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## Jake Meador, 'In Search of the Common Good'

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### Alastair Roberts

Jake Meador joins me to discuss his new book, 'In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World' (<https://www.ivpress.com/in-search-of-the-common-good>).

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## Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by a good friend who has just written a new book. Jake Meador, he's the editor of the Mere Orthodoxy website, which hosts Mere Fidelity, and he has written this new book, In Search of the Common Good.

It's a fantastic book, which I highly recommend, and I'm fortunate enough to be joined by him today to discuss some of what led him to write the book and some of the themes within it. So without further ado, Jake, what prompted you to write this book? Well, thanks for having me on. I'm excited for the conversation.

So the start was a number of years ago. I was interacting a lot with Rod Reher, Benedict Option questions, when he was writing about that before he wrote the book. And through

the course of doing that, I was also reading similar books in kind of this religious decline genre that a lot of, oddly, I feel like the market for them is evangelical, but the writers were predominantly Catholic and Orthodox.

So it was Rod Reher, it was Rusty Reno's *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*, Mary Eberstadt's *Dangerous to Believe*, lots of similar books, and Anthony Eslen's had a couple that would fit there. Archbishop Chaput in Philly is another one. And so I was reading all of these books, and then at the same time, I was noticing that in the broader literature, kind of more mainstream presses, you had books like *The Unwinding* by George Packer, which actually predates all of these other books, if I remember right.

You had *Coming Apart* by Charles Murray on the right. You had Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, which goes back to 2000, and the paper that it was based on was from the 90s. And then he wrote a follow-up called *Our Kids* that was actually heralded by President Obama.

And then J.D. Vance's *Heal the Elogy* was this kind of surprise hit. Sarah Smarsh's *Heartland*, same thing, but more from a left-wing point of view. She's a writer in Kansas.

It says *Heartland*'s a very worthwhile book. I actually like it more than Vance, personally. And so I was putting all of these things together and noticing that the Christians are really scared.

They were kind of being driven into the catacombs. But at the same time that that's happening, there's this broad anxiety across right and left, across racial lines, across class lines, about civil society, about neighborliness, about common life. And I'm a Reformed Christian.

I'm trying to think about these things from the vantage point of historic Reformed thought and was starting to kind of ask questions about how does the church approach civil breakdown while also recognizing the need we have within our own ranks to do a better job of catechesis, to do a better job of approaching spiritual formation, especially with our young people. And it seemed like the two problems were linked to me. And so I wanted to write a book about how the church could be faithful, could talk about the good news, in a way that sounds like good news, to a fragmenting society where there's lots of loneliness, where there's lots of fear, lots of anxiety.

So that was the hope. Now you mentioned there that these concerns seem to be voiced by people in all different quarters of society. You see it on the right and the left.

You see it in different racial and ethnic communities. And yet we see our society today as more polarized than it's been for decades. How can we leverage this sense of common concern for social breakdown to address the polarization that we experience in other quarters of our politics and social life? That's a good question.

It's a hard one. So there's probably an answer that is maybe too easy, but it's worth

getting to and mentioning. Because I think you start with what's in front of you, what you can do, with what you have, where you are.

And I think one simple recognition that Christians need to have as we're talking to neighbors, as we're talking in the church, is that a lot of people around us are just lonely and if you believe the Gallup data, about two-thirds of them don't like their jobs. If you believe that pulling on financials, about half of them couldn't handle a thousand dollar medical emergency. If you believe the loneliness studies, about half of them would say they don't have a personally significant conversation on a daily basis.

And so there's, I think, just a lot of woundedness around us all the time. And so the way that we talk about our faith, the way that we talk about political rivals, the way we talk about other groups, is going to tell those lonely, wounded people that are around us all the time whether or not they can trust us. And so I don't want to minimize the degree of the challenge in front of us by just talking about these kind of simple gestures, but I think trying to have an open home that's genuinely open, not just open to friends from church, but is genuinely open to people.

And trying to be attentive to how difficult a lot of people find life right now. There's a line Walker Percy has in *Lost in the Cosmos* where he's talking about mental illness and his very Walker Percy and not altogether comforting take is that depression is a completely rational response to the world that we live in. And so that's morbid, but it's also I think helpful just in terms of being able to kind of name what's going on and frame the way you want to approach relationships.

Now the hard thing when you talk about polarization is that what's happening right now, which actually just in the we've got a three day a week email that's going out from your own now, and so I was just talking about this yesterday because the National Conservatism Conference is going on in DC and this is raising like all kinds of strong reactions because there are some speakers there that I think are bad. But then there's also some questions that are being raised that can get really scary. What we're coming out of is this era where we've tried to basically punt on questions of ultimate meaning as they direct societies.

And so we've basically tried to avoid answering those questions and I hope that if we just maximize each individual's freedom of choice basically is what that means. We maximize how many choices they have in front of them and we minimize the constraints on their choosing. If we just do that people will figure it out for themselves and we don't have to try and direct our politics toward a true good.

Because the moment we do that we're playing with live ammo and it gets scary. And that's not actually worked because you can't actually punt on those questions and when you say our politics are going to punt on them, our churches are going to punt on them, our neighborhoods are going to punt on them, well that creates a vacuum and what's

going to fill that vacuum often is capital. It's big business.

And that's exactly what we're seeing right now. And so the thing that gets difficult with the polarization question is that the way out of this is we actually have to be willing to talk about substantive accounts of the good life as it informs the direction of society and even the direction of our political processes and our political system. What we have right now is we have competing claims as to what that good should be and they're almost certainly irreconcilable.

If you look at the vision, like one of the things to their credit, I think the young Democrats, this leftward swing, as much as the political pundits want to say it's making them unelectable, it's jeopardizing their campaign against Trump, which maybe it is because they're taking unpopular positions. They're trying to take positions that reflect a more substantive account of what they think society should aspire to. And that's a good thing.

Like, as far as it goes, now you can define the good in really bad ways, and I think they do, and that's not going to go well. But they're trying to actually do politics in a more real way than just create procedures. And the right is now also having to reckon with that.

And the traditionalist answers to those questions, even just the Nicene Christian answers to these questions, are probably not going to be reconcilable with the progressive answers. And so I don't know how you would tackle polarization on that level. I think what you can do is you can strive to be a good neighbor to the people that are next door to you, and that doesn't have to mean super ideological stuff.

It can mean saying hello, communicating openness, recognizing when there's a need, and trying to be helpful. And I mean, we struggle with this as much as anyone, because that's hard. But I think that is something that we can do to try and address some of these questions.

But there is that higher level question about how it works out socially and politically, and I think that's a much scarier question, and yet I don't know that there's a way around it. And so it's just going to be a hard process to work through, I think. Maybe in part because the higher level of society is naturally more geared towards ideological divisions, divisions that are fairly abstract, and it's very hard to form concrete common goods that can often protect us from the super ideological stuff.

One thing that I found your book really encouraging on the front of when I've read a number of books talking about the situation of society coming apart, polarization, these sorts of things, the response has been often driven more by fear, the concern of how can we consolidate, how can we protect ourselves from a social situation that is antagonistic towards us. But recognizing that people from across the political and social spectrum feel much the same thing, there is the possibility of mission, a possibility of presenting a

sense and a vision of the common good that answers the deepest desires and hungers of human hearts everywhere. And I think that's, within your book, you talk about the problems of society and you list a number of things that have really broken down, the problems of meaning, the problems of work, the problems that we have in these different areas of life, and then you give a series of responses to it.

You talk about the Sabbath and how that provides us with a sense of the chief end of man, the membership and how that gives us a sense of renewed wonder, and then good work, what it means to have a calling and a vocation within the world. And I feel often when we talk about the problems in society, it's recognizing that everyone faces the problems we're reeling from and the possibility in the church of creating a context where these hungers, these problems and difficulties are addressed, and then treating those problems as a mission field to bring answers that, as Christians, we have a sense of what it means to be part of a unified people that is not defined by race or ideology, primarily, or by any of these other things that so often divide us rather than bring us together and having a sense of rest in the middle of our work and a meaning and a purpose. I was also struck reading your book by how it does not fit easily into one of the political sides that we often think in terms of.

It's not straightforwardly left-wing or right-wing, but includes elements that would tend to tip one direction or another, but brings them together within a broader vision. How do you see a Christian relationship to politics going forward within our day and age productively in a deeply polarized political and politicized situation where the common good tends to be a politicized partisan good? Right, right. So the first place has to be a recognition that you can't give what you don't have.

So I don't even remember I first heard someone say that. I think it was a Catholic ethicist. But you can't give what you don't have.

And so we need to be pursuing wisdom ourselves. One of the critiques I have of the religious right and recent evangelicalism, especially in the Reformed world, is that we often approach these problems. This is not new to you, obviously, because you've taught things from this predominant.

We've approached a lot of these things through this and the grid of worldview can be good in certain ways, but we've reduced everything to worldview. And that has a way of kind of freeing us from the need to think for ourselves, the need to genuinely listen to our neighbor who has different ideas about something. Because you are handed these boxes that you can then kind of sort people into and then you can respond to each box with your pre-written talking points that have been kind of downloaded from the brain of a guru of some kind.

That does not equip you for neighborliness. It does not equip you for citizenship. And you see this in the way that our politics get talked about all the time.

There are exceptions and I'm grateful for them, but often there's not even an understanding of what the other side is aspiring to or why they would desire that. And so there's a certain kind of habit of mind that has to be cultivated and a certain love of wisdom, a care for conversation and attentiveness to your neighbor. These are just the basics of responsible citizenship in any kind of political society, I think, but it's particularly necessary in a democratic republic such as what we have in the U.S. So that's the first thing that needs to happen, I think.

A second layer to this is that I think Christians need to know their own tradition. One of the things that is jarring to me when I watch these economic debates is it just feels completely divorced from what the historic theologians of the church have said about these things. One of the things I try to do in the chapters that deal with economics in the book is I take great pains to cite my sources to establish I'm not just trying to be reactive and left-wing.

I'm reading Thomas. I'm reading Augustine. I'm reading, I mean, Calvin says private property is a relative right.

Now, he doesn't say like private property doesn't exist. Private property exists, but your right to private property is relativized by a number of factors, most notably the right of the poor to have what they need to live because the earth is the Lord's and the fullness therein. So ultimately it's all God's.

So I'm trying to work from the tradition on these things, but that requires knowing what the tradition says. So we need to be reading and thinking about these things not in terms of the framings that the latest political bestseller from whatever pundit we follow is using, but actually trying to understand how Christians have thought about these things traditionally. So I think like for me, I've found Catholic encyclicals helpful.

I'm Protestant, and so I don't feel obliged to agree with them on everything. I know Catholics don't feel obliged to agree with them on everything, which is a little bit different. But I have found them very, very helpful.

I think the discussion, I think it's in *Quadragesimo Anno*, which was written in the 1930s, talks about wages and workers. And it is just a well-of-course assumption for, I don't remember what Pope wrote that, but the author of that document, that workers should be able to support their families off of a single wage. Yep.

And if you, I mean I had this happen with a friend from church where I was talking about the idea of a family wage, and he thought I was off to crazy town. And I was like, no, it's just a very standard assumption in Christian moral thought. Once we actually get into an industrialized economy where wages are a thing, if you're a society that says you value the family, you value children, then one of the partners in the marriage needs to be able to care for the children.

And that means they're not going to be a worker bee in the industrial economy. And that means, I mean this is kind of, Chesterton has that great paragraph in *What's Wrong With the World*, where he talks about setting fire to the modern world with the hair of a redheaded little girl. This is the process, though, is it's gonna say, okay, if you say you value children, good, you should.

Christianity says they're good. We're straight there. You need a parent to care for that child.

Because the kind of care that children need cannot be, like, you can't find its equivalent in a professionalized setting. It's just not the same thing. That's not to say daycare workers or anything like that.

But it's just different. And you want to have the care of the family for the child. And if you say that, then you will need to have a family wage so that that family can live, like, I mean, I'm not talking about living luxuriously, but living at a good standard of living off of the wage of that one worker.

And this is just a standard Christian assumption for a long time. And yet today, if you brought it to either the Democrats or the Republicans, they both think you're crazy for different reasons. But that's just one example.

And so we need to actually know what Christians have historically thought about these things. And then I think the third thing would be that we need to know how to distinguish between kind of political objectives or goods that we're aspiring to realize and policies that we might try to leverage to realize a good. So in the book, I talk about doctrines and policies.

So a doctrine might be something like caring for the poor or solidarity with the poor. There are multiple policy mechanisms that we could use to try and promote that end, to like kind of submit ourselves to that political doctrine. So it's not fair or right to say, well, if you care about the poor, therefore you need to support this kind of law about wages.

You need to support. Now, there are going to be some kind of laws you shouldn't support if you care for the poor. It's not just open season on policy by virtue of we focus on a doctrine.

There are policies that violate doctrines. But there are also multiple policies that can affirm a doctrine. And this is very much about the connection between the good and the right.

I mean, we recognize it's good to show hospitality, but that doesn't mean that everyone who comes to your door wanting to stay overnight should be invited in. There's a recognition that the right, the question of what is appropriate to do in this particular situation, what obligation does the good place upon you within this situation, that's a

more complicated question. And those questions of policy very much fall into that category.

That doesn't mean that the good has no force within the context of specific concrete situations. Yeah, well, what your country is capable of providing at a time, what your household is capable of providing at a time, there is an ordering to our responsibilities. Like all of these things are true.

And I think the ability to recognize these things while also recognizing this is a political objective that we should have, that's a good foundation for then being able to say, you're in your state legislature or you're on city council, or I mean, sure, you're in Congress or something. If you can do that kind of spadework ahead of time and identify these are the goods we think we should aspire to as a society, this is why, then when you come to sit at the table, hopefully there are ways. And I think you've seen this, there's been small wins in this way.

It's becoming less common because our politics are getting nastier. But you can point to things where a Republican and a Democrat, just to take the easy example, look at something and say, that's not right and we're going to try to define a policy to fix it because we both agree that we don't want that. That's just government, that's politics.

That's recognizing also that when we don't collapse doctrine into policy, so the idea that you oppose a particular way of helping the poor doesn't mean that you don't care about the poor. When we recognize that we share the same doctrine, but there are different policies, we can have a far less antagonistic conversation and there will be differences, but those differences will be broken down to a less threatening proportion. It also probably provides you in most cases with a mechanism for judging the policies.

Because then you can, as best you can, try to reason out where is this policy going to trend and judge it by that doctrine. On that front, it's been interesting to see the issue of work that you very much foreground within your book being an issue of increasingly common concern from people on various sides of the political aisle. So I think of something like Aaron Kasser's recent book, *The Once and Future Worker*, that that raises many of the sorts of concerns that you're raising here from a more conservative perspective, but yet one that would have a great deal of commonality with certain concerns raised from the left.

I wonder whether this approach to the common good provides ways of recognizing common doctrines where those have been disguised by differences in policy. Right. No, I mean, this is kind of horseshoe theory, right? Where you get people that can be... If you imagine the political spectrum as more like a horseshoe, the people that get all the way to the right may actually be closer to the people on the far left than they are to the people up in kind of center-right, center-left positions.



Just this week, Tucker Carlson was talking at the National Conservatism Conference about how much he loves one of Elizabeth Warren's books. Now he also said lots of other things about Elizabeth Warren. The two-income trap, I presume.

The two-income trap, yep. And so I do think you could take like Orrin Kass's stuff on workers, Tim Carney's stuff on alienated America, some of the other things you might find in American affairs or first things, and you can set that next to some of the questions that, I mean, even the kind of supposedly so extreme and radical young House Democrat contingent would be concerned about, and you can find arguably more common ground between them than you might find between, I mean, even like Josh Hawley and mainstream GOP senator right now. Well, I mean, even look at the way that Hawley's gotten covered.

National Review and the Bulwark have been extremely critical of his proposals. I haven't seen him getting covered as much by the left yet, but the center-right has been very hostile to what he's doing in Congress. And yeah, I mean, it's an interesting time when you have these kind of realignment things happening.

It's also kind of scary, but So if you were to describe some of the concerns that as Christians you believe we should be bringing to the broader issue of work within modern society, what would some of those concerns be? I'll start with what I'm focusing more on in the book and then I'm going to tack on something else that I've been thinking about a little bit more directly more recently. But I think work has to first of all be as be evaluated by how it promotes the health of creation, it promotes the health of neighbor, ultimately promotes life. A friend of mine made the comment to me when I was writing the book, which is enormously helpful, I don't make it unstuck in that chapter, that it's not wrong to say that work is ordered toward producing wealth if we understand that life is a more basic form of wealth.

That's a very John Ruskin position there. Yes, yes, and I read Ruskin years ago and then my friend Charlie made that comment to me as I was writing. I was like, that's helpful.

I'm gonna run with that. So yeah, I think that's the the baseline. It's just thinking about our own work in that way.

There almost certainly are going to need to be some significant policy or things done to make that approach to work more feasible for people. Because right now our economy is not structured to encourage that kind of work. Another thing I've been thinking about more lately is just how essential is it to good work that the person owns the whatever the organization is they're working in, they have a strong sense of ownership.

And I don't... Something of that vision in scripture where it talks about everyone under their own vine and fig tree. Yeah, yeah, they own the means of their... Yeah, I don't get into it in the book a lot because I didn't want... The thing that was hard with this book is I

was trying to do a very high-level overview on a lot of things and so I didn't want to go too far into the weeds on any one thing. Because it would distract from the general thrust of the book.

And I also just want to have more time to think and kind of reflect on things, do more reading. But yeah, something Romero says, Oscar Romero, the martyred Catholic Bishop from I think El Salvador, is he argues that in scripture ownership of land is seen as a pretty essential marker of I mean wealth, but also just of communal health. And that when you don't have land something's gone wrong.

And so that's something I'm thinking about more right now. I've got a number of books on my list to read related to that. But if you do you make that kind of move toward a really strong ownership-centered view of the economy, which would seem to both require some kind of redistribution of productive property and also a refashioning of the household to make it productive.

That's going to just overturn a lot of things and be a very messy process and my anti-revolutionary shoulder angel is cautioning me. So I'm thinking about how far to go with that. There's a challenge, I think, again a policy challenge that we can recognize these good things.

And the question then is how can we have non-revolutionary approaches that really seek these goods. And one thing I'd like to hear your thoughts on, just for the sake of clarification for people who are listening to this, your book is titled *In Search of the Common Good*. How would you define the common good? What does common good mean? It's a term that's thrown around a lot.

Yes, it is. What do you mean by that? This keeps coming up on the interviews. It's funny.

It's predictable, I suppose. So the argument and the reason that the title works the way it does is that common goods are goods that must be shared to be fully enjoyed in their true form. So the idea that a lot of people kind of have, and I just took this analogy from my friend Jose, is that we kind of think of the common good as being kind of like a pizza.

And if the pizza is large enough that everybody gets a big enough slice to satisfy them, the common good has been served. So it's this kind of broad public benevolence toward all people, generous benevolence toward all people to make sure that everyone has enough, whatever that means. That is actually talking about maximizing private goods for people.

That's not necessarily bad. Private goods are not bad. They're just private.

A common good is something that has to be shared to be enjoyed. So the illustration I use in the book is orchestral piece. If you wanted to hear Bach's Mass in B minor, you need to hear the whole orchestra.

If the first violin goes off by themselves and only plays their part of the Mass in B minor, you have not heard the Mass in B minor. And so common goods are things that we share in order to actually enjoy. So neighborliness would belong to this.

I think the life of the church is a kind of common good. And so my argument and the reason we're searching is that I think the way society works right now is that we're basically hostile to common goods because the fear, not altogether unreasonable, but the fear is that having these kind of things in common is actually a hindrance to the individual's freedom. And so if we define, again going back to what I was saying earlier, if the good life is to maximize individual freedom, which means maximizing choice, minimizing external influence, then it becomes very hard to sustain common life.

I'm reminded there's a story on, I think it's on Medium, about a couple. It's called something like, First They Found Love, Then They Found Gender, or something like that. And it's about this trans couple.

I think one is trans and one is queer. It's been a while since I've read it, so forgive me if I get the details wrong. But it was very telling that one of the partners in the relationship had lived as her birth sex, which is a woman for a number of years.

She'd married and she'd have a couple kids. And the husband and the kids disappear from the story almost immediately. Because she has this internal struggle with her own identity and it gets worked out in the context of this relationship with the partner that's profiled in the story.

And it's held up as this great heroic good thing. We never actually hear from the children. And so that's a extreme, but I think a telling example of how another common good, family life, something that presupposes mother, father, children, that are literal products of their love, and literal products of their family's love, going back generations.

This is a common good that we should enjoy, that's essential to human flourishing, I think. That is seen as a threat because of how it necessarily inhibits what you're able to do. Like, I have three little kids.

When I get off work today, I'm not going down to hang out with my friends and watch a baseball game at the bar. I'm going home and I'm going to be changing diapers and reading stories and cleaning up dinner. And that's part of the common good of family life.

It is a bit of a squeeze on my personal freedom. I have a Catholic friend who told the story one time. He said he was at an airport getting ready to head out of town and he has three kids.

And two of them have Down syndrome. They're adopted and they have a biological baby as well. And he was talking to this couple that was this kind of classic professional

bourgeois yuppie couple that was traveling the world and pursuing, I think the way that they put it to him was something like pursuing genuine or authentic human experiences.

And my friend's comment on Twitter was, I had an authentic human experience last night. My kid got in my bed with my wife and I and went to bed. And so like those are all, those kind of experiences are baked into the common good as we experience it.

A common good we share in religious life. I'm gonna stand next to somebody on Sunday who's politics I probably strongly disagree with. I'm going to pass the communion tray to someone that wronged me once, maybe more than once or somebody that I've wronged more than once.

These kind of the common life that allows us to share these necessarily social goods. It really does inhibit individual freedom and that's very scary, I think for a lot of people. And again going back to what we talked about at the beginning, disillusionment with work, loneliness, depression, anxiety, all of these things.

It makes entering into those kind of communities really hard. And that's to say nothing of the added mistrust that grows out of the me too slash church too moment. One of the things our church does really well that I'm grateful for is we require every volunteer in Sunday school who does that.

You could be walking kids from one classroom to another. You are required to go through child abuse prevention training, even just do that. And those are the kind of things that you do to make it feel safe to people that don't trust these kind of communities that they can enter into this community.

And that is kind of there's a certain consequence. That's kind of the cost of admission and it's a very low cost like no one should have any objection to doing these kind of things. But I think we need to be doing things.

We need to recognize that these common goods are necessary parts of human happiness. A great deal of our dysfunction right now comes from the fact that we either don't really believe in them or we live in a world that is hostile to them and yet there are reasons for that hostility. There are reasons for that lack of belief.

And so as we commend those ways of life to people which genuinely are a good thing, we need to be mindful of why people are suspicious. To be able to talk about it in a way that acknowledges those fears. Your book talks at many points about the actualization of context in the church that would address many of the problems that we have of alienation, isolation, and lack of meaning and other things like that.

But your book also I think addresses throughout the retooling of the imagination to be able to see the world, other people, our work, other things like that differently. And that retooling of the imagination is in part a matter of the arts, literature, you reference a lot

of books that have influenced your way of seeing the world. And also something drawn in part from the practices of community within the church that exemplify a way of being community that and recognizing membership, beauty, wonder, these sorts of things and meaning in ways that can speak to our crises within society more generally.

Particularly for instance the way that you give the example of a lifeboat community and then recognizing the reality of membership, which I'll get you to unpack in a moment. And also the ways that when we think about the world purely in terms of quantifiable categories of wealth as opposed to the well-being of a good life in enjoyment of common goods together. How do you see Christians playing a part within the arts, within the life of the church in retooling this imagination for society that maybe has lost it? So there's a line, I think it's from Athanasius, it was an early church father who was writing on miracles.

And he talks about how there's a way of thinking about miracles where it's a kind of rapid acceleration of the natural process processes of how creation works. And so you could even look at the wedding in Cana. It's not unusual that wine came from water.

Water allows the grapevines to grow. Grapes are largely made out of water and humans through their affection and creativity and knowledge have discovered how to turn that into wine. What is miraculous is that Christ accelerates the process.

I think when you recognize that then the world becomes much more interesting to you because you can be, I live in Nebraska, I'm surrounded by cornfields on all sides. I wish I was surrounded by other kinds of fields given some of my thoughts on agriculture, but I'm surrounded by corn and soybeans a lot. Although not so much in Lincoln, it's a town of 300,000 people and most people don't realize this when they think of Nebraska.

It changes the way you look at those fields as you're driving on a state highway. If you can recognize that there is something truly miraculous happening here, we just don't always think of it that way because it's normal to us. And yet it's the way that God has deemed to provide for us to have food to eat, to have employment.

And so I think when you can make that kind of move then everything around you becomes a little bit more interesting. I remember this was a big deal for me actually because I grew up in this dispensational church that had no regard for creation whatsoever. Very much a it's all gonna burn anyway kind of thing.

And I remember discovering Reformed thought in college through RUF and I was reading a book called *Far as the Curse is Found* by Michael Williams where he was talking about God's love of the creation. And I got done with the chapter and it just felt like this really affirming thing of like you can go out, you can go make a pot of tea, you can go sit on the porch, you can look at the birds, you can enjoy the warm air, you can see your neighbors walking by and this is enjoying a good world that God's made that he wants

you to enjoy. So just on a baseline level, I think that kind of reframing of how we look at things is really important.

I also think there is a particular call for certain people particularly artists to help us to see that miraculous nature of the world. And actually, we just had a piece go up in Muro today where the author was quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins who I think does an extraordinary job of this helping us to see ordinary ordinary things in a way that causes us to look at them a little bit different differently. I think poetry does this beautifully.

I think hymns can do this really well. One of the reasons I love singing old hymns in church is it reframes the way I see God and the way I see Scripture in similar ways. Sometimes I'll come across a line that I haven't heard before in a hymn and it opens up new vistas for me.

So I think having integrity in your work and bringing knowledge to your work, particularly in creative fields, is a wonderful opportunity to help people to see the beauty of the world. Maybe even for the first time in some cases because we're so bored by the world often. But I think also to grow in their affection for it and love for it.

Wonder and curiosity and love and affection, all of these things are bound up together. And so part of learning to be astonished by the world is learning to love the world. Your work, I think, and your imagination has been deeply shaped by the work of someone like Wendell Berry who can be very suspicious and even hostile to modern technology.

The computer and other things like that. But yes, you have really been a key part of forming a neighborhood online. In mere orthodoxy, creating a context where there can be charitable conversation between people from various sides of the political aisle within an appreciation of common doctrine, our commitments to the truth of Christian faith and a sense of what the common good would look like.

Now, I'll be curious to see how you relate the Wendell Berry aspects of your personality to the far more I suppose this exploration of a very new medium and the creation of communities that in a context where it's very hard to form a place, but yet you seem to have created something that is very close to a place where there can be genuine exchange and a sense of a common good. How do we take the insights of someone like Berry and apply them to a world that can feel uprooted and disconnected and isolated online? So just for myself, the story with Berry is I picked him up in college senior year after I kind of wrapped up work on my thesis and was trying to impress a girl that I wanted to date and that didn't go anywhere. But in the process of it, I discovered Wendell Berry because she recommended it to me.

And so I picked up Jaber Crow about two months before I was moving from Lincoln, which had been my home my whole life up to the Twin Cities and Jaber Crow just put all of these doubts in my head about whether or not I should be doing that. My family has

been in Nebraska since like 1882. My family's been in Lincoln since the 1940s.

My grandpa came to Lincoln after serving in World War II. He grew up on a farm a couple hours north of here. And then he played minor league baseball and he served in World War II.

And then when he came back home, he got a job on the railroad and that was in Lincoln. And by then I kind of felt pop committed to the move, but I had very like inner, that I wasn't talking about with anyone, but inner misgivings about it because of Berry. But then a year later I ended up moving back.

My wife and I, we started dating in the Twin Cities and she had lived here for a while. So we moved back together. And if you both feel committed to Nebraska because your family's been here 140 years and you also have some general sense of a call to the life of the mind, writing, you're kind of squeezed into certain mediums out of necessity.

I don't have any educational ties to media institutions that would get me a job. I don't feel like I could move to D.C. or New York to take a job. And so here I am in Nebraska working on this thing online because it's what's in front of me.

Something that I have a friend who once asked Berry, how do you begin cultivating the kind of community you envision when you are living in a city and you don't have any way of acquiring land and moving into the country to farm? And Berry's response, and this doesn't surprise me, but I feel like it surprises people who think he's not, somehow like not aware of how difficult these things can be. Berry's response was you do what you can with what you have where you are. And so if you can have a small garden, if you can become more aware of where your food is coming from, if you can aspire to neighborliness and realize it in some small ways, then you have done a good thing and taken a step toward refashioning this kind of social fabric that we've been tearing at for years.

And that's all that you can do in some cases. So I think a big part of what's happened with Miro is it's been a work of necessity for me. But it's also because we're independent, because we're not, like it's afforded us a degree of freedom in terms of what kind of writers we've published, what kind of pieces we've published, and what kind of space we want to be.

And it's been able to be shaped kind of according to these ideals that I have drawn from Berry, but also from Schaefer was a huge influence for me in my younger years. So it's been a very weird roundabout process of building this kind of outlet that now is more of a thing, I guess. But it grew out of the necessity of wanting to fulfill what seemed to be a vocation I had been given while also staying close to home.

And doing both of those things in a cultural context that's extremely hostile to both of

those things. So there's a line Tanya has, that's Wendell's wife, in Look and See, which is a wonderful film about Berry and Tanya. They've been married for 62 years now.

And so the interviewer is asking her about it and her comment is, it hasn't been perfect, but it's been right. And that as a description of a lot of types of work that need to get done has stayed with me. Jake, thank you so much for coming on.

This has been a wonderful conversation. Thanks for having me. I highly recommend that people buy your book.

It's called In Search of the Common Good. And you should be able to get it online or in any good bookstore. I would recommend it as a hopeful and a challenging book that speaks very much to a range of issues within our society and gives Christians a way of responding to them with a vision and with concrete practices and with a hope that is not only helpful for ourselves, but also missional as we go out into the world.

Thank you very much. Yeah, thanks for having me on. This has been fun.