

# OpenTheo

## **Conversations in a Crisis: Part IV: On Submission to Government (with Rev Benjamin Miller)**

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Faced with our challenge of remaining faithful within and addressing our various contemporary societal crises with wisdom, Christians and churches are fracturing over our differing approaches and postures. My friend Ben Miller suggested that we have a series of conversations, to help us to pursue greater clarity on the principles, virtues, duties, and practices that can equip Christians to meet such difficult times with prudence, insight, and courage.

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### **Transcript**

The following is one of a series of conversations that I'm having with my friend, the Reverend Ben Miller. Ben is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on Long Island, and he suggested in the context of current divisions within the church over political and other issues that we have a wide-ranging series of conversations about issues of Christian ethical reflection, epistemology, charity, obedience, trust, community, and conscience in this context. While our conversations are occasioned by issues such as COVID, on which Ben and I have different opinions, our conversations will not be narrowly about it, but will be a broader exploration of issues of Christian faithfulness in any sort of crisis, some of the principles that should guide us, and some of the practices and virtues that we need to pursue.

Through our conversations, we're hoping to arrive at more accurate and charitable understandings of each other, a better grasp of responsible processes of Christian

reasoning and deliberation, and a clearer apprehension of principles that we hold in common. We invite you to join us for these conversations, to listen to our discussions, and then to share your own thoughts in the comments and elsewhere. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

In our earlier conversation, we discussed something of our political imaginary, the different ways in which we conceive of our country and their governments in different contexts like the US, the UK, elsewhere, and thought also about the way that someone like the Apostle Paul would have conceived of his government. We tried to move towards a more Christian understanding of, or at least to inform our political imaginaries with some more Christian elements, something more particular to the fact that we acknowledge that God is the ruler of all, and that all human government is penultimate. And perhaps one of the places where we get into the deepest discussion of principles of government within Scripture is in somewhere like Romans chapter 13.

And it raises questions about what government is, what it should do, but also about how believers should relate to their governments in a faithful manner. What are some of your thoughts on how Romans chapter 13 should feature within our theologies or Christian accounts of government? I think it's important first that Paul so clearly situates that command to be submissive within providence. It is in a sense the relative insignificance of human government within which then he can speak about submission, and that doesn't create terror.

I mean, just being told to submit to a power, that could be a perfectly fine thing. It could be actually a sort of a nightmarish experience, you know, but if there's already an understanding, the powers that be are ordained of God, and he's given them the sword for a purpose. So as in other contexts of submission, you are ultimately looking to God in this action that you are taking.

But I also wonder if it might be worth reflecting on immediately why that is Paul's, why that's what he leads with. We could from other places in Scripture draw grounds for critique of certain things that governments do or don't do. The Bible actually talks quite a lot about justice and injustice in halls of power.

It is a lot of prophetic word to the king. The government is, the doings or non-doings of the powers are things that the Bible speaks about, but it is interesting that Paul leads with submit. Like that's the first thing.

Why? Why is it for Christians in particular so important that our first thought in response to ruling authorities is not revolution? It's not even a reformation as important as that might be. It is to be submissive, praying for their good, and as much as possible being obedient and I think we could even say non-disruptive. Like why is that? Oliver O'Donovan once said in an interview and I chuckled because this is me too, he said, I feel that I'm one of nature's libertarians.

I'm always disposed to say why should I? And I'm totally that way. Like my default is not like, yeah, let's submit. I want to, hashtag resistance, that's sort of my default.

But I've spent a lot of time thinking about why is submission so important to the Lord? And it's not just in the arena of government. I think we can maybe perceive the importance of submission more clearly in other arenas, such as the relations of the family between children and their parents or in the relation of marriage also that there are different sorts of submission taking place. But the same terminology is used and even within certain relationships within the body of Christ, it seems that there is a significance of the goods that can be, there's a value to the goods that can be achieved through submission.

That if there is rebellion or resistance and an attempt to overthrow even a tyrannical order can actually lead to the forfeiting of things that are really positive and should not be lost. And I think for instance of the relationship between children and parents, there are times when you recognize, extraordinary times, when you recognize that what your parents might be telling you to do is not good. It may be directly contrary to God's law.

On other occasions, what they're telling you is something that's arisen from their own misunderstanding of the situation. And again, might not be good for you, but it's not a direct contravention of God's law. And how you respond to those sorts of situations, I think, is maybe where you see something of the force of submission.

What does it actually mean in practice? Because it's all very well to submit when everything's going well, when you're being told to do things that you completely agree with and would be doing anyway. But on those situations where it actually crosses your will, what exactly is at stake in going along with that? And why would, as you say, scripture lead with this particular principle? What is it about submission and particularly the form that it takes within Christian teaching that makes it important? There are at least three things that jump to mind as you're speaking there. And I admit I'm largely just batting your question back.

Yes, I feel it. But no, that's helpful. And I think, so one thing that would be interesting to speak about a little bit is the difference, the distinction between authority and power.

So there are certain situations where it's clearer that we are submitting to authority. And I think it becomes a little bit more worrisome for many of us when we find that we are submitting to power. That might be worth thinking about.

It also would be worth reflecting on how submitting, even when I'm not, we're not talking here about doing something unlawful. If I'm commanded to do something that breaks God's law, clearly in scripture, I think we would all agree that I must obey God rather than men. But that's, in many cases, I'm being asked to submit in a situation where I think the authority is wrong.

I don't think it's wise. I might even think that some injustice is involved in what the powers or the authorities are doing. Why is a submissive posture good for me? How does it form us as people? What does that do in us to be patient and forbearing under even bad government, let's say? Virtue being formed through that.

And then another thing we might think about is how submissiveness in a people promotes the public good, even when it can look like you're just submitting to a bad regime or a bad government. But how is it that a posture of resistance and overthrow could actually create sometimes catastrophic problems and injustices that are worse than the ones that we're currently suffering? And none of this is intended to sound like I'm advocating for a quiescent, passive, supine posture before authorities or powers. I do think that there's much to be said about ways to stand against evils that are going on in positions of authority and power.

But yeah, maybe we could talk about some of those things. I do wonder you use the word submissiveness or being submissive. And there is an extent to which I'd want to maybe create some space between the idea of submitting and submissiveness as a sort of characteristic.

There is a sense in which even if we may be spirited and those who want to push against something, we need to, it's not just a matter of rolling over and allowing anything to happen. It's a matter of if we're going to resist, we must do so in a particular way. Or if we're going to, and even our submission should be done in a way that's not just an abdication of agency or just going along or merely trusting whatever it is.

There has to be a sense in which that submission is an act of strength itself. First of all, we see there's an element of trust within submission. So talk about situations that are fundamentally unjust, the servant, slaves submit to your masters.

And there is a situation there where you have a cultural institution that has a deep injustice, or something that is, at the very least, a very unhealthy relationship at the heart of it. And the question of what submission means in that sort of situation, I think, maybe helps us to think about submission more broadly, because this is an extreme situation that helps us to get an avenue into those more normal, ordinary situations. And the fact that scripture, for instance, talks about the meaning of work, or labor, for slaves, and the way that such a person who has every single aspect of their life almost dictated for them, that they're able to find meaning and value in their labor as they're able to work towards the Lord, I think is remarkable, because it shows even in the the very lowest case, there is a way of understanding, having the sort of imaginative framework, where we are not just victims, we are not just those who have been stripped of our agency, because we're expected to be submissive.

And even in the way that submission is framed, it's not framed in scripture as a straightforward, symmetrical thing. So God has given submission to one party, he's given

authority straightforwardly to another. And it doesn't actually work out that way.

And in the sense that we might think about it, there's a unilateral character to both sides. So we are called to submit. That doesn't mean that the government has the has just been given the free reins to exercise authority, it has its own calling, it is also a servant, and it will also be held accountable for how it acts.

And so, in its own way, it's called to submit. And in its own way, it's called to act towards us in a way that's not just a matter of exercising power and privilege over us, but is a practical outworking of ministry. It is appointed as a minister of Christ to people.

And in that sense, it's not primarily a servant of the people, it's primarily a servant of Christ and his rule. But it must minister to the people in a way that seeks their good. Now, you've mentioned on other occasions, the importance of teasing apart what that means in respect to our duties as those subject to government, and the duties of government, that right, you can say that certain things that the duty of government and recognize when it's failing in those respects, without saying that we have a corresponding right to rebel.

And there's a sense in which we're both servants under the master of Christ. And ultimately, when we're submitting, we're not submitting to that servant. We're submitting to Christ, who has appointed that servant.

And that I think, changes the relationship significantly, and puts into play an element of trust that relieves us from something of the sense of tyranny that we might otherwise feel that the servant is supposed to act as one who is seen by God in all that he works. And the wife is supposed to submit as to the Lord, recognizing that it's the Lord that upholds this order. It's not primarily her husband.

And her husband hasn't just been given a free prerogative relative to her. Rather, he's been given a duty as a servant of Christ, as she is also a servant of Christ. She is not the judge of herself, of her husband, but nor is he the judge of her.

Yeah, that's excellent stuff. I mean, so it seems as if there are three, three ways. And I'm just reflecting again on the on the slave master illustration, because it is it's graphic, it sort of forces into relief.

The issues that become perhaps a bit, a bit murkier in more normalized context. But there, it seems like there are three ways in which the lordship of Christ helps us with the problem of submitting. One is, as you said, that my master is subject to Christ.

However much it might not look like it, my master will answer to Christ. We all have a master in heaven who is no respecter of persons. And I do think that that not only enables me to have a certain quietness of heart, even where I'm under a cruel, wicked master, it also gives me a basis at times to speak some very hard things prophetically,

because I am not being rebellious to speak to an authority or a power what God commands that authority or power to do.

In a sense, calling that authority or power to account. I think that is sometimes a perfectly legitimate and even, I would even say, a required thing to do within submitting. But another thing, two things I was thinking about related to slaves again, Christ lordship also enables me when I'm being asked to do something that is basically good to do it as unto him.

So work would be the example you gave. But there's a third thing too, and that is sometimes when I am under an unjust master, the lordship of Christ orients me because I am being called by Christ to suffer. And that's, so you made a good point, like it's not a supine, just, you know, let injustice roll down, just sort of let it happen, and we just were passive before it.

But there are many times under authorities and powers where there are injustices that we are just going to have to suffer. But our suffering is not without meaning, because that suffering is part of it's part of Christ's calling. I mean, Jesus, as you said, Paul, others suffered under authorities and powers, but my chains are in Christ.

And so there is a sense that even where there's a horrific injustice that I'm enduring, it's different from my work, let's say as a slave, that work has inherent goodness and meaning to it, even though it's in a slave context. And so I work as unto the lord, and there's tremendous agency and goodness in that. But even where I'm just on the receiving end of horrific injustice, I am still able to suffer that as a Christian under the sovereignty of God.

And to your point about submission versus submitting versus submissiveness, I think all I was really trying to get at with the word submissiveness is just kind of a disposition to honor, that I have a general posture within my heart as well as in my actions of wanting to honor at least office, even where I might not be able to honor, particularly the person who fills it. I do think that is an important part of just seeing Christ behind the authorities and powers. And that is very much, again, an emphasis of the reformers, the importance of order.

And even if that order is tyrannical, the order is better than anarchy. The sense of a society where everyone is doing what's right in their own eyes, and anyone can gainsay the law is, I mean, even when you have King Saul killing all the priests of the Lord, I mean, this is, you can't get a worse situation of persecution of the church than that. And yet, even at that point, David can say he will not lay his hand upon the Lord's anointed.

There's a sense that the order itself is at stake. And he recognizes that Saul will have his comeuppance. And the Lord's judgment is going to be just and heavy upon him.

But at the same time, that's for the Lord to do. And if he were to act against Saul, it would actually become something that weakened everything else. And it would break down the order of the nation.

And so something that really strengthens David within his reign is the fact that he upheld the authority when it really pushed against him. And when he was in a situation of submission, he submitted as to the Lord, and it's very much as to the Lord, he wasn't primarily submitting to King Saul, he was submitting to God who had established him. And when he's able to do that, when he actually takes authority, that authority has weight to it that it would not otherwise have.

It's not just a matter of his power being greater than Saul's. It's the fact that the Lord has actually given him this power. And the power then comes with a sense of legitimacy.

And it calls for an appropriate honor. One of the reasons why Saul's power failed was because he could not command his people in a way that led to an answering honor. And he forfeited that.

And so he went in the direction of tyranny. And that direction was something that was bound up with the fact that he could not, it was a weakness of his rule. And so when we think about submission, we often think about, okay, here, this party has authority.

And then they just exercise that authority. And we just bow our heads and go along with it. And that submission, but submission is part of a healthy situation.

It contributes to it. It's not just something that just raises its hand and say, we can't really do much here. And, okay, we'll just go along with what the government says.

Rather, it's a recognition that there's a cooperative order between the different parties involved in this situation. And as the people submit to government, and as the government submits to Christ and acts towards the people, that's how a healthy situation arises. And when there's a dysfunctional situation, you're probably not going to set that right by giving up your side of that, and trying to push against the other party for their failure to give up their side of that.

So on the one hand, it's a government that is not really submitting to Christ is not going to have much effectiveness, as it's trying to push the people to be submissive. And on the other hand, people that aren't submissive are probably not going to create a government that's submissive to Christ. And what we see, I think, within Scripture is a recognition of true authority in its healthy form, is this interplay between submission and authority, where there's true contribution on both sides, both of them lead to the healthy functioning authority.

And we might think about the ways in which good authority is very much something that seeks to win over the people. And in a way, it builds, it earns trust, it seeks to give

reasons to the extent that it can, at many points, you won't be able to give reasons, you just say, do this. And like, I'm your parents, and you're only a toddler, go along with this.

And at a certain point, I hope you'll understand why I told you to do this. In parenting, that's the sort of thing that you'll have to deal with on occasions. But in government, to an extent, too, the government can't always give us reasons for its judgments and its directives.

But ideally, it's going to move in a direction of informing and constricting our wills to its action, not just our external actions. And there, I think, maybe constraints in our understanding of what authority and submission mean, leads to a sense that submission is just abdication of, first of all, agency and responsibility. And then also, it's just giving in to some higher agency that just has its way with us.

And I don't think that's what scripture teaches. No, for sure. But I think that is often this, there's often a sense that that is actually what's happening on the ground, though, and a fear that emphasizing submitting is going to play into that.

So, you know, for example, you talked about government. Oliver O'Donovan speaks a lot about government giving reasons, that authority gives reasons, because it is, as you said, it's not just coercively moving people's bodies, forcing them coercively, it is, it's commanding their assent. It lays obligations upon us, but that's not the same thing as mere coercion.

Correct. Yes, exactly. But of course, in many situations, I think people feel that they're under authorities or powers where they're not being given reasons, and it just feels as if they're being herded.

But I was just reflecting as you were speaking, and this is something I haven't really thought much about before, but is it possible that submitting is itself an act of authority? It is a way of acknowledging that there are reasons that should govern the public realm, even if the government is not being particularly forthcoming about what reasons are shaping its policy or why we ought to submit. I'd never really thought about the relationship of an authority figure and one submitting to that authority as an extra, it's a relationship of reciprocal authority in the sense that, and we probably need to stop and define how is authority different from just power, because authority is essentially acting under authorization. And it seems to me that when, let's say, those under authority are keeping their eye on the good, keeping their eye on wisdom, see, this is David, right? He is living under the kingship of Yahweh, even when Saul isn't.

And there's a sense in which, as you were pointing out, David commands respect and a followership in a way that Saul doesn't, because the king is insane and David is following God. And he is thinking things through and he is seeking the good of the people and he's acting like a king in the way that he thinks and loves, in a way that Saul is not, even



though he's being submissive to Saul. And so, in a strange way, David is sort of taking the kingdom while submitting to the king.

That's a very good way of putting it. I mean, in many ways, he becomes the custodian of the common order of the kingdom, because the king himself, in name, has become predatory. And yet, he's the one that's maintaining an order that's not going to overturn that order as the king is.

And he's going to be someone who commands the rule of the people by this. I mean, this is the vision of the Messiah. He's someone who has this erotic relationship, almost, of healthy power, where the king commands the desire of the people, that they want to follow him.

And you see that in, for instance, visions of the king going before his people into war in something like the Lord of the Rings. You feel, I would follow this man into battle. I'm completely on this man's side.

And there's a sense in which the destiny of the people, the good of the nation, is really being represented by this person, not just in name, but they are standing in that place where it naturally falls to them. And people look and act in a way in response to them, that they're responding to something real, not just a title that this person bears. And it's just amazing to think about the possibilities of doing that, even as a real sufferer, a disempowered sufferer, who still can command the moral high ground, not just individually, but really for the common realm, even as one who is even potentially being martyred.

Part of what I was thinking about as you were speaking is, I heard a chilling interview, it was actually a talk, that Professor Albert Robitill, I believe he's at Princeton, gave about the power of forgiveness in the history of African-American slaves in the South. And he gave, he quoted from writings of some of these slaves, anecdotes, where they, under the cruelty of the Southern slave system, would forgive their masters for horrific, I mean, it just makes your blood run cold hearing these stories of how these slaves were treated at times. And they were forgiving as a way of showing what true Christianity was.

So their masters were professed Christians, but essentially the slaves, precisely by their forgiveness, by their refusal to play that power game, their refusal to enter into the reciprocity of power and abuse of power, that their so-called Christian masters were working out in that system, they were as it were standing as representatives of Christ, the true church, the true Christianity, by exercising his forgiveness in the face of evil. That is an extraordinary act of authority. And in a sense, the roles are reversed, where the suffering slave then becomes the true Christian authority, showing how Christ is, how Christ rules, how Christ's law looks when it is worked out in human relations.

And I mean, without in any way, because this was certainly not Professor Roberts's point,

without in any way suggesting then that there is not a place to stand and fight against injustice. Again, it's not supine. It is Christ and his trial who has authority, right? It is Paul on trial who is David running for his life, who has authority in Israel.

Saul might have the power in the sense that he can bring coercive force to bear, but he's lost all his moral authority. And I just wonder if at times we don't need to think more as Christians about how much we are exercising authority, even in suffering injustice. And I hope it's clear what I'm not saying.

Again, injustice matters. But I think that that's absolutely right. And it very much draws my mind to Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where we often think about, okay, going the second mile, turning the other cheek, that these are, okay, we just have to surrender to injustice.

We're not actually going to take any action against it. But there's a sense in which it actually turns the tables. When you actually go the second mile, that person becomes a debtor to you.

It's not a matter of them coercing you to do something. They've coerced you to go the first mile, you gave them the second mile for free. And now, it's no longer the situation that they are in a position of coercive power over you.

They do have that. But ultimately, they're in debt to you, you've freely done something that has gone over above, you've given them what they would have coerced from you, and more. And in the same way, when you are praying for your enemies, and those who despitefully use you, there's this, you're not going to take their terms for reality, you're going to establish your own terms.

And those are going to be the ones of God's forgiveness of not bearing bitterness within your heart of and, and forgiveness requires telling the truth about what's being done involves within it an act of truth telling such that to receive forgiveness involves confession of what you have done. That doesn't mean that we don't forgive if there's no confession, we forgiveness is also to ensure that we don't hold bitterness in our heart that we don't bear a grudge that we don't seek vengeance, but we're able to do that because we recognize in some sense where true power lies and the cross being a great example of this. Likewise, with the turning the other cheek, when you're first struck on the cheek, it's an act of shaming, and then you turn the other sheet cheek.

And there's a sense in which you've not accepted that shaming. They are put in a position of almost being shamed because you've actually returned the thing to them. Yes, without actually accepting that shaming.

And that's one of the peculiar ways in which the church has exerted a sort of power and authority. And I think we also see this brought out in successful and healthy forms of

resistance to authority that have not just overthrown authority, but have exercised a sort of civil obedience in the very way that they have accepted injustice, actually proclaiming the reality of that injustice, that the injustice is actually brought to light through the fact that they have moral authority in that situation that exposes the works of evil. They're not just responding in kind.

Which I mean, is really just an example of how we do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good. We don't let evil set the terms. Which I think is what you're saying that I to act in love and to act in honor and to act in treating people as made in God's image and so on and so forth, to essentially act as a Christian, to not just be a revolutionary, but to be a lover and seeker and doer of good, no matter how much evil is thrown at me.

And to forgive and to go the Nietzschean, just power meets power. And in a strange way, I've seen this and I have to be careful here because there are definitely emotional dynamics to be considered here. But so often when dealing with people that have been abused, there comes this moment when they're finally really free of their abuser, precisely because they are not just raging in resentment anymore.

They are now standing on the good. And that evil in a sense has no power over them. It has no hold on them because they have integrity within themselves that can't be touched by the abuser, even by the memories of the abuse.

And that doesn't mean there's not pain, but it means that they're not controlled. They're free. And one of the most worrisome things to me in North American politics, as I've listened to Christians over the last five years, and I actually feel quite passionate about this because it really worries me, is how many Christians seem to have bought into this idea that it's all about winning politically.

And what distresses me about that is that is the surrender of the good as a guiding principle in political life. It reduces everything to a contest of power. And I don't see how that can even be in any sense a Christian posture in the political realm.

There are going to be injustices. If every time there is a major injustice, our response is to just start blowing things up, delegitimizing and attacking and doing basically whatever it takes to get power back. What then? Now are you going to impose the good by power? Isn't that kind of what you're accusing the existing authorities of doing? And it's just, we're just now in a totally, I would say it's the end of actual politics at that point.

And now we're just in a state of war. And it's recognizing also that when you just resort to power, you actually become very weak. Because the most effective power is the one that doesn't have to exert itself that much.

Because it comes with moral authority and its natural response. I think, in all levels of

society, we're seeing the breakdown of that, where our governments can no longer command assent by a sense of honor. Because they've not earned our trust, they've not actually proved reliable and faithful.

And that doesn't mean that they have to always make the right decisions, they always have to make the right call in a particular situation and deliberation. But to actually recognize that they are on your side, that there's a sense of common good that they're really pursuing. They are, when you know that the coach is actually caring about the team, and that they're really invested in the results, and that they're really going along with you, and they're not just getting their advantage on your back.

You're actually willing to accept a lot of bad calls along the way. And you'll ultimately hope to change the direction of certain bad strategies or whatever, but you recognize that you're on the same side. Here, I think, though, it would be helpful to think a bit more about the fact that, okay, we talked about the example of the slave who has to submit in a really bad situation.

So that's the rock bottom scenario where it couldn't really get much worse than that. And yet, along with that sense of, okay, we can submit to Christ, even in that situation in submitting to a master, there is also the recognition, or there needs to be, I think, that that situation is not good. And if at all possible, we need to rectify that situation, as much that lies within our power, and is in keeping with that duty of submission, we need to actually find some way to change this.

And so I think it would be helpful to think about, first of all, maybe a bit more about what does it look like when authority in government is working well? And then also, when it is not working well, what sort of recourse do we have? How should we respond in a way that will healthily change things? I think that you've already given illustrations that show how to think about government at its best. You've spoken about coaches and parents, and so on. And this is something, without getting into details of how one might actually work this out, I think that it's important that whenever there's a government, or an authority, or a power, that those who are subject feel that there is a genuine connection between the authority and themselves, that their situation is being taken into account, and that in fact, the reason for the exercise of the authority is for the good of that situation that they are actually living in.

I don't want to be controlled by the actions of someone who doesn't give me a thought. That's kind of the horror of being controlled, that I'm suddenly under the power of someone who is not in my head, in my emotions, in my situation, doesn't care, just is manipulating me. That's a terrifying feeling, and it should be.

To live in relationship, to live in love, is to seek each other's interests. And I think that when there's not a sense that a government is doing that, it creates fear. So how then do authorities cultivate in those that they are leading, ruling? How does a government

cultivate that sense in those under them? I think any of us who have ever been in a position of rule realize it's not easy to do this well, but I think that even communicating that it's a desire, it's an intent.

There was, for example, a time during COVID. Now, I realize that Andrew Cuomo's governorship was highly controversial, but there was a time, let's say from April to June of 2020, when whatever political differences I might have had with Andrew Cuomo, he seemed, the way he carried himself before us as New Yorkers, gave the impression he really wanted us to know what was going on. There was a forthcomingness, and obviously, there was a lot of fear, the pandemic was at its height, and there was a sense of care.

And I remember that commanded a lot of respect, even from his political adversaries at that time. Now, things went south later, but it's that communication that I want so much for you to be well, and I'm paying a lot of attention to how to try to serve that, and I listen when you speak, and I'm reasonable, even if I ultimately have to make a decision that you don't like or agree with. That, I think, is authority at its best.

You gave the example earlier of the conductor. The conductor's not up there to put on the conductor show. He's up there to bring out the best of the orchestra, and that would just be, for me, a huge thing.

And I guess I'm maybe sensitive to that, especially as a father, because I've realized when the scripture says, fathers don't frustrate your children, it's so easy to leave your children feeling that dad's just issuing edicts, and he's sort of not listening. And I don't think this means you have to be a wishy-washy ruler at all, that every wind of opinion blows you around. Some of the ways that we've been discussing freedom to this point, I think we can see at many different axes the way that this could break down.

You can think about the sort of capricious authority, authority that isn't forthcoming, or authority that doesn't follow any rationale. You could think about authority that is inequitable, that is very clearly using authority just as a mask for power, and to achieve the interests of one party against another. Or we could think about the way in which authority, the inscrutability of authority that is not just capricious being a matter of pure will, but authority that can't be understood, it's impenetrable, it's maybe a Kafkaesque system where you feel you're not able to engage in intelligible action because you don't know what sort of response you will get.

And then there's also, you don't, the playing field is not visible, you don't, you've not been told the rules, the rules will be enforced upon you without you actually understanding what the rules are, or being informed. Or you can think about the way in which there can be a breakdown of freedom when there's no longer able to be collective action, when there's just an anarchic situation where no one is actually taking authority, and a situation within a household where everyone's running wild, everything's in chaos,

because there's not actually a voice that's able to maintain order. And when order is maintained, everyone feels freer, you're less subject to the injustices of your neighbor, and you're also able to act in a way that makes sense.

And you can also think about the ways in which the freedom can be something that maintains your ability to be different from your neighbor, not to be tied to them in a way that shackles them, shackles you to their limited sense of the good. And there's a sort of common good that is the more capacious society where people can have differing opinions. And that can be really important in some contexts.

Now, in those ways that we see things break down, it's often helpful to pinpoint where the breakdown has occurred. Because I think many people jump towards this more general attribution of tyranny, when they're not actually pinpointing where is the failure occurring. And I think, for instance, in COVID situation, often, what you had was an inscrutable, seemingly capricious law that is inconsistently applied, and leads people feeling that they're just subject to power.

And that can be a situation where the primary sense of the injustice is seeing a situation where you've got a video of police enforcing some law that seemingly on the books, but they're not actually enforcing it accurately. But no one really knows what the law is. And so you've got almost a free reign for just really unjust policing.

Now, that's a slightly different thing from having a situation where there is complete anarchy. But it's a particular form of injustice, and people are responding to that. And it can be helpful, I think, to break down concepts of freedom into these different components of freedom.

Brad Littlejohn has always helped me on this front, where, in some sense, he's giving a taxonomy for categories that you find within Oliver O'Donovan, that freedom has different axes to it. And if you're thinking merely in terms of my individual will, being given some sort of free reign, you're going to have a very narrow concept of freedom. But there are also ways in which you can miss other aspects of that.

So you can have capricious laws, you can have inscrutable laws, you can have unevenly applied laws, you can have a society that where the law is self distorted, in favor of one party or another. And in all of these ways, we can feel that something has fallen short of the good. And they require action in different directions.

If you're wanting to erase a law from a book from the books. That's one thing, if you're wanting to reform policing, that's another. Yes, yes.

No, that's just excellent. I mean, so there's a lot there. And maybe you could bundle some of that together in when it comes to the actions of authority figures.

Are they in any obvious way, freeing us? Right? Like not just because what and I saw this

during COVID a lot. In actual political situations, there are often so many competing interests. And it's part of the skill of great leadership to be able to look out at the diversity of the people in front of you with all of their various interests and be able to communicate, you know, we're about to make a decision that is going to put some constraint on this freedom over here.

Let me help you understand why. And let me just assure you that we're looking out for ways to lift that constraint whenever we possibly can without causing damage over here. Now again, people might not agree with those decisions, but at least the way it's couched is that we are trying to free all of us to flourish.

This is not a situation where you're talking about criminal activity, where there simply is no freedom for that kind of criminal activity. If somebody's going around stealing things from people's homes, that's not a freedom we are going, there's no good in that. So we're not going to support that freedom at all.

But in a situation like COVID, you had so many different goods and freedoms associated with those goods that were in the balance. And I just think a lot of times, there was, there was unfortunately, the impression that there was a great willingness to sacrifice one at the expense of the other without maybe explanation or without acknowledgement that we do see this as a good worth preserving. It just has to give way for a time to this good over here.

And of course, that in the American context was just complicated by party interest again, because it was very easy for, well, you're in that party, that's why you support that good. We're in this party, that's why we want this good. And now the goods are basically competitive because the parties are competitive.

So I think on that front, also, you have the fact that when you're thinking about those sorts of goods, you're in a situation where you will not have full insight into those goods. But you can have a leader that engages the political imaginary that I think this is one of the things that we're getting into, that we got into the beginning of our previous conversation, that there are contingent political imaginaries. And we need leaders that are able to engage those in a way that moves and inspires people to action.

And if you cannot look at your leader and feel he or she is representing me, and my interests, my context and community, it's very difficult to feel that their authority is legitimate over you. And I mean, this has been obviously a big issue racially within various countries, if you don't have the ability to look at those in authority and say, they are actually related to me. And they, I feel, as I look to them that I'm looking at someone who's standing there on my behalf.

If you can't do that, it's very difficult to have healthy authority operational. But actually engaging that requires a political, engaging a political imaginary, telling stories, being

present to people in a way that leads them to have a particular imaginative relationship with you, not in the sense of being imaginary, in just being something that is not actually there, it's just in the mind. But it's something that really is there in the mind, the stories that we tell have deep purchase upon the way that we look at the world, the way that we act, and the way that we see other people.

And unless you have healthy things in that realm of the political imaginary, you will almost always have a breakdown of authority on some level or other. And so when you have a healthy parent, for instance, it's the child's recognition that this parent really cares about me. And they may on occasions tell me to do things I don't understand.

But on the basis of my knowledge of their character, I'm able to go along with it. We have the same thing, of course, in our relationship with God, we we don't know everything that God is doing in the world, we know that he's over all things. And yet, often we say, why has this illness come upon me? Or why have I been bereaved of this particular person in such an untimely manner? Or why did I lose my job, whatever it is, why is my church breaking up, and being able to recognize the goodness of God, even in those inscrutable situations, is so important.

But that's often something that we lack with our leaders and healthy authority, I think always needs to speak to that representative concern, but also to characterize its role, authoritative role in upholding the good, so that people recognize this is actually a good authority that cares about us. It's moral. And it's, but it's not just moral as such.

It is driven by a direct concern for our well being. I just, I so agree with that. And I just could not stress enough, whether it's in the political or the ecclesiastical or the familial context, how important it is that in that primary work of imaginative formation, without which your policy decisions, if people do not know the good, you're going to have such a hard time getting them to support whatever you believe is right.

Because they just, it's not tied to the good in their mind. I guess I feel this so much as a pastor, because for two years now, I've been pastoring a church of a decent size that has people of wildly different political convictions. And one of the things I've realized about leading in a context like that is, a huge part of my job is just facilitating the varying, the discussions of the varying views to help people see the legitimacy often, even in positions they disagree with.

That there's so much to the good. It's a multifaceted thing. It's deeply complex.

And I have had so many conversations over the years where I'm talking with someone with whom I disagree. And when they're finished talking, I realize I have just seen something they see that I never saw. And I'm drawn to it, even if I would very much disagree with them on the actual policy decision that ought to be made and enforced.



And I have just been so disappointed in the states with our public leadership on that score. I mean, we have leaders who just, they speak the same narratives to the same people in the same tribes. There's been almost no real effort to draw our country together around any sort of imaginative, shared imaginative vision.

And it's a highly combustible situation now. And it's just a failure of leadership. And there is an engagement of political imaginaries.

It just is engaged in a way that almost weaponizes things against the other side, whatever the other side is. There are narratives for sure, but they're not uniting narratives. They're not narratives that allow us to ever come together.

And the crazy thing is when you listen to the different narratives, you realize they both have points of the good. So how hard can it be to draw these together? Isn't that what you're for as a leader of a people? So yeah, it's been very sad. I think we should probably leave this conversation at that point because we could easily go into a lot more in this conversation.

I think next time we should probably discuss the question of what might resistance look like? A resistance that is nonetheless submissive in a proper biblical relationship to authority, but is able to push back particularly within our societies where the democratic society is representative. And we have means by which we can push back against injustice. And we also have responsibilities to people like children and other communities that we lead or speak for where that resistance might actually be a means by which we are exercising some sort of healthy authority relative to them.

Looking forward to it, Alistair.