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Doctrine and Life (with Rev Benjamin Miller)

May 12, 2021



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My friend Rev Benjamin Miller, a pastor from Long Island, joined me for a discussion of the relationship between doctrine and life.

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Transcript

Welcome. I'm joined today by my good friend, the Reverend Benjamin Miller, who's a pastor on Long Island. We got into a conversation recently.

We've known each other for several years now, particularly through shared associations with the Davenant Institute and various other things associated with that. This conversation arose and it seemed like something that was apt for a podcast. I'll hand it over to him to introduce the subject.

Well, first of all, Alastair, I'm very grateful to be able to have this conversation with you. We were just interacting with some friends about the recent visibility, I guess, of what are called ex-evangelicals, people who have professed to be Christians and then become disenchanted with the Christian faith and the Christian church. You made a comment in that conversation that really struck a chord with me.

I'm paraphrasing, but you basically said that evangelicals, evangelical Christians, seem to put a very heavy emphasis on getting our theology right as a way of, as you put it,

securing people's emotional and spiritual health. Somehow, for all that emphasis on how theology, good, strong, sound theology, correct theology, is supposed to produce that health, there's very little talk often about just wise and careful and loving pastoral guidance, as if correct theology can carry the whole load. There's almost no mention of this deeply personal and pastoral side of things.

I've just seen so much the truth of that observation in my own pastoral work. I was just wondering if you would be able to elaborate a little on just some of the things you've observed that led you to make that comment. Then I think I might have some similar experiences on my own.

For me, there's been a number of different things. First of all, the breach between or the difference between evangelical doctrine and evangelical culture. A lot of what people complain about is not so much evangelical doctrine as the way that that's filtered through and embedded within a certain sort of culture that is taken for granted, but never really carefully broken down and articulated.

It's presumed to follow straightforwardly from the doctrine, but there's no reason why it should. The other thing is that there is a sort of doctrinal framework within which we want to live our lives. I've increasingly thought about this distinction in terms of the difference between the architecture of a house that gives it its stability, that ensures that you are able to live in it without having to have a hard hat everywhere you go and worrying about falling masonry.

At the same time, there is the need to make that somewhere that's a habitable dwelling. To have windows put in, to have carpets and places to sit and to sleep and places with running water and sanitation, these sorts of things. Now, so often we treat our theological systems, the edifices, as if they were sufficient without actually thinking about the means by which someone can meaningfully inhabit that.

The sort of way that we teach people can often be like learning I don't know, learning homemaking from construction workers. It's not actually the best way to go about it. You do need construction workers, but you need something more than that.

And a pastor in many ways is helping someone to go a step beyond just having a system that actually is able to stand on its own, that isn't going to collapse. There's something more than that. You need more systematics.

That is such a helpful metaphor. Because I find that exact thing so often is in front of me as a pastor. Things can be orthodox, but not necessarily executed in a way that's very edifying.

Which is to say, you know, and I think Paul kind of points us to that in the realm of ethics. The question of whether something's lawful is not the same question as whether

something's edifying. They're related, they're not.

And what you just said, it's one thing to have a house. I often think about this, is Trinity Church where I pastor, one question is whether it's a safe place for people, spiritually safe place. Quite another question, whether it's a place people want to be, a place they want to live.

And I find that especially as I think about the children and grandchildren of a church, they're often a very good kind of barometer of a church's culture. If they don't like being around the church as they get older, they might have all sorts of correct catechism and they might know the creed and be relatively grounded in what is orthodox. But if they are turned off by the culture of the church, you have to wonder how effective is our witness going to be to people outside the church to welcome them in, if the ones who are already growing up there are finding reasons to leave.

And I realize that's a complicated subject, but I 100% agree with that distinction. The way also you describe some of this, there's the distinction also between a sort of sanctified common sense, emotional, just basic groundedness and having all your theological ducks in order. On the other hand, and that seems to me a lot of Christians are looking for a sort of ideological solution to things that do not have an ideological solution.

You want a system or you want some procedure or technique to solve something that requires a very different angle of approach. And that has been something I've noticed on several occasions as a problem that I'm not sure people put their finger upon well. Yeah, agreed.

Agreed. And when you couple that with a nervousness at best, I think in some cases it probably approaches panic in a lot of evangelical Christians about cultural influences that seem like they're going to lead us into profound moral compromises or abandoning the gospel. And so there's this sense of needing to be even more aggressively defensive than usual.

I think when you add that in to that confidence in a system as a cure for all ills, you can actually end up strangely with orthodoxy that honestly at a relational level, if I can put it that way, just becomes pretty toxic. I have personally witnessed church leadership. I'm not exaggerating when I say literally empty their church of people because they were so determined to save their church from corrupting influences.

And somewhere it just seems to me that a good thing has gone way off the rails. So what are some of the, I mean, if you were to put a name on some of the traits or the virtues that you think are missing, what would they be? Well, let me back up to something that, I don't know if this is too basic or if it's helpful, but I've spent a lot of time as a, since being a pastor, thinking about how what we call holiness. Just stepping away for a

moment from doctrine per se, how a Christian understanding of holiness can get separated from humanness.

I guess this is what I mean. I grew up in a church tradition that made it seem as if you were kind of at your holiest when you were doing the least number of things that people outside the church do. You just kind of stayed away from everything that was going on in the culture and that separation ended up producing holiness, devotion to God.

And of course, as I've grown theologically over the years, I realized that Herman Bovec's formulation that the grace of God in our lives restores nature. It doesn't destroy nature. It purifies us from sin, sanctifies us.

That's really helped me think about God's interest in humanness. To give one example from my own profession, I often think that seminaries would do better if they taught guys how to be communicators before they teach them how to be preachers. Because if you don't know how to communicate well, filling your terrible communication with gospel content doesn't make you effective.

You need that human thing of being able to understand how to communicate effectively before you start preaching. And so I think in many areas of church life and Christian life, I think one thing that's helped me is just thinking about kind of how do people work? What sorts of things are winsome? What sorts of things are enjoyable? Abundant life in Christ is not radically separate from just the things that make people flourish in general. Which is why I think among other things, you think about the fact that Jesus gave us the sacraments, a meal, because meals are just so human.

And so I hope that is making sense. I mean, upstream from maybe the particular virtues, just an appreciation of all things human has helped me a lot. Humans are hungry for hopefulness.

So for example, if you're in a church that just has this atmosphere of kind of doom and gloom, I mean, there are things to be concerned about. There are things we ought to speak against. I think it's even appropriate at times to have a somewhat dim view of what the next, say, 25 years of life might be like for Christians in a particular cultural moment.

If persecution is coming, that's not a happy thought. I'm not speaking about our context, but just, you know, if you're somewhere where that's really happening. But one of the things that you see in the New Testament is just this joyfulness.

This sense that God is good and God, Jesus reigns, and therefore history is fundamentally something we should be celebrating, you know, as we think of the works of God. Does that help at all? I mean, just kind of a general mood thing there. Yes, and I think that's also something that gets at the way in which a true presentation of Christian

truth should come with a sort of ethos that's an integral part of it.

And it just reminds me that a lot of the time when we're reading the Bible, what we're trying to do is get doctrine from it. But the Bible doesn't give us doctrine. It gives us narrative.

It gives us exhortation. It gives us encouragement, praise, lament, proclamation, and recounting of God's great deeds. And emotional stuff, right? Exactly.

And so it's all clothed with a form of personal address that has emotional force and content and directionality to it. Now, it seems to me that often we can strip the message of all of that and think that a truer message would be one that comes just in the bare abstract form of the doctrine itself, showing how in its interconnections and everything that it holds together. Now, that can be important in its own place, but that, it seems to me, is a very much second order activity.

The primary activity of the church is to create or to be a place where we enjoy the presence of God, where we worship him, where we have fellowship one with another, where we experience what it means to be joyful, to be hopeful, to be faithful, to be loving, and to be those who are exhibiting in all these different ways, fruits of the Spirit that aren't just, I don't know, some oughts that we express, but they come together to form a very distinctive and compelling ethos. Yeah, I so very much agree. I mean, I think some of this maybe is just a lack of attentiveness to the Bible.

I think sometimes we're just not really all that biblical in how we think about the Bible. One of the things that's just struck me again and again in studying scripture is, you know, the core of the Bible is the kingdom of God and the kingship of God, but when you really watch from the very beginning, God rules in this very covenantal way. He rules by binding himself to those he loves, to his creatures, to his covenant people, and he binds us to him.

And so there's this, I know the word relational gets overused, but it is relational. It is, as you put it, they're personal relations. God is personal and he relates to us as his image bearers that way.

That's how he rules, not just issuing edicts, not just giving us tomes of, you know, correct things to think. Now, I think at its best, in fairness, sometimes when I listen to evangelicals talk about how they expect doctrine to carry, do the work of creating emotional and spiritual health, I think maybe what they're getting at is that understanding the gospel, understanding that God has forgiven my sins, that he has adopted me into his household, but I am justified. I stand before him in righteousness through Christ.

That should have an emotional effect. That should bring, you know, peace and joy and

the fruits of the spirit. So I think at its best, that's often what is intended, is that if you understand what Jesus has done for you and who the father is to you for Jesus' sake, then that should begin to create in your life, you know, a sense of identity and security and vitality.

But boy, I've also seen, we could, I'm sure, talk a lot about just the kind of theological lint-picking that goes on where, you know, this very precise understanding of all these Christian doctrines is somehow supposed to make us all good, and that it actually has the opposite effect in my experience. And maybe part of what's going on is an expectation that doctrine is going to do something that doctrine was never intended to do. There are a lot of things, for instance, that we are expected to know or to learn as people who are embedded as creatures with a brain within God's good creation, and we're supposed to learn and reflect and draw lessons from those who have come before us.

And many of those lessons are not found in the Bible directly, or if they're found, they're found only tangentially. We can think about the ways that you learn how to have a good marriage. I mean, there are things that we are taught in Scripture, but many of the lessons will be lessons that you learn from other people around you, from your parents, from just experience over time yourself.

And so the idea that there's a codebook that gives you all the answers for these things without having to undergo that experiential process, that seems to me to be one of the problems that's at play here. Again, we can sort of come back to being biblical, right? Because isn't that what the wisdom tradition of Scripture is, I would even say, gesturing toward? One of the things that strikes me about the wisdom literature is it does not try to be... it doesn't try to give us comprehensive answers. It gestures towards God's world and God's ways in the world, and you get the impression that these are things that children and parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, are going to sit and reflect upon together.

Like you're saying, Proverbs doesn't tell you how to have a good marriage. It gives you some basic principles that then you probably should sit and talk with your parents about, or you know, wise friends, right? I'm also struck by the fact that Jesus, the Word, took flesh. Why is that important? He dwelt among us.

And then you have the apostolic ministry where Paul says, he preached, but he also says, I was with you house to house. There was this conversational dimension of his ministry in very personal contexts. All that seems important for what you're saying, that God could have just given us voluminous, you know, a whole library of stuff to read and study and understand.

That's just not how his revelation has worked historically. That's important. And even when we're thinking about the scripture in many ways, the scripture is a library.

That's one of the ways we can talk about the Bible as a book. But it isn't a usual book. In many respects, we have different sorts of books that function in different ways.

So for instance, you can think about a recipe book. You don't have a recipe book as bedtime reading. It's not something that you'd, again, you wouldn't say that the best form of engagement with Shakespeare is a high school English class.

It's primarily designed to be performed upon the stage. Whereas a lot of scripture is not really designed to be read in private study, public performance and embeddedness in the life of a community. So you talk about the covenantal character of scripture and the way that God addresses us.

And that's really so much part of it. It is a personal address. So for instance, if you're reading a passage of scripture, so often we're trying to render what is active and vibrant and other things like that into something that's latent and abstract.

So we take a passage of Paul's epistles and we move, remove from a context of personal address, doxology, encouragement, exhortation, rebuke, whatever, some doctrine that stands in distinction from that. Now that can be helpful sometimes in a way to help us to transport some of the truths of that to some other contexts where we're going to express those in an active form. But within the life of the church, the word of scripture is an active, lively word.

It's something that we are singing. It's something that we are praying. It's something that we are recounting.

And so when we talk about scripture in terms of just this flat term reading, I think we're not doing justice to a proper relationship with the text. Likewise, you talked about the sacraments earlier. The word of God is addressed not just to our minds, not even just to our hearts as well, but also to our bodies.

We are given a place at the table. We're given a personal word of address over our bodies in baptism, which declares that our bodies are marked out for resurrection. And so whatever we've done with our bodies has been done to them.

However, we view our bodies when we see them in the mirror. However, we feel the working of death and mortality in our bodies. Our bodies are marked out by grace.

We're the limbs and organs of Christ. And that sort of thing, I think, can easily get lost when we're thinking in terms of the church as a realm of doctrine and losing sight of just how comprehensive God's word of gracious address to us actually is. And that is just a massive thing to think about.

I wonder if, particularly in evangelical circles where there's been a very strong emphasis on academic study of the scriptures, which has its place, if we've almost received

scripture as something that was intended for the classroom in the Western sense of the classroom. Actually, the scriptures were largely addressed, it seems to me, that you think about the New Testament epistles, they were addressed to convocations, to times when the people of God were gathered together bodily with one another in a worshipful doxological setting. That's where they heard the word.

You think about the times when Torah was read in Nehemiah and Ezra and so on, these gatherings of God's people where this is not a classroom. I trust it goes without saying, neither you nor I is opposed to the academy or scholarly understanding of the scriptures, but that ought to be, that more abstract and academic study, it seems to me, really should be for further enhancing the life of God's people under the word, as opposed to almost being something that's used to beat God's people as if they're not sufficiently academic or don't have a sufficiently scholarly understanding of doctrine or whatever, as if a child's understanding of the gospel is a slippery slope into some kind of liberalism or something. I just wonder about that.

One of the things that's really helped me as a pastor is just always, always thinking about the children in my congregation. How are they doing? I mean, say what you will about particular doctrines related to children and the sacraments and all that. If these little ones are not coming to just love their God and love their people and love their story and love being with God and being a part of what he's doing, if that's not something that's kind of washing over them when they're young, and if our older children and young adults don't feel a comfortableness with the deep, problematic, thorny questions that I think any thinking Christian has got to wrestle with at some point, if this is not our relational ethos or culture, then I think you're breeding ultimately either a reaction to the doctrinalism or you will have kids who just become brainiacs.

I've seen that too. There are kids who just kind of become almost pharisaically doctrinaire. Neither of these, it seems to me, is a particularly healthy model for the Christian life.

And so just exploring that a bit more, a lot of these things imply models of pastoring with them. So I think a lot of our model of pastoring has just been created by simple facts of demographics and the organization of our society, particularly around the car, where the church can often become primarily a center of teaching and preaching. And there's less of a sense of the broader communal work of forming a life together.

And with that, I think, comes an increasing burden upon the pastor as the one who almost has to, perhaps the best way to talk about it, is astroturf a community where there is not one that's an organic grassroots community. So how, as a pastor, do you see some of these tensions? How do you see your role within a community as integrating these different aspects of the church's life? Well, I will have to admit up front that these are things I have learned, am learning through a lot of trial and error. It's not as if you... I

had a great class in seminary called Reformed Pastor, and I'm grateful for that.

But the truth is, you have to get to a place among a people and learn how to pastor. And so what I'm doing might not be the best. It's the best I've learned so far.

But there have been some things that I feel pretty comfortable saying, I believe are important emphases just from what I've experienced. I do have a friendship model of pastoring. This has some downsides.

I really try to have a friendship with everyone in my church, and different friendships with different people. You can't be quite as close to some as others, just circumstantially. But I've really worked over the years to try to really get to know people and to wear the pastoral mantle, I guess, pretty lightly when I'm around people.

I've found that if people think of me first as their pastor, that can often clam them up even. There's a sense of discomfort in just being able to break bread together, let's say, and just enjoy time together and just get to know one another as real people. And what I've found over the years as I've built friendships of various kinds is you kind of begin to understand what these people, these particular people, some of what they hunger for and what resonates with them and what draws them and what repulses them and what some of their natural prejudices are, by which I just mean things in their particular life story that have created kind of a reactivity to certain things.

They're maybe hypersensitive to certain things, and we all have those things. And you get to, over time, get windows into that. What I've really tried specifically to emphasize culturally as a pastor, as I've worked on this friendship model, is there are kind of five pieces that I go back to again and now.

One is to constantly be assuring people of who they are in Christ, and especially emphasizing baptism. What you said earlier about being marked out for resurrection, I really believe that the foundation of a joyful, healthy, emotionally centered Christian life is really not, is knowing that God loves you. I mean, it sounds so simple, but just you're the Lord.

He's your father. Security, it's hard to come by. And I think that's a big deal.

The second thing is just what we've already been talking about, which is just building good relationships. I'm trying to model that. Having conversations.

I think that, especially with younger ones growing up in the my goal for every one of the youth at Trinity Church is that they would say, not just of the folks at Trinity, but of the Christians that they know in their broader community, I want to be like those people. I want to be with those people. If that's what our young ones really feel, then I think we're making progress in building good relationships.

Another is just having a church where we just enjoy creation. God is the creator. It's redemption that's kind of, thinking of God as redeemer, separate from God as creator, I think short changes a lot of things.

If you love God, you should love food and love being outdoors and love oceans and mountains and culture too. The things that God made human beings to do in this world. It's just amazing.

We should delight in these things and not have a kind of squinting going on at everything that comes out of culture, even though we want to be discerning. Christian humanism maybe is a way I've thought of this. I want to be a Christian humanist, love humanity, but do it because I'm a Christian.

The fourth is just hope. Let's look at the future and look forward to what God's going to do through the rule of his son. Then the fifth is just don't shirk the hard questions.

Let people ask. If I don't know the answer, just say so. I'm not an answer man.

I don't turn to some big theological encyclopedia and pull out an answer to every question. Sometimes I'm exploring along with people and that's okay. There are hard questions, especially in our particular moment, culturally about the Christian faith.

Let's talk about those and not shame people about those. What I've found over the years is these kinds of emphases, they create what I've called a culture of conversation. We can just talk together and learn together, not be frightened about the wrong question being asked and it blows everything up.

God's truth is stronger than that. I don't know if that's helpful, but those are just some big pieces for me. I'd like for you to elaborate a bit more on, it seems to me that often we can put the work of discipleship and support of other people, encouragement and giving direction and teaching onto the pastor and forget that that's something that should be exercised more generally within the church.

I would be interested to hear your thoughts on how as a pastor you can present yourself as an example for others in their relationship to those that they have, whether that's their children, whether it's younger people around them, whether it's brothers and sisters that they can support and encourage in times of struggle. How do you distribute your task of pastoring, particularly in the current context where it can be very difficult simply because of the nature of our society and the limits that that presents for community? Every day I'm struggling with this, I must tell you. Practically, I mean that's a great question.

I mean one obvious thing is just realizing that is how Christ wants the church to operate, is pastors and teachers are equipping the saints for the work of ministry. It's so easy to create a pastor-centered church. It's bad for the pastor and it's bad for the people.

So one thing is just to consciously keep in mind all the time, how am I actually equipping and empowering and encouraging these saints to live as God's people? Where they are the churches, they're disciple makers. I'm helping them learn to be disciple makers and just at least having that kind of as a governing framework. And then, you know, how do you do it? Well, sometimes it's just as simple as having a couple families together to your home and just spread food on the table and let them talk.

I do know that one of the biggest things, this is a struggle. I think any pastor would have to be honest in saying this, but you need to have a strong family life of your own. If people don't see that you enjoy, you know, in my case, enjoy my wife and my four children and see my home as a healthy place.

Now we have all the ordinary struggles, man, I'll tell you. But that's one thing, just model just a good home life. And, you know, as people feel safe and they can open up to a pastor and they feel friendship with a pastor and that begins to kind of trickle out into the congregation, it is amazing.

People, they do begin to imitate that. And I hope that doesn't sound weird. Like I'm not saying I want people to be imitating me, but there is something contagious about friendship.

Those would be, I guess, some initial thoughts on that. It's a great question. And the modern thing of people being so spread out and you don't, you have more preaching posts really than community churches now, it makes it hard.

We're not sharing life together anymore the way we once did. And that's probably not, we're not going back to the, we're not going back to some previous time in history, but I wrestle a lot with, man, how do we overcome this, the distances of modern life? They're immense. Talking about the importance of your family life and churches, seeing that, that gets me into an area that has been on my mind a lot in the last few years, which is that of authority and trust.

The way that authority is often something that depends upon a certain recognition that the person who's exercising authority is exemplifying that thing that they are directing you towards. And there is something attractive about what you see in them that makes them a fitting teacher of those, of the virtues that form that reality to you. And it seems to me that a great example of this ideally should be parents.

We grow up, we don't understand necessarily why our parents are telling us what to do and certain instructions they give us are opaque to us, but we trust them because we know that their intentions for us are good. And that we also believe that the time will come when we will understand, when the time will come when they'll kind of step back a bit and we'll be left on our own. And the lessons that they have taught us will hold us in good stead.

And so often I think there is a model of authority in churches that just does not take into account the importance of giving a compelling example to yourself, of presenting people with a form of discipleship that will lead them towards independence, where they have internalized the principles themselves, where they don't have to just accept your external word, but there is that telos always there. And finally, that this is something that they can see the fruits of. So Jesus talks about the importance of knowing people by their fruits.

If you want to know what a church is like, pay attention to the people who, the older people there, the people who have been there for 20, 30 years. What character has it produced in them? Pay attention to the pastor. What character has his teaching produced in his life? Pay attention to his family.

What sort of community does he form in his most immediate context? And what does that say about him? And it seems to me that those elements of authority, those are really grounding for authority, of a healthy authority at least. And it seems to me that you need, I don't know, a certain degree of proximity for that to operate well. And I'd be curious to know how you see that how you have seen that operating well.

What are some examples that have inspired you? Are the things that you feel are areas where we really should put a lot more emphasis if we're going to do this well? Yeah, I mean, this gets back to the deficiencies, I think, of a sort of dominant emphasis on doctrine. I'm just thinking of this on the fly, and I hope it's not a clumsy way of expressing it. But the thing about doctrine is you can communicate doctrine via Zoom.

But so much of what I really want to communicate as a pastor, I can't communicate via Zoom, if that makes sense. It can't be reduced to informational exchange. And so what I have found for myself, and this is where I would say my own models and mentors, the people that I look up to so much, one of the things I notice about them is that they are almost to a fault hospitable.

And hospitality is bigger than just having people into your home to feed them. There's a hospitable way of life where I'm eager to welcome. And I think that just has to be cultivated, just where people feel that when they're around you, you're not necessarily rushed.

You listen well. You greet them warmly. That's kind of just drawing people toward you.

I'm struck by the fact that Jesus, people were attracted to him. That I think, there's something about warm, welcoming, hospitable people. There's a magnetism to them.

And so much of what I think hospitality is about is listening well. I mean, Ivan Illich describes this. He basically says, you have a hearth and a listening, you have a table and a loaf of bread and a listening ear.

We just don't maybe even think about how, in our time, how powerful that is. So I mean, I have a lot of people, they're not living close to me. But every once in a while, I'm able to have them into my home.

And we can sit out by my pool. And it doesn't always have to be theological. I try to steer people away from always thinking, well, I'm with the pastor, I need to ask a theological question.

Let's just talk about life. And over time, you get to the gospel things. You get to the things of God in a more maybe focused way.

So the first big thing I'd say would be hospitality. That's what I see. That you can always do.

Even in a world that... And authority. I mean, I just think what you've said is so helpful about authority. I've learned the most about this with my own children.

Trust is everything. And you can shatter trust. If people don't trust you, then it doesn't really matter how accurate what you're saying is anymore.

And they don't trust you just because you're accurate. They trust you because deep down people are looking for two things, I think especially, do you really care about them? Do you really care about them? Like authentically. And the other is, are you pursuing the God that you're always talking about? Do you live with him? Like from the heart, is this like the fuel of your life? One of my children recently said, Daddy, you're a hypocrite.

And it was hard to hear. And I thought about it. And we talked about it.

And I realized what he was saying was he sees a gap between what I say and what I do. And we had a chance to talk about it. I said to him, I said, it's not hypocrisy to fall short of the standards that I articulate.

What is hypocrisy is if I ever justify that, or I don't repent to you about that, now I'm really a hypocrite. But obviously, I'm always going to be saying things to you that I'm falling short of. And it was a good conversation really kind of talk about that.

And I think that's a big part of biblical authority is I'm following Christ. And the life of Christ, you can see, you know what you said, the virtues of the Holy Spirit, people need to see those in not just in a pastor, but in all of us as Christians. And when they do, it creates trust.

I'll be curious to hear more about how, when you've lost the context of life, rich community life, or family life, or the ethos of a community, and all you're left with is the doctrine and the teaching. How does that explain some of, for instance, some of the struggles that we're experiencing in evangelical and conservative reformed context

today with people moving away, rejecting what they were brought up with? How can some of these, I don't know, some of the deficiencies that we've been discussing, explain people's reactions and departures? Yeah, well a few things come to mind. Maybe four, three or four things particularly.

What I see when I see disillusionment in people who have been in the church, and then they become antagonistic to it. One is that very often it seems they work in a church context where they just were actually not encouraged to work through the challenges of the faith. That it was made to seem as if doctrine is just obvious, and evangelical belief is just kind of almost a given, and we just keep saying the same things without necessarily interacting with the possible objections to them.

And so sometimes kids will get out into, let's say, a college setting, and they feel like they've been lied to. They felt like there was all this certainty in how things were said, but no one ever talked about the counter arguments and the potential, you know, the pushback that can come. And then they meet these intelligent, enjoyable, hip, you know, people that are asking these intellectually incisive questions.

They just feel like, why didn't no one ever talk to me about this? That's one. Related to that, I think quite often people have not, in some churches maybe, what I see is they haven't been prepared for the mysteries of God's work in the world. They're made to feel, sometimes again because of this strong doctrinal emphasis on truth, and we know who God is and how he works, but do we also talk about the dark places of the faith where we're left without explanations? The Bible does talk about that.

If that's not something that we're comfortable talking about in the church, at some point people will hit a dark time in their life, and all that doctrine they've learned isn't helping, if I can put it that way. The third thing I often see is, you know, some churches, some Christian communities, I think, are just lacking in just joy. You know, there can just be a kind of rumpiness, a kind of, you know, these are not celebratory places.

They're not places where it's just good to be. It's not, you know, kind of just, if I can put it so clumsily, it's just not positive energy, you know, and a fourth is I often see that people have actually had, they've actually had, I guess I would call it relational trauma. I mean, there are churches that are just abusive, relationally, and those, all, any of those things, you can have rock solid theological precision, but if that other stuff was unaccounted for, man, you know, a head full of theology is not going to help with that stuff.

I hope I'm answering the question, you know, just from my own observations, but. Yes, on your last point, it seems to me that just thinking about trust, which we discussed a bit earlier, is absolutely imperative. Truth runs on the lines of trust, and when you've lost trust, people just won't listen to anything that you say, and so the way that churches have handled abuse crises, that has compromised the truth of the message that we proclaim far more than all sorts of theological heresies, because when people see an

abusive church and nothing being done about it except things being covered up or shifted out of sight, they know that that's not a place that they want to learn truth from.

They just won't believe you, and with that comes failure, I think, often to understand how trust works. People have to give you trust. You don't have a right to trust.

There's no entitlement just because you've got truth on your side, even if you've got all this work that you put into so-called building trust. Trust isn't something you build. Trust is something that you earn, and people have to give it to you, and if you don't respect them or honor them, if you don't have a sign that you really want their good, I'm thinking about this a lot at the moment in terms of just public messaging around health, the way in which even good messages that are absolutely correct, if they're expressed in a condescending and dismissive manner towards people, they're just not going to get across.

They're going to be absolutely counterproductive. People will dig in their heels. They will reject what is said, no matter how accurate and scientifically supported it is, and yet this is often how churches can operate too, and we should know so much better than that.

Yes, emphatically yes. I don't think we've ever improved on Aristotle. It's got to be logos, pathos, ethos, right? I mean, really, truly, it does.

He was right, and you can't just have logos. You can't just have the facts. Do people trust you, and is it presented in a way that just shows some emotional sensitivity? Okay, so maybe you're absolutely right, and they're absolutely wrong, but they don't feel wrong.

Sometimes when I hear people talking, and they're trying to set someone straight, you realize the person you're trying to set straight doesn't think they're wrong, so maybe you ought to just get inside their headspace enough to kind of see it through their lenses, enough to understand where maybe a meeting place would be at least, right? I mean, isn't that just persuasion? One of the things that we've really emphasized at Trinity, and anything I'm saying about my pastoral work at Trinity, I mean, it's all in process. Things we're learning. I don't want to make it sound like we've arrived at all, because we haven't, but we've really worked for 10 years now to have a very transparent approach to leadership, which is to say, anytime we make a church decision as elders, we don't put everything out for a vote.

Presbyterianism is not democratic fundamentally, but we do make representative decisions, but we talk about it with the people. We explain things to them. We listen to them.

We invite input, because we have nothing to hide. We're not doing things in secret. Our deliberations are mostly wisdom questions.

We don't have a word from the Lord about most of the decisions we make. I had a

brother, a pastor one time, and it so helped me. You know, Ben, he had some pastoral experience.

He said, most of the time when we've deliberated as a board of elders, and we make a decision, I think I'm about 70% sure we're right. That just helped me. Exactly.

We get some things wrong. Again, it's strange how that kind of honesty about your, you hope you have some wisdom, but you don't have perfect wisdom. I think it actually improves the effectiveness of your authority, because just even the fact that your leaders have enough self-doubt to know they might be wrong is kind of reassuring.

That leads into something that I've often thought about in churches, particularly more evangelical churches, which is there's a tendency to a sort of patronizing mode of ministry, where people are given very clear statements about what they must believe. They're not taught why. Again, they're put in a position where they're infantilized.

They're spoken down to in certain ways. They're not informed and helped to understand the deliberations that lead to a decision, or even talk through the process of interpreting a passage. That's one of the things that I've really appreciated about good biblical teaching, where someone would actually show you how they arrived at their conclusion.

They'll say, okay, this is what I've settled on as my reading of this passage. Here are some of the other readings that are available. I'm not absolutely certain of this.

There's a certain degree of, well, it depends on these factors. If one of these factors were to change my opinion on these, or if some other evidence appeared in this area, it would weight things differently, and my opinion might alter. There's a sense there of the responsibility of the person who is exercising trust.

You're not just engaging in a complete wholesale giving of your trust to some other party who could easily abuse it as they present themselves with more confidence than they actually deserve. On the other hand, what you're actually doing is acting more as a counselor to people. You're expecting them to take responsibility for their choices in life, for their directions, but you're giving them the means by which they can make better and wiser decisions.

You're exercising oversight for them, but you're doing that in a way that is not allowing them to outsource their responsibility. Rather, you're teaching them how to exercise their responsibility well, and giving them the means by which they can arrive at your conclusions by their own exercise of good judgment. That gets to one of the areas of that you're saying people don't believe that they're wrong, and they don't do it often because they don't have some information that you do, or they don't have the trust networks that you do.

They're thinking about things from a very different vantage point. Ideally, what you're

trying to do is not just tell them what's true and force that upon them, but give them the means by which, by their own exercise of their own good judgment and conscience, they could arrive at your conclusions. I'm so glad you circled back to that because I remember earlier in our conversation thinking about that word infantilizing.

First of all, I would just note, I think that kind of leadership requires more competency. People that I talk to that impress me the most intellectually are the people who appreciate the granularity of their topic enough to realize, as you put it, if one piece of information changed, there'd be a different line we'd take in the schematic. They appreciate the fine points that I'm pretty sure I've reached a conclusion I'm comfortable with, but if something in my thinking were to change upstream, then I'd probably be coming to a slightly different conclusion because there's just a lot going on here.

In any truth that we believe, there's many strands. Truth is complicated in a good way, in a beautiful way. The best thinkers just always seem to have that awareness of the questions that are still questions.

They have confidence without absolute certainty, if I can put it that way. Some things we can be absolutely certain of, but many things I feel like we have reason to a place where we're comfortable, but there's still a lot to learn. There's a kind of tentativeness, and I don't mean by that a sloppiness.

I think that's actually a form of precise thinking. With that observation, back to the point about infantilizing. This is something that kind of haunts me as a pastor, to be honest.

This is not quite the way to express it, but I almost feel that if I'm pastoring well, I'm working my way to being out of a job. This is what I mean. My goal would be that people are walking with the Lord well on their own, so that it's still a privilege to shepherd them, but I'm not shepherding them in a way that's creating more and more dependency on me.

They themselves have come to lean upon Christ, understand the word, and not only be healthy themselves and knowledgeable themselves and growing under their own power, if I can put it that way, but are increasingly able to help others come to that same thing. It's in 2 Timothy 2 when Paul says, commit what I've committed to you to faithful men who can teach others also. The thing is, Alistair, if nothing else forces this issue, our mortality should force it.

I, you know, one of the biggest things I think about as a pastor now is just succession. I'm not going to be around forever, so if I'm building a ministry and I'm just increasingly creating a community where people are dependent upon me for the right answers and you go to the pastor with all of your problems, I mean, at the best you can say of it is I'm setting them up for a horrible shock when God moves me on, but I think actually in some cases that might even be a little bit more sinister than that. I think there can come a real

pride in that as a pastor.

I am the oracle. I am the one that people come to. That can really play to your, you know, your ego.

So yeah, I just, I love what you said. I think that's something you've talked about so much more. Are you creating self-sustaining sainthood? Talking about the issue of creating teachers, think of the way it's described in Hebrews that some of you are still needing to be fed milk, by the stage you should have been already teachers of others.

How can people listening to this who are not pastors, who are wanting to be more responsible congregants and more helpful for their pastors, people who are actively part of creating a healthier culture within their churches, how from a pastor's perspective would you counsel such people? What are some, maybe the specific steps they can take, practices they can commit themselves to, virtues they can develop? I wonder if one possibility would be, take whatever it is that you feel most comfortable with as a Christian, whether it's something, maybe it could be something more theological, you know, a book you've read that you found edifying or just something as you look, as you think about your own sort of gifts as a Christian, what do you think is something you might be able to contribute? You know, maybe something as simple as, I just love to, you know, teach people how to cook. I love cooking. I love to teach people how to make good food because it's a big part of hospitality or whatever it might be.

And just maybe talk with your pastor about just doing that with other people in your Christian community. Maybe you could start a reading circle, read a book together, just have time to talk about it, and it doesn't need to be anything super organized or, you know, terribly profound. I mean, you know, it could just be something that's edifying and just getting people to, maybe you're just a person, you just like having conversations with people and you'd like to take someone in the community out for coffee once a week.

I just wonder if you could talk to your pastor, because pastors love to look, they love when people take initiative, at least I think healthy pastors do. And if there's just something that you kind of sense God has given you a passion for or some giftings in, and just see how you could plug that into your community. I think it's a small place to begin, but it's so much better than just kind of sitting back.

We don't need like super teachers in the church so much as just Christians who are actively contributing what God has given them to contribute. And good relationships will flow out of that and a sphere of influence will grow. And I mean, it's a simple enough thing, but I think that would actually be, if a bunch of Christians in a church did that, I think it would really be quite revolutionary.

There's a difference between that and the sort of extreme dependence upon whether it's

worldviewism or whether it's getting a system in place. Those sorts of things can be attempts at a shortcut towards something that should be achieved just by basic, simple Christian discipleship and being faithful over long periods of time, which is not really theoretically hard. It's practically hard.

Right. But we don't need college class for everything. We just need people doing life as the people of God in the world.

Right. Yeah. I mean, just it's little things.

They make such a difference. You know, maybe you just get all the kids in your church together for a game night once a month. I mean, for kids, that makes a church a whole different place to be a part of, you know.

I also think one of the important things is just as a member of a congregation, you have a pair of eyes and ears that your pastor doesn't have. And there are a lot of things that you'll see in here as opportunities and needs that he won't. And take advantage of that and act into those needs and concerns and be someone who just is proactive in these things.

This is one thing that's just thinking back over my experience. I went through a very difficult period in my late teens and could easily have just gone away from the faith altogether. And there were just a few people who paid attention and spent a lot of time just mentoring me during that period.

A woman who was the leader of one of the youth groups that I had been a member of previously and a guy who was about 10 years older than me, who just took me out to various places and talked with me and prayed with me. And it was just fantastic having someone who was prepared to notice that I was going through a struggle, who was able to give time and attention. And for that sort of attention, the long-term effects can be huge.

And there are many situations within any congregation where there will be those sorts of needs that will go unnoticed. And there are people who you could change their life just by paying attention. And it seems to me that if you're expecting the pastor to do all of that, he's not going to be able to do it.

You'll feel betrayed and let down. And because he's just human, he's limited. But there are many other people within the congregation that can have an impact, who can support and encourage and exercise a sort of pastoral guidance.

And ideally, you should take the initiative and take advantage of that. And also taking the initiative is one of the best ways for you to grow. And I found, again, there'll be many times in church contexts where I've just not seen a ministry or activity that would really speak to a particular need or interest that I had.

And with a group of people, I've set up something just in a very organic way. And it's interesting thinking back on that and how thankful I am for being in churches where there's just been an emphasis upon giving space for that and encouraging it and wanting people to be enterprising, to notice where there is a need and to act accordingly. Because in many churches, there just isn't that.

You expect the church, the pastor or the ministry team to do those things, and they're just not going to do it. Yeah, I think this is something I would say to pastors and Christian leaders too, is you do need to, I think, really encourage that. I think it is possible to have a leadership style, quote unquote, that really is lovingly prompting and encouraging that.

I've told people when they come and ask me, pastor, can we do this? I've told them, you don't need my permission. You really don't. Like, don't ask my permission.

It's fine. Just if the Lord's prompting you to do something, you're His child. Go do it.

That's part of exercising your Christian dominion in the world. You don't need to ask me, because I'm just trying to make the point. Like, I'm not a clearinghouse for what the Holy Spirit's doing, you know.

I'm here to encourage it. And I think what you said, so much of Christian discipling is just coming alongside. It's just, you know, an arm around a brother, how you doing? What's going on in your life? People have a lot going on.

Honestly, in my experience, they're very eager to share it if they feel like they can trust you. So just, even just asking a question, even if you don't see an obvious need, just asking a question, how are you doing? You know, I've been praying for you. Is there anything I can pray for particularly? Trying to just open a door, and man, I'm like you, I'm like you, so many times I can look back on my life where being noticed quite literally changed the course of my life.

And I'm very thankful for that. And I think that's something every Christian can do. I think that is a good note to finish on.

Thank you very much for joining me. This has been a great conversation, and in many ways, one that might spawn other conversations in the future. It's just such a big subject.

I've loved it, man. I hope we will get a chance to talk again, it's a very rich, rich topic. And thanks for letting me join you.

Thank you to all of you who have listened to this, and I look forward to talking to you again soon. God bless.