

OpenTheo

What Are Christians For? (with Jake Meador)

February 11, 2022



Alastair Roberts

My friend Jake Meador is the editor-in-chief of the Mere Orthodoxy site and the author of the recent book, 'What Are Christians For? Life Together at the End of the World' (<https://amzn.to/3sv3RbH>). He joins me to discuss the book and the challenge of Christian faithfulness in our cultural context.

If you have enjoyed my videos and podcasts, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by the author of the recent book, What Are Christians For? Life Together at the End of the World. My friend Jake Meador is the author of the book.

He's the editor-in-chief of Mere Orthodoxy, which I'm sure all of you know and is associated also with the podcast that I am one of the cast members of, Mere Fidelity. He has written a book that is wide-ranging that will annoy people on all sorts of sides, but also stimulate great conversation and thought about some of the fundamental issues of modern Western society. I found it a very challenging book and I'm very happy to have recommended it.

And I want to have this conversation just to encourage you to take a look at it too. So thank you very much for joining me, Jake. Thanks for having me on.

Could you tell us a bit about the elevator pitch for the book? What prompted you to write it? What are you trying to achieve by it? Um, so there's actually kind of two different answers to it because there's what I thought the book was going to be when I started and then what it actually ended up being. And so the way it started was I was reading Grunewald Prinzterer's *Unbelief in the Revolution* and was very taken by his argument. He's a kind of pre-Kuiper Dutch reformed, not really a neo-Calvinist because neo-Calvinism wasn't a thing in the 1840s when he was working.

But his treatment of the revolution I actually found far more interesting than Kuiper and was, as I said, quite taken by it. And so I started kind of trying to think through what would it look like to pick up Gruen and try to take his analysis and use it as a tool for talking about where we are in the 21st century in the West. Because I don't think much today would probably surprise Gruen.

But what it ended up being as I was doing a lot of reading and thinking over the time it took me to write it, I missed a couple deadlines, IVP was very gracious, is it kind of morphed. And so by the time I got to the end, I think what I would say now is it's actually my stab at a kind of Christian high theory to critique the modern West. It's something that Keller talks about in his *How to Reach the West Again* kind of pamphlet that he just released.

He says that we need a high theory that allows us to offer a fairly pervasive and also fairly deep critique of where we are culturally in the West right now, so that we can then present Christianity as a striking alternative to where we are. And so that's where the book kind of ended up being is kind of my attempt at a Christian high theory critiquing the 21st century West, particularly the US, because that's the context I know best. One thing that does stand out about the book is the sheer range of interlocutors that you engage with, and not just the number of them, but primarily the diversity of them.

And you've got Bavinka, you've got Jennings, you've got the Bruderhof, you've got L'abri and all these different sorts of organizations and persons and theologians and theoreticians, and you bring them together in very fascinating ways to provide an analysis of modern Western society, and also some sort of suggestions for how to go forward. I'd be curious about what you found to be the most surprising insights in the process of writing the book. Who were the the finds, as it were, the people who were your interlocutors who became maybe more important to the larger thesis than you might have originally thought they would be? Yeah, so when I started and I was working principally from Gruen, when Gruen talks about the revolution, that's kind of his big concept he works from, and then Kuyper of course picks it up when he founds the anti-revolutionary party in the Netherlands and does a lot of his own writing against the revolution.

Kuyper's mostly talking about France in what I've read of him. I mean he wrote a ton, so

I'm sure there are things he said about the revolution that I haven't seen. What I've seen, he's mostly mad about the French revolution, whereas for Gruen, the revolution for him is this kind of extreme voluntarism, where now he's chiefly concerned with politics, and so for Gruen, the revolution is this move to say politics are whatever we say they are.

There's no kind of natural order in which our politics are embedded, to which our politics are accountable. It's just whatever we want them to be, and Gruen saw that move as essentially trying to suspend our common life in mid-air, and it was doomed to fail because you can't actually live that way. Now what happened as I was doing more reading on it, I think there were two people that helped me a ton but kind of surprised me.

The first was Hannah Arendt. I read her book, *The Human Condition*, as I was working on this, and Arendt has this really striking observation in the opening pages of the book, where she argues that the modern West climaxes in October of 1957 in what is now southern Kazakhstan with the launch of Sputnik One, and what that symbolized, she said, is so modernity begins, this is Arendt, with people turning away from God their father, and it climaxes at Sputnik One with people trying to escape the Earth their mother, and she found quotes from both Russian and American scientists at the time talking about the space race, which very much vindicated her analysis. No longer will we be bound to the Earth, was what one of the scientists said, and that whole image of turning away from both God his father and Earth his mother, it can sound very kind of neo-pagan, and yeah, neo-pagan, but as I was doing more reading on it, I was struck by the fact that John Paul II actually uses that framing in his pro-life encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly, and then Jonathan Edwards, who admittedly is kind of weird on doctrine of creation stuff, but Edwards also uses that concept when he's commenting on Job 1, when Job says, naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return.

Edwards looks at that and says, well, if you're going to return, you're not talking about your biological mother, you're talking about your mother, the Earth. And so as I did more thinking on it, I was like, this is actually a legit way of talking about this in the Christian tradition, and it's a very striking way of trying to hold together our pursuit of supernatural ends, of knowing God, and our natural ends of being in a right relationship with one another, organizing our life together in mutually beneficial, delightful ways. So Arendt kind of gave me that concept, and then I was able to find it in JP2 and Edwards to continue developing it.

And then the other surprising figure was Willie James Jennings, who's a Black theologian at Yale these days, used to be at Duke, and I found his work, *The Christian Imagination*, really helpful for filling in some of the early modern critique. I think it's actually deeply, it's very easy to reconcile what Jennings is up to in *The Christian Imagination* with

Gruen's critique of the revolution, and it's not necessarily surprising. Jennings studied at Calvin, he spent time at Fuller, so he's spent a lot of time intellectually in that Dutch Reformed world.

It's not made explicit in *The Christian Imagination*, but as I thought about it, I wasn't surprised to see him doing stuff on racialization that rhymed in some interesting ways with what Gruen was doing. And so Arendt and Gruen were two that kind of turned the book in certain ways, and made me late on my deadlines. I can relate to that.

I found your use of Jennings to be one of the more stimulating parts of the book, simply because bringing that critique of modernity into dialogue with accounts of whiteness and things like that is just very stimulating. It helps you to recognize some of the ways in which those concepts have taken practical force, and the ways in which it impacts upon specific populations and plays out in particular contexts. I found a number of things about the book very thought-provoking.

I think part of it is the way that there is a push against revolution, but it's a deeper push against revolution than we might have in many of our contexts today, where revolution is seen as a thing of the left. And there's a failure to appreciate that a far more fundamental revolution has been playing out over the last few centuries. Things to do with the industrial revolution, the sexual revolution, the ways in which the order of our social life, the way in which the modern nation state, and all these sorts of things, our relationship with the earth, the way in which we see our humanity and relationship to the planet, these sorts of things have all undergone remarkable transformations.

And the sort of technologies that we're using now are increasingly abstracting us from the creation and making it very difficult for us to have a healthy relationship with our bodies, with each other in society, whatever it is. But to raise a critique about that as a revolution can often be seen as, if you're going to push that to the thoroughgoing critique that I think we need, you're going to end up with opposition on both sides of our political aisle. You're going to find that your critique of our economics and our politics and our approach to industry, our approach to the planet, will lead to critiques on the right, and then on the left, your critique of the sexual revolution, your critique of a lot of other aspects of things, will find resistance there.

So how do you negotiate that challenge of presenting a critique of revolution that goes deeper beyond the traditional or the typical cultural categories for such challenges? How do you avoid being pulled to one side or to the other and just parroting a particular party line to actually have something that's more fundamental and searching for modernity? I mean the funny thing about that is that I think part of trying to do that is the people to your right are going to say that you've been pulled to the left, and the people to your left are going to say you've been pulled to the right. And so there's not really a way of avoiding the accusation, which means that when you're evaluating whether or not that's

what's happening to you, you kind of have to shut out a lot of noise and listen to the people who know you well, and which also means you need to have people in your life who know you well and who are willing to speak frankly with you, and I'm blessed to be fairly rich in those kind of friendships, thankfully. So that's one part, it can just be difficult because there's going to be a lot of noise that is telling you things that just aren't true, but it's going to be very loud.

If you're on social media it's going to be showing up in your mentions all the time. Some of it's going to be nasty and that's just unavoidable. I think another piece is just being honest about what that will mean.

There's a wonderful interview I actually just returned to recently, Bill Moyers did with Wendell Berry a number of years ago, where Moyers asks him at one point, do you ever feel like you are running in front of the locomotive of history waving your arms and shouting stop? And Berry goes, oh certainly, and it's very easy to do that if you're willing to be run over. And then Moyers is like, have you been run over? And Berry is like, of course. And so for Berry, I mean he's been arrested for civil disobedience in a variety of contexts, and he just had to make peace a long time ago with the fact that he would be run over.

And so I think just a willingness to recognize that and accept it as the cost of fidelity is really important. To recognize that there is a certain joy even to be had in standing on principle amidst much opposition, because that seems to be what is demanded by scripture and reason and the Catholic tradition. So I think that's a really important thing.

I guess the other thing I would say is that I was able to find probably the two figures who pervade the book the most are Martin Bucer and Hermann Bavink. And if you spend much time reading either of them, you're going to find that they don't map well at all onto our contemporary politics. Bucer is a 16th century German Protestant who believes all of the very retrograde things a lot of 16th century people would be expected to believe.

Bucer also will say things like, well, if there is rampant poverty in an area, the deacons of the church should know that area and know the people well enough to know which people need work and help them find work, and which people need money and to give them money. And then the question is raised, well, what happens if the church doesn't have enough money to provide for all of the poor people in its area? And Bucer's answer is he just says, well, then the king should give the church more money, which is not a terribly right-wing capitalist way of dealing with poverty. But there it is in this absolutely foundational figure in the Magisterial Reformation, mentor to John Calvin, for his part at least, friend to Luther, a friend to Zwingli, saying things that would get him tarred a socialist by people on the right today.

I mean, I've sometimes found myself wondering lately that if Mary were to pray the

Magnificat in some of our churches, if she would get chased out of the building. But that's Bucer, and then you kind of get similar things with Bavink. I read Eglinton's biography of Bavink as I was working on this, and I was just kind of shocked at how precious Bavink was.

And at how, I mean, if you're looking for using him from a culture war perspective, how frustrating he is. There is one speech Eglinton used in the book that was just so striking to me because of how much it sounded like Jennings. So Bavink, it's 1911, he's a member of the Dutch Parliament from the Anti-Revolutionary Party, in fact, because he worked closely with Kuiper for a number of years.

And he gives a speech to a number of church leaders, warning them that if our foreign missions movement becomes too wrapped up with the Dutch colonial project, what will happen is the colonial project is going to uproot traditional cultures all over the world, and what it will replace them with is not a kind of like Christian, like a Christian corrective to some of the problems that are going to be in any kind of culture, but rather it's going to uproot all of the traditional culture that gives a sense of meaning and purpose and identity, and it's going to replace it with the market. And when we replace this rich age, like significant shaping influence in the lives of people all over the world with the market, we are going to inspire an incredibly harsh backlash against Christianity and against the West. And what is the second half of 20th century history, and even much of the early 21st, if not that, in many parts of the world? And Bavink saw it all coming in 1911.

He also had some really striking lines in his book, *The Christian Worldview*, where he's clearly addressing some of the developments happening in Northern Europe at the time, and he says something to the effect of, we'll let Jesus be authoritative if he will allow himself to be pressed into an Aryan mold. And so we accommodate Jesus to our racial ideas, to our cultural ideas, our economic ideas, in a way that kind of neuters many of his words. We can even pick them up and read them, because we've already predetermined, well, whatever that text mean, it can't mean acts, so it must mean something else.

I tell the story in the book of being in a Bible study at the church I grew up in, it was a college Bible study, we were reading James 1. And we got to the end where James talks about pure and undefiled religion and the sight of the father is caring for the widows and orphans in their distress. It seems pretty plain to me, like I don't, I wouldn't think there'd be a lot of wiggle room on that. But the young man leading the study, I will never forget this, he said to us, oh well, there aren't any widows and orphans in our church, which wasn't true anyway, but there aren't any widows or orphans in our church, so that just means we need to look out for each other.

And so because it was this genuinely fundamentalist, I know that word gets used a lot, but this church really was, genuinely fundamentalist, hard right-wing church, when it

came to a text like that at the end of James 1, it was kind of already predetermined that it couldn't possibly mean what it seems to mean. It has to mean that we basically just look out for each other. It can't actually disrupt the way we want to live as comfortable middle-class white Americans.

It can't mean this thing that would demand we change our lives. It has to mean this thing that fits into the way we already want to live. And so that was something I found Bavink critiquing in a really trenchant way that I think still has obvious relevance in our context today.

And so I think just reading promiscuously in the small c Catholic tradition and letting those texts speak for themselves, and even more importantly, reading the Bible and letting the text speak for itself, is going to force a lot of people to have to make their peace with being cancelable to their right and their left, just as kind of the table stakes for being faithful in this particular context. I wonder when you're talking about how this plays out in terms of political agendas and movements and things like that, is there a danger of a sort of adoption of a prophetic posture that speaks to all the sort of errors and the compromises that deep within our society, which leaves us basically hamstrung to actually do anything to at least shore up some good things? And so I can see some of your critics saying, okay, I can see much of what you're saying here, but we need to actually fight the culture war. The culture war is coming for us and for our children.

It's coming for our churches, it's coming for our institutions. And so we actually just need to fight this, even if it's compromised, even if it's got failings in this, that and the other way. We can't afford just the luxury of this prophetic purity.

We actually have to just fight the political fight that's given to us, recognising that we have some maybe unpleasant allies at certain points, that this isn't going to be a pure revolution, it's not going to be a pure movement, it's going to end up failing to address certain issues. But we have to do something and we have to recognise just the fights of our day that have come to us. Yeah, there's two thoughts I would have just kind of right away in response to that.

The first is that I think often the debate gets kind of defined in a really contrived way. What I mean by that is, so somebody says, well the culture war is coming for our children and that means we need to make these kind of political choices. So just to get real practical, I want to know who the hour is in view there.

Because like, so some of our closest friends here in are African-American and they report to me, and I have no reason to doubt them and don't really have the personal standing or position to be able to speak from my own experience anyway, that they don't feel safe having their kids ride their bikes three blocks to the corner store for a candy bar in the summer because they don't know what might happen. Or they worry if their kids were playing out at a friend's house in the suburbs and they were playing in the front yard and

a neighbour saw a few Black kids in the front yard and didn't think they should be there and called the police. What would happen? And I talk to a lot of Black folks that have those kind of fears.

And so when I hear the culture war is coming for our children, I'm kind of like, well there's lots of children that the culture war is coming for and it doesn't cut in a neat political way. And so I think just trying to actually reckon with the full scale of the problems in the U.S. and the West more generally, although I think the U.S. has some unique accents on things because of our history. I think often we kind of pick the two or three issues that we're going to be most worked up about and then make all of our political choices according to those issues.

And if you go that way, then a lot of the choices make sense and are defensible. I just don't want to go that way. I think the second thing is that it seems to me the best way to protect oneself against a kind of prophetic purity, detached sensibility, which is absolutely a danger, is to be deeply involved in one's local church.

Because you're going to be in church with people who don't share your politics, although that's becoming harder because of the way politics are functioning in the U.S. And you're going to have to be able to talk through issues in ways that make sense to people that don't agree with you about things. And so like I go to a church that's been pretty divided, I think, on COVID issues, for example. We've had a lot of arguments over how to respond.

So Lincoln, Nebraska, where I am, Nebraska is a deep red state, but Lincoln is a pretty deep blue city. And we've had mask mandates in place for most of the last two years. Not all.

We've had a few breaks where numbers had gone down a lot where they got rid of them. But for most last years, we've been under a mask mandate. And there's been a question of how our church is going to relate to that.

And there's not been unanimity in the church on that. There's not been unanimity amongst the leadership on that. And we've had to talk through those things together and figure out how we're going to handle this.

I mean, it might surprise some people, but like I go to a church where like another guy my age who attends there is on Governor Ricketts staff. And I regard him as a friend. I respect him.

I appreciate him. We have very different politics. And that's fine.

We're united in love for Christ and in sitting around the same pulpit and hearing warning from the same ministers being shepherded by the same ministers, sharing the same meal every week when we have the Eucharist. And so we have a very good relationship.

There's been a couple times where we've pushed each other on a couple things.

And so I think that's where Christians should be going to as the primary place where we kind of encounter the real world. It should be like your neighborhood and your church. The fact that that argument gets made as a defense for associating with extremely unsavory internet people is just weird to me.

Because I'm like, that's your relationship with that crazy person on Twitter actually has very little impact on how you love your family, how you participate in your neighborhood, in your church, in your local politics. They are too far removed from your local context to really have any impact on it at all. And yet, these people want to tell me that I need to be willing to make those associations.

Otherwise, I'm this kind of above it all, living in the ether, like detached prophet. And I don't understand how to square that kind of narrow fixation on the internet with the actual expectations of Christians living as godly loving neighbors in mixed communities and mixed societies, which I am engaged in. I think that particular point is one that gets back to one of the most fundamental duties that we have as Christians, which is to recognize each other.

And in that recognition of each other, we can also recognize that there are many different fronts on which these struggles against the various faces of the revolution that we've experienced are being fought. And there are many worthy fights to fight that would seem to belong to different political sides, but actually are united against a common threat and are united by a common service and allegiance to Christ. And that sort of recognition, fundamentally of each other as brothers and sisters, I think enables out of that to arise a bit more attention and charity towards each other's political vantage points and recognizing that within the difference of the politics, often those differences can be broken down to size.

We can recognize that fundamentally, we are on the same side, driven by the same deep principles, and yet we're playing out those principles in very different contexts and against very specific challenges that loom large for us in our immediate horizon. But we recognize our own immediate horizons are not the only horizons against which threats can be seen. And again, I think when you actually do try to read deeply in scripture and in the Catholic tradition and let it speak on its own terms, it's not going to support the kind of super narrow friendships and communities that are becoming very normal today.

I think especially in white evangelical churches. Martin Buzer, who's just, he's become more and more a hero of mine, the more time I spend with him. After, I never remember his first name, I think it's Michael Sattler, the Swiss Anabaptist.

After he was martyred, I think, in, it was near Zurich, I think, I don't remember if Spingley was directly involved or not. Certainly could have been. Buzer wrote for public

consumption, like he didn't, it wasn't in some private diary.

He wrote it where it could be read by anybody, that Sattler was a brother in Christ. Now he had loads of critiques of the radicals and he had had arguments with Sattler himself, but he recognized Sattler as a brother. Even when Luther was especially nasty to him, Buzer still loved him.

And you see, what's really cool about it is you see the way that changes other people as well. So I remember once reading, there's several places where Calvin talks about Buzer. He writes a eulogy for him where he speaks of him as one of the best men of the world.

And he's a man who's character all revered or something like that. I'm not remembering the exact phrase, but it's in the eulogy that Calvin writes or the kind of reflection Calvin writes on Buzer after Buzer's death. But there's also a letter where Calvin is writing with someone, I don't remember who, it's when, so Buzer and Melanchthon actually were part of a movement in the 1540s to try and unify the Germanic church.

It was modeled after what they saw happening in England. So they saw there was this English reformed, state reformed church in England. They wanted that in Germany.

And so Melanchthon, who's obviously Lutheran, and Buzer, who's reformed, are working together with German Catholics that were sympathetic to elements of the reform, of the reformation, to try and forge a kind of consensus document that would allow for a Germanic church to emerge. And Luther hated the idea. He was the one who kind of ends up torpedoing it from the Protestant side.

A Catholic curate named Cardinal Carafa, who would later become Pope, did it from the Roman side. And Buzer's reputation took a hit because he was seen as being soft on Catholicism. Because of his work there.

But Calvin wrote a letter defending Buzer. Even while he expressed disagreement with what Buzer was doing, he loved him and he respected him. And so he was able to recognize this is not being done by somebody who is soft on theological error, or somebody who's going squishy on things.

This is a man who loves Christ, loves his word, loves his people, and is trying to help the church be more unified, which is a pretty serious thing when you consider some of the things that Christ says in John 13 and John 17 about the unity of Christian believers. And Calvin was able to look at Buzer and recognize that's what he's doing. And so he defended him, even as he disagreed with him.

So I think church history is full of these stories of friendships and disagreement, and yet finding ways of working alongside each other. And I worry about what it would mean for the church, for our churches to essentially become kind of culture war vehicles, where we don't encounter people we disagree with, or where we're not able to talk about our

disagreements. Because we expect, I mean my mom's talked about some long-time friends where it's hard for her to talk about things with people these days because they just get mad.

If that is what's going to happen more and more in our churches, then I mean frankly at that point I don't necessarily care about the culture war outcomes. I feel like even if we win, we'll have lost. Yeah.

So I do, reading your book, it seems to me that you are trying to respond to some of the crises of our time, in part by broadening the base of Christian fellowship and reflection. So it's not just a matter of engaging with certain people who have certain ideas, there's learning from the Black church, learning from the Bruderhof, learning from going back further into the Reformation sources and digging more deeply into those, learning by extending the base of the church and the different voices that we'll hear from it. How can we develop practices that equip us to respond to these modern crises as the church and as Christians within the church? I don't think it's anything terribly novel or unheard of that we need to do.

I think this is what the spiritual disciplines are for, is helping to form us as followers of Jesus. It's prayer, it's scripture, it's sacraments. The thing that I think is probably harder is living in close community with other Christians because we're all so busy and we're so geographically scattered that it makes it very difficult to be in regular relationship with one another.

But I don't know, I'm listening, a Mennonite friend of mine recently recommended a podcast to me called This Cultural Moment. It's by a Portland area pastor, he's kind of the interviewer, and there's this Australian pastor named Mark Sayers. The pitch of the show is basically the Portland guy just asks him questions and lets him go.

But they were both talking about on the episode I listened to last night, they came out of the missional movement and some of the early 2000s emergent stuff. They had all of these ideas about reaching the culture through a kind of more relevant church forms. Sayers is old enough that he was involved in a lot of the stuff going on in Australia in the 90s and early 2000s, where we're doing seating in the round and candlelit services and all these different things.

What both of these pastors realized is that we're sending out people into the world, we think, to preach the gospel, but they have no grounding in the spiritual disciplines. And so what's actually happening is our people are just getting colonized by the world. At one point, I don't remember which one of them says it, but he said, I think the iPhone is going to do far more damage to the spiritual lives of most of my congregation than anything that the right or left is doing politically.

And so they talked about, you know, we were trying to do this missional movement when

we had people who didn't even know their Bibles, had very poor prayer lives, were not receiving the Lord's Supper regularly. All of these things that have just always been kind of the core practices of Christian faith are just absent to a large degree in most of the lives of the people in their churches. And so I don't know, I mean, maybe it's too simplistic, but I think at minimum, I guess I would say, let's try that.

And if we're all like actually spending time in scripture and living lives of prayer and quiet generosity and availability to others and receiving the Lord's Supper weekly, I mean, that's one thing churches could be doing is just having the Lord's Supper weekly. I'm very blessed. All three PCA churches in Lincoln do weekly communion, and I'm so grateful for that.

I wish it were more the norm in the PCA, although I think it's becoming more that way. But like, let's try to do all of those things. And if we're still having this problem after we've done all of those things, we can start trying to get more creative.

But I mean, I don't know, it kind of feels like the person whose house is burning and is wanting to know what they should do, and they're trying to come up with all of these very creative things. And it's like, well, just put the fire out first. I feel like we've got a real problem in day-to-day discipleship, and I would like to see what happens if we try to address that.

And I don't know what it looks like after we've taken steps to address that problem. Maybe we still have tons and tons of issues in the church. I suppose probably we do, because the church always has tons and tons of issues.

But it seems like if we're not doing those things, the first step just has to be doing those things more faithfully. And a lot of your book seems to be responding to the very particular cultural moment for the church too, where evangelicalism made more sense in a society which was positively disposed towards Christianity, or even neutrally disposed. Now it's hostile.

And so you have that push between either you accommodate to culture, or you engage in war against culture, because you don't know how to be a Christian without having some sort of relationship with the culture. But now we're starting to have that distance. There is that space in which we can reassess that previous situation of that cultural situation, that cultural situation where there was a deep compromise between cultural factors and the Christian faith, and the inability to have the, I suppose, the detachment that would be sufficient to render a more prophetic or challenging critique to some of the things that were endemic within the society.

I think one of the questions, particularly as we draw to an end, I'd love to hear your thoughts upon. You are dealing within this book with a lot of systemic, large-scale factors, our relationship with the environment, our technologies, the way in which the

industrial society works, the way in which modern politics have worked and have sustained racial and other social inequities, all these sorts of factors which, on an individual level, we might feel fairly powerless to address. In that sort of situation, what you tend to have is the movement for personal praxis is into a sort of advocacy, activism, and voting.

On the other hand, you have the response to that, if you're going to take it on board, is primarily in the form, I mean, you have a sort of impotent and abstracted moral responsibility that registers chiefly in the form of guilt and admission of that guilt, but not in a way that actually tends to make that much of a difference. It tends to be more signaling your moral sensibility to the situation. I wonder, is there a Christian alternative to that sort of thing, something that's an alternative to just complaining to management? Which, in many ways, it seems to me it intensifies the problems.

One of the struggles that we have are many of the ways in which we push against these things, for instance, a recovery of a relationship between people and place, that can end up going in some directions that collide with welcome to the alien and the stranger. We're having the fight against the big system or NICE, whatever it is, it's one that's pushing us in different directions, and it's very hard to thread the needle of how to do that. Well, it's far easier just to take this detached approach.

Is there something that actually engages on this moral responsibility that is distinctively Christian and which enables us to stand against this sort of system and society without just doing so within its structures? Yeah, so I guess the first thing I would want to say is that big ships turn very, very slowly, and I am not the Christ, you are not the Christ. And so, if we begin in a way that defines success by radical cultural transformation, we're probably dooming ourselves to failure or setting ourselves up to make really bad choices from the start, because cultures change slowly, and we are creatures. We're finite, we're fallible.

It's really important. We just ran an essay at Miro recently talking about the dangers of trying to imitate God in non-creaturely ways. And I think that problem pops up in a lot of places.

So I think I would want to begin by just foregrounding the fact that change happens very slowly, and you're one person. I mean, honestly, even think about a figure as gifted and as titanic in his personality as Martin Luther. When Luther dies, there's a very real possibility that the Reformation is going to end.

The Schmalkaldic War did not go well. Chunks of the Reformation in South Germany get wiped out, because of the, I mean, when Bucer dies, Bucer dies basically thinking, a lot of my life's work is gone, because Strasburg, it goes back to Rome after the Schmalkaldic War, and he dies alone and very unhappy in England. And so often, I think we can, because we have the perspective of looking at the bigger historical story, we can

often exaggerate the relative effect that one person can have.

And when you actually zoom in on one person, even a figure as large as Luther, you realize even someone like that could only do so much. And so I think that's really important. I think the other thing I would say is that what I want to see happen more is, I think what happens, I can speak to my ecclesial context the most in the PCA, is that you kind of have these two groups in the PCA that will compete with each other.

So you have the pietistic types that are very interested in day-to-day spiritual disciplines, and see involvement in broader cultural things as being kind of a distraction, a waste of time, unimportant. And then you also have the transformationalist types that are very good at like pointing at a hill and saying, okay, everybody, that's our hill, we're gonna go take it, let's go. And I think we need both of those inclinations.

And it's very hard to maintain both. But the reality is, the person that is trying to be faithfully present within the academy, or within media, or within the business world, if they're not being deeply shaped by regular practices of spiritual disciplines, they're going to get colonized in that space. However, it is also true that if the pietists all just stay at home, they stay pure from the world, which is kind of the right-wing tendency, I think, often, not always.

There are lots of people that need to hear about Jesus that might not. And there are lots of good things that institutions can accomplish if they are being faithfully disciplined, that won't be accomplished. I think about, I had a column for the campus newspaper when I was a student at UNL.

I regret many things I wrote in that column, because you're an idiot college kid, and idiot college kids shouldn't have large platforms for the most part. But when you write for the student newspaper, you do, and you embarrass yourself. But because I was encouraged to be in journalism, I was encouraged as a writer by my RUF pastor and my church pastor, I was equipped to work in that space.

And there are two people that came to RUF, one of them kind of had a return to faith, one of them would say that he became a Christian through the ministry of RUF. And they were, they first came to RUF because they read my column and were curious about kind of where I was coming from, and reached out and I invited them to RUF. And those are the kind of encounters that I think we should be wanting to see happen.

I mean, I remember I have a friend, we both have a friend, who talks about what Keller did for New Yorkers, he made it possible for New Yorkers to imagine themselves as Christians. Because Christians weren't just these weird white people that lived out in the suburbs in the Bible Belt, and shopped at Hobby Lobby and ate a Chick-fil-A and listened to Rush Limbaugh. Somebody like Keller could be a Christian, and Keller seemed to like New York and seemed relatively normal.

And that was kind of an on-ramp for people. So I still think it's funny the whole idea of faithful presence from Hunter, I think gets mocked a lot right now. And yet, I still think it's actually what we should be doing.

I just think it needs to be linked up very tightly with a grounded spiritual life committed to the local church, and in which you're practicing the spiritual disciplines regularly. Because otherwise you'll go into those worlds and what people think happens with faithful presence all the time really will happen, and you'll just get devoured. But it doesn't have to happen.

And if it doesn't happen, really beautiful good things can follow from having faithful committed Orthodox believers in these kind of environments. So I don't think it's a thing where we have to choose between being engaged in politics, being engaged in large institutions, and being pure from the world. I think that the Christians that are going to be most fruitful in the years to come are going to be the ones that have very, very, very strong foundations in scripture, in prayer, in traditional Christian thought, and people who in their day-to-day lives are encountering non-Christians and working in close proximity with non-Christians in various ways.

I have a good friend who's a software developer who's doing some wonderful stuff in his company that I think a lot of Christians would just not want him to be doing because they wouldn't want him to be working there. And yet if he wanted to be working there, there wouldn't be anyone else bringing the light of Christianity into those spaces, which to me seems far worse. So yeah, I think if we can have a faithful presence that is deeply embedded in healthy practices of piety and devotion, I'm still very hopeful about where we can end up.

Something I've often returned to, and particularly recently, the importance of when we face these cultural challenges, not actually leaning further into politics, but digging down deeper into the fundamental sources of faith and practices of faith. And I think one of those that has really stood out to me is the church at prayer, that the church recognising that cultural change does not happen on human schedules, it doesn't happen according to human will and expectation. We are facing forces culturally that even our governments and our greatest economic and technological powers are not in control of.

Some of the technological forces that are rising, we can't control them, they have their own logic to them. And so we need to seek the face of the Lord. And as we do that, we'll find that we have a political agency that those who are just looking to government and corporate power, whatever it is, that they lack.

And it also gives us, I think, a confidence and an assurance in a society where we can otherwise feel besieged and powerless, that we know that our God is on the throne, that he has shepherded his people through worst times, and that we can root our lives in him without having to solve all the problems of the world. He can shepherd us through the

stormy waters without us having to calm the seas. We live in a remarkably anxious moment.

And I mean that in several different ways, just speaking of like actual clinical anxiety, but also just speaking of a kind of pervasive low-grade fear about the future, short-term and long-term, that I think a lot of people live with. And if you can have a practice, a friend of mine would talk about a Sabbath of the soul. If that sort of spirit defines you, you're going to have opportunities relationally, hopefully in your work life, to do some really good things, simply because your sense of calm, quiet trust in God is going to stand out amidst so many people.

I mean this is one of the things that unites the right and left, is the degree of anxiety that everyone feels. And if you can actually engage with the real things driving the anxiety without just becoming utterly neurotic yourself, that in itself is pretty powerful, I think. That is a really helpful point to end on.

Thank you very much for joining me, Jake. And I would highly recommend that people get your book, *What Are Christians For? Life Together at the End of the World*. God bless and thank you very much for listening.