

# OpenTheo

## **Conversations in a Crisis: Part VIII: Disagreement in the Body of Christ (with Rev Benjamin Miller)**

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

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### **Transcript**

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

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

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

Alistair, in this conversation, let's maybe shift gears slightly to the question of how Christians can relate well to one another in the midst of what can be very significant and at times heated disagreements over things going on in the public sphere. These might be government policies on this or that, they might be pronouncements by authorities in the realm of knowledge, whether we agree or disagree with what they're saying factually, or how they argue their case for why certain policies are being enacted, or questions of injustice, questions of resistance, questions of what's even going on, the larger narratives of our times and how we got here and where we might go. It's, I think, been pretty obvious throughout the COVID years that churches have landed in very different places from one another, and sometimes the exchanges between Christians have been almost shockingly acrimonious.

And in a way you can understand because when you're talking about issues like justice, oppression, authority, jurisdiction, our common life, our common agency, the majority and minority, the dissenter, and the majority report, as it were, these are things that matter, and they should matter to us as Christians, but also as we've said, this stuff touched people's personal lives. These were not academic discussions. These were matters of life and death.

They were matters of employed or unemployed. They were matters of I can feed my family or I can't. I'm able to see my brothers and sisters and worship with them or I'm not permitted to, etc.

I mean, these are things that really got into our business. And so I know that's an awfully general way to outline things initially, but I just think that might be worth talking about. How do we now in the within the body of Christ think together and grow together hopefully, but in some cases, work past what have just become almost seemingly insurmountable barriers in relating to each other.

There has been an actual fracturing of Christian fellowship in many cases over these issues where people cannot walk together anymore, will not walk together anymore. When we look through Paul's epistles, I think one of the things that constantly comes out is his discussion of the flesh as a realm of activity and its characteristic features. And particularly, it's the characteristic of anger, antagonism, particularly manifest in words, sexual immorality, and pride and greed and these sorts of things.

These are characteristic features. And when this realm of the flesh is dominant, people end up biting and devouring each other. The context of the spirit as we walk according to the spirit is supposed to have a very different character.

And so when we see churches where there is this biting and devouring of each other, we should first of all begin by mourning because there is something that is deeply awry. It's not the way that the life of the spirit should be. The life of the spirit should be characterized by the fruit of the spirit that Paul lists in places like Galatians chapter five.

It's a context of peace. It's a context of joy and of building each other up, of the edification of the body of Christ in the bond of the spirit. And that, the lack of that has been quite evident in many contexts.

And it's been a cause of deep sorrow, I think, to many of us, as we've seen what is signaled by its absence in some of these contexts. I think for me, one way to recognize ways to at least break some of those issues down to size has been seeing the way that people are driven by empathy in many of these situations for particular parties who are close to them that they see being mistreated or hurt as a result of something that they think the other party represents. And this is especially hard in the context of something like COVID where those forms of empathy can really push in antagonistic directions.

One party sees the way that members of their own family, people close to them have died or been hospitalized as a result of COVID. And many of us have examples of this. On the other hand, many of us have examples of people who lost their livelihood, of kids that had to go to school for months, wearing masks all the time, and it just seemed unnecessary.

And then policies can change without any regard to the huge damage that it does to people and their livelihoods and their mental health. And so we have those two sets of concerns. And it's very hard to hold those two things together.

And the challenges we've mentioned earlier on in this series of weeping with those who weep is something that the church has not really been up to. You can weep with some of the people who weep, but actually having a sense of this is a tragedy for all of us. And there are ways in which we have affected by different things by the virus itself, by the consequences of having to deal with this virus, by the incompetence and the overreach of people who are dealing with this virus in bad ways.

And by all these different knock-on effects of the antagonisms that creates, we've all been wounded by it in some way or other. And as a result, we respond with more of a reaction than a response. This is raw and emotional for many people.

And so actually being patient and being calm and being rational about things, almost that requirement seems like another sort of affront, another sort of injustice. You expect me to be calm about this sort of thing that first of all is urgent. It's a deep injustice, people are being hurt.

And you expect me to be calm and rational about this, no way. Go ahead. Well, I was just

going to say, I'm imagining this interlocutor responding to what you've said.

And this is not my view, but I can imagine someone responding to what you've said and saying, well, Alistair, it sounds like you've just outlined a case for being nice. But the only problem with that is that sometimes Jesus and the prophets and apostles were anything but nice. Brutal vipers is a strong language.

And I'm looking at stuff that seems to me to just totally fit that description. So how do we have this fruit of the spirit model on one hand and put that together with the fact that we should have righteous indignation, right? And now this is Ben speaking in Ben's voice. This I think, Pastor Lee, has been something I have really become, I'll say concerned about, because I really want to be able to speak to it well.

I have seen a lot of people of all ages who have manifested such anger during the COVID times. And when I watch exchanges online, and we've had the conversations already in this series about why that might not be a good idea. It's not a very good context at all for real conversation.

But the kind of sniping, the kind of demonizing and treating even people who name the name of Jesus as just enemies of Christ, because they have so clearly allied themselves with the evil. How could you? Almost that feeling coming through, you know. And, you know, you watch this.

And if you don't happen to share this person's assessment of the evil, it's just kind of shocking to watch. I mean, I guess if I was inside their head seeing the evil as the evil that they see, maybe I could understand the anger. But I'm just interested in how you would interact with that, because it is true.

I mean, walking in the spirit doesn't just mean this kind of placid niceness. But man, what you're talking about makes a difference between a Christian community ruled by love and a Christian community ruled by everything that characterizes those outside of Christ. I mean, it's just, in fact, frankly, sometimes I've observed more self-restraint among those who don't even profess to be Christians than among those who really seem to feel that they're championing the cause of Christ himself.

Yes. And that struggle, I think, to recognize that there are moral stakes in human society, that there are really demonic forces at work, that we are really in a struggle for the gospel, that Christ really is against wicked powers that are an operation in our time. And to recognize that we are in societies that practice things like abortion, these are not righteous powers that we're dealing with.

All of that makes it very difficult for us to have measured responses. Now, a measured response is not a response that is completely relaxed about injustice. It's not relaxed at all.

It recognizes the severity, but it speaks to it in a careful way. And I think this is the danger of anger and passion driving things. Now, we can definitely feel those emotions when we feel, for instance, someone close to us being really wounded.

We feel our own loss of our livelihood, whatever it is. And we feel that there is some party out there that's responsible for it. What I think this, the way that I'm suggesting, for instance, thinking about the way that empathy can drive some of these oppositions, that can help us to recognize that what we might think of as antagonistic actions towards us need not be so conceived.

And so we can see the person who is opposed to us in some way is an obstacle to us, but not see them as an enemy. And that distinction, I think, is important. There are many people who are opposed to us who are obstacles to us, but yet nonetheless, are not our enemies.

And furthermore, there may be people who are seeing different aspects of the situation. And they are seeing good things that are being attacked or undermined or that they want to preserve. And as a result, they are pushing in a direction that seems to be at odds with us.

But they may not be driven by the evil that we feel, as we would define them purely in opposition to the goods that we are defending. And so for instance, when you see some of the anger that is aroused when people are not taking all the raft of measures to prevent the spread of COVID in certain situations, you need to recognize, first of all, there may be a reason why they're doing, they're resisting that, and taking the full measures, without just wanting to be careless about people's lives. It may be out of concern for some people, and for instance, their kids that they do not want their lives to be just taken over by fear.

Now, those sorts of questions, I think, help us to turn down the volume, turn down the heat a bit, and at least give us some opening to actually have hopeful engagement with other people, recognizing that even in our differences, we may be driven by genuine, virtuous concern for certain goods. The question then can often become more one of wisdom and recognition of the broader situation, submission to lawful authorities, even when we don't understand what they're doing, these sorts of things, which is knocking it down a level of antagonism, which I think is helpful. And so for me, that's often the first step to make.

Yeah. Is one maybe illustration of that, trying to practice getting inside the story that this other person seems to, the way that the other person seems to be narrating the situation. So for example, I've often, I've reflected throughout the COVID time, how difficult it must have been to be a public official in these times.

Take the governor of New York state, for example, a very, very diverse state. I mean,

upstate New York and downstate the city are totally different, might as well be different states, culturally and population density-wise and so on. And I was often imagined, governor Cuomo and then governor Hochul, just how difficult is it when you are not an expert, you're not a virologist, and this is a changing situation.

And you are also not only trying to sort out what scientifically is the case here, but then you know that there are political, there's a huge political divide and you're going to encounter resistance. And so there's this tendency sometimes when you know you're going to encounter resistance to you know, kind of put your strong face forward and make sure that you know, you're clear what you're, this is how it's going to be. And I guess what, now say what you will about all of that, but I just was sometimes amazed at how little sympathy I heard from people about just the difficulty of this.

The assumption seemed to be, well, this person just basically is using this whole thing as a way of aggregating more political power for his or her party or his or her side of things. And I, look, that may be some truth to that, but it just, it almost didn't seem to register. Try putting yourself in governor Hochul's head.

You have millions of school children in your state. How do you make the call? Now you might disagree, you might disagree emphatically with how she made the call, but the point is like, do you ever think what it's like to be in her head? And I've tried to do this as a pastor. I've been trying to step inside of the headspace of people who even say some stuff that strikes me as crazy and just try to imagine if I thought things were as this person thinks they are, if I was narrating the world, the way they're narrating the world, does their reaction at least make some sense? Does their defensiveness make some sense? Does their aggressiveness make some sense? Does their panic make some sense? Does their indifference and frankly, their scorn that people are taking this so seriously make some sense? Now, the point of that exercise is not to agree with them ultimately on the narrative, but just as you were saying to dial down my reaction from like a 12 to a two and a half, because I'm now relating with a human being, I know what it's like to assess a situation a certain way and react accordingly.

Well, that's what they're doing. So could we just at least extend that grace to each other? And that can involve just making space for people's emotions and recognizing that they're going to feel this particular way about the situation. You're not going to attack those emotions and how they're feeling.

You can affirm that and yet challenge some of the ways that they are narrating the situation. Say, I understand why you feel this way about the situation. I think you have some genuine points.

There are injustices here or there are dangers here that other people are ignoring, whatever it is. And yet, let's try and think about the bigger picture and recognize that there are other valid emotions that would seem to countervail yours. But yet we can

have room for both of them.

And so your emotions do not have to swamp the whole issue so that no one, I mean, you wouldn't put it this way to them, but this is what you're trying to do to ensure that one set of emotions do not dominate the whole conversation and insist upon the way that it should go. And that I think is important on all sides. Even however the conversation goes, whatever conclusions you reach, you need to make space for people who are experiencing incredible pain in ways that would seem to make the sort of clear line that you want to present difficult to uphold.

There's something that their feelings represent an obstacle. They feel someone's loss of their livelihood is not something that you can just dismiss because the crisis is big enough. You need to weigh that in.

That needs to be something that you feel weighing upon you as you're making those sorts of situations and those sorts of decisions in these situations. And I imagine that the authorities felt those sorts of weighty feelings in many cases. These are not decisions that I imagine that they took lightly.

Yet along with this, I think we need to consider the way that the church is a realm of discourse that exists within this broader cultural realm of discourse. There's often framed in terms of friend-enemy relationships. And the church is a place where we cannot operate in those sorts of friend-enemy relationships.

We're called to be one body, to weep with those who weep, who rejoice with those who rejoice. And in that sense, those friend-enemy relationships are always going to find an obstacle within the church. If the church is being the church, if the church is a unified body, it will always find the sorts of sympathies that cross the friend-enemy divide, as it's framed within our political antagonisms, will make it very difficult to sustain those well within the church.

Now, of course, it tends to happen the opposite way in many situations. It's difficult to sustain being the church within the friend-enemy divide of culture. And so we tend to divide into churches that align with some of these friend-enemy divides within the society at large.

But that challenge to be a place where we can overcome the enmity that is fundamental within our society, and not misplace. And this is another thing that I think is important that we've been discussing, to not misplace the true enmity that exists between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, between Christ and Satan, not misplace that to the friend-enemy divides that we have within the culture. To recognize that these are not things that are without any interactions.

There are ways in which we can feel that enmity that Christ has established as

something that is operative within some of our political divides. But nonetheless, it is not to be conflated with or confused with those. I just feel like we need to take a minute though and continue to disentangle those two things because they do get conflated.

I mean, if you really believe that there is a war of good and evil, you know, that there is Christ and Belial, right? There's darkness and light. Like you really see the world that way, not in a dualistic way. We know God reigns, but there is we are wrestling with principalities and powers.

It is so easy to read that into, as you were saying, the friend-enemy divide on the political spectrum. So easy. And this gets back to something we, I've just seen that happen again and again, sometimes in shocking ways.

And it gets back to something in our previous conversation about the secularization narrative. So one of the things that I see in my North American context is there's this sense that at one time, I'll just put this sort of clumsily, history is tough to do with precision because you have to generalize, but there's this idea that America was at one time sort of more or less Christian. Certainly our quote-unquote civilization, however you define that, has been Christian in many ways.

And there's been this fairly rapid decline, whether you want to start it in the Enlightenment or however you want to tell the story. But there's this sense that things have been more and more rejecting the Judeo-Christian God, eventually just rejecting theism, rejecting even any kind of transcendent moral order and so on. And now what do we see as a result of that? Everything from abortion to sexual confusion to economic oppression, communism in the 20th century was a, it's easy to call that the evil empire and kind of lump it into this big story, of the call it the death of the West.

You know the narrative, it's out there. And there's this feeling then that, okay, so that's one thing, more and more godlessness. But then in the 21st century, so I am going somewhere with this narrative, but in the 20th century, that secularization, you saw it manifest in these huge militarized totalitarian powers.

It was very easy to look at Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, USSR and so on, and see like that's where godlessness leads. That's where secularization leads. And then in the 21st century, enter the technocratic age, where it's not so much world powers that are militarized, though those still exist, but it's these huge technocratic powers.

And it feels as if now we're just in a whole new world where the coercive and mass persuasive power of the powers is so great and they're so godless. And you can imagine people that are in this headspace, Alistair. And you know, it's just so easy then to see the political divide and say, you just need to get on the side of Christ here.

And I really honestly, as much as that probably sounds like I'm just telling a bit of a tall



tale here, I really heard this come out in some of the conversations. You know, kind of not to over dramatize, but kind of mark of the beast type stuff. And it sure didn't make for improved careful analysis or measured emotional responses.

But how do we, I mean, as just Christians in love to our brothers and sisters, how do we help disentangle the good and evil Christ and Belial axis from this friend enemy axis practically? For me, one of the big issues is the way in which there is an attachment to the wider society that makes it very difficult for you to think of yourself as Christian first. Your Christianity is bound up with your cultural belonging. And so the change of the cultures relationship to the faith makes it very difficult for you to have the integrity and the self differentiation to deal with threats in the culture without seeing them as far more intimate attacks.

So I've talked a lot about the importance of self differentiation and thinking about this in terms of having a skin. So having a skin means that we can be in non-sterile contexts and yet fully engaged within them without being infected and without feeling this exposure to all these toxins and bacteria, whatever it is. And yet we can still receive things.

Skin enables us to take in certain things. It also gives out certain things. We perspire and it enables us to have an interface with the world is nonetheless also a boundary that distinguishes us and our homeostatic order within ourselves, keeping our own body warm at a different temperature from the world outside.

For instance, we feel the cold or the heat, but we're not completely subject to it. And then we have the cycles of our body that can be maintained that way. Now, if we did not have a skin, we would either have to quarantine ourselves from our environment or we'd have to sterilize our environment or we'd be in constant immune reaction against our environment or we would succumb to our environment.

And it seems to me that Christians often lack something equivalent to a skin, a sense of a barrier that makes us, allows us to interface with the world while not being of it. And so our identity is not bound up with all these cultural issues. Primarily, we have an identity in the world.

We're not completely detached and divorced from the world, but nonetheless, in Christ, we are no longer June or Greek slave, nor free barbarians, Gideon, whatever it is. These are identities that we are in some sense unplugged from. And so the church is a context where we are in the world, but not of it enables us to have that, that sort of hiatus between us and the world, that sort of gap.

And within that gap, deliberation, reflection, and response can occur where those things do not exist. We're creatures of reaction. We're like cornered animals, right? Where those things do exist.

We recognize ourselves to be exposed to the world, but not fundamentally threatened by the world that we would, as we would be otherwise. And so we have the ability to, I think, engage with the issues of the day without feeling so defined by or exposed to them that we're constantly in a sort of emotional react, emotionally reactive state relative to them. Now that sort of differentiation can occur, can take more concrete forms.

I mean, one of it is one of the aspects is physical distance, focus yourself in your locality and the issues of the big stage will feel a lot further away. They still intrude, but they are no longer so dominant. So if you spend less time listening to the national and international news, I just focus upon your locality.

You'll find you just feel a bit more emotional breathing space. Same thing in relationships where you give each other physical space and emotional space where you're not always attacking each other or forcing each other into corners, but you're giving each other the position to work things through in your own time. And time is another aspect, time where you're not always expected to give the next response where you're not just presented with a situation and immediately expected to give a reaction to it, but you're allowed to process and deliberate and reflect.

And our media are just not good for this on social media. They depend upon the speed of the interactions. And then there are other things like the way in which we have different rooms for different conversations, those sorts of physical forms of differentiation.

And all of these things enable us to have the space to feel secure, to think through things without constantly reacting to them. Now, of course, in a crisis, things intrude upon us in ways that are harder to handle. We have intimate attacks, our family and its livelihood is threatened.

The lives of people that we love are put in jeopardy, whatever it is. And we no longer feel that we have the security of our skin in the same way. We feel maybe there's a wound there, right? And we feel exposed.

But yet, if we have that sort of those sorts of boundaries, we can deal with those situations of woundedness in a far more effective and healthy manner, when we're not constantly in that sort of immune reaction. And that I think, is something that needs to be formed within the church, the church needs to be a place where we're in the world, but not of it, where we feel engaged with reality, but we're just not as invested in it in the ways that our neighbors are. So we can, we'll listen to the news from time to time, we'll engage in social media, but that's not the locus of our identity.

And that is not just a mental thing, it's practices and habits and virtues of life. That is just a fantastic metaphor. And yeah, I think a couple of things came to mind, just as a pastor, as you were talking about that is, one being, you do, I'm not quite sure what the

metaphor here would be, but you do need to work on sort of skin building away from times of crisis, cultivating that awareness that we are fully immersed in the world, and yet the origins of our life are not from the world, they're from heaven.

You know, that it's not, the kingdom of God is not abstracted from the world, but its origins and foundations do not lie here, they lie in God himself. And really a lot of, I think, what contributes to that kind of strong skin, as you put it, is just straight up strong theology, really knowing who God is, quite apart from his particular way of relating even with us, just who he is, really knowing our rock. I think weak theology, you're getting back to your other metaphor about food versus medicine, you know, we often want God for medicine.

God's godness is food. And just when you really know God, it just allows you to walk through things that happen in your life, not with detachment, but just with stability. I mean, the idea that he has a rock and fortress, like, you can feel it, it's there.

But then, you know, what it's felt like for me in the last couple of years is I just am often dealing with Christians who maybe it's not like they don't have a skin, but there's clearly a puncture. And you know, for me, I've been a, you know, I'm a father of four, and so you have these moments when your kid is just wiped out on a skateboard in the driveway, and he's bleeding from multiple joints, and you know, you're just trying to calm the child down to realize you're actually not dying. It's not that all your skin has been removed, and you're, you know, but you just have a puncture.

And we just have to tend that now in a way that is going to allow your body to fight, you know, you're not immunocompromised, you can actually fight through this, and there'll be some pain, but we'll get through it. Why? Because it's not a real injustice, because it's not a real wound, no, but because our health is not driven by the environment. It's, you know, as you're saying, it comes from within.

As Christians, we, I mean, if it literally came to being carted away to, you know, concentration camps, you know, to use the extreme examples, we could still, even in those contexts, be fruitful for Christ, and bring forth the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and well, now my neighbor is a fellow prisoner. Now my neighbor is a prison guard. This is still a place where I am a representative of the kingdom, even in like the worst, worst case scenario.

And in that sort of situation, we're not, it's not that we cease to care about wounds in different parts of our social life, whatever. Indeed. But there's a sense that even if those things occur, there is not a fundamental compromise of ourselves.

We don't feel exposed, ultimately. They may take our bodies, they may take, you think about the great list that Luther gives in a mighty fortress, all the different things that the authorities can take, right, but yet what they cannot take, because we are founded upon

Christ. And that gives us the confidence that even if the worst were to happen, it can't be the worst, because like, there is something secure at the heart.

And it also gives us the space in which, even in the worst crisis, to be able to respond with a spiritual calm. And that expression, the peace of Christ ruling in your hearts, or the peace of God ruling in your hearts is one that really sticks with me, because it's that ability to be within the storms of life, and actually have peace at the very heart, and have it reigning. It's what dominates and rules everything else.

And so in the situation, I think this sort of thing is contagious. It's also an important aspect of leadership, that if you're a leader in your family, if you're a leader within a business, leader within your church, that peace, if you have it for yourself, other people will feed from that, they will gain something of your confidence, that they're able to keep a cool head, because you're not losing yours. And that, I think, is something that is found as we pursue a relationship with God in crisis.

And for me, I've often thought about this in terms of René Girard's work, where he talks about this mimetic rivalry that develops, where we imitate the person who's our rival. And how do you break that? You break that in many ways by having an alternative model. And that can be the person who's the calm person, listening in on your conversation, not actually antagonistic, not partisan, but just wanting to listen and be persuaded.

Or, and I think this is one of the most helpful ways I've found to approach these issues, to recognize that we relate to other people, we relate to the world and our crises, primarily, as people who stand before God. And so we relate to the Lord primarily, and we relate our situations and the people and the conflicts that we have in our lives to the Lord. And as we do that, that becomes the framing reality for everything else.

And so there's no longer, I mean, I find this something that sticks out to me in the story of someone like Jacob, Jacob has a series of dominating struggles in his life, the struggle with his brother, Esau, the struggle with his father, Isaac, who prefers his brother over him, the struggle with Laban, the struggles that he has with just things that happened to him. And then recognizing behind all of that, you've wrestled with man and with God and prevailed. But that ultimately, the Lord is the one working with him through all of this.

And so that confidence that can come that ultimately, we are dealing with the Lord, our lives are in his hands, we can place our situations in his hands. And if the worst would happen, we have him. And that is not something that needs us to deny our situations, the injustices that we experience, but it does preserve us from being dominated by them.

I've wondered if in that wrestling story with Jacob and the angel, if part of the lesson in that for Jacob is when he thinks he's been attacked by a man, he's been fighting men all

his life. Like you were just saying, everyone's out to get him. And it's that moment of awakening when he realizes that hand that just put your hip out of joint is the hand of God.

That behind all of these human hands grasping for your blessing, God himself has wounded you. You're in his hands. And what is his response then? It's just a response of faith that I'm just going to grab hold of you and I will not let you go until you bless me.

And also the recognition that that hand at any point could completely destroy him. Absolutely. But yet it's the loving hand of the wrestling father who wants to strengthen his son, not destroy him.

Because if God wanted to destroy Jacob, it could have happened long ago. I mean, he's still even around for that wrestling match. So that's the grace of God.

And I think what you just described there, yeah, it's a kind of wisdom that you just can't talk at people. I would have to say that's something the Lord has been teaching me over the last couple of years is you just sort of have to live this around people because I don't know, it's one of those things that almost is more caught than made explicit. I mean, you can teach it, but I mean, most of us would affirm the sovereignty of God.

It's easy to sing a mighty fortress, but to be around someone who is living as if he is the mighty fortress he says he is. And I was also going to add just one other thing about this peace that Christ gives. It seems to me important that that is not merely about my individual circumstances.

Because look, I mean, as you said, take my life. I believe in the resurrection. What's the worst that can happen? I end up being eaten by lions.

I mean, it's only so far they can take this. But it's even bigger than that. It's peace in the fact that this is God's history.

You know, kingdoms rise and fall. I mean, we really need to sit with that. Powers come and go.

Ages pass. And I think one of the things about biblical history that more and more impresses me is just, yeah, the individual people in those stories were living with some really hard things. But all of the great towers in history eventually are just rubble and ashes.

And God remains. And I think that that just allows us to take our particular historical moment, even now, because I often hear people say, well, you know, Ben, it's just different now, though. The technological reach of things, the global reach of things, the sheer power to change things across the face of the world that exists now.

This is different. This is Babel, the Tower of Babel at a whole other level. And, you know, I have to be careful this doesn't come off as dismissive or some kind of cliché that I give to people.

But I just I've had to tell people there's never going to be a Tower of Babel that succeeds. I don't know exactly how to I don't have enough history to know how to relate what's going on right now to the bigger picture. But I can tell you this.

I mean, he who sits in the heavens last and that's just never going to change. And I think we really do need to just constantly reinforce that to our own hearts and to one another. I think the reinforcement we can often think about the reinforcement about telling ourselves these things in a sense of teaching ourselves about them.

And often it's more the case of actually just practicing this. Yes. In terms of a more immediate form of practice confession.

I think there's a difference between expounding the meaning of something like a mighty, mighty fortress and actually just singing it wholeheartedly when you actually feel it. And you think, OK, I'm not just teaching myself about these truths. I am expressing these with a full voice.

And I am my confidence is being aroused by this. I'm feeling at the end of this song, very different from how it began when I first started it. And I think often we have almost we talk about Christian hope.

We talk about Christian confidence and faith. And that is not quite the same thing as doing those things. And we maybe need to think more about what does it look like when we're just practicing these in not just the self-reflective manner, but just in this immediate sense.

And how do we stir each other up to these sorts of practices and encourage each other along the way where we might be facing our drooping knees and we're just not able to mend our pace? How do we come alongside each other when we feel disheartened and discouraged and disillusioned and just raise the spirits and help people to draw their eyes up back to the Savior and to actually go on along the way? And I think just looking around for many people, that's what is needed more than anything else. Not some theory, not some new understanding or knowledge, but just the encouragement of seeing Christ again in all of these situations and being able to have their eyes upon Him. Because I think the last few years more than anything else has left people spiritually winded.

And in those sorts of situations people will become fearful, antagonistic, vengeful, whatever it is. And we just need to, I think, pray for and be with each other to lift each other up spiritually because it's a tough time for all of us. Well, and this is well-trod

territory, but what you're describing in so many ways is just good Christian liturgy.

We need to sing. We need to receive the Lord's Supper. We need to see baptisms.

We need to confess our faith using the creeds. We need to have corporate prayers. And I think one of the things, Alice, that was so hard about the COVID years was the fact that often worship ended up being muted at a time when we all needed it most.

And I kind of felt for everyone all the way around in that because there was totally a reason for, you know, lockdowns and things that made worship just more difficult. But I really felt for the people who by the time they were like 12 months into this just wanted to be in a room full of Christians singing the Psalms at the top of their lungs so desperately. One of the things I really wished we'd do within the early part of COVID, we had in the first lockdown, there was this, I can't remember who it was, woman who started this idea of every single week on one evening, we'd all stand outside of our houses and clap for the medical services.

Yes. Now, wouldn't it have been amazing if we'd had extraordinary acts of worship, gathering together in open situations where we did have the rights and opportunities to do so, and actually asserting worship against the situation. Not just trying to get back to normalcy, but actually trying to do something extraordinary to affirm just how important this act is in the face of the powers, in the face of the crises, in the face of the difficulties of our lives.

And that, I think, it was that sense that worship can be something remarkable that I think was often missing from all responses. We kind of had something fun we did with that at Trinity. The summer of 2020, our landlord would have let us back into their rental facility where we worship, but we decided that summer we were just going to worship in my backyard.

And so I have a huge kind of backyard here, and so I just stood up on the pool deck in the blistering, it was on the hottest summers in a while, and I'm just up there perspiring. But we spread all out, socially distanced all around the yard, and some people wore masks and some didn't. We set up a great big tent to kind of protect people from the sun, but we just worshipped.

And the neighborhood got to hear us singing psalms, you know. But it was, I think that will go down as among the most memorable worship experiences we've perhaps ever had, because it was a way, like you're saying, of being submissive to where things were at the time. It was a really tough time.

But also laying hold of God together in extraordinary ways, and it really was a kind of lifeline for that summer. One thing in the conclusion of our discussion that I'd like for you to say something about is the way in which people can support their pastors in these

sorts of situations, and how pastors can support their people. Because it seems to me that within the context of the life of the church, the way that the pastor responds to a situation will often set the tone for everyone else.

In the same way as a father within a household or a leader within the context of a wider nation. And yet, there are incredible pressures upon people in leadership, and pressures that just are not understood by others. How can we be more supportive of our leaders? How can leaders help people that they're leading in these sorts of crises? And how can we grow together, no longer seeing each other as obstacles primarily, but seeing each other as mutual support? Yeah, we could do a whole episode on that.

It's easier for me to speak to what a pastor can do, I guess, because I'm working on that actively. I found over these two years, the most crucial thing for me was just to have a lot of conversations and really listen to people. Know what I thought, I was unafraid to push back on things.

But I listened to everybody from across the spectrum. I really listened. And we talked.

And I didn't listen merely to rebut, I didn't listen merely to assert. I listened because I was learning too. It wasn't like I was wishy-washy.

But we had to make a call about what do you say as a church after the George Floyd was murdered? We had to make a call about what do you say about the lockdown? What do you say about the advisability of live stream worship? What do you say about mask mandates? What do you say about, do you say anything about vaccines? We had to address this stuff. And I was learning and wrestling with the politics and connected to things. And I have a congregation that comes from across the political spectrum.

And so I just listened and I talked and people knew they had my ear in the sense that I took them seriously, even when I vigorously disagreed. That's important. Now, in the end, it didn't mean that everyone necessarily agreed with what we decided at times, not everyone stayed.

But I can honestly say to my knowledge, there is not a single relationship that ended acrimoniously if it ended. And actually with almost vanishingly small exceptions, our church remains in good fellowship together. And I think part of it is just we've tried to have that culture of real conversation that you can ask the questions here.

You can say what you really think. And it'll be engaged with not, it won't be pounced on or dismissed. It will not always garner agreement.

It couldn't, you know, I couldn't agree with everybody because people just disagreed among themselves so much. But having a leader and my elders did the same, having a core of leadership that where that's your mode, you could feel it just kind of took the edge off for people. They'd come in riled and understandably so.



And these were just such hard times. But then through that kind of way of relating, you would just sense, you know, it's, it is like in family life sometimes there's just this agitation and there are ways to just make people, there's a kind of validating, like you were saying earlier of, I know you feel this and I get it. I really get it.

But let's seek wisdom together. And let's not try to be too definite about what that, where that leads. I mean, sometimes I've had to tell people the best answer I can give you is that God has not spoken clearly on this.

These are, these are hard questions. We have to continue to wrestle with them. And even just hearing that sometimes was helpful to people like, you know, everyone wants the right answer in a moment of crisis.

Maybe there's not like a perfectly clear, right answer. There's just considerations we have to. So that, that, that, that's what I did, how successfully, I guess, other others would have to say what I would have to say for myself, I guess what I've craved from people is just be gracious with your pastor.

You know, he is but a man, you know, and it's hard sometimes feeling like you're almost held, not that my folks did this, but you can feel as if in positions of public leadership, you're being held to a standard of wisdom and, and maturity and, you know, Christian virtue that almost as if you're not processing too. And honestly, Alistair, you know, I serve a church of about 150 people. And sometimes I wanted to say to people, not in a mean spirited way, you know, there's one of me and 150 of you.

Sometimes I just have a, I have a saturation problem. I've had so many conversations. I literally can't even think anymore.

And it's just finitude. I love you, but you got to leave me alone a little bit so I can like process, get ready for the next sermon. And I think, you know, as people see that, just realize, you know, your pastor, he's just a human being.

Sometimes he just don't be too hard on him. He doesn't have a great answer, or he seems weary, or, you know, he's just not up for another conversation because you have a great shepherd. It's Jesus.

And that really reminds me of one of the things that has felt most evident in its absence from our politics and our social life in the last few years, which has been mercy. The recognition that people are human beings, flawed, and they do not understand everything. They're limited in their knowledge.

They are sinful and broken in various respects. They do not act with a complete sense of balance. They are responding to things often in ways that mixed with reaction, and the mercy to actually love people despite that to exercise what trust we can, and to support people and to pray for people, even when we recognize that they're not perfect, and

especially as we recognize that they're not perfect.

And that mercy, when it's absent, can lead to a very brutal and cruel society. Yeah, and in that way, I think just the gospel has become more precious to me. The fact that God knows our frame.

He remembers that we are dust, and he is merciful to those who are just full of sin. Sometimes we just respond so badly, and God is merciful. Can we extend that to each other?