealing in areas of expertise, but with very little executive power, and counselling other people, and maybe encouraging other people to take certain approaches to things in their personal church practice. But beyond that, I'm not exercising any official position or authority. When you have that relationship between executive power and experts, something different arises.

And I think that is one of the things that concerns people. And trying to think through the way that that relationship works, I think, is one of the challenges that we have. Because if we don't have executives actually willing to act upon expertise, then nothing ever gets done.

Actually, as an expert, you want to be listened to by people who have executive power to do things, to make decisions, to craft policies. But at the same time, there is something of the integrity of the operation of expertise that does push back against some of the operations of executive power that might prematurely settle things. Right.

Yeah, that's one of the downsides of, I think, a more typically American way of thinking about, say, medical expertise as advisory as opposed to authoritative. Now, whatever might be said about the value of that perspective, because I would have some questions and cautions about simply viewing medical experts as authorities. Just tell me what to do, doctor.

But the downside of viewing them as advisors is just that that when it comes to, say, public health crises, you don't just need advice, you need direction as a society. And so that executive piece is really important. And it does produce some backlash.

I mean, as a pastor, we had to, I and my fellow elders, we had to make decisions for the church. This is our policy. This is what we will require or not require.

And, you know, as long as things stayed in the realm of just exchanging opinions, it was one thing, but then when decisions were made, then people understandably reacted. And decisions have to be made. But they have to be made.

That's, that's the point is you can't just have advice when, especially when when matters of health risk are on the line. But you raise another thing that I do think we need to talk about and that is, I've called it sort of the layman's, the layman's dilemma. So how, how do you think as a non expert about a situation where apparent experts apparently disagree.

So, part of the challenge of being a lay person is you might not even necessarily be able to say who is or is not a true expert. I mean if someone is a doctor and has, let's say MD, after their name or some other. They clearly have a degree in something that's medical I don't even always understand different fields of medicine.

Let's say and how expertise in one field doesn't necessarily equate into expertise in another field so if I have a bunch of doctors going on YouTube and saying things about this or that medical issue. They appear to me to be experts in the sense that they have medical knowledge I clearly don't. So I'm not even in a good position to weigh the expertise of the experts, but then they start saying things and making claims and citing studies.

And let's say they're a minority opinion. It's pretty clear that they don't represent what the majority of experts are saying, or at least the experts that the executives are listening to are saying, but it even gets more complicated. Because the majority, especially if there are real health risks in play may very well try to suppress the minority view as disinformation, which to a lay person starts to look like we're not being told the whole story.

And I mean really I'm almost narrating to you, things I've heard from very frustrated people who are actually not trying to be difficult and just throw dust in the air these are

not revolutionaries but they, they get this, you know, they sort of start to smell this issue of like why are why is it not okay to even talk about what these other professional medical personnel are saying. And so it creates this impression of, well you can see how this turns into conspiracy theories and so on and so I think that I think that it does get complicated for people who really don't know, and openly acknowledge they don't know enough to even weigh all of this, but it looks kind of fishy. It definitely does.

And one of the starting points for me has just been thinking about the ways that things operate among experts within fields where I do actually have expertise. Yes. And in that sort of situation, whenever someone said experts differ on this issue feel like tearing your hair out because yes experts differ but that difference has a shape to it.

And first of all, not experts differ does not mean that everything is up for grabs. Also, it means that when experts differ, often the vast majority fit into a certain range of opinion, and then there are some just weird cranks out there who hold their positions in terms of their whole positions that are bound up with other positions that most people when they actually start to know they clearly reject them they don't find their positions persuasive. And so the mere existence of a plurality of positions among experts is not sufficient argument one way or another.

The other thing is that experts usually recognize each other. And so an expert might differ with another expert but they'll recognize genuine expertise. And that, for me, is one good sign that you're looking for when you're talking with someone who is proclaiming to be an expert and won't recognize the expertise of people who disagree with them.

And there's probably a problem there. And so, a context in which people have expertise but also have known disagreements among themselves, where those differences can be knocked down to size. These are the things that are under debate.

These are the things that are not under debate. And these are the things where there is a broad range of consensus. These are the issues where really there is no agreement whatsoever.

And these are the things in between. And often I think what you find is the crank is someone who just takes up a position over against all the expertise, all the experts, the whole institution, etc. It's all about power, it's all about misinformation, it's all about control.

And what you generally find is they are putting their fingers on certain things that are genuine problems. None of these contexts are without some sort of pollution of power. I mean, the idea of power and knowledge and their relationship is one that has long been an issue of discussion on the left, and I think it's increasingly been an issue of discussion on the right over the recent last decade or so.

And there's something very true that information and truth are always bound up with power. There are ways in which governments can settle what is the science, and even within scientific discourse, it's settled very much by institutional powers. And I think that's a very important point.

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And I think that's a very important point. And sometimes in a very specific niche where most of us don't know much of anything about this, but they've, this person has spent decades. But often things are presented as truth.

With this sort of semi divine ring to it, like this is the truth. Well, the difficulty of course once you frame something as this is the truth. Is that anyone who opposes that is an enemy of truth.

And so you've sort of got this politically charged thing going on now. And I guess, for me in a perfect world. I would love to see those who are in the majority in their expert opinion, being able to say things such as this is our.

This is what we understand the facts to be based on this research and these are our informed opinions about that and these are our proposals about what policies might flow, based on our opinion, although that's for the executive to decide. But we also understand that there are those who share a different view of the facts and or have a different opinion of how to read the facts. And while we disagree with them.

We don't want to be seen as we, we are, we are. We are open to conversation, at least about some of the underlying issues they're putting their finger on now let me move over to my realm of more theological stuff like I, one of the things that makes me kind of twitch as a pastor is when someone approaches me with a Google search they've done on some theological issue and they've you know they found these experts, and I know these. Well, I'll be charitable.

But it is helpful in those conversations for me to say, I don't agree at all with the conclusion or maybe even the reasoning. But it's not that necessarily the question that's being asked is totally wrong, or that there's not cause for concern like in the vaccine context. I think it would have been helpful for certain experts to simply say, there are good reasons to ask questions about the safety of vaccines, and we do need to, we do need to thoroughly research the question of vaccine safety and those who are have questions about this it's not insane to have a question.

But we also need to have some basis for resolving those questions and acting on what we resolved because at the end of the day public policy has to be established. But it'd be helpful to hear experts say things like that that that don't seem as if they're just shutting down conversation and obviously on the minority side will be hugely helpful. It's been discouraging to me Alistair to hear.

Sometimes minority views that I might even have some sympathy with but they are stated in such an adversarial posture toward the majority. You know they are often framed in terms of, we are being suppressed. You know there's this agenda.

And, and it's all about power and money and so on and I just think that that is a, that is, if you're going to be a minority be responsible minority. I'm not saying no one has done this but sometimes I've just heard things from a from a minority camp that just are so you can understand people's anger I guess at some level but it doesn't create conversation. It actually creates an impression of kind of being wacky and even if the question you're asking has some merit.

And then down below for all of us who have to kind of sort all this out I think just a recognition that experts are always stating opinions, but learning as you said how to

weigh the how to weigh those opinions patiently and charitably and understand that at the end of these conversations policies still have to be enacted. And I might disagree with a policy, I might even at some point, find it necessary in my own mind to resist that policy and then humbly accept the consequences of that, but at least understand that this process of forming expertise and and and an expert opinion is a is a process that requires enormous work, respect those who have put in the work and and don't make everything about power and I think that positions us to at least responsibly kind of process things that we don't don't know much about. But at least understanding that that expertise.

We need to not delegitimize expertise, even if the way it works out in a particular context seems to us questionable or even suspect I hope that makes sense. Yeah, it does. I think, often the way it appears suspect to us is because we do not understand its operations.

Yes. And so I imagine that governments are hearing a lot of things that are not communicated to the public in these deliberations about their policies. And we are not actually in a position to make the policies ourselves.

That's not something that we're responsible for. And so it's very easy to, from a distance, judge what they're saying and when you've experienced people judging your own community and the way that it handles certain issues without knowledge of, for instance, I think most of us have had the experience of, for instance, discipline cases within local churches. Yes, where people outside are judging about matters they just do not know all the facts.

And if they were to know all the facts, their judgments would be very different. And I think I feel the same way about many of these questions of expertise, we do not have all the facts. But then there are also situations where we can pick apart different aspects.

First of all, there are the facts, as you say, there are the opinions, there are the policies that are suggested. There are also underlying values. And many of the things that have made these debates complicated are the differences of underlying values.

And so it would be the way, for instance, we regard the threat of death and sickness, the way that we think about togetherness versus individuality. And those sorts of questions, I think, also need to be included when we're thinking about expertise and that relationship between expertise and executive power. That's something that appears on many different levels that can occur on an individual level, for instance, as your advice concerning fixing some thing within your house, let's say you have a problem with one of your walls, and it needs to have some sort of treatment, you'll get in a number of experts, they'll quote you a number of different prices, they'll say what they think needs to be done.

Others will have far more extensive suggestions about measures that need to be taken. Some will have the opinion, you could actually leave it as it is for a few years and it will be okay. Now, you're dealing with a number of different positions, you're weighing them up, and ultimately you have the executive decision, what is going to be done.

In other situations, we have church leaders making those decisions, in others, governments and other institutional authorities. And it seems to me that that relationship between executive power and expert advice and counsel is something that the scripture actually talks a lot about. And so the relationship between the wise person and counsellors is one where the wise person is not often in the position of the expert.

The wise person is the non-expert, listening to counsellors and weighing up their positions in order to take action. So it seems to me that thought about that way, we can learn a lot from things like the Book of Proverbs about how we relate to experts and some of the dysfunctional ways. So, for instance, it's very easy to want to be flattered, to be told the things that we want to hear, and to be far more receptive to the opinions of experts that will line up with our preconceptions, with our preferences, whatever it is.

It's also very easy to listen to the first case that comes to us. And that can be a number of different, whatever that case can come from. It can come from the side that's opposed to the orthodox side.

So it could be the position is the orthodox sides, whatever it is. It's very easy to listen to the first case and just take that on board. But truth often is illuminated through searching discussion.

And there is a way in which, as we receive a multitude of counsellors and weigh up their positions over against each other and bring them in, sort of curate conversations between them, truth emerges in a new way. And often you'll find that they, as they're challenged by each other, they clarify and they qualify. And you end up with a much more honed position at the end, even if they don't completely align.

And so curating those sorts of conversations and interactions, I think it's important. Can I interject something quickly there? Definitely. Could I just interject something quickly because I want to hear the rest of what you're about to say, but I just want to underscore what you just said.

I do think that this is one of the reasons why siloed thinking, right? I have certain people I read, I have a certain, I have only so many counsellors I listen to all of whom kind of speak in a similar mode. And this is part of why that's ultimately so unprofitable and even really destructive is because, like I found throughout the COVID times that listening to friends and thinkers across quite a spectrum kept me from going to extremes that honestly I was inclined to go to. So I just wanted to underscore that kind of pastorally before you move on with your reflections.

That's huge. I think the other thing is time. These things take time and the wise person needs to be patient and allow these things to work out.

Now that presents particular challenges in a crisis situation where you need to take action immediately. And that I think has been one of the challenges that we faced as often the initial impressions that were given by the science were later. I mean, science was trying to catch up with the reality.

And there were many different impressions. And many of those in retrospect were quite badly off the mark. And I think we've seen that throughout the crisis.

So in these sorts of situations, the counsel that we get in a book like Proverbs is not necessarily about how to be an expert. It's how to be someone who is receptive and receptive to experts, but receptive in a responsible way. So you're not just taking whatever the experts say.

You're able to bring experts into conversation with each other. You're able to form measured judgments. You're able to, for instance, weigh the amount of trust that you're going to put upon someone.

You can distribute your trust. These are things that I think we've struggled to do because people think in terms of a binary of trust. Do you trust or do you not trust? And often I think that expert conversation can be something that causes us to measure our trust.

I trust this person on their grasp of most of the facts. I don't necessarily trust their values, the ways that they will arrive at their opinions to the extent that they are informed by those untrustworthy values. I will also distrust them.

But yet the extent to which they are operating on the basis of the facts that they hold, I trust their research. They're rigorous in this respect. Or we can think about the way in which people have motives and think about the way those motives inform their judgment or some of the ways in which they're facing particular pressures to arrive at certain viewpoints because there's a social consensus in their context.

Whatever it is, I think that allows us to measure our trust without necessarily just putting all of our trust upon people or taking it all away from people. Yeah, I read something recently where someone said, we tend to think the only two responses to experts are those of the infant and those of the adolescent. It's either this infantile, everything you say, I take it, or it's this adolescent, you know, challenge everything.

And what you're saying is wisdom is neither of those. I was actually thinking as you were speaking about something I read in Victor Lee Austin's book, *Up With Authority*. He says, it's impossible to ask the question of truth without a continuing submission to authority.

But conversely, it's impossible to submit to authority without asking the question of

truth, which I think is what you're saying about wisdom. It's prudence. That.

And it's interesting to me Alistair that in Proverbs, it's the prudence of the king so often the counselor is speaking to a king. One of the things I've also said to people through the COVID time is, I don't think we believe in representative prudence, at least here in the States. It's not your prudence as a private citizen that ultimately is what matters, although you do need to have prudence, because you will need to respond to policies and think about policies like you're describing.

But someone also has to act prudently for us. Right, like we elected these executives. It's their prudence informed by expertise that we're actually called to submit to even if we don't necessarily think they're acting prudently.

That's what representative prudence means. I think that leads to one of the aspects that is particularly challenging to consider within a more democratic context when we're dealing with the situation of the Old Testament, for instance, you don't necessarily have any say in who David appoints as his counselors, you don't necessarily, you don't elect David, you support David, but you don't necessarily have much say in the fact that he is your king. We actually elect our authorities, and we have some measure of influence over the ways that their advisors and counselors are chosen.

How should we handle that? I mean, how can we be none experts, but also choose our executive powers? That is such a good question. I should add, this is not necessarily my own question. This is one that was raised by a listener.

Well, I think that, I mean the most obvious answer is, you should know enough to know whom you can responsibly vote for. I mean there's a certain amount of background work you need to do, you know, do I trust this person's judgment, do I trust their values, etc, etc. Once people are elected into a position of authority, I mean, look, here in the States, we have a long standing tradition of public protest.

And I don't know, I think that that has a place. I just, I worry, I worry about that impulse of protest in a time when I think there are less and less, there are fewer and fewer safeguards on the ways that protest is appropriately expressed. It is one thing to speak.

I publicly disagree with this official and what they have just enacted. But my word, things escalate so quickly beyond that, to open calls for the delegitimization of maybe not even a particular ruler but their whole office. You know, you hear the sorts of things recently said in the light of this leak from the Supreme Court about the Roe v. Wade decision.

You know, you start to hear stuff along the lines of if this is what a constitution can produce then away with the constitution and that's an extreme statement but that's in the air now in a way it wasn't maybe 20 years ago and so... Everyone likes government when it supports their judgments and then as soon as it goes against them. Well, and so

if you know if your response when it goes against you is simply to say, I'm willing to register public disagreement as a matter of speech, then I would say you look that's probably just part of democratic society but if you're willing to stage open rebellious disobedience, and or even potentially start talking about overthrowing. If it is really all about power and you feel you must meet power with power then we're beyond democratic dissent to something else and I'm, you know, from our conversations I'm more worried about that, by far, in the last five or six years than I was 10-20 years ago and so I still think there's a place for verbal dissent and that being a kind of resistance but... So let me ask in relation to this.

One of the things that I think sometimes justifies this very strong, I disagree, therefore kind of all bets are off, almost kind of rhetoric, is that we are now 100 years into a... We've observed things in regimes and we have had quite a lot of literature reflecting on this, a really worrisome wedding of totalitarian power to quote unquote science. Right, I mean, you read Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, you read Huxley, you know, you read Simone de Beauvoir, you read Hannah Arendt, you read, you know, George Orwell, etc. I mean it's not like we don't have these even fictional characterizations of this kind of thing where totalitarian powers will use science and I think what's one of the things that I've heard a lot in the last couple of years is that it's happening again, and people are asleep.

So, how do we appropriately distinguish our situation from those kind of situations, without opening ourselves to the charge that see you're just among the duped? Because I do think, Alistair, that plays into the question you're asking about just disagreeing with authorities and the experts who inform those authorities. I do think there's this kind of visceral fear now that big time totalitarian stuff, like of the 20th century variety is raising its head again and we don't have time for the philosophical niceties of, you know, democratic dissent. We need to get the ax to the root of that tree.

I mean, do you have thoughts on just how to, I don't mean this disparagingly, but really kind of talk people off that ledge? Yeah. Well, first of all, I would say that those concerns, I'm pleased that there are people with those concerns, because I do think that we play with some very dangerous forces. That doesn't mean that we were dealing in dangerous areas here.

So, for instance, when you're dealing with great state power, that is something that we should treat with respect and care and caution. Likewise, when we're dealing with a situation of a pandemic virus, we are dealing with something very dangerous. And so we must act with an appropriate care and caution.

And so the people who talk about bio power and biopolitics, for instance, I don't want to just dismiss their concerns. Those concerns, I think, for instance, if you look at China right now, the ways that they're handling COVID seem to me to be very much characterized by a sort of biopolitics and control of people's bodies and other things like

that. Exactly.

That is deeply troubling. And I think we should be concerned about that. I think also people are concerned about something like a vaccine in ways that they are not necessarily about a virus for a reason.

You can think about the way that David responds to the question of the Lord when after the census, the Lord says, how would you like to be punished for this? And he said, I'd rather fall into the hand of the Lord than my enemies. And so, the fact that we might prefer a sort of natural disaster than falling into the hand of the government, which we don't necessarily trust. Now, that's something that I can understand people feeling.

What I think we need is a measured fear. We have these fears. And the important thing is to hold other fears alongside those and not just act in terms of an absolute aversion.

And I think this is one of the concerns that I've had throughout, and I think we've discussed already. The way in which fear, which is legitimate, can easily become a sort of totalizing aversion that leads us to fall into all sorts of other problems. So, the person who's paranoid about the virus can easily fall into extreme government responses to that.

And on the other hand, people who are paranoid about government authority can easily fall into all sorts of other problems and not actually taking the virus seriously and trying to discount its severity simply because it seems to push in the other direction. And so, when people have been talking about the vaccine, I think they are recognizing a genuine danger that can attend such measures. Medicalizing, testing, measuring, managing people's bodies as part of a larger population.

These are medical measures that are quite different from the personalized medicine that we're used to when we go to our general practitioner. These are measures that can often come with degrees of social control, control upon people's movement, access to services, the ways in which people are viewed as members of the polity. And that's been a troubling thing, the way in which people have often demonized people who have different perspectives on these issues.

Now, I can understand why people feel very strongly about it, but we need to be careful on those fronts. So, first of all, don't deny the legitimate fears. So, recognize those fears, but also put those fears in proportion and make clearer the measure of the threats that we're facing, how we can take measures to guard ourselves against those going to dangerous places.

But also, recognizing we can't avoid these sorts of things. We are dealing in a world where there are risks. If we want to avoid certain risks completely, we'll end up in a very unhealthy position.

If you want to avoid all exposure to pathogens and anything that might affect you, you're going to live a very unhealthy life. You're going to cocoon yourself away from society. On the other hand, if you're going to throw yourself into certain situations of danger, you're going to live an unhealthy life.

You might end up in an unhealthy position too, with serious bodily injury. So, putting fears in a measured degree, and then also trying to increase people's range of exposure to considerations. Because it's very easy when you're so focused upon one issue to put aside everything that might push against that, and every countervailing opinion, but every countervailing consideration too.

And here I think it's helpful to consider some of the ways in which we are to choose good leaders. And we're choosing good leaders, not necessarily on the basis of their opinions, but on the ways that they come to judgments, their processes of deliberation. And so if you want a good leader, you want someone with a cool head, who's not just going to react impulsively to every situation.

You want someone who's going to listen to wise counsel, a wise counsel that may be critical of them, that's not just going to flatter them. You want someone who's going to be decisive, able to take judgment, make a judgment in a situation where they do not yet have all the facts, but a decision nonetheless needs to be made, and they will make things on the balance of the evidence. You want someone who's not stubborn or too proud to change direction or to change their mind when they found out that the course they've taken is wrong.

All of these things are matters that exist apart from their actual knowledge. It's the processes of wisdom by which they execute judgment. And we need to execute judgment, we need to follow that sort of thing ourselves.

But this is especially important for those who are the lead decision makers, the executive powers that we elect. And so when we cast a vote, we're exercising a sort of executive power on a small level. We're taking in all these considerations, what we have heard about these candidates, what voices are they listening to? What are the ways that they arrive at their opinions? What are some of their deepest values that they hold that guide their opinions and their judgments and policies? And what are their readings of the facts? All these sorts of things we take on board, and then we make our executive action of actually casting a vote for or against them.

And we're hoping that in their judgment, they will show these virtues that we see in somewhere like the Book of Proverbs. And then I think if they are doing that well, often they will be able to communicate with people who differ with them. Precisely because they're taking on board their considerations.

They've not dismissed in their attempt, for instance, to have a good policy on vaccines.

They've not rejected or dismissed the concern of people who are worried about biopolitics. They are weighing that very seriously, and they're trying to take measures to address that.

And so they can at least allay some of the fears. Now, if they're just focusing upon one particular danger and not considering everything else, they will generally be poor to laying those fears because they've never actually weighed them. They've not factored into their own considerations.

Yeah, that is just excellent. And all I would say is, God give us such leaders. Because that would so change the tone of the public conversations about all of this on both sides, I think.

And just backing up one point to your comments about fear. This is something I came back to personally and as a pastor many times to the last couple of years. And it was a great comfort.

Something about faith and then something about love. It is not a theological abstraction that amid the wheels turning in executive agency and in fields of expertise, we truly entrust ourselves to the Lord. I mean, I said a number of times to people, for example, people who might have had concerns about getting the vaccine.

Maybe they were just unsure there had been adequate testing, let's just say. And I just had to say to them, as I would say to people who are very, very fearful about the virus, who are like vaccinating and boosting and triple masking and just clutching at anything that could protect them, I just had to bring myself and others back again and again to the fact that as we try to make prudent decisions, we make our decision and commit ourselves to the Lord. If you triple mask and vaccine and boost and you're set, your life is still in God's hands.

And if you decide you're not going to get this vaccine, your life is in God's hands. And if that means you lose your job, your, your life is in God's hands. And if you get the vaccine, even though you have questions about it, your life is in God's hands.

Right, I mean, and I just think that enables us to weigh things, make decisions without being belligerent or reactive and then ultimately recognize the Lord is my shepherd. And what that can lead to then, because our fear, which there are legitimate fears but those fears are tempered by by faith that also leads to a certain posture of love toward toward one another because it enables you just to be gentle with other people's fears. I had to be careful.

I'm still learning this as a pastor to be tender toward even fears that struck me as extremely powerful. And extreme. It's not easy to process fear.

And as you pointed out it's it's it's hard when you know be nice if all of these scientific

and policy and value questions could have been sorted out in advance the pandemic but something is upon you and things are happening and you're just caught up in it and it's affecting your life and you don't. It can just feel almost out of control at times. And it is very very helpful, I think in Christian communities for people to have a sense that with my brothers and sisters in Christ, at least, even if we have very strong opinions that differ, even in a polarized way, and we are passionate about these issues in our polarization that there will continue to be a posture of respect and kindness and tenderness, and just in a way kind of validating the fact that there's a lot to be afraid of here and yet because we trust in the Lord we can be gracious to each other.

And I did see that play out in some tremendous ways. Over these two years, just really beautiful expressions of the body of Christ, living as a body. Despite principle disagreement.

And it was encouraging to me. Derek, it seems to me that just as you're not going to cause a situation to become cooler by telling people to calm down. You're not actually going to.

You're not going to improve things if you constantly dismiss people's fears, and if you do not show love towards them. And I think this has been one of the challenges throughout where people feel that they're being told this is for your own good by people who clearly do not seem to be that concerned about their good. That sort of hostile paternalism does not, does not lead to any sort of healthy result.

And so, if we have a love for each other, if we have a genuine weighing of people's concerns, and can talk through these things from a posture of actually taking them seriously. I think that is absolutely necessary. We're never going to change people's mind or win people over from that position of hostile paternalism.

I think this is one of the things that can also help where we do not have a situation of trust where we see people who are hostile to us but nonetheless telling us things to do. We will still have to arrive at judgments in those sorts of situations. And often, we can do that by a sort of careful reading of the ways that they're acting.

And this is one of the things that we hope we don't get pushed back onto. But in that sort of situation, how are they treating the people that they love? I think, for instance, if people are getting their kids to get vaccinated, they probably are being truthful about their belief that it does not have any sort of great danger, certainly when compared to the virus. Now, those sorts of considerations are ones that ideally, you'd want to know that they care about you.

But I think often, we can doubt those sorts of things. But we know on the basis of their action that they really believe certain things and they have expertise that might back up that knowledge. And on the basis of their actions and the ways that they treat people

that they clearly care about, we can arrive at judgments that don't necessarily depend upon what they're saying towards us, which in other contexts has proven to be untrustworthy.

And so I find myself often trying to consider what people believe on the basis of those sorts of judgments, which are not necessarily being worked out in any great detail, but you have an impression of what's motivating people, what they truly believe. And in many of our debates, it seems to me that there is an inability to understand what motivates people who differ, which leads to exaggerated fears, which then leads to some of the hostility and the tensions that we experience. So I've thought about this a lot in the last couple of days with the reaction to the leaked news from the Supreme Court.

So many of the reactions to that news are based upon this notion that the right just wants to control women's bodies. That all of this is about this hostility towards women and this attempt to squeeze them out of society, to hold them down, suppress them, and to control every aspect of their sexuality. And that is not the case.

Now, there may be ways that people on the right are engaged in some sort of push that will limit women in various ways, and that can be considered and should be considered. But the fears that people bring to those sorts of debates are so exaggerated and so disconnected from the reality that the hysterics about the policies begin to make a bit more sense when you realize they're working with those fears. And so how much you go about allaying those fears, I think, is a key question.

And first of all, it will involve an expression of love and concern that you take on board their considerations, you take on board their fears, and then work through those. You don't just dismiss those, nor do you purely frame things in terms of the hostilities that will occur in antagonistic debates about policy, which there always will be, but you don't allow that to frame everything. And so I think, for instance, in debates about abortion, we should give a lot more prominence to crisis pregnancy centers and the work that people are doing on the ground to just help people in situations of crisis, help women in situations of crisis, to be there, to come alongside them, not to just oppose a certain set of policies that have become associated with them.

And there, I think, we really failed in many of the debates around COVID, because it's just not, there's not been that demonstration of care and concern and love. And as a result, we're thrown back upon suspicions and readings of people's actions and judgments that are far more limited in the resources that they can work with, because there just is not that basis of fundamental trust that there should be for healthy deliberation. Well, and it's interesting how these things begin to create kind of an escalation back and forth because, so for example, if I am not hearing you with some sensitivity to what fears you're working with, and to what judgments you might have made about me that are exaggerating those fears, and I'm just hearing you speaking

kind of at me.

And then I'm forming judgments about the fact that you don't care about me. You just want to railroad me. Your side wants to control my side, because that's the other side of this right, I remember, I had the chance to receive some anger management help in my 20s, and one of the things that my counselor said to me that I will never forget is he said if you really think about anger.

It's always because of a judgment you've made about the other person's motives so for example if I'm walking on the streets of New York City and someone jostles me I don't think anything of it. I figured this just happens in a crowd. But if my child or my wife walks past me and I get an elbow.

It can be the exact same physical experience. But the impression in my mind that you probably meant to do that or you were just not thinking about my being here and you're, and you start to read into motives, as you're saying, that's, that's where the sense of injustice now comes in. And so much of what I've observed and I've felt at times over the last couple of years is that sense of these people don't care about me.

They don't care about us. And once that gets playing back and forth. You know you just get these rhetorical firestorms of cross accusation and I actually think, from a Christian standpoint, perhaps our Lord cares as a matter of Christian formation more about us learning these relational matters in the body of Christ, then where we land on our decisions with respect to the public policies, you know those things matter.

But I've realized how we treat each other with respect to a virus is so much more than whether I wear a mask, you know I mean I made principal decisions to care, care for my neighbor through taking certain precautionary measures and some of that was just obedience to government mandates. But underneath that was this whole other thing of how am I building my Christian relationships through all of this. Does the person who disagrees with me feel heard, especially by me as a pastor.

Do they feel that in the church now they're these top down things being just imposed without being heard without, you know, fear of being weighed. So that what's going on in the culture is now just, you know, sort of being replicated in the church and I think that those are matters deeply important matters of Christian formation. And we can be thankful to the Lord that the pandemic brought those out.

And I think we have seen that we need to learn those lessons in the body of Christ. It's also very easy to focus upon government and we've been doing that within these discussions and to neglect the degree to which government is acting very much as a representative of what people actually want and their concerns. And there are so many people who feel deeply hurt by what the government has done, but also by the resistance of people to the government because they think the government really needs

to do this.

Yes. And so those concerns on both sides are not necessarily ones just to be channeled in a relationship with government. We need to consider our relationship to our neighbor and the way in which that's playing out within churches, I think, gives a far clearer perspective, I think, some of the things that are needing to be dealt with here, where we don't have the same degree of authority in church government as you would have in national government in setting policies.

The ways that we negotiate those sorts of relationships, I think, really is telling about how we regard our neighbor more generally. Can we love across these sorts of divides? And that concern to actually perspective take to consider people's fears and to, I think, the process of steel manning, I think we've discussed this already, is a very important one to take people's fears, concerns, take their arguments and put them in their strongest possible form and weigh them in that form. That doesn't mean that we have to voice those ourselves, but we should at least have them within our heads.

We should try and understand their position in its most articulate and rigorous form, even when it's something that we might strongly and fiercely oppose. So, for instance, having a discussion last night, trying to get into the mind of what is it that causes people to be so strongly in favor of abortion? Now, it's clearly a position that I'm very firmly opposed to, and it's not one I'm going to compromise on. But yet I want to understand what makes people take on this issue and where it might be possible to find common ground, where it might be possible to show a certain sharing of their concerns.

Where I might be able to allay certain fears, where it might be something that I'm doing that is causing them to fear. In all these sorts of situations, I think there is a benefit to be found in rigorous interaction and conversation. I think I've mentioned also the way that O'Donovan talks about this, the way that the sorts of conversations that we have don't necessarily have to yield agreement.

They can often yield a deeper understanding of each other, a cooling of the antagonisms, and a breaking of the differences down to size. But to do that, we need to have a healthy form of conversation, one in which we're truly communicating our concerns, the inner posture of love towards each other, and hospitality and reception of other people's concerns, weighing those up. And then at the end of that, we will often find that the differences will be retained.

We still have different policies we're going to adopt, but those will have taken a lot more consideration of the things that cause people to react against them, that stoke their fear. And once that's done, I think we'll find they are more receptive to us. And that failure, I think, of love has been the most telling aspect of all of the debates and other things we've experienced over the last few years.

And that posture, I think you can see the same sorts of things in a marriage that's about to break down. There's a posture of despising the other person, a posture of fundamental hostility or disgust. That once that exists, it's very hard to recover things.

And it's that that we've encountered, I think, in various aspects of our society over the last few years. But all sides, that absolute hostility, disgust, and disregard, that we need somehow to overcome that. And the first place to start is, as you say, in the body of Christ, where we do have these different positions represented.

And we need to, first of all, work at understanding each other and recognizing each other. I think that is one of the most fundamental tasks that we are given as Christians, to recognize and to receive each other in Christ as we have been received by Christ. And once that is done, I think we'll find many of these other debates within the wider culture a lot less challenging, because we've already received people with these concerns within the body of Christ itself.

I so very much agree with that. And I think what you're describing is really just politics in the more classical sense. It's just friendship.

It's neighborliness that can persist through disagreement, as opposed to a politics which is just deteriorating into a state of war. So, amen. And I do think that the body of Christ must take up that challenge in our time.

That's key.