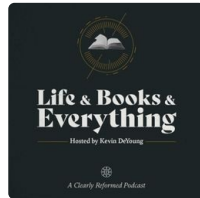


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Evangelicalism, Elites, and Excellence with Aaron Renn

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Coming out of a consulting background, Aaron Renn is now a regular contributor to many important conversations among Christians and conservatives. In this interview, Kevin asks Aaron about the three worlds of evangelicalism and how we should think about elites. They also discuss where evangelicalism has faltered and where it has been too hard on itself.

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The Masculinist

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The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 - George Nash

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To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World - James Davison Hunter

The Mortification of Sin - edited by Aaron M. Renn

Transcript

[Music] Greetings and Salutations, welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung and perhaps I sound a little bit more in the base register. I always thought I would pay good money to have Lig and Duncan's preaching voice booming, echoing around.

But this is just cold infection. Maybe it was strep, I'm not sure. So hopefully it just sounds manly, especially considering the guest we have who has written often about masculine things.

I'll introduce him in just a moment. But want to mention a new book by Crossway. I'm sure many, maybe most of the listeners have read some book by Paul David Tripp.

I know I've read many of his books. Most of them. His new book, Reactivity, How the Gospel Transforms Our Actions and Reactions.

So he's looking at digital media, technology, how these train us to act in certain ways, react in certain ways. What does it look like to live a gospel life with cancel culture and the ways that digital media stir us up to fear and anger. So reactivity, wherever you can find books and you can go to [crossway.org/plus](https://www.crossway.org/plus) to sign up for their plus account and you get 30% off.

So thank you to Crossway. Our guest this morning, at least this morning as I'm recording it, is Aaron Renn. Aaron, thanks for being on the program.

I have a friend of mine recommended the masculinist a few years ago. So I read that, started listening to your podcast, reading the articles, your sub stack, and then the piece that we'll talk about in a moment that I think you're most well known for, at least at this point, is your three world of evangelicalism piece. You do lots of other good stuff.

So I've appreciated listening and reading your stuff. And one of the things I say to people is I like listening to people who I feel like are worldview overlaps and yet we're not into the identical stuff. You read some things I don't read, you talk about some things I don't talk about.

So it's always, it's always interesting and I've wanted to have you on. So thank you for coming on life and books and everything. Thanks for having me on.

Aaron, tell us a little bit and tell me because I've, I think we know each other by way of public consumption, but we've not met before. So tell me about yourself. You're a Christian.

How did you become a Christian? Tell me about your family. Sure. Well, I grew up in rural Southern Indiana.

My family's from Catholic peasant stock on both sides. My mother got very involved in the Catholic charismatic renewal movement in the 70s, which ultimately led her out of the Catholic Church. And so I was raised in a rural fundamentalist assemblies of God type church in Southern Indiana.

So that's where I grew up. So I feel like I have a good sense of that environment in rural America and all that. I went off to college and then essentially had three careers as an adult.

Career number one was management consulting. I was with a firm called Accenture for about 15 years. Made it to was now known as the managing director there.

Then I transitioned to a second career in essentially urban policy research in journalism and ended up spending several years as a senior fellow with the Manhattan Institute in New York. And then I've essentially translate trans shifted again into writing primarily about Christian issues. There is an emphasis on kind of men's issues.

That was my entree into the space, but now sort of the future of evangelicalism and helping American kind of conservative evangelical successfully adapt to the 21st century is really what I focus on there. So I lived most of my adult life in Chicago and in Manhattan. So I come from a rural environment but lived in the city.

That's probably how I got interested in urban policy. It's been sudden. I love cities like only someone from a town of 29 people can.

I also spent most of my adult life really not as a Christian at all, I would say. And like a lot of people, a very prosaic story. You know, you run into personal difficulties and all of a sudden you're like, Hey, where's this God guy? So I was previously married and ended up getting divorced, which was very traumatic for me in ways I did not expect given that it probably shouldn't have been given that we didn't have kids, dogs, cats, anything of that nature.

And that was really, I think, the trigger for my genuine conversion. And today I am a Presbyterian. So I'm very familiar with kind of the urban church movement, etc.

I probably became Presbyterian candidly through the influence of Tim Keller. You know, we could talk more about that if you like. He was a big influence on me.

And today I live in Indianapolis still in the urban center, however. Good. So do I have it right that you are at a PCH church? Yes.

Actually, no, I have never been a member or regular attendee of any of these was at Napark churches. Napark. Yeah.

So I was, you know, my reform, I went in Chicago. I attended actually a non denominational church. It was essentially Baptist.

And, you know, when I was living elsewhere, I attended a CRC church for a while. And then when I lived in New York, I attended an EPC church, which technically I'm still a still a member of, but you would probably theologically place me, you know, on the very conservative and, you know, of the, of the Presbyterian scale. Good.

Well, I conservative on the Presbyterian scale. I can resemble that remark. I wonder you mentioned Indiana.

So we had a family reunion this summer. I'm one of four kids. And between us four children, there are 30 grandchildren, three zero grandchildren.

So a lot. And we got together and they just kind of, my parents just found a place that was a big place where we could meet somewhere in the center of the country. So we met in Winchester, Indiana.

Have you ever heard of Winchester? I have. I think it's up north somewhere, isn't it? No, it's, uh, it's over toward the Ohio. I guess Muncie would be the closest.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

I kind of recognize city to it. I don't think I've ever been there. And I have like the middle of nowhere.

I grew up along the Ohio River. Do you have no reason to drive through? Right. Okay.

Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

What way down south. So, um, yeah, my, my kids were excited to go out into the country until we were there. And you go to some, no offense.

If anyone's listening from Winchester, I'm sure there's some great things about it. And the accommodations were, were nice. Thank you, Verbo.

Uh, but yeah, it was a, it was, it was a town. Let's just say it looked like it's glory years were well in the past and walking around beautiful courthouse, but dilapidated other

buildings. And I heard you do a, an, an episode on your podcast, not too long ago.

And this is something about your ban of file instincts, because you were sort of speaking against this conservative lionization of the countryside. Correct. Of rural America.

Uh, I, I found inside because I have, I've, I didn't grow up in the country. I didn't grow up in the city. I've been pretty much suburban, exurban kind of most of my life, but that knowing some of your background now helps me understand that if you grew up in a town of what you say 29 people, something like that.

Hey, Chicago has some, some good things going for it. Yes. I'm not anti rural by any means.

There's a lot I like about rural life. I love Southern Indiana. Culturally, I'm very much still of that place in a lot of ways, but having grown up in rural America, I'm under no romantic illusions about the nature of rural life.

We were very disconnected from the world growing up. So there's a lot of things I was sort of cut off from that I didn't get to participate in today. Perhaps rural America is too connected in terms of things like meth, fentanyl, etc.

A tremendous decay there. And it's not like to say once you've castrated a calf, all of your, you know, illusions about the, the idyllic nature of rural life are kind of, you know, you've left behind. So, you know, it's, you know, it's, you know, it's not like turning on the British TV show and see some quaint village village.

This is not what it's like. Yeah, or an urban rock well painting or something. Right.

This is not, this is not the reality of rural America. Again, there's a lot of wonderful things about it. When my father in law, you know, ended up, he had an accident and needed some prayer.

Somebody posted on their Facebook page in this town called Lagote, Indiana, southern Indiana. And this group of people, the Lagote prayer warriors, 100 of them, you know, start praying for you this idea that there's 100 people who somehow have a connection to your family who will actually pray, not just say they're going to pray. Is a big deal.

And so there's a guy, great things about these towns. I don't want to be down on them, but we need to face the realities that there's tremendous, tremendous dysfunction in these places. It's not necessarily healthy environment.

Not all of it is their fault. And the reality is that the economy today no longer needs places like that in the way that it did 100 years ago. So thinking of change, that's what we're talking about, your piece which has shown up in a few different variations, the three worlds of evangelicalism.

I read it whenever it first came out and then you kind of expanded it and repackaged it and first things published it. So give us a quick pracy of what your argument is on the three worlds of evangelicalism. What are the three worlds? What were you trying to communicate with this thesis? I came up with this idea back in 2014, when I really saw that the world in which contemporary evangelicalism had sort of tuned all of its messaging was about to radically change.

And then sort of developed it and have been developing it over time. But basically, in the mid 1950s, let's say the 1950s, America was still basically a Protestant normative country. We actually had what was called a Protestant establishment in that area, half of all Americans attended church every weekend.

There was still prayer in the schools. And although it was a sort of generic Protestantism, maybe even a sort of liberal Protestantism in a sense, Christianity was really core to the public identity of the United States. I might have said there was a soft institutionalization of a generic Protestantism in that era.

In the 1960s, you could really probably date it to around 1964 Christianity in its status and society started to go into a decline, which continues to the present day. So, I would say that there was a decline in terms of attendance in churches and decline in terms of the public morality reflecting basic Christian morality and decline in terms of how you were perceived by society if you were known as a Bible believing in church going Christian. So, the result of decline, I divide into three segments, eras or worlds that I call the positive, the neutral, the negative world.

And these refer to the ways that secular society views the church. And so, the part of the talk about Christianity and culture is about how the church sees the world. That's basically the perspective of H. Richard, Neab, Christ and culture.

Here's how the church has tried to reconcile kind of reason and revelation, if you will. And so, the society views the church and so the positive world, which lasted from 1964 to 1994, is really a period of decline. I want to stress that that what I really think of as the positive world is a period in which Christianity is in decline.

It's still basically perceived positively by society to be known as a good church going man, makes people want to vote for you, makes people want to hire you. There's some credit there in society and Christian moral norms are still the basic moral norms of society, although increasingly being called into question through the sexual revolution, etc. But they had not really percolated through all society.

Around about 1994, we hit a tipping point where Christianity was not perceived positively anymore, but it wasn't yet perceived negatively either. And this is the era that I call the neutral world from 1994 to 2014. And in this era, Christianity is essentially one more lifestyle choice among many, any multicultural, pluralistic, public square, sort of

this neutral public square that a lot of people sort of talk about.

And then around 2014, we had a second tipping point and enter what I call the negative world where for the first time in the 400 year history of America, being known as a Christian actually hurts you socially, certainly in the elite domains of society, being known as a devout Bible believing Christian does not help you get a job in Silicon Valley. For example, and Christian morality is expressly repudiated and in fact viewed as the leading threat to the new public order moral order. Indeed, Christianity itself is often perceived that way.

All of the recent furore, for example, over Christian nationalism is in essence a statement that Christianity is the threat to the country. It is the threat to the new moral order. And this transition has really been a shocking one and a difficult one to which evangelicals have not yet figured fully figured out how to adapt, even though they in essence did adapt successfully to the positive in the neutral world.

So those are the three worlds. And my main thesis is now we've entered this new and unprecedented era, and we need to update our thinking and update our strategies and update our practices, personally, institutionally and missionally to reflect that. Yeah, I think I hadn't quite thought of it in the maybe you said it in here and I missed it but I like the terms you said at the beginning.

We've tended to say, well, how do we view the culture? How does Christianity? How does Christ interact with culture and not thinking from the other side? Well, how are they doing us and how does that then change? Now we've done some of that, but I think we tend to do it in a sort of lopsided way. So for example, the book that came out, I think it was over 10 years ago now, UnChristian. And there's been a lot of books like that.

And it was kind of a it was based on Barna polling and the idea was, look, we and you hear this argument today, the reason people are leaving the church is because they see the hypocrisy of the church because we're not loving because we're anti gay. And the implicit exhortation is sort of if we would if we would be truer to ourselves and if we would be more decent people and if we would we don't have to change our beliefs, but if we would stop being mean and bend over backwards to be nice to folks. The problem is people see us as not being very Christian.

And I think that argument has purchased power with a number of people. But one of the things that your article is helpful in fleshing out is that's going to increasingly be the case that people see us that way, no matter what we do. It's sort of just completely selling out and changing all sorts of views and all sorts of matters of doctrinal and ethical orthodoxy.

That is, I remember somebody saying that the culture is the report card of the church. We should look out at the cult then that's the church's fault or the corollary is if they

don't like you in the church, then you're probably doing something wrong in the church. Now again, we got to pause and say, sometimes that's true.

Sometimes Christians are the big jerks and churches are filled with sinners. So you there will never be a shortage of scandals and sinners and bad churches and bad pastors to point to. But I think if we go through life now with the idea that if I just keep my nose out of trouble and we're nice enough as a church and we do a soup kitchen and we are just really strive to be inoffensive in a cultural way, we can just keep preaching what we're doing.

And you know what, people will still say they're glad we're here. And your argument is telling us, hold on a minute. I don't think that's going to be possible.

Have you gotten that sort of pushback to your your article? Not that one specifically, but I'm definitely familiar with this line of argumentation. And you can see its origins in a couple places. One, maybe it could be from people in the world who are sort of making these accusations, but it's also very popular within the church to make these sort of arguments.

And I have really sensed among some people this notion or this implicit assumption that people in the world today have this incredibly refined sense of justice. That they are just so concerned about justice. They, and they have such this lofty moral sentiments.

And, you know, gosh darn it, the church just doesn't measure up to the world's moral standard to this incredible ethic of justice that they, well, I disagree. I don't think so at all. I don't think that the world is.

I don't think we're a country that exhibits tremendous justice, or that that is a motive whatsoever that really motivates most people quite candidly. I think we are a society that is highly motivated by ideologies with which people have to go along to get along. But this idea that the world in essence has a better moral truth than the church is really something that I have found very disturbing for a lot of people quite apart from, you know, who actually does wrong or doesn't do wrong.

There's this sense that, you know, the world has this true, accurate and very high and lofty sense of justice and morality. I simply don't find that a compelling argument at all. And so I'm not trying to please them.

You know, I can, again, obviously, when you look at it, we do have to take the logs out of our own eye. And I think that's one of the things I say is if you look at Paul the New Testament. And I'll make a few scriptural references here, but as I always tell people, I am not a Bible teacher or theologian.

I'm a cultural critic here primarily so keep that in mind. But, you know, when you look at first Corinthians, he's not out there trying to critique Roman practices. He's telling the

church how they need to respond.

Those who are outside God judges. So there is some of that, you know, attend your own business. But I think there's also the case, you know, everybody likes to talk about John 3 16, but we don't like to talk about John 3 19.

That judgment is that the light came into the world, but people prefer the darkness to the light because their deeds are evil. And that's an important element there. A second part of what you said is this imputation of blame to Christianity for injustices in society.

That is a mental framework from the Christian normative soft institutionalized era prior to the decline in the 1960s. And you could go back and say, well, we did have a basically Protestant Christian establishment. And what was the church teaching on segregation? What were they teaching on slavery? What were they teaching on all these issues? Given the status of Christianity and the fact that all of these leaders were nominally Christian in some way, there was a sense in which the church had a responsibility for the institutions of society.

That is essentially a majoritarian position, an institutionalized position, where today Christians do not control basically any institutions in our society. Certainly evangelicals have virtually no seat at the table anywhere in the powerful domains or institutions of society. The Washington Post wrote this article about how there were no evangelicals in Joe Biden's cabinet.

For example, there are no evangelicals on the Supreme Court, even though you would say it's a conservative court. It's almost all Catholics, Jews, and one Anglican. There's hardly any evangelicals to be found in the senior leadership ranks of politically conservative movement, conservative institutions.

And so this idea that evangelicals are responsible for what's going on in society when we don't run anything and our views are expressly repudiated by society. That is an important link that I think needs to be broken. The problems with our institutions are the responsibilities of the people who are running those institutions.

And the reason we have problems with these institutions is because the people running them have very bad ideas. They're not very competent and are often people of a very low character. And so just because we have some problems in the church, I don't think we should therefore look out at the world and say, oh, they're so great.

Actually, they're quite bad too in a whole number of ways. And it's reflected in every domain of our society. We have declining life expectancy.

We did not have declining life expectancy in the 1950s. You can't blame Christians for that. We didn't shut down the schools for two years and now cause all these massive learning problems for kids.

So all these things that are going on, those are not our fault. We don't bear any blame for that. And so I think we need to psychologically break this link that says we are responsible for these outcomes in societies.

That may have once been true, but that is no longer true. And that is one of the adjustments, software updates we need to make, for example, for the negative world. I think one of the instincts that we have as evangelicals, which is both very true and spiritually healthy and can be like, it's like an immune system that overreacts and it becomes unhealthy.

And that is a basic instinct that we want to look at ourselves and often blame ourselves. So there's a good instinct. There's a good take.

The log out of your eye. There's an evangelical sort of, well, let's look at ourselves. We probably have sinned in some way.

We've missed something. Before we look at others, let's try to figure out what we could have done better. And I think there's a certain rhetorical strategy, though I don't think we would call it a strategy.

But I think just intuitively there's a kind of rhetorical strategy. If I come hardest on myself and on my people, maybe that will win me a hearing to then come and talk to some broader issues. So I think there's something healthy and gospel about that.

But I've noticed for decades that there is such an evangelical tendency towards self-flagellation. If there is a way, it's almost like we don't believe the gospel we say that we need to prove how bad we are. So if there's an explanation, and I guess in a way it is a self-absorption.

It puts evangelicalism at the center of American life and almost everything going on so that somehow, if we got our act together, problems would be solved. And somehow the reason we have these problems is because we've been so bad. There is an instinct among a certain type of evangelical to constantly want to self-flagellate.

And if we just could beat ourselves up hard enough, then things would get better. But the irony is it's often not really beating up ourselves. It's sort of implicitly saying, thank God that I'm not like these other evangelicals.

I feel like you can... You remember? I shouldn't say this. It shows worldliness in me, I guess. But I did watch a fair number of Seinfeld episodes back in the day when I was growing up.

And you know the one where what he becomes... You're an anti-dentite. He says to Jerry because he's telling these jokes about dentists and then who is it? Watley, I forget his name. But he becomes a Jew so he can tell Jewish jokes.

It's just sort of his in. If I can do this, then I can do... I'm not saying people are doing on that level of cynicism. But there is sort of... If I play the card, if I start by saying I'm a conservative, I'm an evangelical, I have all of this, then sort of whatever self-flagellation follows after that must have war and must be listened to.

I wanted to circle back to something you just said there about evangelicals not on the Supreme Court. Now it's not a surprise they wouldn't be in the Biden administration. But even in kind of movement conservatism, I think you maybe read the book that came out this summer by Matthew Continetti on the Hundred Year War for the right and conservatism in this country.

And one of the things that struck me, I guess I should have known it, but just reading that and maybe it's somewhat of what he knew and what he wanted to talk about. But this Hundred Year War on the right for conservatism and especially the Buckley Post World War II growth of movement conservatism, there's almost no evangelicals who are at the center of that. Now voting block, yes, moral majority, yes, I suppose Francis Schafer in a very popular level way kind of comes in.

But when it comes to seminal texts, ideas, people at the table, and I think that's even true today, evangelicals are not largely, in fact, they're almost entirely absent from that. I have some theories, but I know you've been thinking and speaking on this, what are your explanations for why evangelicals who are often accused of being overly political, and I suppose that is a dangerous idolatry temptation. And yet in terms of intellectual influence on these things and institutional influence have been really woefully absent.

Yes, we should distinguish between what's called movement conservatism and the Republican Party. In a movement conservatism is really the intellectuals and the core institutions. This was originally a very small movement and never had a mass constituency and really didn't fully take over the Republican Party.

Maybe even into the 2000s, there were still some old liberal senators from the Northeast. Lincoln Chafee, for example, I think he was a Republican senator from Rhode Island, he's now a Democrat, but it wasn't a mass movement for much of its history. It was essentially an intellectual movement.

In fact, the canonical history of conservatism is George Nash's book. It's called the history of the conservative intellectual movement since 1945. And it was, so it was by and large, the Christian wing of it was very clearly Catholic centric and I would even argue Catholic normative and that sort of extends to today.

There is sort of a very, very heavily Catholic influence there. My presentation I just recently gave on that. It's a weird kind of conservatism in which the people who founded it were essentially people who were, in a sense, a little bit socially marginalized.

You know, conservatism got started in the 40s and 50s. You could really maybe date the congealing of it to national reviews founding in 55. We still had a Protestant establishment.

We still had a Wasp upper class. You know, these folks were still a little bit socially excluded. They were being included, but if you were Catholic or Jewish in the 50s, you were going to experience some level of institutional discrimination.

There are a few ways about it, even if you know, even being white, it's not going to get you. So it is a little weird that the conservative movement was essentially not from the cultural center or the elite center, but from essentially a little bit of a marginal place. Now again, Buckley himself went to Yale.

He was in Skull and Bones. So these people were not all, you know, low status, Iowa farmers or something like that. And I'm not the Wasp elite.

And this is where I haven't read Content Eddy's book, but I would posit that there's a distinct break between the pre war conservative tradition, largely pre war of people like Senator Robert Taft, who was of high Wasp background. There were a lot of super elite people who were very involved in that. But the America first movement was founded at Yale University.

It was sort of a student anti war movement among the Ivy League originally that part gets kind of written out of it, get written out of it. But it was sort of a there were a lot of upper class components to conservatism and the pre war that and in the post war movement it really changed a lot. And you know evangelicals were originally Democrats.

That's really important to see that the first evangelical president was Jimmy Carter 1976. And that was an evangelical evangelicals were Democrats. James Davis and Hunter wrote a book.

I think it was called American evangelicalism in 1983. He cited survey data that a plurality of Democrats evangelicals were still Democrats then. And so evangelical sort of realigned into the Republican Party and have become essentially the largest most important voting block, but have never really gotten the right key at the table.

And I think that evangelicalism in America is a kind of a quintessentially middle class and lower middle class movement. It is not a movement of people who are, you know, at the elite, you know, with an elite mentality or an institutional mentality that hey, you know, we should be running institutions we should be reshaping institutions in accordance with our kind of values And that sort of thing it's like we want to save souls and we want to do some good work we want to help the poor. But the idea of shaping institutions and shaping the culture of the country and all that in the sense that the old liberal Protestant main liners did.

That's like outside the categories of how evangelicals think about the world. They don't even aspire to run a guy like that's not even a kind of thing that like, Oh, I'll be an evangelical. Yeah, I'll be proud to be a spider to be president of the American Enterprise Institute, which is the largest and oldest and most important conservative think tank.

And I have a vision for, you know, how an evangelical would influence, you know, influence political conservatism. And one reason, you know, frankly that social conservatism kind of failed is, you know, movement conservatives are by large socially liberal. They don't advertise this.

You know, I worked for conservatism Inc for a while. These people are not extreme social liberals, but they're definitely very progressive socially their blue state milieu type people. You know, this sort of even, you can just tell there's almost a distaste for the people that they've got to recruit to be their voters, because, and it roused out that has written beautifully about this in the New York Times.

I'm not saying anything Ross Dow that hasn't said a million times is like the elites sort of created this populist, they ginned up a lot of populist energy to win electoral victories in the Republican Party, which was then to implement the ideas that this narrow elite was going to put forth. And, you know, evangelicals, you know, have been pretty happy with that arrangement. Well, I think that candidly speaking, I think evangelicals really need to rewrite their relationship with political conservatism and Republican Party, because they're essentially, you know, evangelicals have kind of been chumps, I think, in a lot of ways, and it issues pay more attention.

I just say this, pay more attention to movement conservative institutions, assuming there's ever another Republican president, look at who staffed in the senior most positions, look at who they're nominating for judgeships and say, wow, are they really like reflecting us on our interest or things at all. I think, you know, that's a good thing to look at. We shouldn't ignore those sorts of things.

Yeah, I think you hit on a lot of important issues there. And on the one hand, there's some things that we might say are failures or areas of growth. I think there can be an unhealthy kind of biblicism.

It can be a good thing if biblicism just means we're radically about the Bible and proving things and show me in the Bible. But a bad kind of biblicism that cuts off evangelicals from larger philosophical currents or trends or natural laws, sort of thinking, I think in short circuit, evangelicals thinking creatively and making arguments that have broader cultural purchase on some of those issues. And as I read the Cotton Eddie book, just so much of it, you know, everything, not surprisingly, conversations are happening in New York and DC, or other, maybe Chicago, maybe LA, they're happening in cities.

And, you know, people like Tim Keller have tried to change this, but by and large,

evangelicals are not in cities. I listened to some of the probably the same kind of folks on podcasts and things and or read stuff, whether they're still podcasting or not. And it's amazing how many of these people have stories about growing up in New York City.

Now growing up in the Midwest. I know there's it's the biggest city. I don't know people who grew up in New York City.

I don't I don't know people that that's not my world, let alone the world of East Coast private school education or leave there is a whole, even not a social strata but just a kind of milieu as you said that I think the rank and file PCA SBC church member is not a part of it. And I think evangelicals. This has been true from the very beginning, for better or worse evangelicalism, such as it is an identifiable ism is is a popular level movement.

That's a middle class movement. It's a middle class movement. It's Heartland is really suburbia.

And, yeah, here's some realities we may not like but we have to face. The power centers of America are basically New York, Washington DC, San Francisco and LA. Right.

That's where it's at. And that's not to say that people from outside of there can't have it influence. Silicon Valley was built by a lot of Midwesterners who moved there.

That's a great article. I think it's by Tom Wolf, actually, the tinkering of Robert Nozick. Yes.

They talk all about that. So that's not to say that if you're not from there, you can influence, but that is where the sausage is made in America. And so that's reality.

Some places really are more powerful and more strategic than others. However, we might not like to think that. And in the middle class mindset of evangelicalism has really shaped, heavily shaped how we think about the world and how we engage culturally, how we engage institutionally, how we think about things, etc.

Yeah. And let me just say this to our credit, I think. So I'm a pastor and I'm interested in these things and that's why I'm having people like you on Aaron to talk about them.

But the last thing I want is, I suppose not the last thing, you know, the last thing. There's lots of last things. But one of the things I don't want is for the church as the church to suddenly think its mission now is to reclaim America or its mission is to make conservatism great in America or something.

I wrote a book, What is the mission of the church? I'm a Presbyterian, I believe rightly construed in the spirituality of the church. So I don't want to see pulpits across this country deviate from preaching about verse by verse through the Bible and preaching about the glories of Christ and the glories of the incarnation and God's sovereignty and character and holiness. That's what I want to be front and center.

I don't want our pulpits to turn into just outposts of conservatism in this larger social sense. Nor do I want the church to lose sight of what its mission is to make disciples to plant churches. So I think, yes, if you look who's going to produce a book that's going to help you understand the Bible's probably going to be evangelicals.

Evangelicals are going to be busy out there, planting churches, staffing crisis pregnancy centers and trying to win people to Christ and raise their families and they probably have bigger families on average than many and are going to the soccer games and bacon cookies for the bake sale and they're doing that kind of life. And so as much as I want to see an intellectual influence from reformed, even evangelicals, I don't want that at the expense of staying true to what our mission is and what I want, say my church's mission to be, which is not, first of all, about America, but is first of all about the Kingdom of Heaven and discipling people for that. And so I do see deficiencies and yet some of those deficiencies are the flip side of evangelicals doing the things that evangelicals do really well.

Well, I would say we have to be careful not to equate evangelicals with church or evangelicals teachings with pastoral teachings. One of the things that the Catholics do very well is that they have not ordained intellectuals who are recognizably Catholic who are bringing something to the table. One of the things that I'm trying to do is come to the table with my high level expertise from being a gene director in a consulting company from being a senior fellow in a think tank and saying, "Ow can through my writing," which by the way, you can find it [Aaron Ren.com](http://AaronRen.com). Go subscribe.

So through that, to basically influence evangelical church in the world being an evangelical but not being pastoral. And so you look at why the men, this is where I got me interested in men. It's very easy to talk about this today.

It was harder when I started because nobody knew about these people. Why do people turn to Jordan Peterson and not to the church? It's because Jordan Peterson is a PhD in psychology and he had a clinical practice and he's got a lot of expertise in the realities of gender and psychological research and all that. Whereas pastors really don't know much about the topic, to be quite honest, when pastors start talking about dating, they often engage in a lot of wishful thinking.

And they start talking about things that are neither in the Bible and frankly aren't even true. And this is where purity culture, I think, went off the rails. And Joshua Harris, as he was deconstructing his faith, basically admitted in, I guess, dating goodbye that he presented as if they were sort of biblical commands, things that were really sort of life advice.

And so I think we put way too much of an expectation on our pastors to have the answer for everything. Where instead we need to have lay people who have genuine expertise, which means they have to actually cultivate that expertise. That's the evangelical mind.

Become world class experts, become world class leaders, and yet be spiritually formed through even to an evangelicalism. Right. What does it mean to be an evangelical governor? What does it mean to be an evangelical intellectual? What does it mean to be an evangelical psychologist talking about gender issues? We have to take our seat at the table through the lay side of our ministries, not through the church, because that's where we really get kind of off base, I think, in some ways.

We get sideways. We try to make the pastors like they got to have the answer to everything. When pastors don't have the answer to everything, nor should they have the answer to everything.

And so that's where I think we need to encourage more excellence in our people and encourage more leaders. I really feel like this is where the faith and work movement was appropriate, but has not really produced the kind of leaders that we need to see, unfortunately. And so we need to, I think, completely reformulate what we're doing there.

I mean, my most controversial statement of the day is that I kind of don't see that as a successful movement at all. And we need to start thinking about what does it mean to be an evangelical intellectual in the sense that we have Catholic intellectuals like Patrick Deneen. Or people of that nature.

And why do you think we don't have those evangelical intellectuals in the same way? And I totally agree with what you're saying, both, and I am a pastor. We don't want pastors to be experts. We don't want to presume they can be, nor do we want pastors to stand up and speak.

I mean, this happens, and I'm sure I've made these mistakes too, but you're dealing with a parable say, and it has some economic impact. And so the pastor thinks he starts making very sweeping economic statements about economic systems. And you think, no, you really don't know what you're talking about.

You should stick more narrowly to what this text does say, because pastors should be experts on some things. And if they're trained right, and I teach at a seminary, they really are experts on some things, but you're absolutely right, Aaron. Pastors are not experts on most things.

And there's a way to faithfully serve the cause of Christ, or the cause of the common good as a Christian, and you're not a pastor. But you're being disciplined and being fed with important Christian truth. And that means too that we don't have to, every important thing doesn't have to come under the auspices of a local church elder board.

It's one of the hard things as a pastor is to say no to people who have good inclinations, have good ideas, and they want to even do good things and just say, well, we're not a

cult. You don't need my permission. Just go do that good thing.

But I think there's an instinct to say, well, it doesn't really matter unless it's in the church bulletin, and it doesn't really matter unless the pastor's kind of celebrating it and championing it. And that's just going to create a bottleneck, and it's going to create a confusion about what the church is really about, and then what these other Christians in their workplace can do. But let's go to a very concrete example.

Why do you think there are no evangelical Christians on the Supreme Court? We have, it's kind of like, you got Robbie George, and you got all sorts of Catholic intellectuals who are there, and then you got Carl Trueman. He's in the mix now. And he's not even an American.

Yeah, Carl, come on. Why have we been bereft in this way? Well, there's no doubt that the intellectual classes have tended to be less Christian for a very long time. You know, even going back to the founding fathers, they were not all Orthodox, let's just say, to the extent that they were Christian, they were long liberal Protestants.

I mean, the elite America was the domain of liberal Protestantism in many respects, and the collapse of the mainline tradition is really in a part of what decrystionized these things. And so there's probably never been essentially evangelicals, probably have never had, you know, at the table there. It's just, so there's just fewer kind of Bible believing people who go there.

You know, we also do have a lot of people who go to, you know, we have a lot of conservatives and a lot of evangelicals who go to Harvard Law School. Most of them aspire to go into business, because I like they went to private practice, they go into business, the idea of shooting to be on the Supreme Court. Just don't see that.

You know, I think the guys I know who are top lawyers, if we're evangelicals, they're in private practice, you know, in some way, you know, or they're the general counsel of a big hedge fund. You know, or something like that. And so we haven't had people go there.

And I do think middle class culture is actively hostile to the cultivation of excellence. And maybe I'm overly influenced by Indiana, which has some uniquely negative culture here. But I always say that the culture of this state is very suppressive of the pursuit of excellence.

You know, if you try to say, well, why can't we have something nice, you get like attacked. And evangelicalism actively preaches against aspiration, in most cases. I aspire to be in the Supreme Court.

That's selfishness. That's a quest for power. I mean, what is, you know, when does anyone ever say, oh, that'd be great to have a child call in the Supreme Court.

I think there is a sense in which we tell people that if they have aspirations in life, that's idolatry. That's like you're making an idol out of that. All of the teaching is basically contrary to the idea of becoming truly excellent in something and aspiring to lead something.

Yes, I would like to be the governor of the state because I think I have a lot to offer to the people of the state. That's like not something that you're going to hear a lot of affirmation of if you're an evangelical. It seems to be all about, this is a little far far afield.

And I'm certainly not the only one who's made this observation. I almost think there's a certain Buddhist inflection to evangelicalism. And I really noticed this, you know, in kind of the urban church area where it's like, if there's anything you want in life such that if you don't get it, you're upset, then by definition that is an idol.

And ergo, the only way to avoid idolatry is to essentially empty yourself of desires. And the teachings on men are very much like that. Men are to be essentially purely servants.

The idea that a man might assert his own interest or himself in any way is completely delegitimized, treated as almost sinful in the evangelical church. So we've got this kind of sense in which any sort of personal cultivation, aspiration, desire to lead is essentially denigrated culturally and theologically in the church. Even though I think the New Testament is actually quite favorable to, for example, desiring to be an elder.

He who desires becoming elder desires a good thing. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be in leadership. There's nothing wrong with having your own ideas about things.

You know, we just don't have a culture. I think if anything, we have a culture that suppresses and delegitimizes that. And that is one thing I would change.

It's actually a good thing to be in charge of something. It's a good thing to become a world-class intellectual. There are a lot of things like that that we could do a better job of culturally affirming.

I think we have an allergic reaction to ambition because we know that there's vain ambition, but there's vain ambition because there's some good ambitions. And I think the, again, the evangelical default, which sometimes serves us well and sometimes doesn't, is to be very suspicious of our own motivation, desires, especially when it comes to ambition, especially anything that may use the exercise. The exercise of power.

That's especially suspect. I want to come back to that in a moment. But I want to ask you about evangelicals and elites.

Before I do that, I just mention our other sponsor, Westminster Seminary Press. Turning out lots of good books. Thankful to have them partner with LBE and check out they have

a new website, WestminsterKids.com. So this is what the church does really well.

And that's to help train up kids and young people and people in our churches to learn about the faith. Or at least that's what we're trying to do well. And I think many reformed evangelicals do.

So this is a great website dedicated exclusively to curating biblically faithful books. So if you're saying, "I want good books for my kids, WestminsterKids.com" helps you filter and helps you get some good books for kids. Aaron, you've written about elites.

And this was helpful to me because I'm not someone who's read, I didn't even know there was a whole literature. I guess there should, I shouldn't be surprised, there's a literature on everything. But there's a whole literature and study of elites and elite theory.

And you've done a lot of reading in that area. What do you think we don't understand about elites and then say why if we're critical of elites, we must be willing to become one of them? Sure. The truth is every organization, every human society has an elite.

There are elites, there will be elites, there will be people who are in charge of it. So it's not a swear word. It's not automatically evil stormtrooper music.

I can't remember the person who coined it but decided the iron law of oligarchy, which is that there's always going to be a small group of people who end up running anything. And that just seems to be sort of what it is. And so, you know, there are going to be elites, there are going to be leaders.

If you look at even revolutions that we assume are like populist revolutions, in fact, there are very few cases of populist revolutions that succeeded. If any, typically if there's some sort of genuine peasant revolt, it is invariably crushed ruthlessly. Revolution succeed when there are factions of the elite that get behind them and lead them and shape them.

There's almost always elite, even revolutions are almost always elite shaped endeavors. You know, James Davis and Hunter has done a lot about this and cultural change in his book and to change the world. He's like, well, you need to think about like how this actually works.

And so, I'm not saying that everything originates in the center that everything originates with elites. But at some point, if there's no elite buy-in, there's no faction of the elite that doesn't support what you want, then you're probably not going to change anything. You have to kind of earn some of the elite to your cause.

And so the question is, right, do we have good elites or do we have bad elites? And so I got very interested in this through studying the work of the sociologist, Edig B. Baltzel.

He's basically unknown today, but he's the one who popularized the term Wasp for white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. And so a Wasp is not just anyone who's a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

A Wasp was really a member of the upper class. And we really miss so much about history when we fail to account for class issues. So much of the literature that you go back and read in American literature is obsessed with class, like the works of Edith Wharton.

For example, you can't understand half of literature in history until you understand the idea of class and social class and things of that nature, which we sort of pretend doesn't exist today. And Baltzel was the foremost scholar of the old Protestant establishment. And he actually believed it was a good thing for there to be an upper class that predominantly staffed the elites.

He actually don't want to go too much detail because we could really get down on the weeds. But just briefly, the upper class are the people with high social status. The elite are people who hold the key positions that actually run things.

And in his view, an ideal scenario was when a critical mass of upper class people actually held the elite positions. That was his definition of establishment. He wanted that to happen, and he wanted this upper class to absorb sort of new blood that proved itself worthy.

And when you inch up in a scenario in which the upper class basically closed itself off from sort of new men of merit and refused and did not take up these elite positions, that would be a problem. And so the reason that you wanted this is because upper class society had a sort of code of conduct, and they sort of had an internal discipline to them that would allow them to essentially enforce the norms, the rules of the game, if you will. Why do we behave in a certain way? Why does a man behave like a gentleman? Because that is the code of the upper class.

And they enforce that on their own people, and men who did not behave like gentlemen did not get invited to the dance, so to speak. And these begin things everyone was expected to aspire to. Why don't men behave like gentlemen anymore? Because we have no more upper class and no more upper class code of the gentleman anymore.

And so the fact of the loss of this idea of the gentleman is one of the many consequences is sort of the fall of the establishment. And so we have today essentially what he would have called a de-classed elite, who are people who are, it's sort of an, the elite are no longer a social group. They're just an economic or functional group.

They're very dominated by kind of petty personal concerns. They're dominated by ideologies. They no longer are held accountable to any sort of moral code of conduct.

Many of the old ideas of like fair play that were values of the old establishment, they're now completely gone. And so as we've seen this transformation in the elite, it is more open in a sense, and maybe there's goodness in that, you know, people like myself from sort of peasant backgrounds have more opportunities than we used to. But I think we have to also acknowledge that things have not gone well.

Again, we have declining life expectancy in this country. There is no greater sign that our elite are failed than the fact that we cannot oversee society with that. You know, our power grid reliability is going down.

It's objectively the case. The number of people installing backup generators is up like 10x in the last decade because our power is so unreliable today. That tells you something profound about the way society is going.

And I'm not one of these people who think it's over by any means, but if we want to change this, the answer is not going to be a populist rebellion. It has to be some sort of a regeneration of the elite. And that's also the case within, you know, kind of the church as well is, you know, we need to update and update our software, reformulate, reformulate ourselves for a new era.

If we want to meet this challenge, it's not a bad thing. That's why it's not a bad thing to be an elite. And we need a leads and we're going to have a leads and if the elites aren't very good, which aren't right now, then as I've said before, it's incumbent on us to not just sit here and critique, but we have to step up and be willing to serve.

When we have opportunities, we can't just say on the sit on the sidelines and take pot shots. You know, so that's what, you know, we have. You know, there are real problems.

Yeah, there are real problems with elites and yet, and I think you've pointed this out. If we just use elite as shorthand for bad people that I'm not around or bad people that don't have me in their club, nobody ever admits to being a useful shorthand. Right.

Yeah. That's right. I'm not an elite.

The elites are other guys who are messing up. The elites are the elites, the elites are the elites, no thing. So I do think that the term elite has so much negative baggage that I'm sort of reformulating how I talk about it because I think the, we do have the language that we use is important because we need to say things in ways that people are going to pick them up.

So I'm trying to move away a little bit from this, talking too much about elites and talking towards excellence that we need to pursue excellence. I like that, you know, pursue the pursuit of excellence is really important. And, you know, the pursuit of competence and then the pursuit of leadership positions.

These are some of the things that go into a, you know, I want to be part of the elite. I just think it's a negative. It's kind of a negative term today.

So. I don't know that I'm ever going to have the power to reclaim the word elite from all of its negative competitions. But, you know, I think that the idea of what's behind it, we need to find a way to talk about that in ways that people will step up to.

For if you can stay around for a few more minutes here and I want to just kind of go into one more area of conversation before I let you go. I said I told you for an hour but thank you for staying on. And I'll just set it up this way.

I'm teaching a Sunday school class at our church, early church history and I'm focusing on a different important individual from church history each week. And yesterday I did Constantine. I'll get that lecture up on my website, KevinDyoung.org sometime this week probably.

And it occurred to me in preparing an hour lecture on Constantine that we're arguing about the same sorts of issues. 1700 years later from the conversion of Constantine, the same sort of enduring tensions. You can almost map out many of, not all, but many of our online disagreements in a Christian tribe with just a simple kind of Rorschach test.

Was Constantine becoming a Christian emperor in trying to favor Christianity in the empire? Okay, it's never one or the other. Basically good or basically a fall from grace with the church. There are two very different narratives and that's a historical question but it comes down to us with sort of intuition.

Should we expect or should we even desire that church and state, are they implacably opposed? Should they be aligned? Should one be over the other? I framed it this way when I was talking to our people. One of the questions of Constantine that you can ask for our time as well, would it be better if it's very hard for people, if there's a high social cost to become a Christian, or if there's a high social cost to not be a Christian? Which would be better? And of course it's some of both. There's dangers either way.

There's a high danger of nominalism, of people who are deceived, who think they are Christians. There's a high danger of hypocrisy when the social cost is to opt out of the Christian mainstream. So you might say, well then if we were just persecuted, if we were just martyrs, if we were just then it would be, well the church might be pure perhaps, but would it be better? Would it be able to send missionaries? You can talk to people who are evangelizing on college campuses and they'll tell you even how much things have changed in the last 15 years.

And it's much harder to get a hearing. It's not all bad when there's a certain cultural pressure that, yeah, to be a Christian would be a good thing. So it's this larger Constantine question which comes to one of the buzz words, I guess it's two words of the

day, and that is Christian nationalism.

Aaron Rynn, are you a Christian nationalist? I don't like the term nationalism all that much to be honest. Again, simply because, as I talked about a lead earlier, it's not a term that has any real valence in America. I don't think it's the way that Americans have ever thought about themselves.

Although the people who kind of advocate for a classically Protestant conception of the relationship between state and faith and all that, I have no problem with that at all. I think they're doing great work on that stuff. It's above my pay grade.

I think the bigger questions are there are other questions underlie this, and I keep going back to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, and he does a great job outlining this. He calls it the dilemma of renunciation. And you basically have two choices.

You can either set a high bar, like a really high bar for people to become authentically Christian at the point that only a handful of people clear it. And therefore, you either have to have a tiny sect, or you have to be comfortable with what he called two-speed Christianity, which is what the Catholic Church has and what it had. You have the super Christians who are the people in the monks, the priests, the people who've sworn the vow of poverty, celibacy, obedience, all that stuff, and you've kind of got the average people.

There's sort of two standards there. Or you try to, you say there's only one standard, you only have a one-speed Christianity, which invariably means you either have a tiny number of people, or you sort of have to have the least common denominator Christianity that most people can plausibly get over. And so, you know, one of the underlying questions there is how many people are among the elect? And historically, the answer would have been very few.

There's actually a famous Catholic sermon called something like "On the Fewness of the Saved." This idea that it really was a narrow gate. By the way, I don't know the answer to this question, or told what the answer is. But if you think that there aren't very many people who are saved, then you're probably going to set the bar for what it means to be saved, to be a Christian, very high.

Whereas if you think that potentially most people can be saved, then you're going to set a pretty low bar. And so I think your answers to this question, like how much persecution should there be? If you don't think there are that many, like, authentic Christians, then the idea that you have to be like a martyr, or somebody who undergoes persecution, and these very, very high bar concepts makes a lot of sense to you. If you think that most people are saved, then probably most the average person is not going to be able to live up to these extraordinarily lofty standards of standing firm under persecution.

So I really think there's a lot of stuff that underlies this that we don't think about that candidly I don't have the answer to. I just look at it this way. There's going to be somebody running our society.

Okay, and do we want that somebody to be a Christian and somebody who's favorable to Christianity and who's leading that society in accordance with, you know, basically the laws of God? Or would we rather have an evil ruler? Would we rather have a pagan ruler? Would we rather have someone who's going to implement evil policies? I don't know why we would ever favor having an evil ruler over a good ruler. Maybe God could use some of the other things, not all pagans were evil rulers. There are righteous pagans in a sense of good government and all that stuff.

But nevertheless, just because God can use this sort of stuff to create saints or whatever, I don't think necessarily means that that's the desired state of affairs, and that will not be the desired state of affairs in the age to come. That will not be the state of affairs. I would much prefer to have the society run by Christians, personally speaking.

Right. If we have somebody running it. It's like, say, would you rather be in charge or would I have somebody that hates me in charge? You know, I mean, those aren't the only two options.

If you put it in that terms, it's like, well, yeah, I think I would rather be in charge. Or someone who doesn't hate me to be in charge would be good. I mean, again, I'll think with the limit.

There are just two choices. There's a range of choices. I would rather have a competent non-Christian be in charge of the sanitation department, right, than a Christian who doesn't know what he's doing.

So, you know, there's a lot going on there. There's competence. There's qualifications.

But the idea that the belief, the moral belief systems of our rulers don't count for something is a little crazy. Right. And I'm with you.

It's a much larger discussion than the Christian nationalism. I mean, I wrote the last couple of years. I mean, I've wrote blog posts that the only people using that designation were people who were critical of others.

And it really has changed in the last year. Now, a lot of people on the right are saying, yeah, bring it on. I am a Christian nationalist.

I am for that. And it's like a lot of isms. Well, what do you mean? Do you mean the idea of a nation's state is important and to have Christians influencing it and to recognize a Christian heritage to it is important and good and desirable.

That's one thing. Or does Christian nationalism, like you said, mean some kind of European view of nationalism? And, you know, I've heard you talk about this before too. I think it was helpful.

That's not how the American tradition has talked about. There's a reason that the heroes in the revolution were called sons of liberty. They weren't called sons of nationalism.

Sort of that in the water, in the DNA, for better or worse, the American experiment was a desire to be set free from tyranny. And I think just on practical levels, people will get farther and have more lasting of the world. And have more lasting effect when they tap into some of those, some of that language and some of that tradition.

So, Aaron, where can people go to find your stuff and any other resources you want to recommend from you? I'm asking you to go ahead and get a plug. So, number one thing that I would say is go to my website, Aaron Ren.com, A-A-R-N-R-E-N-N.com. And sign up for my newsletter. There's lots of great free content there.

Everything that I do will ultimately make it there. I'd also like to tout a book that I created, which is a modern English translation and adaptation of John Owen's Mortification of Sin. Everybody touts this book.

Tim Keller loves it. John Piper loves it. The problem is it's inaccessible to most of the population because the English is too archaic and difficult.

I actually created essentially an NIV-like paraphrase translation of the entire book into modern English. And then also did things like gave good chapter titles and section headings and things like that that actually help you make sense out of it. It's a very highly rated book.

So, I think it's a great way to reach this important work, which, mortifying the sin in our own lives is really, really critical. And so you can buy it anywhere, but it's easy to find on Amazon. And the best way to identify it is to see that it's got me as the listed as one of the authors.

But also the cover is a part of the image of Giuseppe de Roberra's painting, The Tears of Saint Peter, which you can find very easily. I think it's in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. So it's a wonderful cover that my designer created.

Aaron, thanks for being on life and books and everything. And thanks for giving your time and keep up the good thoughtful pursuit of excellence that you're doing. So glad that our listeners can be with us.

Until next time, glorify God, enjoy him forever, and read a good book.

[Music] [Silence]