

# OpenTheo

## In Appreciation of Stickiness and the Midwest with Jon Lauck

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### **Life and Books and Everything** - Clearly Reformed

Often lampooned as boring, bland, and less important than other regions in the country, might it be that the Midwest actually has its own regional identity and a story worth telling? Jon Lauck, a professor at the University of South Dakota thinks so. In this episode Kevin talks to Jon about his excellent new book *The Good Country: A History of the American Midwest 1800-1900*. They explore what made the region from Ohio to the Dakotas different from New England and from the South and why the old virtues of the Midwest might just be worth pursuing today.

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### **Transcript**

(music) Greetings and salutations. Welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung and glad to have you joining with us.

I'm going to introduce our guest in just a moment. As always I want to thank our sponsor Crossway for sponsoring LBE and a book to hire us. I'm a book to highlight for today which just came out.

I'm reading it. I haven't finished it yet but I'm excited for this book edited by Andrew Walker who teaches at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Andrew's a good friend of mine.

This book is *Social Conservatism for the Common Good*, a Protestant engagement with Robert P. George. We are listeners I hope are familiar with Robert or Robbie George who's a Catholic conservative at Princeton and has done a lot to speak and think about natural law. Andrew, an evangelical abaptist, has a friendship with Robbie and then has written, edited this book with a number of evangelicals who are working and assessing George's work.

It's a really fascinating book. I encourage you to look at it. Crossway published it.

Just came out interacting with George's new natural law theory, how to collaborate across ideological lines. I'm a Protestant. Andrew's a Protestant.

Professor George is a Catholic but there's common ground and a number of these things. So pick up a copy of *Social Conservatism for the Common Good*. Wherever books are sold or visit [crossway.org/plus](https://www.crossway.org/plus). Find out how you can get 30% off.

My guess today is John Lauk who is the editor in chief of the *Middle West Review*, teaches history and political science at the University of South Dakota. I'm really excited to talk about his book which I put on my 2022 top 10 books of the year list. I love this book.

It's called *The Good Country, A History of the American Midwest, 18 to 1900*. I just say if you're listening to this right now and you're not from the Midwest and you think of the Midwest as very boring, please don't don't hang up your podcast. You don't have to be from the Midwest.

I am from the Midwest. I minister and live now in the south, which is a wonderful place to live as well. But in particular, as a born and bred and raised Midwesterner, I really enjoyed this book.

So, John, thanks for being here. Thanks for writing this great book. Give us a little bit of background about yourself and where this book came from.

Well, thank you, Kevin. It's a pleasure to join you. I should say right off the bat that I just

made a note to order this book about Robbie George.

The Midwestern History Association meets every year in Western Michigan in Grand Rapids and at Grand Valley State, which has an institute there called the Howenstein Center. They host something called the Common Ground Initiative. They invite out Robbie George and Cornell West to debate issues.

It's a very popular venue. They do a lot to promote discussion across party lines and various divides. Also, I think Robbie George is a good friend of my friend Jody Bottom, who many of your listeners would know.

I just want to give a shout out to Jody. He's a fellow South Dakota. He lives in the Black Hills of South Dakota, where he writes many of his great books and articles.

That's a great connection. One of the themes here is going to be Midwesterners connecting. Grand Valley State University.

I can literally run there from my home where I grew up in West Michigan. That's where most of the people from my high school went to Grand Valley State University. I know exactly where it is in Allendale, Michigan.

That's a great Midwest story too. All those Dutch settled West Michigan. Then they moved into Iowa, First Pella, then Northwest Iowa, where I know you have a lot of connections.

Then they set up a couple of smaller colonies in South Dakota. My kids happen to go to Sioux Falls, Christian, and Sioux Falls. That was set up by Northwest Iowa Dutch people.

I run into lots of the youngs when I'm out playing baseball and basketball and stuff. Let's get back to this book. Thank you.

I appreciate you putting it on your list. I've been working on this for a long, long time. I grew up on a farm in South Dakota, South of Madison, South Dakota.

It just occurred to me that there's not much history about our place, about our home. You mentioned that you live and work in the South now. The American South has a tremendous amount of history.

There's a very active history association. Many institutes study the American South. There's no shortage of historians looking at the South.

But there's not much work done on the Midwest. Here's a good example. University of Georgia has 10 people who teach the history of the South or the history of Georgia.

University of Minnesota, a huge institution in our part of the country, has zero people who teach about the history of the American Midwest. This shows you this is a good

example of the disparity in terms of research and knowledge about the regions. I was teaching at South Dakota State University many years ago.

The head of the department came down late in the summer and said, "You have to teach the history of South Dakota because education students need it." I scrambled around and organized a course. In the course of doing that and teaching the course, I just noticed that there's very little about this part of the country. I did a book about the settlement of Dakota Territory called *Prairie Republic*.

I noticed all these people settling South Dakota were from the Midwest. They're from Illinois and Michigan and Wisconsin and Minnesota. That obviously is very important.

The DNA of the settlers who set up a place, they're going to affect what that place is like. They're going to bring a culture and traditions to that place. I wanted to know more about what Midwesterners were bringing into Dakota Territory.

There wasn't much written about the Midwest, so I started digging into it. Soon we had a *Midwestern History Association* and we have this journal that I edit, which is kind of an academic journal that focuses on the history of the region. I started writing books about the region.

That's great. This is a great book. Let's start with an obvious question that maybe isn't obvious to answer, but what is the Midwest? Growing up in Michigan, I heard Midwest all the time and I just thought of Big Ten teams.

I'm old enough that I remember when Penn State wasn't even in the Big Ten and Nebraska wasn't, of course, Rutgers and Maryland weren't. I didn't ever think that was the Midwest, but I just sort of thinking the upper Great Lakes Midwest and then the Dakotas, Nebraska, I usually call that the Great Plains, but of course that's the Midwest. What's your definition of what states get this august title of being the Midwest? Well, I should say first of all that one of the great outrages of the last century was allowing Rutgers and Maryland into the Big Ten, which makes no sense whatsoever.

Nebraska made sense. Nebraska makes perfect sense. They should have brought in Nebraska and Kansas and Missouri and stuff.

Now they're expanding out to California and bringing in UCLA and whatnot. It makes no sense. But the Midwest definitely includes your Michigan, of course, and Iowa, where you were active for many years.

It includes most of Ohio, but Ohio, of course, that southern tier is very Appalachia-oriented. But when you get to Columbus and farther west, that's definitely the Midwest. The Ohio River down on the southern side of the Midwest, those counties in the Midwest, in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, they have a certain southern orientation to them.

So, you know, there's a borderland. It's not a sharp distinction. But if you just want a very general rule of thumb, the Ohio River, but, you know, keep in mind those southern counties, like Illinois, for example, far southern Illinois, Cairo, Illinois, if anybody's ever been there.

I mean, that's pretty southern. Yeah, you say it's further south than Richmond, which is the capital of the Confederacy. Yeah, I had to look on a map.

Oh, yeah, that's right. Yes. Well, and then you mentioned the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas.

If you're into this and I am, there's a great book out there called *The Interior Borderlands, Where the Midwest Ends and the Great Plains Begin*. And just as a rule of thumb, the 100th Meridian, or if you can visualize where the Missouri River cuts through South Dakota, in South Dakota, there is a local phrase, East River and West River. And people know when you get to West River or past the Missouri River, that gets a lot drier.

There's a lot more cattle ranching and Indian reservations and mountains and short grass country. I mean, that's the Plains West, but East River, South Dakota, especially the part where I'm close to the Big Sioux River Valley, where Iowa, Minnesota and South Dakota come together. I mean, that's very Midwestern.

So that's the parameters here. You can also, there's also a kind of unique debate about Missouri and what parts is in Missouri and what part isn't. But that's the general framework.

And I remember incorrectly, is it, is it Cozad in Nebraska, where the Meridian line passes through? I seem to remember driving on Interstate 80 and stopping there at the line to commemorate. So that's when you leave the Midwest. Yes, it is.

That is very, very accurate. There's a great book written about John Wesley Powell, who was a geographer and adventurer in 19th century. And he's the one who first developed the 100th Meridian, is kind of the rule of thumb.

But if you follow that straight up, you know, it goes right close to where the Missouri River divides the Dakotas and stuff. So that's a very accurate. So at the very beginning, Iowa, so for our listeners, I lived and worked for two years in Orange City, Iowa, which isn't too far from Sioux Falls.

About an hour and 15 minutes up to Sioux Falls, 45 minutes down to Sioux City. And I was a pastor there, associate pastor, did a lot of hospital calling. And there was a hospital in Orange City, a very good one, but any sort of major thing.

So I was always driving down to Sioux City up to Sioux Falls, half day work to go visit folks in the hospital and went and walked and ran on the river trail in Sioux Falls many

times. It was just kind of being redone parts of it were kind of gritty and I'm not sure where I am. And then the falls were really lovely.

But Iowa, speaking of Iowa, you open with this, which I didn't know to laugh or to cry. But it's really amazing. And it's from Philip Roth, famous writer, and he is writing about Iowa.

You say he was then teaching at the Iowa Writers Workshop, which is a really famous writers workshop. And here's somebody said he had been frog marched to the Midwest by an unhappy spouse. He had found Iowa anti-whisky, anti-Girly magazine, anti-communist, anti-intellectual, cold, republican and white, a place of bland food.

And an orientation toward the Chamber of Commerce and the PTA, where people use the phrase "real good" too much. A state generally inhibited by an enveloping "smallness", "Iowans" were too nice, chatty and folksy. In Iowa, grown men, respectable merchants wore beat Minnesota buttons to Iowa Hawkeye football games.

DeMere Housewives baked cakes and made fudge. He complained that the Des Moines Register ran photos of hogs and corn and cheerleaders. He confessed he lived at the periphery of Iowa life.

And you use that as a great example of the way in which many people think about the Midwest. And I think you say at the very end that Ohio is kind of the anchor of the Midwest. And maybe Iowa, it's sort of the butt of people's jokes of the Midwest.

If you're going to get the just its corn and its hogs and its boring and its bland. Where did this come from? Because Roth isn't the only one who was writing like this. Where did this very negative impression of the Midwest as boring, repressive bland? How did that originate? It's funny, Roth said he used to call Iowa, Kansas.

Because when he was growing up, anything west of the Hudson River was just some bland spot on the map he called Kansas. So he couldn't even differentiate between these places. Well, I chose that story because Philip Roth is obviously a giant in American letters and writing and literature.

He's from New Jersey, spends lots of time in New York City. But he kind of represents a point of view, a dominant point of view of the literati of the coasts. And he captured very well and confessed very openly what he thought of the interior of the country.

And he's not alone. A lot of the people who make decisions about what our culture is going to be, what kind of books we should read, what books should be on the top 10 list, what books should be sold in our bookstores. They think a lot like Roth.

And so I'm an advocate of sort of pushing it back against that coastal domination of the culture, which is a whole other story. But as to the origins of the stereotype, it really takes flight in the 1920s. Prior to that, I think there was a general image of the Midwest

as a very active and energetic and small democratic place.

I mean, at the end of the about 1900, the Midwest was the biggest region in the United States. And this is where this is the manufacturing belt. And this is the bread basket.

This is where there were a lot of big cities and this is where all the presidents come from. I mean, people weren't joking about the Midwest in 1900. It was seen as the pace center region.

But by 1920, there were a group of intellectuals and writers who began to poke fun at the Midwest and its cultural dominance and make light of it. There was a writer from, unfortunately, from Illinois, small town Illinois, who went east. He took a job in New York City, became an English professor at Columbia.

And he wrote an essay in the Nation magazine called "The Revolt from the Village" in which he posited that these writers, several writers are beginning to pull back the curtain on the repressive retrograde backward Midwest. And unfortunately, this article can be poked full of holes and I've done some writing on this and the errors and logic and fact in it. But the important thing is it caught on and people in New York wanted to hear this.

This is a message that resonated with them. Was this Van Doren or am I remembering Carl Van Doren? Yeah, it was Carl Van Doren. Yeah, and he became, he was the book editor and culture editor at the Nation.

So he had a lot of cultural influence. And he wrote this essay called "The Revolt from the Village" in which he said all of these Midwesterners are finally waking up to how backward their region is. And some of their writers are exposing the region.

And he pointed to people like Sinclair Lewis who wrote Main Street and Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson, etc. And this was just kind of taken as fact for many, many years. And then about 15 years ago I said, what is the basis of this Revolt from the Village idea? And so I did a thorough analysis of that notion and it's just simply not true.

Lewis and Sherwood Anderson and all these people said, I never revolted against my Village. That is completely made up and many of the things they wrote were actually very positive about the Midwest. And here's the kicker, Kevin.

I dug into the life of Carl Van Doren and even he said personally in his memoirs, unpublished memoirs, that he loved growing up in his little town in Illinois. I hope Illinois has fascinating. Here's what's important about this.

He knew that if he was going to get book contracts and he was going to get noticed in New York, and if he wanted the publishing world to lift him up as a new voice of the country, he had to turn his back on the Midwest and to make it a butt of jokes. That's how he got ahead. Wow.

Yeah, and you could argue that that hasn't changed that much. No. You need to see especially small town Midwest as repressive, a bubble.

Look, I remember always hearing growing up, this is a bubble, this is a bubble. I went and visited New York City and of course New York City is different and has a dynamism that small town Midwest doesn't. So it's not better or worse.

We're talking to people there who lived within, hardly moved out of their few blocks radius. I even heard some of them say, "I live in such a bubble here in New York City." So a bubble is what you make it and really because of our human limitations, the digital world fools us in this way, but we really can't have meaningful relationships with more than I don't know, several dozens of people. So all of us, if we're going to have real relationships have a bubble.

In fact, I want to come back to it at the very end, this concept that you borrow from, I forget her name, but the stickiness and that stickiness is seen as a bad thing because stickiness means you're stuck. But why do we only see it as a bad thing that we might be stuck or we might be associated with a particular people in place? Maybe one of the ways, John, to talk about the Midwest here is to talk about it in distinction to a couple of other regions. Now you're looking at, in particular, the 19th century and obviously immigration is always moving west across the US.

But in particular, you look at it as it's not New England, so it's not the northeast and it's not the south. How would you explain or maybe how would Midwesterners have seen their unique regional identity in the 19th century as distinct from northeast and New England and from the south? I will address that in one second, but I want to follow up on one quick thing that you mentioned that I don't want us to lose this thread. You mentioned people in New York City living in a bubble.

Well, I ask you, who is more cosmopolitan? I mean, we're out here and when we watch TV or Netflix or the general, you know, the general, you know, TV shows, who knows more about New York? I mean, just think I love this show, "Signfell." It's a great show. It's a great window into New York life. Right.

Do people in New York have a show that they can watch about Iowa that is a great window on to Iowa life? No. We know a lot more about the world, other places, I should say, than people in New York who I disagree are very, they have a certain provinciality of their own. Well, yeah, we have to know about D.C. and New York, and I always would joke, especially in Michigan, where it was always snowing, especially on the west side of the state, and it could dump two feet.

And then when the same storm got to New York City with five inches, it was national news. And I get it, there's a lot of people there, but you know, there's a lot of people in Chicago, too. But the storm sort of didn't materialize until it crossed the Hudson River.



Yeah. I mean, there's a real New York City narcissism. If it doesn't happen there, it's not news.

And this is a problem because this is where our books come from and our culture comes from and our news comes from. And so we need to develop our own institutions, our own sense of history and identity out here in the middle of the country, or it's going to be made for us by someone else. So that's one of the larger implications of this book.

Yeah. But back to your question about the development of the Midwest vis-a-vis these other regions. Well, one of the things that should be said, first and foremost, is that the Midwest is a very mixed region in this sense.

The Midwest is settled by, of course, these Yankees from New England who come in through the Erie Canal and other means. It's also settled by upland Southerners or backcountry Southerners, as they're called, as opposed to people on the coast, sort of the planter class on the coast. And then you have some backcountry Scotch-Irish who trickle in.

You have Pennsylvania immigrants, Germans and Quakers. And then you have this huge foreign immigration, starting in the 1840s, 1850s. This is mostly Germans and Irish.

But then later on. And Dutch. And Dutch, yeah.

Well, one of the Dutch start in Michigan early 19th century and then spread out across the Midwest. This is why we have towns named Orange City. I mean, with tulip festivals and stuff.

Yeah, I always tell people here, you know, there are no oranges there. It's named after William of Orange. It's a bit of a misnomer, no oranges growing there.

Right. Yes. And then Little Town, which I thought was pronounced Maurice, but they all pronounce it Morris, but it's named after William of Orange's son.

But Maurice, I think, sounds too, I don't know, too foreign or something. So they just called this little town Morris. Yes.

And I was born in South Holland, Michigan. I went to college in, or South Holland, Illinois. I went to college in Holland, Michigan.

I passed it in Orange City, Iowa. Yes, I've hit these Dutch birds, but go ahead. There's another out here.

If you follow the migration, there's a new Holland, South Dakota. Yeah. But yes, the Dutch are very prominent in my part of southeastern South Dakota.

As they say, if you ain't Dutch, you ain't much. No, that's true. We got that in bumper

stickers.

We got that everywhere. Shower words have never been spoken. Right.

But just think about that for a second. Let's reflect on that. This very important Dutch enclave in the Midwest.

It's prominence, very important businessmen and political leaders come out of that, you know, the Meyer food chain, et cetera. Yeah. But do people know anything about this in this country? Does anybody have any sense of this in New York City or LA? No.

It's the Dutch garbage mafia. It's just not really a mafia, but the Dutch started, they were the ones who said, "Okay, we'll work with trash. We can make money.

We'll work hard." And so there's all sorts of history with so many of the leading, you know, waste management companies were started or run by the Dutch. You know, I was reading this article yesterday where they were talking about regional distinctions. And someone said, "People in the Midwest use the term garbage, and people in the South use the term trash." Now, since you lived in both regions, do you think that's true? Yeah.

Yeah, I do. We definitely call them garbage men now. I know trash sounds a little more refined.

Yeah. I wonder what you think this is sort of skipping ahead, but I'm, I guess, emblematic of a lot of movement in our country right now in that I've spent most of my life in the Midwest, and I'm living here in Charlotte, and it's a great place, and it's going to be sunny in 70s today, and I, it's got four seasons. It's a beautiful place.

Yeah. And I'll tell you in, I, I, I pass for a fairly large church, and there's probably as many Ohio State Buckeye fans as there are almost anything else. Of course, there's lots of Duke, Carolina, NC State.

We've got a lot of Wolverine fans, a lot of Spartan fans. So there's Midwesterners, a plenty who have come down here. So it doesn't feel, you know, you go outside of the city a half hour, and I feel like I'm in real North Carolina more than I am in, in Charlotte, which is such a huge transplant city.

But what is the future for the Midwest? Because I'm, I'm, you know, emblematic of that, of a Midwesterner who has moved down to the South, which a lot of Midwesterners are. You said in the 19th century, it was the culture shaping place in many ways, and the leading edge and the experiments and reform and democratic rules, lowercase D. And even into the 20th century, you know, Detroit was like the Paris of the New World, they thought of it. What do you think is the history for the Midwest when the, the just migration patterns within the country and the weather now that we have air conditioning everywhere and people can choose where to be.

People would say that the future for the Midwest isn't very sunny, no pun intended. How would you respond to that? Well, I've been thinking a lot about this because this book just, that I just came out is, of course, about the 1800s. It ends up around 1900.

And so I need to begin to think about the next century. I mean, what happened and what does it mean? And there are a lot of regional shifts that go on. As you said, the Midwest was the industrial heartland of the country.

And you're from Michigan, you've seen this more than anybody. It was incredibly impressive how efficient industry became in Ohio and Michigan and Wisconsin. And there's been an unwinding of that old order.

I mean, we can imagine these visually, these places like the Packard Plant and the old Packard Plant that's closed down and people always like to come take pictures of it and as emblematic of deindustrialization. And it was. There's a new book out about what happened to the rubber industry in Akron, Ohio.

There's a new book out about what happened to the glass manufacturing that went on in Lancaster, Ohio and what that does to a town and how when everyone loses these good paying jobs where one man could work a 40 hour week, provide for his entire family, send us kids to college and he could have a nice lake cabin in the north of Michigan or Minnesota or wherever. And he didn't have to get to advanced degrees. Right.

Right. And so, you know, what happened to that world and, you know, I'm still making sense of it. Of course, in my part of the Midwest, it was more rural and life was organized around farming.

I grew up on a farm. But back in that old era, there were just tens of thousands of hundred and sixty acre farms. And that small farm world is as fallen apart.

And most of those farms have been folded into bigger operations, 10,000 acre operations because people have better machinery, etc. Well, that changes the nature of a place. And there's been a lot of rural out migration.

People either move to a city or they move to Charlotte or they move to Texas. A lot of people go to California. You know, it's this is hard to put your finger on.

The other thing that became a prominent, I don't know, influence is mass culture. Mass culture and the coming of television, the coming of radio. But more importantly now, just the internet wave and how people are increasingly placeless.

Meaning they don't have to be in a particular location. They used to be very heavily identified with a place. And, you know, that's breaking down somewhat, which is very unfortunate.

So now on the other hand, it's not all a negative story. You have cities like Grand Rapids, Michigan, Des Moines, Iowa, Sioux Falls, I'd put in this category. These are very vibrant, growing, healthy cities.

And a lot of the reasons they're healthy is because this rural out migration from the hinterland around them, they move there and they have small town values and they like to be neighbors. And, you know, they're good people and they join these churches that have become very large. And maybe your church is part of that migration.

But in Sioux Falls, I know, and in Des Moines, there are these new big Protestant churches, which a lot of people who have moved in from the countryside, to where they go. And so that's a readjustment because back in the years, him describing, most little towns had churches and they had all denominations. And there was a very interesting denominational friction at a very low level.

I mean, in my part of the country, people joke that when a Lutheran and a Catholic marry, that's a mixed marriage. At least 40 years ago. Now that's not really the case.

So I don't know, Kevin, I wish I had a better answer for you. It's been a major readjustment for this region. But, you know, I want to think about it.

That's something I want to tackle. And I think you hit on it that I think, you know, I'm not a demographer, it's not my expertise, but what I read and can just see, it does seem like there's a bright future for medium, small to medium, medium to large cities anywhere that are well run. And that's a key.

When you look at the demographics over the last 10 years, I mean, the one, if I remember correctly, the one state in the Midwest that's been shrinking, you know, it's hard to shrink when you just have at least birth, all fertility rate has fallen and some immigration from overseas, but has been Illinois, which has been, and sadly, that's my home state, but has been a really great example of poorly run government for a long time. And that makes a big difference on where people go. And so they go up, you know, people from Illinois will go up to Wisconsin or go over to Indiana and the Northwest suburbs.

So it still is the case that better government, better run smart policies will attract people or repel people. Now you can't change the weather, but those policies still make a real difference. Well, in the case of Illinois, I think I would highlight the election in Chicago last week.

I mean, Chicago is a democratic left leaning city, but even there, they were so tired. There was a mayor there who was extremely ineffective and made a bunch of dumb mistakes and allowed lawlessness to kind of take over the city. And I think basically as Chicago newspapers described it, I mean, the police in Chicago kind of went out on sit

down strike or they just wouldn't respond to calls and stuff because every time they went in, they would be blamed for everything or sued.

And so you need someone in the mayor's office who's going to provide leadership. And, you know, this is a long standing problem with Chicago. But I mean, this mayor, if there hasn't been a mayor of Chicago who's lost reelection in a long time.

Yeah, this is the city of the dailies who just, you know, build the machine and live in it. Yeah. So it's really remarkable to in a very blue city to say, no, this isn't working.

No, again, to me, that should be a huge national story, the defeat of this mayor in Chicago. I mean, she didn't even make the run off. She didn't even get to the-- Yeah, right, right.

I mean, that is a huge rejection of a sitting mayor. And, you know, there should have been a couple weeks of analysis and stories about it. But, you know, the coastal media who makes decisions about what is news, they're quickly on chasing the next squirrel.

And they don't delve into what this actually means. But, you know, similar things have happened in other cities, Minneapolis, where I went to law school. And I loved Minneapolis.

There were so many cool, interesting things there. And if you lived down in Orange City, I'm sure you felt the gravitation. Oh, yeah, I've been to all of Minneapolis.

And I'm a Vikings fan, which is a long suffering condition. But, you know, Minneapolis, it just has been-- It's not the same old place. And it's just-- No.

I don't need to go through the litany of what they've done there to undermine that city. But a lot of Minnesotans are moving into South Dakota now. There is kind of a sorting of people.

And there was a book that came out a few years ago called The Big Sort. I don't know if you saw it about my great patterns and why people are moving to particular places. Detroit, you mentioned earlier, is another good example.

Detroit is what half the size of what it once was when it was this industrial powerhouse. And, you know, a lot of-- And starting to come back. I mean, they're starting to-- they've had a lot of good reinvestment on downtown.

But, yeah, it was-- I remember growing up in the '80s and learning all my facts and figures in Detroit was, you know, six or seventh largest city. And it was 2 million people. I think the latest census is maybe even under 700,000.

Now that the suburbs surrounding that are still-- there's still a lot of prosperity there. And I do think Detroit is making some good decisions. But it's so different.

People younger than me couldn't even fathom, really, when Detroit was just about the best city in the country. Absolutely. It was the Magic City.

It was the Motor City, home of Motown, and all these things. I mean, it was an amazing place. I remember this is a good story about the prominence of Detroit.

My dad's dream was to someday go out and buy a car that came off the line. This is something you used to be able to do. And so he took the train from South Dakota to Detroit, and he wrote his check out.

And he got in his car that had just come off the line. I mean, this was a very cool thing. But boy, a lot of that industry that surrounded Detroit and all these little manufacturing towns that made the glass and made the tires and made all the parts and components for cars.

It's they've fallen apart. Yeah. I have one more brief add to mention from one of our sponsors here.

And then going to spend a little more time with John. Thank you for hanging on here. Scripchura.

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I wanted to ask a little bit about what made the Midwest distinctive. One of my favorite lines, you have so many good quotations here, but one later in the book, someone says Iowa. I've always heard that is where the women read next year's books, even though they were last year's hats, which I think many Iowans would say, yeah, yeah, we're proud of that.

But it hits it one of the characteristics, and there are several that you hit on in the 19th century Midwest. A literate Republican with small R, although they actually were almost all capital R Republicans too once the Republican Party began. Democratic, in fact you say, probably the most democratic place in the world, and then foundationally Christian.

So just hit on some of those. What does it mean to be small D Democratic, Christian, literate the colleges? Give us a feel for what made the Midwest unique in the 19th century. Well, I was trying to think of a way to start this book when I sat down to begin writing, and I decided I wanted to make a comparative point about, because I could describe all these things about the Midwest, but the reader would be like, yeah, okay, well, whatever.

I mean, what does that mean? And I wanted to draw out this distinction between the Midwest and the rest of the world at that same time in the 19th century. So I describe what conditions were like in Russia and China and Brazil. It's really compelling England and France and whatever.

And, you know, by far, I think, and maybe someone will challenge this down the road, but I think the Midwest was the most democratically, organized place in the world at that time. And ever, and because you had very robust elections, basically universal manhood suffrage. You had a very strong education system for creating citizens who are smart and would be good voters down the road.

They promoted civic involvement in the joining of clubs and charities and helping their communities, etc. And obviously churches were a huge part of this. One of the first buildings erected in a new town or a new place was the Christian church of many different kind of denominations back then.

And the progress kept growing or there was more and more progress throughout the century. More and more people were brought in to the voting process. I'm talking about Native Americans and African Americans and women.

I mean, women's vote voting becomes pretty active in the Midwest. I mean, this is long before presidential voting. I'm talking about voting in city elections and voting in local school board elections and women becoming lawyers and doctors and professionals and going to college.

The Midwest is kind of the land of co-education. I mean, many of these universities started off as co-education places, like University of Iowa from the beginning. Women were allowed in and many of these colleges and schools were also integrated in terms of race.

I mean, they have integrated schools in Ohio going back to the 1830s. I mean, I was surprised. People don't know this.

This is way ahead of, I think, what people thought was going on in this country. And it's just that talked about. So this is why I'm flagging it in the book.

Yeah. And I'm a pastor, obviously, and a lot of our listeners are Christians. So I didn't want to just hit on this theme that you talk about.

The foundation of the culture was Christianity. And in fact, they were so in favor of public education, but their public education was assumed in the 19th century that it was going to be a great thing. And it was going to be twin with Christian.

I mean, even though if it wasn't the same as Christian education, they saw public education and Christian churches as really doing the same things to make moral, virtuous, God-fearing citizens. So it was a very different kind of conception of public education than would probably be true in most public education spheres. When you talk about Orange City, Iowa, I don't want to get Orange City in trouble if they still do this.

But one of the divisions you may know between... So I grew up Reformed Church in America and are fighting, kissing cousin, sister is the Christian Reformed Church in America. And one of the most important differences between the two is Christian Reformed tend to send their kids to Christian school and Reformed Church was here longer. The Americanization happened longer, so they would send their kids to public school.

And those issues have all changed now in the last 30, 40 years. So I went to public school, and so when I was a pastor in Orange City, Iowa, Reformed Church, and it's true in Orange City, you had two gas stations and you had a CRC gas station and RCA gas station. And it wasn't because they hated each other, it was just, "Well, you know that person, he goes to your church and he owns that one and that person goes to the other church." The person you know goes to, but I remember, I mean, there was a young girl in our church, went to the public school, and she died, she was 8th grade.

So it was a very big, traumatic thing, she had cancer. And I mean the school just, of course, pastors come into the school, meet with the students, we sang worship songs, I opened the Bible, I prayed nobody... If anybody thought anything was wrong with that, nobody would have said so, and I think everybody thought, "Of course." I mean, it was until very recently you could still have the pastor, the domini come in the public school and do some catechism classes afterwards. So this has changed dramatically, maybe still in some small towns, it hasn't changed as much.

But say a little bit more about how the church and the Christian culture was foundational, and one of the things I just got done reading a book, it's just, I can't quite reach it over there in my other desk, but about southern evangelicals, 1800 to 1860, and you probably read the book, it's 30, 40 years old, very well-known book. But one of the things that's striking is almost certainly the Midwest before the war at least was much more Christian than the South. Would you agree with that? Well, in the Midwest throughout the 19th century, a kind of generic Protestantism prevailed.

I mean, that was the basis of the culture that held everything together. Now, there were variations on this depending on if you went to the Presbyterian church or the Methodist church or whatever, but that was the dominant culture. And there were obviously groups



that weren't completely happy with that.

The Catholics would be the most prominent group. And they kind of created their own system of education and colleges. But there was definitely friction there, but it wasn't super oppressive.

I mean, it was, people could get along and the polity functioned fine. But it did give a kind of basis to social life and intellectual life. And there was a lot of agreement on what the common good was.

And there was a kind of a common culture or language of Christianity that held everything together. And like I said, when a new church or a new town was founded, I've read this a thousand times in the histories and chronicles I went through. The first thing that people did was start to build a church.

And if every denomination had not had time to build their own church yet, everyone cooperated and went to the first church that was built. And that fostered a kind of quasi unifying generic Protestantism that everyone could agree on. And then finally when the church got, or when the town got settled a little bit more, people could all have their own churches.

But this was the prevailing culture in the Midwest up until, I don't know, maybe the last 30, 40 years. Yeah, so you hit on it when you said not everyone would have found this Midwestern and this sort of informal Protestant establishment. It wasn't an established church, but it was informal, a kind of public truth.

And you say there if there was one weakness isn't even a strong enough word, but one failure I think you say would have been race relations, though there are, you know, I did make a note, you said Michigan was one of the best examples in the country come the 1850s for, you know, still we wouldn't be pleased from today's standards where they were, but ahead of their time. So we don't want to pretend that everything was, you know, wasn't a utopia of course in the Midwest. And if you were a Catholic, Mormons, Native Americans, African Americans, this is true in almost any place at any time.

If you're not a part of the dominant culture, it can be very difficult. So say a little bit about where the Midwestern life in the 19th century failed or failed to live up to its own ideals. Well, I should say that chapter four in this book was completely dedicated to the question of race.

Because as you say, this is one of the major failings of the region. Now, I would also say that that's not the end of the story. There's also tremendous racial progress throughout the 19th century.

A lot of these young preachers in the Midwest, you mentioned the book on preachers you just read, but a lot of the younger preachers in the Midwest often affiliated with colleges

like Oberlin and Antioch and places like that, smaller evangelical colleges. They were the heart and soul of the abolitionist movement. And they rallied the troops in the region to speak out against slavery and to the mistreatment of African Americans.

And you can chart the path of their progress throughout the 19th century. It ends with a major civil rights revolution in the 1870s and 1880s, sweeping civil rights laws passed across the region, which are completely forgotten. I mean, I've taught American history for 25 years.

Believe me, when people talk about the civil rights movement, what they tend to talk about are the 1960s. And they don't realize or they don't talk about this first civil rights movement in the Midwest in the 1870s, which is something that needs to be added to our knowledge of American history. Because this happened almost a century before in the Midwest.

And as I said, I was really surprised to discover a large number of integrated schools and integrated churches and a fairly healthy amount of racial collaboration in the Midwest in the 19th century, which goes largely unrecognized. Yeah, you refer to it. I like this phrase.

It was the age of mild reform. So what were these reforms you mentioned some in the area of race relations, but others throughout the century in the Midwest? Well, the Midwest, of course, is a farming region. It's agriculture is fairly dominant there in the 19th century.

And one of the major changes in life was the coming of the railroad, which was a very powerful force economically, socially, politically. And some of these small farmers would complain about they were not getting fair prices for their grain or their agricultural products. So there was a movement started in Grange halls in the Midwest and ended up with populism.

But they were calling for basic reforms like rate setting commissions and antitrust law enforcement. I know that sounds kind of boring, which it was kind of boring. This wasn't radical reform.

When I say the age of mild reform, I'm saying that people weren't manning the barricades and joining the Communist Party and calling for revolution. They're just working through their normal democratic institutions and processes to seek reforms to address these problems. That's kind of a pleasant image in this day where people seem to be so radicalized.

Yeah, one of the, I don't know, you're the expert, so you can tell me if there's monographs written on this. But one of the very overlooked reforms in our nation's history has to be the Land Grant Act, which established all of these state universities.

There's a funny story, so I was a pastor for 13 years at University Reform Church at Michigan State University.

And when that church started in the 1960s, they first met in the Alumni Chapel at Michigan State. There's a beautiful little alumni chapel seats, maybe 80 people there on the banks of the Red Cedar. And it looks like a Christian chapel and yet it has sort of secular iconography.

So it was always a funny story to go in there. And you can see that they have stained glass windows, but there's a stained glass of somebody kicking a field goal. There's a stained glass and there's a famous one of Abraham Lincoln signing the Morrill Act to establish Land Grant Universities.

So it's very funny to have this beautiful, you know you're in a church and then you look at the stained glass. Well, it's not quite the apostles, but we are celebrating the Land Grant. Why was that such an important and, you know, it shapes, it's not an exception.

It shapes our entire country, those universities, that act. Why was it so important? Well, this was Abraham Lincoln's doing and he was able to get it passed in, I think, 1862. And it granted some land for the raising of some money to create big research colleges in the Midwest, well in all states, but I think the most prominent ones come out of the Midwest, which emphasizes practicality and pragmatism and being useful.

And so these colleges tend to teach things like botany and zuala, like their ag schools. Yeah, and you know they developed new plant varieties, they've improved ag production. I mean I went to a Land Grant school, I went to South Dakota State University.

If you go there, you feel the presence of all the farm kids and the ranch kids and you know they have big veterinary programs. But these schools like Michigan State, Iowa State, these are flagships, these are jewels in the crown of the Land Grant system. And tons of our research now, basic research about plant varieties and about animal production and about veterinary medicine.

I mean that's where this research is done and you know they're very Midwestern, just based on you know that history coming out of Lincoln, based on their research agenda. And there we can all be very proud of that legacy. Yeah, yeah, so since we mentioned Michigan State, I just mentioned this for the other side University of Michigan because you have this great note here and I just wonder any Wolverine fans out there, you can tell me if this is still the case.

You indicate that the presidents, I forget if this is the middle of the century the presidents of the University of Michigan opposed Sunday feeders being open in Ann Arbor, and they were upset that scripture readings were no longer offered at the

beginning of trustee meetings for the University of Michigan. So I'm just imagining Wolverines out there it's exactly like that in the people's Commonwealth of the people's Republic rather of Ann Arbor so these schools, and that's not a Land Grant school but they had a certain ethos and a lot of that has changed and yet they're still do wonderful things and wonderful schools. So I'm going to check around because you're generous to give, I said we keep it to an hour but you mentioned at the beginning Charles Van Doren and you come to him at the end of the book and the conclusion is, is really, it sounds over the top but it's really inspiring in many ways and you don't have to be a Midwestern it's just the sort of ideals and the sort of things that you're, you're thinking about here.

And so you talk about Van Doren and growing up in rural Illinois world and he speaks so disparagingly and yet you say in his memoirs he said no I was actually glad to be from this city but he says things I'm quoting from you. In Van Doren's rural Illinois world was quote to work save money by property hold a stake in the social enterprise quote feud seldom lasted long abusive husbands were shunned adultery was rare wives often thought of sex as family duty, which failed to meet modern standards of pleasure and liberation but was also not oppressive. Most people were similar though there were not there were not wide social gaps or divisions extremes and vices or in virtues were not common in a sense of normalty envelop the town.

That doesn't sound that bad. I mean of course there are some things there that were were bad but a lot of that sounds like a kind of American civic virtue that might be worth highlighting and worth remembering. So I just come here and ask you a final question or two, you say coming to the conclusion judged on their own terms and not ours which is always important as a historian.

Midwesterners generally sought to build a constitutional order based on Christian and Republican small r principles and Victorian morality and they generally succeeded. And so if you find stuck out to me and you're quoting here, this culture was committed to the mission of teaching men to behave. What did you mean by that and what how was that essential to the Midwestern ethos teaching men how to behave.

The prevailing prevailing Christian culture and Victorian culture was heavily focused on the shaping of souls and the shaping of people's behavior patterns and instilling in them virtues that they were supposed to live by the rest of their life. The best example of this is the McGuffie readers, which were ubiquitous throughout the Midwest were promoted by William Holmes McGuffie, who was a college president in Ohio and very active public figure in the Midwest. And it was a reader for kids in school, so they would learn to spell and read and write, but they were moral stories about being good and avoiding temptation and helping your friends and neighbors and being a good citizen.

This was instilled constantly, and so this became the standard, and this became the way people were judged, and this is the way you were expected to behave. It sounds pretty

good. It sounds pretty good.

I wish we were doing more than now. It just seems like we're just going in circles fighting culture wars about foolish little issues when we could be focused on the big picture like this. So that's why I kind of hint at the end, like, you know, let's maybe think about these ways of instilling virtue, which we all need more of.

And so the last question, which I mentioned earlier, you talk about stickiness, and people can think of stickiness as a bad thing because the fear is you're going to be stuck. And I've always heard from, you know, people that say, "I just can't wait to get out of this place and this small town, and I'm not going to..." People move a lot, and I don't live in the same town that I was born in through a number of different circumstances, but this idea of stickiness being not something bad, of course it could be, but why is being stuck or rooted in a place? Not merely about constraints and weakness, as you say, but actually can help in human flourishing. What's the good of stickiness? Well, I think people need to know their place.

They need to understand their roots. They need to know where they're from. And when they do, they care about that place more, and they work to improve it more.

And they're not just a tourist in their own life. And I'm sure you know this as a pastor, the more people can be placed and rooted, and the more friends they can have, and the bigger network they can have, and the bigger community they can have, the healthier and happier they are going to be. I mean, some of the most...the saddest people, the people with the most problems are people that are essentially alone, and they don't have friends to turn to.

You see some of these statistics, Kevin, about adult men, say 42% of adult men say they have no friends, or they have no good friends, or something like that. I mean, it's mind-boggling. But that is the root of a lot of problems in American life.

I mean, people get bored and sad and lonely, and they do dumb things. And if you're part of a community, if you're part of the common wheel, if you're rowing the ship with all your friends and mates, that gives you a purpose. That keeps you going.

And your friends, if they see you're falling behind or having problems, they help you out. And if you're not pulling your weight, they tell you. That's a pretty healthy culture to live in.

I mean, this is kind of thing we should strive for, and I think it existed to a great extent in the 19th century Midwest, and that's why I think it's worth remembering. Yeah, that's a great closing line. And I love that.

I'm really struck by that. I need to think about it. You're lying about not just being tourists in our own life.

And isn't that what many people would tell us? Well, that really is the good life. And look at all. You see these things that come across social media and mark how many of these major global cities you've been to.

And of course, you feel good if you've been to 40 of them, 30 of them. And there's nothing wrong with traveling and seeing these places, but it can feed this mentality that the good life is, and the cosmopolitan life, is to go to these big places and take some pictures and put it on social media and show the way that I've been in the cool places in life. And go, yeah, visit those, but your whole life, you're not a tourist.

You need to be in a place, bloom where you're planted, stick somewhere, even if you're going to move and take other jobs. And if you don't have friends, you can have anything and you're not going to be happy. And of course, Jesus himself said, if you lose your life, is how you're going to find it.

And ultimately, as a Christian, that's losing your life and giving it to the Lord. But there's even an overarching, overarching principle there of this kind of ethos that says, live for your own gratification, your own self-expression. Not only, you know, what I say that's wrong as a Christian, I just say as a human being, it doesn't make you happy.

It's a recipe for unhappiness and discontent. If you're always looking over the horizon and always looking at Facebook and Instagram and saying, Oh, those people are in that fancy resort in France. Why am I not there? That's the wrong way to look at the world.

That is a way of looking at the world that's only going to make you envious and unhappy. And if you knew your roots, your place, your town, your neighborhood, if you knew it better and you knew your neighbors and friends and built up a network, you're going to feel a lot more at home. You're going to feel a lot more connected.

You're going to feel part of a community. And you're going to be a lot more happy. That's right.

So all you stout the cozens out there, be thankful for the corn palace. Is there still the enchanted Dowel Museum? That's absolutely. Yeah, that's there.

So on your way, visited it on the way to the Badlands, on the way to wall drug, all those things. So know your own hometown. Thank you, John, for being here.

The book once again, if you're watching here online, *The Good Country*, a history of the American Midwest 1800 to 1900. Don't be intimidated. It's 300 pages, but a lot of those are in notes.

It's 200 pages of text. It's well written. It's well researched.

And I think whether our listeners have any roots in the Midwest or not, I think they're just

important lessons for us today and the parts that are really edifying and inspiring. So keep up the good work and hopefully we can meet in person someday. Thank you for being on the program, John.

Thank you, Kevin. So life in books and everything listeners. Thanks for joining us.

Until next time, glorify God, enjoy him forever and read a good book.

[MUSIC]

[buzzing]