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From Wales to America and Back Again: Lessons from a Life in Ministry with Derek Thomas

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

In this episode, Kevin is joined by his friend and RTS colleague, Derek Thomas as the two of them talk about pastoring, preaching, and why Derek loves Columbia, South Carolina. Derek shares about his conversion (through reading John Stott), some terrible advice from his vicar, and the differences between pastoring at a small church and at a big church. You'll also hear the story of how Derek and Ligon Duncan were finalists for the same ministerial position (which went to Ligon!). As Derek nears retirement, this episode is a great opportunity to listen to some of the lessons he's learned in almost five decades of ministry.

Transcript

Greetings and Salutations! Welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung. Glad to have you here.

I'm going to introduce my guest in just a moment. Derek Thomas, who I'm very glad to have with us, but I do want to thank our sponsor, Crossroads, and everything. Thank our sponsor, Crossway, and mention this new book by Michael Reeves called *Evangelical Pharisees*, the gospel as cure for the church's hypocrisy.

There's obviously more issues than just Phariseeism in the church, and yet that's a perennial one. And in this book, Mike studies three essentials of Christian doctrine that Pharisees misunderstand. They're approached as scripture, understanding of salvation, and disregard of regeneration.

So that's a new Crossway book. Grateful to Crossway for their support of life and books and everything. And Michael Reeves' books are always edifying.

Derek Thomas is the senior minister at First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, and he's from the Great Land of Wales. We'll talk about that in a moment and give a little bit more of his background, Derek. Thank you for joining us on this sunny

Carolina morning.

It's a great pleasure, and it's a cloudless day here in Columbia today. So it's wonderful. Yeah, just an hour and a half south of here.

Now, you have an evening service. We have an evening service. So if your scruples allow after the evening service, did you watch any of the Super Bowl? No.

It wasn't. I didn't do it with scruples, but I just don't care. I just was not invested.

I was going to glimpse it for five minutes, but actually never going to run. Well, that's quite all right. Better for you.

Do you care about rugby golf? What do you you went to something? Yeah, so I quite like watching golf, and it was the Phoenix last weekend. It's got still in Arizona, and it has that crazy 16th hole where people throw bottles and beer mugs and stuff. When everybody gets a hole in one, although I don't think there was a hole in one this year.

Ricky Fowler got a hole. He had an ace on some some social. I don't know.

Yes, this sort of background for a good Sunday afternoon nap. And it was nice to see Scottish Sheffler win since he's a member of PC PC in Dallas. Is he a member there? Yes, and the last time he won a tournament, he was in church the following Sunday.

I think he's a golfer. I remember asking Sinclair about golfers and Christianity and not being able to attend church since the last days over Sunday. And he just said, it's their job.

Like like nursing or electricity workers who work on Sunday. That was his answer. Well, good.

If it's good enough for Sinclair, good enough for me. Here around Charlotte, we we like to root for Webb Simpson. He's a he's a good Christian doesn't go to to Christ covenant, but we got a lot of friends.

Actually, one of our forget which child because I have nine of them, but was born at the hospital. The same time that web and his wife were having a child just down the hall. And so we met in the cafeteria and my kids got to say hi to the famous golfer.

It was a good bit of Providence. So just just have enough babies. You'll be in there sometime with some famous person.

Yeah, my time for having babies is long gone. It's long gone. Do you have grand babies? I do have two grandchildren.

They they're in Glasgow in Scotland. I have a granddaughter who's 16 going on 19 and a

grandson was 14. Okay.

And how often do you get to see them? Well, in the flash, maybe twice a year, they're coming over in April. Rosemary, my wife just was in Glasgow a few weeks ago. But because we see them on FaceTime, you know, living in 2023 is a whole lot easier.

So we FaceTime, not every day, but probably every other day. Really? It makes a big difference. Yes.

It's one of the good technologies. So can I say happy birthday? It was your birthday last week? It was. Is this a big one? I've taken down all the balloons that were in this office.

I was 70 last Tuesday. And how does that feel? Oh, my goodness. I think I think I went through the collie wobbles at 40, 50 and 60 were non-eventful.

But 70 just sounds really old. What are the collie wobbles? Anced fear. Okay.

Right. All right. Well, I'm 45.

So I'm halfway through the decade of the collie wobbles. I can barely remember 45. And I announced to the congregation three months ago that I'm ready to retire.

And I'll stay on until they find someone. They had a difficult time finding a replacement back in the 90s and the church kind of split. It was speaking for like four years.

And the older folks talk about the four years in the wilderness. So to try to avoid that, I'm going to stay on until they find my replacement. And that might take a while.

And when was so you came in 2013, 10 years ago? Well, I came on in for that. 2011 as the evening preacher for Sinclair Ferguson and had two wonderful years of close ministry of known Sinclair all my life. But they were two very precious years.

And then when he left, you know, it was thought in Sinclair's mind when he asked me to come to be the evening preacher that I would then become the senior minister, where Presbyterian Church, not an Episcopal Church. And so they did have to go through the motions of such committee, but in three months time, I was called as the senior minister. So I've been the senior minister for nine years, but I've been here 11 years.

And when did Sinclair come? 2005. So he was here for seven years. I mean, that was, I mean, not flattering you or Sinclair, but I mean, to have Derek Thomas and Sinclair Ferguson, your morning and evening preacher, that's a pretty good deal for that church.

I don't know, you didn't watch the Super Bowl. So I can't say it was Tom Brady and Patrick Mahomes or something that the illusion would be lost on you. But that must have been a sweet time for the congregation and for you because I know what good friends you and Sinclair are.

It was a very sweet time for me, for sure. And I'm not always sure that the congregation realizes what they have. When they hear it every week, when they were listening to Sinclair every week, you know, I sometimes wanted to sort of shake a few of them and say, don't you, don't you realize what it is that you're listening to here? But this congregation loves preaching of all the congregations.

I say all, but I've only been in three congregations. And this one for sure, you can hear a pin drop when you preach. There's a, there's something about the architecture and the positional pulpit and the balconies wrapped around you.

And you can have, you can have eye contact with almost everyone except the ones right in the back in the balcony. But it's a wonderful place to preach. I've enjoyed it immensely.

And what's, what, what are you hoping to do in retirement, a good pastor preacher, never really quite retires? But what's your plan for hopefully many more years? I'll continue with Ligonier and maybe, maybe, maybe do a little more. If that's possible. I'll continue to teach.

You and I both are here at Charlotte. We never see each other, but I'm typically there on Thursday afternoon. I'm there Wednesday morning.

Right. And I've asked Ligonier, the chancellor, if I can continue and he said yes, continue until I drop. I'll stop before I drop, but yeah.

But I enjoy, I enjoy that because I'm only teaching courses that I actually like teaching. Right. I can choose my electives.

So you'll, you'll stay in the Carolinas? Yes. This is home. Our friends are here now.

And we, we love Columbia. I know it gets mocked by Charleston and Greenville and probably Charlotte too. But there's, there's something of a character about the city and you're, you know, you're two hours away from the beach and you're two hours away from the mountains.

Not, not that we throw that often. You got a zoo. My family goes down for the zoo.

We have, we have family that my, my brother-in-law and his family live in Lexington. So they live just outside of Columbia. So we've forgotten it.

Yes. Yeah. Do you go to the zoo often? No, no, no.

When the grandchildren were smaller and they came to visit, we would take them to the zoo. But it's a good zoo. Well, kept.

So I, we'll get to life and ministry just a minute, but while you're on Columbia. So I'm

reading a, a book on, well, I have it right over there, but it's called something like Sherman and the burning of Columbia. So the perennial question and I'm not going to, I don't have a dog in this fight, but who burned Columbia were coming up on.

It was in February of 1865 toward the end of the Civil War. And then there's, there's been a long debate. Did Sherman order it? Did he allow it to happen? Or was it a, a, a bunch of things, drunken soldiers and cotton in the, in the streets that were burning and it really wasn't Sherman's fault.

I'm not asking you to settle that 150 year old debate, but did those sort of things still come up? What, what's the, is that still part of not maybe that issue, but that's still part of Columbians identity, 150 years ago and what happened in the Civil War? Yeah, I mean, they still talk about Sherman's troops and the damage that they did to the city and, and the surroundings that conversation comes up quite a lot. There's a, there's a story and it's not, it's not provable. It sounds a wonderful story and, and it's, it sounds as though it might have happened, but it might have been embellished and it might have been made up.

But the caretaker of first Presbyterian Church was a different building than the one now. But in the same location, same spot, it's been there for 228 years. It was established in, in 1795.

And when Sherman's troops came through, they asked where was first Presbyterian Church and the caretaker pointed to first Baptist across the road, and they burnt it down. I think I don't tell who to tell that story. I think in.

Yes. Yeah. In his history.

David's wrote a history of first press. Oh, 25 years ago now, I think. And.

It's a wonderful book. I love, I love books on a church's history. I love the one that, that Phil Reichen edited years with, with boys on the history of 10th.

There's one, the Sean Lucas worked on with first press Jackson that you're familiar with. And then this one, I'm sure there's many others. But especially these old churches.

I just love to read of the stories. And they're hard stories to tell because any church, Southern church that lived through the period of slavery and civil war. I mean, there's good things and bad things are likely things.

And they were on the wrong side of some, yeah, some really egregious things. I didn't, I guess I had forgotten. And I was just looking at David Kohun's book, but Thornwell married a witherspoon.

Right. Yeah. I mean, I think not a descendant of John Witherspoon, the signer, but, you

know, a shirt tail cousin or something.

But there's the witherspoon's basically settled in South Carolina. James Henry Thornwell, you know, is an immense figure from the 19th century and was a minister here. I have to push myself.

I think that I'm in the same. He passed it. He was a relatively young man then.

But I say quite often that his view of the ruling elder, that part of his ecclesiology, the office of the ruling elder still dominates first press. When you, when you sit in a session meeting with 48 elders, and you ask yourself, who's in charge here? Well, it's not me. It's, it's this body of men.

And I think that's an inheritance that has been passed down generationally from James Henry Thornwell. So let's, let's go back and we'll work our way up to the, to the present. I'm going to start with a book that you didn't write, but I bet you've read this book by your good friend and I've met him several times but you're very close to Jeff Thomas.

You've read this book. So in the shadow of the rock Reformation Heritage books just came out the end of last year. Jeff Thomas was for over 50 years pastor in Everest with, I'm saying that correctly, in Wales.

And it's a wonderful book. This is not a paid advertisement. It's just, you should read Jeff Thomas is he's, he's still alive and he's, I'm going to be with him at a PCRT conference.

So wonderful preacher, wonderful legacy there at that Baptist church. And he's kind of apologetic in here. Why am I writing an autobiography? But it really is so fascinating to read because it's mostly stories about the professors he had at Westminster and the 60s and the, the people that he's met.

And he has several pages here toward the end about his friend Derek Thomas. Look, if you're watching this on YouTube, you can see, look at this lovely picture there of the two Thomas is. So what, what role did Jeff Thomas play in the conversion or early discipleship of Derek Thomas and why are there so many Thomas is in Wales? Well, I became a Christian in Everest with my first year.

I grew up 38 miles away on a farm. Social historians will tell you that, that the generation that came back from World War two identified with the church but never went. And then the generation after that didn't identify with any church so that that's the history briefly of Christianity and Britain in the 20th century but in the 1960s when I was a teenager, I wasn't an atheist but I'm certainly an agnostic.

I was a math major and a physics major. So I thought that science had all the answers and I told my grandfather and my paternal grandfather that I was going to Everest with university and he was then in his 70s and he lived until he was 96. And he said that's the

furthest I've ever been from home and that was 30 miles.

In my first semester my best friend in high school who is also a physics major but at a different university sent me in the mail John Stott's basic Christianity. And I thought what in the world. But I read it over the Christmas break and within three days.

I'm on my knees, saying the sinners prayer. I'm sure theologically it was awful but but I went. I went to the local Anglican church.

And that my mother associated with and I told the bicker that I'd been saved and he said, no you haven't he said come and see me tomorrow and I went to see him in his home. And we talked about all kinds of things rugby and sport and cars and, and, and he gave me as he went he said too much religion is a very bad thing and he gave me a copy of Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations. And I was like, that's like, that is the definition of above a millstone to hand a young Christian.

I started reading it and you know, I just, I just couldn't understand it. I mean I wasn't, I wasn't familiar with all the terms that we're using. And so I left it.

But when I went back to college. Now you have to understand that in Britain you can drink at 18. So the center of a British University is the bar.

I mean that's the, the lively spot of university. And I was familiar with the bar but upstairs on a Saturday night. The God Squad met the university fellowship for the union, which I, which I'd never gone up to but but when I went back to college I went, I went there and started evening and, and lo and behold my future wife was there.

She was also a math major. As were several others and they asked me where was where was I going to go to church. And I said something like you know, sing mountains in the field or something.

And they said, no you're not you're coming with us. And they took me to Jeff Thomas's church of a place. I just church and that was the beginning of a lifelong 50 plus years of friendship with Jeff Thomas.

Jeff Thomas was then preaching on Matthew's gospel. And I ended up living in his third, third floor apartment for a year. And I've been, I've been in touch with Jeff off and on for 50 years.

And it's one of those relationships that when we see each other at a conference somewhere. And he was, he was in Mississippi last week and he's, I think he's 85 now. But he's still going strong.

But I became a deacon in our workplace. And then did a, did a kind of internship at a church in Oxford for a year. And then came to RTS in 1976.

And there's a wonderful story that I like to tell that I was at the banner of truth conference in 1976 in April in Leicester in England. And Sam Patterson, the president of RTS. And Dick DeWitt, who is a former senior minister here at first prayers but he was teaching systematics at RTS Jackson and I had lunch with them and I said, you know, I really, I had been attending a liberal seminary for about a year and it was horrible.

Every, every class was a defensive scripture. I mean, but you want, you weren't moving from, from the first base. I mean, you were, you were kind of stuck.

And I said, I really, really would love to come to RTS and what are the chances and about three weeks later in the mail. This is more email and stuff. I got, I got a letter from Sam Patterson offering me a scholarship.

And I called him on the phone and calling the United States in the 70s was a big deal. And it was expensive. So I had an egg timer and I could turn it twice.

So I had six minutes to get out what I needed to say and what I needed to say was that I've been dating this girl for about three years. And I wasn't sure about leaving her for another three years. And Sam Patterson said, well, marry the girl and bring her with you.

Yeah, the good advice. So in July, which was barely two months later, we got married. And two weeks later, we were in Jackson, Mississippi.

Must have seemed like a different world. You know, I dread Tom Sire and Herkelberry Finn in high school. And it hasn't changed much.

Yeah, right. And in the book, beginning of Jeff's book, well, all throughout, there's a lot about Wales. And I imagine people listening to this.

We got some people from all over the world by a lot of Americans, I'm sure. And so people know about the UK, although it's confusing for us America, how many countries are there in one country, but England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland. I would guess that Wales is the least known for most American.

I just say, I've been to England, Scotland, Northern Ireland many times. I'm ashamed to say I've never been to Wales. I apologize.

What, what, what do people not understand that they need to know about Wales? How is Wales like or unlike the rest of the UK? Well, Wales would have affinities with Scotland and Ireland because they are Celtic races. And would identify and being general now, but they would identify themselves as not English. And Wales rest of the UK does that.

Yeah. Half of the population speak Welsh as their first language and many more would speak Welsh as a second language perhaps. And that that changes the culture.

Great deal. There are very few highways in Wales and that makes that makes the

country a little more insular, I think. And I, I haven't lived in Wales for 50 years and I haven't spoken Welsh on a daily basis in 50 years.

I still, I still understand what people are saying if they speak to me in Welsh and just find it more difficult. To reply these days. Did you grow up speaking Welsh? Yes, I never spoke English to my father and my grandfather didn't understand English when I just rosemary to him.

The only thing that he could say was, how are you? And then, and then he started speaking Welsh to me and I had to translate. So Derek after training at RTS, you didn't start at RTS then you went and you passed for more than a decade in Northern Ireland. Is that right in Belfast? I was 17 years at a EPC church, no relation to EPC in the in the States, but this was a very conservative denomination.

A bit like the EPC would be here in the States and I was there for 17 years. It was in the center of Belfast city next to the university. And it was a congregation of about 120, which, which in British terms was a large congregation.

I was a solo pastor, there was no secretary, there was, you know, so you did everything I did. I did the college ministry, the youth ministry, the, wow, all the visitation and it was a congregation expected you to visit in the home on a fairly regular basis. And I loved it.

I, I much prefer what I am now in a multi staff church where there's camaraderie and, you know, there were often days. You were in your office at the church and there was no one else there. And it was, it would get quite lonely.

It was before internet and text messaging and cell phones. So the only communication that you're likely to get was was the landline. But the church is still going strong and the person who succeeded me who at one time had been a college student at the church has done a wonderful, wonderful work there.

So it's a very strong congregation right now. But in 1986. I had met Ligen Duncan, he had come over to the church for a wedding.

He was doing his PhD on covenant theology and in the patristics. And I had just begun my PhD on the Calvin and the book of Job. And so, so we, we were, we were already texting back and forth and, or emailing back and forth.

And then, first place Jackson was vacant. And from out of nowhere, the search committee. Gone touch with me and eventually brought rose me me over to visit.

The search committee was all and cloak and dagger stuff and, and I was there for a couple of days. And I knew the only thing I knew was that there was one other candidate and that the search committee were divided. So I went back and then a week later, Ligen who by this time is teaching systematic society as Jackson called me and said I

want you to come.

Yes and teach and, and there was a chapel role involved in the, in the offer. And I, I said to him, I can't, I can't come to Jackson next weekend. I was there last week, I said, I just, and there was a long pause and he said, Why were you there last week? Yeah, he said, yeah.

I you the other guy. And I said, I you the other guy. Well, so eventually, of course they called him and I took his job at RTS.

And then, and your friends, you didn't there wasn't any rivalry. And even more than that, he asked me to be the evening preacher. But the congregation that men, part of the search committee, this congregation did not know that I was the other guy.

And he told the congregation the day I left, the Sunday I left, which was 16 years later. He, he told the congregation the story and evidently many of them just had no idea. And you didn't ask them, did they make the right decision or not? They made the right decision.

Yeah, of course. I wasn't, I wasn't, actually I learned from him how to be a senior minister of a large congregation. And I couldn't do what I do here if I hadn't sat under his ministry and watched him for 16 years, watched him handle difficult things in session.

I watched him, I watched him handle things and avoid things. Things that were priority and things that definitely were not a priority and you just let them go. And learning that was, was, was wonderful.

And he's been, you know, he's, he's one of my closest friends. He's my boss, but he's my, he's my, he's everyone's boss. There he's my boss.

He is, you know, Pope Ligon, we all, they are respects and homage. The greatest, the greatest privilege I had was, was officiating at his daughter's wedding a couple of years ago. Yeah, very sweet.

She's in Greenville now. Yes. Mark, go.

Very smart. I, I, I sometimes hear and Charlotte teach the pastoral ministry class. So I haven't done it for a couple of years because I've been filling in and doing the ST stuff, which I love doing.

But one of the things I talk about in the pastoral ministry is just, I often tell people being a pastor of a large church, I wouldn't, I wouldn't say it's necessarily harder. In fact, just what you said, I think there are some things about being a solo pastor at a small church that are much harder than having the shared ministry, lots of people. You're not so, I want people to be dispelled from the notion that, you know, it's, it's the best pastors out

there who are the pastors of the large churches, not so.

However, I think it is true. There are unique challenges about being at a large church. So it's not that the, I think often I feel like the pastors, I know at 100, 200, 300 person churches, I think objectively are just better pastors than, than I am.

Just caring for people, visiting with people, being in people's lives, which is more difficult to do that with folks at a larger church. But there are different challenges and you hit on some of them. To say it's political makes it sound nefarious and that's not what I mean.

But you put it well. What issues that you have to get into and what issues to stay out of, how to navigate. I mean, you said you have 40 some elders, so we have over 40 elders on our session.

So it's a very different dynamic when I was at university forum church, also a great church. When I got there, there were six elders. When I left, there were 12 elders.

Very different session meetings with six or 12 elders than with 40 plus elders. How have you, what do you really enjoy about being in a larger church? What are some of the challenges or things you miss from being for 17 years at a church of a couple hundred people? Some of the challenges would be that if you have 3,000 members, as we have, you don't know half of them. You don't even know their names.

You know, when I was in Belfast, I knew everybody. I had been in everybody's home. But here, I know some people and I know some people really well.

And it's a tricky thing navigating that because I'm pretty sure that some folk. I was going to use the word jealous. That if you have those friends.

And it's inevitable that you have some who are closer than others. I mean, that's inevitable. He just did.

So. Right. Right.

The session in a 48 elders and. You know, they're strong elders, some stronger than others. They have lots and lots of opinions.

And I think in COVID season that that that magnified I think in COVID season, everybody got rattled and everybody wanted to express their opinion about everything. Twice or three times. And I've noted, I mean, up until COVID.

Almost all. Decisions that we made it session were unanimous. I mean, you just, they were just unanimous.

But I've noticed since COVID that that hasn't been the case. And, but it's a very, very strong session. They take their, they take their role very seriously.

But in, you know, the more members you have, the more pastoral problems you have. And sadly, you know, in the church, you have some of the worst pastoral problems. And in a small church, those, those issues would be, it would be hard to keep them quiet.

But in a large church, stuff goes on that most of the church has no idea. Right. It goes on.

And it's very easy to make an allegation that in large churches, there is no discipline. You know, the discipline is ignored. And I would, I would push back on that.

There is discipline, but it's done, it's done more quietly. And it's not done. You know, it's not done at the session meeting.

It's done in the pastoral care committee. Right. But I mean, there's often an allegation that in large churches, discipline is just ignored.

Yeah, we have our Shepherding Committee and those guys are in the trenches. And I'm not on the Shepherding Committee, but they'll come, you know, usually when it's, hey, we're coming to discipline one of our members and can you weigh in? What do you know about? They are absolutely doing the work. And we, you know, one of our mantras here is we say people are always going to fall through the cracks, but our job is to make the cracks as small as possible and that people have to look for them to find them.

We don't want big cracks that everyone just comes to a big church to fall through. In any church, big or small people, some people will look for the cracks and try to hide out there. But our role is to make them as small and it's difficult to get into as possible.

And if you crawl into them, hopefully as loving shepherds, we're looking for you and trying to care for you. But you're right. There are those, those pluses and minuses of being at a, at a big church.

And there's things that big churches can do that small churches can't. So I always tell our students bigger is not better or better. It's a, it's a different size.

And it takes just a little bit of a different mindset. Derek, how have you thought about this as somewhat a selfish question because I've wrestled with this? How have you thought about straddling the, the seminary church world, the academic pastoral world way back when I was in university? I remember sort of thinking, which, which route do I want to go? And I have no doubt that the Lord set me on the right route, which is pastoral ministry. And I love having a foot in the, the RTS seminary world and doing some of that.

But you, you've done the reverse, or at least I think that was Jackson was really primary seminary role. And then also preaching most weeks at a local congregation. How have you thought about the interplay and the proportion of those two things in your own

calling? I think that I've been spoiled.

I have the best of all possible worlds. I love theology. I love reading.

I've always loved theology. But first and foremost, I'm a preacher. That's how I think about myself.

And I have no interest in theology that can't be preached. So I, I'm terrible by teaching prologometer because I have, I have almost no interest in it. And, and is it Turritin that has four volumes? Am I picking up the right? Turritin has three.

Don't say anything bad about Turritin or the floor will open up underneath you. But that, that early section on prologometer, I just, that's kind of weed myself through it. That's Bob think that's got the one whole volume out of the four.

I'm in prologometer. Yeah. I've never, I've only read the last page of volume one about it.

So, no, I hear you. You want to be able to preach it? Yes. Yes.

But I, I like the fact that because you're engaged in systematic theology all the time that you're, you're preaching. I mean, the Westminster divines in the directive of public worship has that little section on preaching, which is probably the finest summary of preaching in four pages that's ever been written. But, but they have a very definite view of what preaching is.

And it's not, it's not sounding like a commentary, which too many sermons do. I listen to a ton of sermons and I think just give me the commentary. I mean, I can, I know exactly where you're getting all this from, but it's finding the doctrines that are in the text.

And, and I think that when you teach systematic theology inevitably that's, that's how you preach. But I just love the fact that I dip my toe in the, in the, in the academy. Once a week.

And then I, I go back to the real world, which is the church. You drive up here every week. Why, why aren't we having lunch or something? You need a place to say we need to do that.

It's, it's an hour and 20 minutes and hour and 25 minutes. Because RTS is on the south side of Charlotte, you can avoid. I mean, if you could avoid Rock Hill, it would be a lot easier.

But we have eight interns here at the church and I, you know, I tell them you're, you're going to experience something that only big churches can do. And in all likelihood, you may never experience this ever again. Probably.

But because the church is big, it can do more stuff. It can be engaged in more stuff. And,

um, it's, uh, it's one of the blessings really of, of a large church.

Well, we have, I have students all the time from Columbia, from your church. They do very well. I know you have some, uh, you have some folks that finished up or are, are still going through classes at RTS and some from Charlotte.

We can talk about them later. So it's a good pipeline there. I want to go back a little bit of a rabbit trail, but you mentioned Westminster Divines and preaching and running commentaries at the risk of sounding here.

I do fear that, okay, I am all 100% for expository preaching. I do fear, however, that some of us, especially in the reform camp, we equate that with, I must give an explanation of almost every word, almost every verse as we go through a passage, which tends, and I'm, I'm saying. I'm saying physician healed myself.

I can have this same tendency. And I think I did earlier in ministry when my sermons were even longer. I gotta say everything in here.

And I think we can sometimes feel like, well, if I jump out to a doctrine, that's probably too much systematic theology. If I go to a big theme, well, that's topical preaching. And that's that lightning will will come right down.

How have you, Navi, I think I remember reading, you had a chapter in the feed my sheetbook. You know, that was 25 years ago or something. It was a collection of essays.

Maybe I don't remember who edited it. But I think you talked about this some, some false ways of mistakes and expositional preaching. How have you thought about that in your own ministry? How have you helped your interns think about preaching so that there is the connection with the congregation, the, the, the, the, I think in most of our reform circles that you and I would be in.

Men are generally handling the text in a faithful, truthful way. That wouldn't be my main objection. It would be this other kind of, is it really a sermon though? Yes, I hear you and I'm on the same page.

I tell, I tell guys all the time. If you're turning over 15 or 20 pages of notes. Maybe, maybe you've got a full manuscript in the pulpit.

I don't know what it is you're doing, but it's, you're not engaging with the people. So give rid of your notes. I have one small piece of paper with just a few words on it.

I usually have the three or four points that I want to make. I think it's scribble down an illustration or so, but anyone looking at them probably could make very little sense of what's there, because 99% of the time I want to be looking in the faces of the congregation. I think can be drawn to Sinclair about this in the last few months.

Preaching is cerebral today. And I think how he asks is turning out preachers that are, and this is my institution that I love, but we're turning out brilliant expositors. When I hear students saying to me, how long does it take you to prepare a sermon and they say 36 hours.

And I'm thinking, what in the world are you doing? I mean, if it's taking you 15 hours to translate the passage Greek is not your thing. Right. You know, get a good translation stick with it.

You know, how many commentaries are you reading? I mean, I think as a young preacher, I mean, I would have consulted maybe 20 commentaries. And currently, currently I'm preaching on Colossians and I'm not consulting any commentary. Now, granted, I know, right, the New Testament better after 50 years probably preach through it before you've read commentary many times.

But there's not there's not enough affection in preaching. You know, that appeals to not just the mind, but appeals to the will and appeals to the art and the affections. And I don't know if you can teach that I think it's better caught than taught.

Yeah, I think so. I just read James Alexander's book, Thoughts on Preaching. You've probably read that before.

I hadn't read it before. Of course, Archibald Alexander's son. And this was put together really almost like Pascal's Poncez.

It's little snippets of thoughts and then some essays that appended at the back. It's not the book I would give to a first year homiletics class because it presumes a certain cerebral atmosphere and intellectual apparatus. But I found it very moving, even correcting at times because he really leans into what you're saying about the spirit in preaching about freedom in preaching about, you know, you're going to do probably your best sermon work.

Close the books and go on a walk and think and pray and write down. And I know some of the worst sermons I preached have been cramming 15 books and ideas into trying to get it all. And I think some of the best ones have been a salient point or two comes into my head.

And I've tried manuscript preaching because I find most, I think most guys in our circles do that. At least when I preach at some big conferences, afterwards people will say, "Hey, we want to turn this into a conference book." Can all of you guys submit your manuscripts? I feel like am I the only one who doesn't preach from a manuscript? So I've tried manuscripts and some people do it well. John Piper preaches from a manuscript.

You wouldn't, I don't think you can tell that he does. David Platt does. A lot of guys do.

I can't, I don't feel free when I do that. I've tried preaching absolutely no notes. That's what I learned in Hatton Robinson from Gordon Conwell.

I found at least early in ministry that took so much time cramming points. So each year I shrink down a few pages of notes. I'm not quite at one page, but have you always done it that way? Or as your sermon preparation and delivery changed over the years? So, so what's the camera? This is, this is one of my sermons from just a few weeks ago.

It takes me an hour, a pair of sermon. And if I, if I haven't got three points and, and an introduction in an hour is going to be a long day. If I, if I have the three points that I want to expound on, I'm good to go.

Even if I have nothing else except those three points, I can preach a sermon. It's not going to be the best sermon in the world. But we all have files in our head that when you, I mean yesterday I was on union with Christ and, and so the file on union with Christ in your head just just gets opened up.

You know, illustrations and applications and how do I want this sermon to end? That's, that's an important thing. How are you going to end? Are you going to end on a high note to low note? And I can take the dogs for a walk for an hour and think about that. And I, and I think that, that comes better away from the desk and away from the temptation of, I've got to get one more reference to a book here.

I'm not a, I'm not a quotation guy much if it's more one line. I'm not going to use it. And, you know, it's, it's, it's probably different folks for different folks.

But it's say an hour you only take an hour. Yeah. All right.

Well, that's 70 years of, well, 50 years. Well, as a, as a young preacher, if you're preaching on. Second Samuel, you, you, you probably didn't even know the story well.

Right. You didn't know who these characters were you didn't know. Background of 9th 10th century BC and what life was like, but after 50 years you, you, you know more.

Right. You know, you know what the Babylonian Empire was or you know what this Indian empire was you know about the Roman Empire. So, so a lot of that background stuff is, is in your head.

At least enough, enough to say some broad brush characteristics in a sermon. You're not right. Yeah.

Paper with footnotes. Right. I've heard ligand.

I'm sure many people have said, but I remember after one of ligands T4G talks where he was doing all sorts of great stuff when the Old Testament and somebody said, how long to take you to put that sermon together? He said, well, my whole life. I mean, to some

degree, it's, it's bringing, it's cumulative. It multiplies.

There are some things that as a young man, we can do better or have more energy or more related, but there are things that accumulate with knowledge with wisdom that hopefully make some aspects of the job a little bit more manageable than they once were. And it's some of those. Yeah, some of those connections.

What are some of your favorite books on preaching? Well, I Jones's book. It's not a, it's not a beginner's book. It's a book for a fairly established preacher just to address some issues that, you know, preaching and preachers.

I still love that I love. Virgins quirky. Yeah, come on on preaching.

I haven't enjoyed so much the more recent books on preaching because they preach in a different style to me. So, but my go to is the directory for public worship. And if really is good.

Yeah, you're not exaggerating when you say the best four pages on preaching. Yeah. Maybe ever written certainly in English.

Yeah. Let me mention now, as just a couple more questions. I always forget.

I'm supposed to a mid episode book. So, end episode book. Come Lord Jesus also published by Crossway John Piper's newest book.

My last life in books and everything was with John. So, if you're listening or didn't see that, you can listen to that conversation about his new book. Come Lord Jesus.

Greatful for desiring God and the ministry there of John and so many other people and their support of this. So, it's just been released and encourage you to look at WTS books. It's currently 40% off.

If you don't look at WTS books first, you're missing some good deals that you could buy from somewhere else besides Amazon. So, you can check out that book at WTS books. I want to ask just a couple more things.

If you have a few more minutes, Derek, I was looking at your list of books. There are many, some 15 or more. But a number of these titles, Heaven on Earth, what the Bible teaches about the life to come, Strength for the weary, how the gospel brings us all the way home.

The storm breaks. Job simply explained. Help for hurting Christians.

And of course, you did your PhD on Calvin sermons on Job. So, was this a conscious direction of your ministry to think about? I just see a lot there about suffering in Heaven. Did that come? Have you noticed that before? Was that an intentional? This is something

that means a lot to me in my life and I want to write and preach about this? Where did that come from? Well, it came from pastoral ministry, but it also comes from the fact that I'm a kelp and therefore I'm fairly introspective.

And I'm prone to dwell on certain things. I've had moments of suffering in my life for sure. And most of the books I've written have been sermons at some point.

A series. And in a congregation like ours, there are a couple of hundred people who are just passing through enormous awful trials. And thinking on those things which are above where Christ sits at the right hand of God is the way to live the Christian life.

So thinking about the world to come, thinking about Heaven. And thinking about that we sit in Heaven be places in Christ Jesus. I mean, all those are vitally important.

So as you think back on you just had your 70th birthday, you've announced at some point in the next year, year and a half retiring. What convictions, what truths that you started out with have just become even more clearer, more vibrant. You know, I had one older minister tell me one time there are some things that looked black and white.

And at the end of his ministry they looked gray and there are other things that looked gray and now seem black and white. What would you put in those categories, anything that's become even more convinced of and on the other side anything you've changed your mind on. Yes, without sounding.

You know, too strong about it. I think that most conservative, reformed features begin with their feet on the legalistic side. I've just read the book that of yours that's just about to be published and your first chapter was on first john and very well written.

But I tell students on a fairly frequent basis. I'm going to say the first john and the first 15 years of the ministry because you're going to sound like a legalist. Right.

And for me. Understanding the shape of the gospel. It is more important and it sounds strange to say this but it's more important to me now that it was 50 years.

And I teach first john and not sound like a legalist. And you can't do that unless the gospel is firmly that before you know that at every point you're saying nothing in my hands I bring simply to that cross cycling. So, and it's in my head because I'm in Colossians and I just beats a couple of sevens and legalism at the end of Colossians 72.

And it touched a nerve and a lot of people in the congregation. Sure. I was more convinced now than I was 50 years ago of the inerrancy of scripture.

Here here. And, and that without a firm commitment to the inerrancy of scripture. There is no future.

It is a slippery slide to a blivian. In our work culture in the pressures there on the modern

church that weren't on the church that I entered 50 years ago. Of gender and and and LGBTQ stuff and all of that.

That that the only answer to that is the inerrancy of scripture. And if you let go of that doctrine. The church is finished one generation two generations.

It'll be gone. Yeah, and you'll think that you're you'll think that you're just making a very savvy accommodation to to win a hearing or an audience and we'll just change a few words. We'll just avoid a few subjects and you don't know that you're you're what what is saying, you know, you you shoot yourself in the foot and you're shooting your grandchildren in the heart.

So last question, Derek. This is life and books and everything. So we love to talk about books.

I'm just going to open it up. And it's an impossible question because I know you love books. Give us just a couple authors that jump into your head that have been most formative for you as a Christian as a minister.

Old books, new books, you got open floor people listening to this. What books and let's just narrow it a little bit to think about maybe pastors or church leaders, although it doesn't have to be about Christian ministry per se. What are some of the best, most important books that have been in your life or authors? Well, anything and everything that Sinclair Ferguson has written.

I have read multiple times and it's gotten me into some trouble as you know, and. But he has been the most influential person as to the way I think about a doctor. And to the extent that I, if I read a book two or three times, I can, it's filed in my head so I can pull it out.

My early days, I was introduced to the Puritans. And it's the Puritan interest in in application. And not just application at the end.

You know too many sermons will have five minutes before it closes, they'll say, let me say something by way of application. And as if everything else, as if the doctrine is not application doctrine is application to the mind. So, so that's a false dichotomy to me.

Calvin has been an obsession all my life. And because of my doctor work in Calvin. And Calvin sermons are very simple.

It's amazing how, how simple he was when he preached. And his consistency in, in, you know, lecture, lecture, continue preaching preaching through books of the Bible. I've read every book I think that you've written.

And you have, you have a unique style I think to appeal, especially to a certain

generation. I've, I've been blessed by Scottish authors, for sure. Yeah.

And 19th century Scottish authors, who wrote, who wrote at a level that would not be publishable today. I don't think crossway would allow you to publish books. You know, I think I think you think a man or man or if you can and or ours or.

Yeah. I mean, that prose was 19th century, right. And our process is different, but I'm a, I read, I read less commentaries now than I used to.

Yes, because they're all saying the same thing. You know, it's very rare to pick up a commentary and think, Oh, this is, this is a brand new idea here that I've not seen anywhere else. And then there's a two or three that have called all of the insights before them and, you know, read Carson's on John or whoever is the leading one.

And then a couple, and then a few old ones. I often start a sermon series with here's I got 10 commentaries. And after a few weeks, it's only really need to read these three.

Right. I'm going to do. So anything else, any other books or authors you wanted to commend.

I, I consistently like, you know, all molars writings. And the books that he has published, I've enjoyed very much. I've been blessed.

I've been blessed by knowing RC, rule as a, as a friend. I don't know how that came about. It was just a providential thing that we became friends and everything that he wrote is, is, is wonderful.

And though dead he still speaks. Yeah. His commentary on the Westminster confession is wonderful.

I would recommend all elders and deacons to read it. We recommend it here. Well, we insisted they read it here.

It's a, it's a good summary of the Westminster confession. And he had a way of handling doctrine that the ordinary person in the pew would understand it. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. The fantastic mind and I've heard him speak one on one at a depth that you would never would have heard him speak in the pulpit or at a conference.

But his understanding of philosophical matters was, was second to none. But the ability to bring that down to a level that the ordinary person can understand that that was genius on his part. Derek, thank you for your friendship for many years.

I remember you were, I don't know when we first met, but years ago, remember you

came and you spoke at an RCA event. I was leading this RCA renewal group and you flew in and you did that for us bag of bonds in the RCA and you've preached here at Christ Covenant and I've been able to be there at first press. So we'll have to pulpit swap sometime.

But thank you for your ministry, your books, your friendship, your preaching. I will, I will, so you got an 830 service. So if we don't have our Sunday school in the morning, so I don't have to be a church till 10 or something.

Some of those Sundays, I'll have you up and listen to a sermon or if it's not you sometimes, Alice or bag. I was in Colorado a few weeks ago preaching at a different church, so with the time change I was able to watch your service and listen to your message on Colossians. So keep up the good work and thank you for this.

Thank you for taking the time to be here. Thank you to everyone for listening to Life and Books and everything. Until next time, glorify God, enjoy Him forever and read a good book.

[Music] [Silence]