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Our Ancient Faith: Lincoln, Democracy, and the American Experiment with Allen Guelzo

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

He must be one of Kevin's favorite historians and favorite guests, because Dr. Guelzo is back for an unprecedented third visit to the LBE book-cave. Although Dr. Guelzo's new book is about Abraham Lincoln, Kevin and Allen talk about much more than just Lincoln—everything from John Locke to Christian Nationalism to progressivism to a healthy dose of Reformed anthropology. And no, Dr. Guelzo did not watch the Super Bowl.

Chapters:

0:00 Intro

6:40 The Lincoln Book

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48:00 Has Virtue Disappeared?

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Transcript

Greetings and salutations. Welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin D. Young, Senior Pastor at Christ, Kevin and Church in Matthews, North Carolina.

And today I am joined by the first-ever three-time repeat guest. I think when you get to five, then you get a golden jacket or some other paraphernalia. But Dr. Allen Guelzo, who is the Thomas W. Smith Distinguished Research Scholar in the James Medicine Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University.

That's a long distinguished title, and he's taught at many other places, and has written many books. And I am having him on today. As you can tell, he is one of my favorite authors and historians and an all-around delightful guy to talk to.

So *Our Ancient Faith, Lincoln, Democracy, and the American Experiment*, which is either just out or just about to come out by Alfred Knopf. I always wondered how you say the name. They insist that the first thing you're corrected about, they don't even look at the text that you've written that they're supposed to be editing.

First thing is, make sure it's Knopf. Knopf. Dr. Guelzo or Allen, if I may, thank you for being with us.

I just asked you before we hit and record, so I'll ask you again. We're recording this on Monday morning. Did you watch any of the watch a Super Bowl? Is that now a point of deliberate intention? I've gone this long or simply no interest in the Super Bowl.

Simply no interest in the Super Bowl. Are you a sports guy in any other way? Not terribly much, although one major exception I do make for it is baseball. And well, you could speak like a true American historian.

If I have any sport bones in me at all, they are the bones of a baseball person. And it won't surprise you that I spend some time with baseball history. And well, that may be for another broadcast.

Yes. And have you talked to George Will about baseball history? The very first time I met George, and this was I guess 20 years ago, the first question I asked him was the likelihood of unassisted triple plays. So we didn't waste any time.

They're very, very unlikely. Very unlikely, but he was able to give some examples. I bet he was.

Well, thank you for being here. What were you doing instead of watching the Super Bowl? Something Lincoln, I hope? Oh, yes, I was working on a Lincoln text, actually his letter to James Cook Conkling from August of 1863, because one of the projects I'm in the middle of is preparing an edition of Lincoln's political writings for Cambridge University Press. So it'll be a single freestanding book with all of Lincoln's major political comments and writings.

And the Conkling letter is a very important item in that collection. Nothing like that exists yet. I would think with so many collections, there's nothing quite like that.

The Conkling letter tends to turn up in almost every anthology of Lincoln's writings. And there have been numerous anthologies through the 19th century, in fact. But Cambridge University Press is creating a series of American political writings.

And it has done volumes on Hamilton. It's done volumes on George Washington. It has in prospect a volume on John Jay.

And one of the things they wanted to do and include in that series was a volume of Lincoln's political writings. So the editors of the series suggested that perhaps I might be interested in doing that volume. Before we jump back into Lincoln, I'm just curious, you surely you're involved at some level with some people, maybe at the highest level of the government, I don't know, but in planning for 2026, 250th anniversary celebrations, are you doing any of that? Not really.

I spoke one time to a commission for the 250th anniversary of independence. But that was simply speaking at one meeting about in fact, what I was doing was reflecting on the experience of 50 years before at the time of the bicentennial. There I was I was very active.

I was actually in those days I was a tour guard during the bicentennial in Philadelphia. And I wound up with many interesting stories to tell about the groups that I piloted through Independence Hall, through what was then the Liberty Bell Pavilion, and so on like that. But what has really surprised me has been the apparent lack of interest in the approaching 250th anniversary of independence.

I did some consulting two years ago for Carpenter's Hall, as they were preparing for the anniversary of the first Continental Congress, which would of course be this year, the 250th anniversary of that meeting in October of 1774. But as much work as we put into planning for events and applying for funding to the national endowment for the humanities, we returned down. Really? So there's there has what has really struck me is how very little public interest there has seemed to be in the approaching 250th anniversary of independence.

Certainly nothing. Nothing like the explosion, the frenzy almost of attention and interest that we saw back in the 1970s. Let's jump into the Lincoln book.

So Alan, first question, you've written a great biography and we've talked about it before on Lincoln. So why another Lincoln book and how is this one different? This is a different book because almost everything I've written about Lincoln up to this point has been a narrative. I'm a history person.

Narrative is one of the principal tools that historians have for communicating with people. This is a different kind of book. This is thematic.

This is topics. And rather than giving you a start date and an end date, what I do is invite

people to come and talk about themes. And especially themes connected with democracy and what we can learn from Lincoln about them.

And it's occurred to me to take this different angle and to approach this subject because these have not been happy times for this thing we call democracy. They haven't been happy times in a number of ways. I can remember growing up that it just seemed in those days like the old Soviet Union, the whole block of communist countries, seemed to have such power, such influence.

We just seem to shrink in comparison and you were fearful of the future. And then, and then in 1989, the Berlin Wall comes down. And two years later, the Soviet Union implodes.

I thought I'd never live to see anything quite so dramatic. And it appeared at that moment that democracy was on this, this rising arc that Francis Fukuyama was right. We had arrived at the end of history and that end was democracy.

And that it began to crumble, it began to crumble, I think really with 9-11. And ever since we have been watching the long withdrawing roar of democracy in so many different places, we're now dealing with a Russia that had a brief moment to stand in the sunlight of democracy and then has lapsed back into authoritarianism. We've seen one of the great world economies.

Some people may not be the single biggest world economy. In the hands of a totalitarian system, we have seen democracy under assault collapsing from within place after place after place and even in our own country. We have had questions posed to us.

Is this democracy thing really workable? Does it have so many problems, so many internal contradictions that in fact, it's going to fail? There is an almost palpable sense of anxiety about this. I don't know, maybe people are surprised if I don't follow the Super Bowl, but they may be more surprised if I quote as an authority on this, Elmo. Also a surprise, yes.

Well, I only noticed this because it popped up on a newsfeed, but the Elmo character, you know, Sesame Street and so on like that, apparently Elmo tweets and he tweeted two weeks ago, something to the effect, how are you all doing? The answers he got back were a tsunami of depression. I got things so terrible. I can hardly wait to get from Monday to Friday.

I can hardly get out of bed in the mornings. Everyone just seemed to be in need of some kind of comfort. And I think a lot of it is attached to our fears that what we're calling democracy is in some way in danger.

Well, there's a sense, I think, in which democracy always feels that it's in danger. Maybe one of the things we need to tell ourselves is, democracy is constantly, constantly at all

times, 24 or 7, telling itself what danger it's in and what problems it's encountering. And the funny thing is, we're very alert to problems that turn out really not to be all that serious.

But at the same time, also totally oblivious to things that really do turn out to be problems. And yet, and yet we have encountered grave situations this way and recovered, come back. Democracy is so much more resilient than we think that it is.

And yet, the voices are all around us that tell us, well, this is problematic. There are voices, of course, on the left side of the spectrum. And they are suspicious of democracy.

They don't trust people. They think that people by and large belong in a basket of deplorables. You've heard that phrase.

And there's a kind of contempt that is very clear in that and which is deeply resented by the people who hear about or read about that. But at the same time, on the right end of the spectrum, there are also people who announce to us that democracy has failed because democracy has no particular moral commitments since what you do in a democracy is you cultivate individual rights and anybody can claim any kind of bizarre behavior as they are personal right. And in a democracy, what right do you have to restrain them? And the argument is, well, this is eating away at the foundations of any viable human culture and human society.

So democracy, in fact, is an enemy to a moral society. And sense in so many quarters that democracy is just not working. And so I, in these topical pieces that compose our ancient faith, have suggested that perhaps we should look to a figure from the past who can tell us about democracy in a time of extremely grave crisis, which is the American Civil War.

And is there something that this man Lincoln can tell us about democracy? Well, first of all, we'll explain to us what it is. And secondly, may give us some realistic hope for the future. And in large measure, that is what I've written the book for.

The book's dedicated to my grandchildren. Yeah, I saw that. I liked that.

Yeah. Part of it, I suppose, is sentimental. But another part is a way of saying, I am passing on to you a generation to come.

A recommendation about hope. In this case, political hope, but still hope. And I think you can derive some measure of that hope from consulting this particular person that I'm describing to you, which is Abraham Lincoln.

So that's very well, well put in summarizing. Well, we're going to get to the hope part, like a good, you know, reformed anthropologist here. I'm going to spend some time on the bad news for a little bit.

So you talked about this left and the right. And you know, several times at the beginning of the book at the end, you talk about, and you just said it kind of are as American people, our ancient creed. And, you know, I'm a generation after you, I grew up in public schools in Michigan.

And so maybe, maybe it's, it was different in the south. And I'm sure it's different today. But I just think I kind of grew up with, you go from the Declaration of Independence, to the Constitution, to Lincoln's interpretation of it at the Gettysburg Address.

And then you maybe add in as one of our other sacred texts, sort of the I have a dream speech, because that needs to remedy what was a massive blind spot and not even blind often, but just evil inconsistency, not living up to our ideals. deals, and it maybe I was naive, but it seemed like there was a shared kind of idea of what America is about. You say at the end, you know, when America was found, we didn't have Toga draped elders.

We didn't have an established church. We didn't have, but what we had were these sets of ideals that ran through these founding documents and then Lincoln's grasping of them at the Gettysburg Address. So, was I wrong to think that there used to be, I mean, it's always been contentious.

I get that, but there used to be more of a shared consensus. And if there was, how did this fall apart? I certainly can remember growing up and thinking that there was such a consensus. Although I think I probably was simplifying, as you do when you're young.

In truth, I think we've always been contesting aspects of what we hold in common. And yes, there is the Declaration of Independence. And yes, there is the Constitution.

Yes, there is, I have a dream. Yes, there is Mr. Gorbachev tear down this wall. These are some great moments.

But in between those moments, there's furious contest, often dissent, contradiction. There were people, for instance, in the 1850s. And this troubled Lincoln, a great deal, who, quite frankly, came to the conclusion that the Declaration of Independence was wrong.

One major example of that, of course, was John Calhoun. Calhoun looked at the Declaration of Independence and said, no, this was a mistake. All men are not created equal.

Very generic, is that what you called him? Didn't you write a review? Yeah. I am not an admirer of John Calhoun. I visited Calhoun's home, by the way.

I was speaking at Clemson University. And Clemson, of course, was built around what originally had been Calhoun's property. So Calhoun's home is preserved there.

But I did go and make the visit. I did write on the guest book. I did, well, I wrote, you know, name, address, from an admirer of Abraham Lincoln.

Oh, you did. I am the sort, Kevin, you have to understand. When I'm invited to Atlanta, I ask to be taken to the general Sherman monument.

Mm-hmm. Yeah. I could see you doing that, yes.

Yeah, a little snarky strain in me. Calhoun is probably the most well-known person who raises these doubts about the declaration, but he's not alone. Many Southern intellectuals do the same thing, and not just Southern intellectuals.

There were their northern counterparts. Lincoln was scandalized when a senator from Indiana got up in the Senate, gave a speech saying the same thing. Declaration was wrong.

This isn't really true that all men are created equal. So we have certainly had our times of consensus, but we've also had our times of extraordinary division. I think we are in one of those times of division.

I think we are in one of those times when people have tried to explain to us the past in terms of selfishness and sometimes illusion. I've been a severe critic of the 1619 project. I think the 1619 project speaks in pretty much the same accents that we heard from John C. Calhoun, the American experiment as a fraud.

So alongside the consensus, there has also been dissent and dissension. And in the case that I'm citing, it brought us to civil war and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. So I don't mean to ignore the consensus, but I also think that we have to pay some serious attention to why the dissension is there, what it says, because at least on one occasion in the past, we paid a pretty severe price for it.

And what did Lincoln then mean by some of these terms? So you argue Lincoln was a classical liberal and he believed in democracy. So give us a layman's understanding of what Lincoln would have understood. And maybe I don't know if he used the word liberal.

He certainly talked about democracies. But what do you mean by Lincoln's embrace of those two isms? Liberalism in the 19th century meant John Locke, in large measure. It's John Locke who really formulates much of what we call a definition of liberalism.

And that's particularly true in two sources of Locke. One is his two treatises on government and the other is his writing on religious toleration. In the two treatises on government, Locke borrows a page from an ongoing intellectual revolution in Europe that had begun almost at the onset of the 17th century.

And that was an intellectual revolution which abolished the notion of hierarchy. It started

by questioning the hierarchical structure of the universe, the physical world, that had been taught by Aristotle and by medieval scholastics, that the universe was a hierarchy, the earth was at the center or the bottom, and then there were this great, this cursus of honor that existed. And everything in the universe functioned according to this hierarchy.

Galileo and Newton undermined the science, so to speak, the Aristotelian science that lay behind that by saying, no, that's that there is no, there's no hierarchy in the heavens. Rather, what the heavens move by natural physical law. So there's no hierarchy there.

All right, well, that established a new scientific way of understanding the physical universe. It wouldn't take terribly long before many people began saying, well, what about the political universe? The political universe up to that time also was governed as a hierarchy. You had the king at the top of a hierarchical pyramid beneath him, the nobles beneath him, the commoners and beneath them, the people in the worst possible condition, maybe serfs, maybe slaves, but still it was a hierarchy and authority, sovereignty, that relied, that resided with the king and then flowed down the hierarchy or the pyramid.

And Locke borrows a page, so to speak, from the new science and says, no, that's not the way politics are hierarchy is not the way politics are. Do a thought experiment. A group of people are cast away on an island.

What are they going to do? Well, the first thing I want to do is eat, wondering where the next dinner is coming from. So what are they going to do? They're all going to set the work to provide for food so they can eat. And maybe they're going to go out in the woods and hunt.

Maybe they're going to plant crops, but they're going to find a way to survive. Then it occurs to them that they need to protect their hunting and their agriculture, because there may be some members of that community who don't want to work. They don't want to contribute to that for a variety of reasons.

They'd rather take from others who are doing that work. So what do you do? You have to hire somebody to be the police. And Locke says, aha, we have just discovered government.

And what people do is they surrender a certain part of their liberty to a governing authority so that a governing authority can protect their property and their lives. Now I'm saying something which resounds in our ears as perfectly logical, normal way of describing government. Oh, that wasn't the normal way in Locke's time.

See what Locke was doing was saying, government starts at the bottom. People look at each other and they say, we're in a state of nature. Anything goes.

People can do things to us. We need to organize. And they organize.

And whatever it is they organize is something they do. The organization's authority is derived from the people who make it. And Locke's conclusion was, if a governing authority the people create to secure their lives and their property isn't doing its job, they can take it apart, build another one.

Well, where have we heard that idea before? Ah, wait, the Declaration of Independence. So liberalism is built first of all in the assumption that there's no hierarchy. Secondly, it's built on the assumption that people organize their own government.

And the authority that government comes from the people who have created it. And a third assumption is that the most important thing that that government can do is to protect the individual rights, the lives, the property, the survival of the people that it's supposed to be governing. So when you take those three things, that importance of the individual, the importance of their decision in creating government, and the fact that government starts from the bottom and draws its authority from the people, there you're talking classical liberalism.

And what is the form that this classical liberalism should take? Well, liberalism doesn't necessarily mandate democracy. John Locke, for instance, was not living in a democracy in 1688 when he publishes the two treatises, Britain is still a monarchy and still a very closed door monarchy. Britain in fact will be overwhelmingly governed by its great noble families really almost exclusively until 1906, when the first non-titled, non-nobled, non-elite person becomes a member of a cabinet.

So what liberalism mandates, so to speak, is not a particular form, democracy, but, and here's where the American experiment becomes significant. When Locke wrote the two treatises and also wrote about religious toleration as a concomitant of that, he was writing to people proposing a thought experiment. Americans, in what was then Britain's North American Colonies, looked at that and said, wait, that's not a thought experiment, that's what we've done from the very beginning.

I know that it's not, it's not terribly much of a compliment to look back on our colonial forebears in this way, but the truth is, Gavin, Britain took all of its unwontons, all of its oddballs, all of its square pegs that didn't fit around a whole, literally all of its kind of religious nuts with guns, if I can use that phrase, and it's basically sent them all to America. America was the stream, they flushed all their unwontons into, and it was, goodbye, have a nice trip across the Atlantic, and don't let us hear from you again. Sometimes that was characterized as Britain's benign neglect of its colonies, but that is really what happened.

Britain didn't spend any money, it didn't try to protect its colonies, if a colony succeeded, well, good for it, if it didn't succeed, too bad, as long as it's going off our nose, but to

please don't expect us to assume any responsibility, fiscal or otherwise. So Britain's North American colonies had to go look out for themselves, and so they did, they set up their own little ad hoc legislatures, they established their own towns, they created their own commerce, now mind you, all those legislatures were technically illegal. They didn't do so much break law as they didn't have any standing, the only legislature Britain recognized was parliament.

But Americans did this, and what shocked Americans was from the 1760s onwards, when Britain decided, wait a minute, these colonies have gotten very prosperous, we would like to extract value from them, and so there begins the long train of legislation which leads to the revolution. Americans balked at that, why? We've already always governed ourselves. Law gave you a thought experiment, but we've been putting it into practice.

So for us, democracy was the logical form that governing our lives as colonies took, and we saw no reason when we read Locke to think that there was anything unnatural or fanciful about that. We took those habits, we threw off British rule, and we set ourselves up to govern ourselves in the way we had been governing ourselves. So you get a combination, you get a combination of Locke's theory, and you get a combination of the practical realities in which Britain's North American colonies had set themselves up, and what you get, you get American democracy, and it's captured in the Declaration of Independence and in a more formal way in our Constitution.

I'm working on a chapter here at Reform Theological Seminary, we're putting together a big massive book that's going to be academic chapters on each of the chapters of the Westminster confession of faith. And so I've been assigned the one that has to do with the civil magistrate because I've John Witherspoon guy. Well, I mean what I'm tracing down is of course that's the one that the American Presbyterians change significantly.

And not only by 1788 and 1789 when the National Presbyterian Church almost literally across the street from the Philadelphia Convention, right there in Philadelphia, but even before that in 1729 with the adopting act, they've already said at 1729 the Presbyterians have, we want you, Presbyterians need to subscribe to the Westminster confession, but oh by the way we don't mean this stuff about the civil magistrate. And so I'm trying to trace why that is because it's not like it's just something that happens as you cross the Atlantic that you change, but it has something to do with the sort of people who are coming as you said, and one of the things happening in Presbyterian history at this time or one of these abjuration oaths that the Presbyterians had to take toward the king and there was something in there just a little fine clause, okay, they could take an oath that they would not be against the Protestant succession of kings. They were Protestants, they wanted a Protestant king, they weren't yet thinking of democracy, but there was a little clause in there that it said oh by the way, and that he ought to be a member of the Church of England.

And the Presbyterians in Scotland thought this was absolutely unacceptable. So that's some of what's in the background which already these Scots and Scots Irish who are here are saying wait a second, we've already experienced and you have the law of patronage which is interfering with who can be the pastors and their churches. They're already saying I'm not sure that we want to give the civil magistrate as much power.

And one of the things in the discussion going on even today is some people are saying sort of wistfully looking back if only we could reclaim the magisterial reformers view of church and government with established churches and enforcing both tables of the law and some reformed Christians are looking back and saying you know that's really, they really got that right and that's really our heritage. And as a reformed Christian I want to say no wait a minute, it didn't take long for people once you weren't on the top making those decisions, you weren't so sure you liked that. One of the things you put this really with a pregnant phrase Alan you sit in the book, one of the golden rules of democracy is do not do unto others what you would not want them doing to you and then follow the rules that you want established for others.

That is if you would not want someone to force their religious establishment upon you, don't do it upon another. Now I'd love for you to talk about that either your own view Alan or you can go channel it through Lincoln but you're a serious Christian and I'm sure you think of these things as a historian but also as a Christian what sort of response would you give to some Christians who say well wait a minute I think that the purpose of government is to work for the common good and that common good ought to be towards our heavenly good and therefore maybe this democracy and this liberalism thing was a mistake maybe Locke well didn't lock hadn't he heard of Romans 13 isn't this whole social contract theory sort of sub-Christian how would you or you can use Lincoln though think you're right he wasn't much of a Christian how would you respond to these sort of Christian objections. I hear a great deal of this too and and not without a certain measure of sympathy because here are good people whose souls are vexed like lot in Sodom at the kind of public behavior that now seems to be not only tolerated but in some cases actively agitated for or the new religion of the state if you or even that yeah yeah and they want to respond to that and they want to say no no what we really should be doing is putting back in place the ten commandments we should be putting the two tables of the law back in place and that should be our standard of judgment and there's one part of me which says I think that would be an excellent thing to do I would have to say that the tables of the law tell us what the ideals of human behavior in human society should be and these are God's expectations for us but there's a great difference between God's expectations of us and our ability to discern and enforce them and sometimes some of my Reformed brothers who are very very trenchant on this subject of how far American society how far American society seems to have drifted in immoral directions their Reformed concern has forgotten one of the chief cornerstones of Reformed doctrine which is total depravity that's right and it is not difficult to see once you reflect on it that

no human being is trustworthy as a human being with the kinds of authority that some people are talking about yes it grieves me yes I am vexed by the behavior of many people in public and especially about the way that that behavior sometimes seems to be sanctioned but at the same time I also understand that the moment I put into someone else's hands the kind of authority that would be necessary in dealing with that I also run a serious risk because no matter how well-intentioned that person is that person is still a center that is someone who is still afflicted with depravity I am afflicted with it I would not want that power and limitations on power first of all are one of the cornerstones of the American experiment but limitations in power are also one of the cornerstones of the Reformed experience because where else where else did Reformed theology shine at its best except in environments when it was protesting unilateral and total authority the Westminster Confession this is 1648 have we reflected on what the year 1648 marked England was in civil war England was in revolt against an absolutist king Charles I and in fact in January of 1649 they will actually take the step of trying and executing the king so we were dealing with an environment here in which yes there are serious problems are we going to make them better do we have within ourselves the capacity to completely rewrite everybody's lives or are we going to make just as awful a mess when power is put into our hands I mean understand something there are two there are two great forces in human politics and human society one is liberty and the other is power liberty is a desirable thing we all want liberty at same time we're not sure we want the other person to have the liberty to do the things that they're doing that we don't like so that's the moment when we want to reach for power now the problem is the power is toxic powers like something radioactive it's like radium polonium even in very small amounts it poisons relationships and this is why the american founders particularly in the constitution are at such pains to limit power some because they're trying to hamstring government almost all of them were involved in government in some way or another what they understood was the power is toxic what you want to do is maximize liberty sometimes that means taking a risk sometimes it means making the people but you take just as much a risk if not more by trying to cure it with this radioactive power so you have to have some power in a society I mean someone has to be responsible for keeping the traffic lights on but the founders understood that what you want to do is you want to use power at its absolute minimum and you want to maximize liberty because you'd rather take the risks of liberty than to run the more much more palpable risks of power and the members of the Westminster assembly in 1648 always had right in front of them a vivid illustration of what power could do to them and that vivid illustration was king Charles the first so they they understood this relationship and that principle of liberty of conscience becomes a huge principle for the american revolution i mean there is there is you know a mingling of enlightenment ideas and christian ideas but of course in the 18th century people weren't thinking well i got team enlightenment and i have team christian and they're very different there there were a whole mingling of ideas one of the one of the ways so i teach an elective course here on the the history of the enlightenment and when i get to some of the american founding and enlightenment ideas i say there are

two different ways you can conceive of government so one way is to say what could all of the people in a society if they were really brought together under one enlightened purpose what great good could they accomplish and let's devise a government that can move people toward this great common good that's the goal of government to help us as a people accomplish some great thing the other view is what will a group of people tend to do when they coalesce and how can government prevent the worst excesses of human nature and clearly the founders leaned more in that second direction which is why the watch word was as you said liberty as the commercial now says liberty liberty liberty for the insurance company it was liberty they had in their mind what are the bad things that can happen and how can a government prevent those whereas i want to save into many of my conservative friends today that i think dear friends some of you have embraced a very not so reformed anthropology and how you view the purposes of government because of an overconfidence and if only our people had the power if only our people and it's easy to look and i agree with you it is vexing and you sympathize when you say well look at what they're doing look at how their side is doing and if we have to play by these new rules and so we're going to use they're using that power against us if we only had the power we could use it against them which is as old as time immemorial and i think there's some wisdom of course the founding american founding isn't you know it's consistent with christian principles i would never say it's the only way christians can have a government of course it's not but lincoln you point out said and i'm going for memory from your book but that he said in one piece you know government really had three functions it was to defend the people against foreign nations it was to defend the people against each other and then it was some basic public works so he put it he put it in a very simple formula he said government should do for the people whatever it is they can't do in their individual capacities or can't do nearly so well acting jointly anything else he said anything else beyond that should be left to people he gave some a handful of examples he talked about insane asylums he talked about houses of refuge for the poor he talked about statutes that governed the descent of property through wills and estates his government government has a legitimate service to provide and that but as soon as you move beyond that lincoln got very very dicey about it because when you do that then you start to move not only away from democracy you begin to move to oligarchy but you also begin to put more trust in human behavior then you really should if there's a one sentence word of wisdom that i think the american experiment captures it goes back to someone i will call one of our reformed brethren all of her crumwell speaking speaking to the to the scott's and saying to them i i be think you that you may be mistaken and it seems to me that there's one very good thing that reformed theology will constantly remind us of it is at that frailty of reason that sense in which we might be mistaken and in that respect democracy has an important lesson to teach not about arrogance and sometimes we can be arrogant we are the democracy therefore we are superior to everybody else i think what democracy should teach us first and foremost is a measure of humility that democracy is always reflecting on the fact that whoever is in charge at a given moment might be wrong there

might be a majority that rallies around you and supports a particular policy and you go on with that and it seems like that's that's the way things go what do you do then with the minority the dissenters well if you are arrogant you will suppress the dissenters they will annoy you so you put them up against a barn wall and shoot them is that what democracy is no democracy says if you're in a majority right now next week something might occur which persuades you that no in fact you were wrong and the minority was right and then the minority becomes the majority and they roll and if they're functioning as a democracy should they will not put you the new minority up against the barn wall and shoot you there's an element of hesitation of humility of realizing the other guy sometimes might be right and i think that that humility is a virtue that we recognize as christians so while i'm not i'm not going to be someone who will insist well democracy is the christian way to do government no the christian way to do government is to submit to the sovereignty of god in whatever circumstance you find yourself but it is a form of government which does involve and embrace at least one christian virtue and that is humility yeah well put let me circle back to Lincoln i'm overdue to mention a couple of books sponsoring this episode first i want to mention the crisis of confidence reclaiming the historic faith in a culture consumed with individualism and identity by carl truman so carl has been on the the podcast several times and carl is a good friend and this is a great book about the importance for christians here we are talking about history and sort of cultural creeds but even more important are christian creeds so check out that book by crossway and i also want to thank desiring god and a new book ask pastor john 750 bible answers to life's most important questions i did a blurb for this book it's really remarkable in that it's piper said uh he was doing making up for a lifetime of sermon applications and so all of these episodes he's done where people ask him anything and they've uh tony rank he has put together in a summer i 750 of these it's really amazing so check that out from desiring god i want to go back to what you were you were saying there allen and think about uh you say at the very beginning that certainly the american experiment it was understood that you needed to have some shared mores and there's lots of famous instances of this from george washington and many others about the importance of virtue that a republic in a democracy cannot exist without some shared virtue and even though the founders were anything from very stalwart Presbyterians and evangelicals to latitudinarians to unitarians there was yet a shared sense virtue was necessary and by and large what they had in mind was some kind of Protestant Christianity is going to produce that and even when you get to lincoln and you've argued in this book and in your wonderful biography though he grew up surrounded by a very strict sort of Calvinism and that did influence his way of probably viewing providence and sovereignty of god yet he never joined a church or expressed a christian creed for himself and yet at the same time he said he never wanted to speak ill of any christian denomination so he seems to have this same idea that the founders had 80 years prior that virtue mattered and some kind of christian faith was important or at least a respect for the christian faith so one have i accurately summarized lincoln there and two application here what then can we do if it seems like that interest in virtue and the

christian foundations for that societal virtue have almost disappeared well we need to work yeah a lot of the times i hear people say well america was once a christian nation and what they're usually thinking of is george washington kneeling in the snows at valley forge it's a great painting i know great great painting one one witness one witness ever claimed to have seen that happen uh-huh and there's some uncertainty about that but there's a there's a commonly held idea that america begins as a christian nation and somewhere along the way usually fairly recently we have lost that and we've become a nation purely dedicated to self-interest selfishness self-preoccupation a kind of nation of narcissists if i can borrow an image from christopher lasch's green book i think there's i think there's fundamental problems with that where we found that as a christian nation well certainly there were christians involved in the founding of the american republic one british disgruntled british observer said that the that the american revolution was mainly a scott's irish presbyterian revolt follow it is jonnie witherspoon oh there were references to the the so-called black regiments not about race but about presbyterian ministers in black garb exhorting their their congregations um and yet when you look at the founding documents exactly what does emerge from them well thomas jefferson will talk about nature and nature's god i'm sorry that's not the westminster confession you look at the constitution there's no reference to god in the constitution and that's despite the plea of benjamin franklin benjamin franklin of all people at the constitutional convention that they should open their sessions with prayer he makes this eloquent appeal and the response is silence and that's okay now for the order of business today so where we found it as a christian nation i think that's an assumption that people are making on some dubious grounds what is true i think though is that we became one and we became one very much through the energies of what we sometimes call the second great awakening right the 19th century actually looks different than 1776 oh it certainly does john marin who taught at princeton for many years made this observation one time that if you want to measure the distance american culture moves between the revolution and the civil war look at what people sang in 1776 they're singing yanki doodle dandy in 1862 they're singing glory glory hallelujah and i thought that that john really captured something vivid in there all right a little bit a little bit of a colorful exaggeration but some real truth there this event we often focus a lot on the great awakening of the 1740 1739 1742 that's usually the good one for you know right because that's it's johnathan edwards it's george widfield it's gilbert tenon as a lot of the heroes especially reformed heroes we we sometimes forget how apical an event the second great awakening was because the the first great awakening yes it gives us figures like edwards and widfield and tenon but it also was much smaller in scope it was western massachusetts western canada it was some parts of new jersey pennsylvania a little bit of mariland and there were large stretches of british america that it didn't touch so we sometimes forget that but in the 19th century this i think i've seen some estimates that will run this maybe from about 1810 till 1835 but it's it's an apical event it is a meteorite strike in american culture and richard carbodine who i think has done more than anyone else in tracking the impact of this great awakening in american culture has said that by the time we get

to the generation of the civil war something like 40 of the american population are either members of evangelical churches or else attenders add them and it's extraordinarily extraordinary percentage how did that happen it happened because people did extraordinary amounts of work which was blessed by the spirit of god but they they set to it with their shoulders to to the wheel of moving people's hearts and minds and churches and institutions and churches and institutions and the growth of those churches and institutions was extraordinary i mean especially almost nothing and by the time we get to the civil war they're one of the great denominations on the american landscape but everybody a congregation list presbyterians baptists across the boards there's an extraordinary explosion of religious interest and growth that transforms american culture so when i when i hear people say today oh if we could only get back to a christian american my response is then we need to work as hard as the people who created the second great awakening we need to dedicate ourselves that way rather than sitting on our hands complaining about it whining about the situation we find ourselves in and then imagining as as i'm afraid some of our friends do that all we need to do is to put some kind of authoritarian regime in place that will enforce the ten commandments no that's the lazy way if you really want to transform the culture then you have to take on the culture itself and you have to meet it on its own terms and you you're going to have to arm wrestle with it and my recommendation is that we take a serious leaf out of the book of the second great awakening if what we want are the recovery of those mores then my recommendation is that that's that is a signal that some very hard work has to get done and we're not going to accomplish it simply by waving our hands and introducing some kind of authoritarian solution yeah i've said before to people it's it's fascinating and i'm sure it's for a reason that at this very moment when there are talks about catholic integralism or a you know a a neo kind of theological Caesar to reign over us with benevolent tyranny in a Christian with at the time when we've been never been farther away from the possibility of these things they're becoming a point of some intellectual discussion and i think that's not an irony i think that's that's the point because it seems like something has been lost and i think we can acknowledge some really painful things have been lost but because of that there's this energy that says the way to get it back is if if we could maybe we could rack up a couple of elections and maybe we could we could turn this around one of the things i was asking and you know what you know we'll do then yes let's suppose we could elect all of our brethren to all the major and significant political offices what will we have elected we will have elected people just like ourselves who are sinners and we will make mistakes and after we make the mistakes how are we going to explain that all we said going up to it was just give us the power we'll change everything around i'm not sure i want to give people even the best of people that power i don't want that power given to me because it's a lesson of tokens ring yes exactly and in that respect tokens ring is a fable not only and i and i i don't i use i don't use the word fable in a pejorative sense i mean as an instructive lesson not only for the world he was writing in the 1930s 1940s 1950s but it but it is a permanent feature that if you put into people's hands the power to do great things you

also run the risk of them doing terrible things and i have to say there's probably no better example of this thing king Solomon king Solomon is supposed to be the wisest of rulers and yet look what wreckage he made of his own life look what happened to his kingdom the kingdom he inherits from his father look what happens to that kingdom afterwards so you can you can talk as long as you like about or what we would if we had the power my anxiety is because i i take total depravity seriously my anxiety is that we don't lose our depravity just because we have good intentions yeah let me ask you a couple of questions if i if i can keep you for just a few more minutes uh so one uncomfortable question with Lincoln was Abraham Lincoln a racist you talk about that in some detail and defining well what do we mean so how you must get that question often and how do you answer it to someone who doesn't have an hour but they have a couple of minutes and they want to know you're a Lincoln expert i've read what he said at the Lincoln Douglas debates is Lincoln a racist should we tear down his statues which is the next question but let's just stick with the first one i'll respond to the question to that does a racist take black men put them in the blue uniforms of the united states put weapons in their hands and tell them to go out and kill other racists does a racist do that i haven't heard too much on the way of significant answers to that question does he say things yes the problem is that in the 19th century a lot of people were saying all kinds of contradictory things that way some of the most prominent abolitionists would say things that we today would shrink at right so in some respects i'm not surprised that Lincoln does that but fundamentally was he a racist did he have retrograde thinking on the subject of race sometimes he did and sometimes were tempted and i say this in the book itself sometimes were tempted to think that Lincoln was a racist and his whole approach to emancipation was limited by that racism no i think we have to invert that this this is a man yes who had some retrograde what we were regarded as retrograde thinking on the subject of race but his commitment to emancipation for everyone was so profound that that commitment overrides whatever defects they were in his thinking about race stacking up against the people of his own age rather than judging him by our own and he is a much more forward thinker but i think that even even if we don't want to do the context argument which i'm very dicey about if we want to say as some people sometimes do to excuse Lincoln well he was a man of his times all right if he was a man of his times then he has no lessons for ours if if we want to say yes he does have lessons for our times we have to take him on our terms as well as the terms of his own day but even if we take him on our own terms what we see is a man whose commitment to emancipation to freedom for everyone was so profound that it overrode even whatever baggage he might otherwise have had on the subject of race so it very well put what would you say to one of the other arguments you talk about in the book is well Lincoln for whatever he said about these limited his limited purposes for government a critique from the right has often been he really was the founder of big government he was paving the way for for the the new deal suspending habeas corpus and raising the profile of government initiatives during the civil war he's the big government trojan horse in american history i can only say come on all right here is a civil war you don't fight a civil

war as he put it with elder stalks charged with rose water yes the government expands significantly no surprise there are three million men in uniform all right that's an expansion of government what i think is much more telling is what happens when the war ends if Lincoln had been the founder of big government you would have seen it in certain ways you would have seen a tremendous expansion in the federal budget and you do see that during the war years you would have seen a federal you would see an extremely expansion in federal employment and federal hiring when you do see that during the war years you would have seen an extraordinary expansion in federal bureaucracy which you do not see during the war years today we have something like 220 federal agencies in lincoln's day he has seven and those are things like the coast survey to fight a war right look look what does lincoln's staff look like in the exact today in the executive office of the president which was created by franklin roosvelt in the executive office of the president we have over 200 personnel lincoln gets through the whole civil war with a white house staff of count them six six six a civil war tell me how this is an example of big government all right well even if you then look at these other numbers about the budget and so on look what happens when the war is over we get to 1865 and what happens for one thing the union army shrinks i mean it does almost a disappearing act within a year of the end of the war the united states army has shrunk back to about 27 000 in strength and it will shrink back still more over the years of reconstruction the federal budget does a dramatic shrink down as well and if it weren't for the fact that the government is now obligated to pay pensions to union veterans i mean if you would if you would like to eliminate pensions for veterans most of the people who make this complaint about lincoln would not do that but if you would like to eliminate pensions for veterans then yes the federal budget goes pretty much back to where it was before federal bureaucracy shrinks again at every point where people want to say lincoln is the author of big government if lincoln was the author of big government by by what magic powder but by what magic words did we suddenly after 1865 go right back to where we were and and stay there in large measure until woodrow wilson and the turn into the 20th century that it seems to me that is really if you want to talk about origins of big government you need to talk about the progressives of the wilson administration you need to talk about what happens in the heirs of the wilsonian progressive which is what you get in the new deal that's when you need to talk about quote unquote big government but lincoln no he he is expanding government but he's expanding it to meet an unprecedented national emergent what what would we expect him to do simply to stand there on the steps of the capital and say to the confederate army you must not oh that would be a really effective way of doing things if ever there would have been grounds for impeachment that would be so the argument that lincoln is the founder of big government i think is absurd and the people who are making it are making it i have at least this strong suspicion are doing it in bad faith but they're doing it because if you make an argument based about abraham lincoln you'll get people's attention if i was to make an argument kevin if i was to argue for you that the origins of big government are with grover cleveland do you think that would make it onto the

headlines of the yeah would that make it on the tabloids no but but if you can say oh lincoln did it then suddenly yes you've got people's attention and it goes back to our previous conversation when you mentioned woodrow wilson uh if ever there was someone who should have been one of our our guys here i'm speaking as presbyterians uh i mean he was raised and reared by a stalwart southern presbyterian who had uh you know these grandiose ideals he might have even owned the phrase christian nationalism which are wilson he certainly envisioned something of a world shaping significance for him and for his presidency and today almost all conservatives would look back and say well that's one presidency that we would have liked to take him all again there was not blaming that on his presbyterianism here that as a presbyterian pastor i'm just saying the fact that he lined up in the right way with some denominational affiliation didn't mean he was the sort of president that those same people would want to see today i think there's good calvinist wisdom and the caution that says be careful what you wish for that's right so give us that last question you talked at the very beginning and summarizing the book explaining the problem that we find ourselves in and you're turning to lincoln to provide some hope and you end the book with some of that lessons so so leave us on a good encouraging note as we look at democracy as fallen on hard times and of course you know much more important than democracy is the kingdom of christ and yet the kingdom of christ is proclaimed through churches that by and large have existed in places in recent memory where there are democracies or some kinds of even you know a parliamentary some kind of freedom and liberty that allows this happen so it's not it's not a thing indifferent for us no so what then is the hope amidst so many headlines that would make us think we're we're looking for we can expect nothing but declension on our way to national oblivion lincoln i think would respond this way first of all democracy has within it an element of resilience it can absorb a lot of punishment we're sometimes tempted to think that a solution would be through authority and power but but kevin the real truth is that authoritarian regimes even totalitarian regimes they look powerful they have big mayday parades with strutting soldiers and generals wearing medals and missiles being pulled through the streets they look powerful but in fact they're fragile they look like they can make an immediate impact but when that impact goes nowhere they fall apart and that's been the history of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes over and over and over whereas democracies democracies get slugged in the jaw they go down on the canvas and you think oh well they're finished but they get up they get up and they absorb more punishment then they start hitting back and they win this historically speaking this has been what has happened over and over again in the distinction between the two so there's an element of hope first of all in resilience the resilience of democracy and lincoln appeals to that resilience in his first inaugural he says speaking over the heads of his audience really to the disgruntled southerners who were already seceding from the union he says why these seem patience why this big hurry why not some kind of confident reliance on the wisdom of the people he says i i'm an anti-slavery person i've been elected president i'm not going to be president for four years if i make a mess of things then the people go to the polls

and elect somebody else that four years is not a whole lot of time to do a lot of damage he's reasoning with people democracy has more resilience it has more room for all of us than we sometimes think alongside resilience for him there was the stability given by law and a democracy democracy unlike a lot of other regimes democracy is a regime of reason debate with people you put your reasons for doing things in front of people and if that garners enough support then you encode them as law other regimes don't other regimes the law is really not law at all it's the whim of the powerful the whim of the oligarchy but in a democracy law is more important than the will of individuals and the function of law can become a guarantee of peace and order and stability in one of the early speeches he gave as a public figure in 1838 the so-called lyceum speech he talks about what happens when law is disregarded well when law is disregarded some people do terrible things to others but what's the impact on bystanders the larger public larger public says obviously law is ineffective therefore what we need is some heroic figure to show up on a white horse anapolian an Alexander a Caesar who's going to impose order on this chaos and that's when you get despotism in a democracy law protects us from that to the extent that we understand the rule of law then democracy becomes strong because the rule of law protects everybody but I think in the in the largest sense he would appeal for hope from us because he believes there is a well of wisdom in a multitude of counselors and isn't this of course the advice given to Job looking at his dilemma there is wisdom in that multitude of counselors democracy is a is a multitude of counselors it says that ordinary people have sufficient capacity they have sufficient insight they have sufficient ability to reason to work their way through the problems of government themselves democracy has a certain element of confidence it says that ordinary people really know how to do this job they're not born with saddles on their backs and bridles on their mouths for some aristocrats to come and rule so Lincoln would appeal to that confidence as well and on all these grounds he would say on the basis of those three things we survived a catastrophic civil war when we've we've most recently had the experience of the pandemic we know what kind of of disruption that imposed on us and in our lives that was that was a major major event of of tectonic proportions but it was small potatoes compared to the American Civil War democracy survives the American Civil War survives it intact continues to function we are still the democracy that was saved in the American Civil War I think Lincoln would ask us to look carefully at what was done then in those years when he was the 16th president and to say if we can be guided as a democracy through that kind of nightmare then we can be guided through the troubles that beset us today and that Kevin I think that is a that is a word of hope very well put the the preacher and me wanted to make this into a nice alliteration resilience rule of law confidence in regular people there you go you can take it on the road you got your three Rs for Lincoln's hope always great I can't wait for your next book Lincoln or otherwise and hope that you'll come back on Alan Gelso our ancient faith Lincoln democracy and the American experiment look for it it will be out if it's not already by published by Alfred Knopf come up with the K thank you so much always a joy and grateful to have you with us so until next time for all of our listeners or if I got enjoy

him forever and read a good book