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Conversations in a Crisis: Part I: The Good and the Right (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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You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2.

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.

So thank you very much for joining me, Ben. It is a privilege, Alistair. Very glad to be here.

Would you be interested in starting us off with a discussion of one of the reasons why you suggested this conversation, and what you think we need to pursue through it? My work, as you said, is as a pastor. And I've been following your work for many years and learned so much from your thinking on many different subjects, and perhaps a bit more of an academic environment than my own. And we have had the privilege of exchanging ideas, along with other friends, obviously throughout a very tumultuous two years that we've all been enduring this pandemic.

And a lot has happened in your UK and my United States, politically, in response to all of this. And so as we've at times debated quite intensely just what are the principles that are in play, and particularly how should we as Christian laypersons be responding to all of this, one of the things that has really stood out to me is how hard it has become to have truly friendly, friendship-based, friendship-nourishing conversations about these things. I've been, perhaps I shouldn't have been, but I've been a little taken aback over the last couple of years by how much, obviously, hostility the pandemic has seemed to generate between people who, up till that point, had considered themselves to be friends and allies.

But even I have found with people with whom I still have a good personal relationship, sometimes the differences on principle, or even what principles ought to be considered. So maybe it's not so much disagreement over one particular principle as even what principles apply, let alone how to work those out practically. Those differences are so acute that at times I found myself kind of stepping back in personal relationships just out of a kind of fatigue.

And an uncertainty of what might happen if we were to begin conversing about these things. So my hope was that we might be able to just, first of all, deliberate together a bit about the principles and then the practices that flow from those principles, but also, hopefully, model, I would just prayerfully desire that we would be able to model a new way of conversing about these things within the body of Christ. So that was, in general, what prompted my suggestion.

And so far, it seems like that's been really fruitful. So you mentioned both practices and principles. And it seems that much of the struggle that we have is understanding the relationship between those two things.

So on the one hand, you'll have people who have common practices or policy commitments, but whole very different principles. And on the other hand, you'll have those who have the same principles, and yet they seem to lead them in divergent ways. And that relationship between principle and policy, I think, is maybe one that we could begin by discussing.

So one of the ways we could maybe think about this is the relationship between what is good and what is right. So, for instance, it's good to be charitable. That's a different sort of question from whether I should let the person who randomly comes to my door late in the night and ask for my hospitality, what I should do in that particular situation.

That's a question of the right. It should be informed by the good. But it's a more complicated question, and it brings into play other factors.

And much of what we're doing in these discussions is trying to retain the connection between the good and the right in situations where maybe the movement between the two is a bit more complicated and thorny than it might appear at first glance. That is very, very, for me, that's very insightful framing, because one of the things that I've noticed is that if we're able to determine that something is good, that can turn into almost a kind of mandate about what ought to be done. And this has been sort of a puzzler for me in conversations where I'll be speaking with someone with whom I actually would agree that not just about maybe the good in general, but particular goods.

That thing that we're talking about is worth preserving. It's worth promoting. We don't necessarily disagree about that, but how quickly that can translate into, well, that means the right thing that needs to happen right now is X. And I've had many times when that is just not obvious to me, but it feels as if sometimes in these conversations, if you hedge, if you balk a bit at the idea that that's the right thing to do, it's almost as if now you're perceived as calling into question what is good, or that you don't care about that particular good.

And so I do think that distinction you've made helps maybe pull some of the sting out of disagreements where it can seem as if you're being dismissive about the goods that ought to be even fought for, because you're not entirely sure that that's the right way to fight for them, if that makes sense. I mean, that's always been an issue within politics. So, for instance, when people say that if you don't support this particular approach to government welfare, you don't care about the poor.

Now, that's not necessarily the case. You might be very committed to caring for the poor, but you just don't agree with the policy as the best way to go about it. Or maybe you're concerned about throwing more things into the hands of government.

And maybe it's precisely because you want an ethic where people are actually involved

with the poor, that you don't want to just displace it and outsource it to some other agency. And so those sorts of questions are tough ones, because on the one hand, there needs to be a connection between the good and the right. If there is not such a connection, then the right is sapped of its actual force.

I mean, when someone comes to my door, I should feel some sort of moral, something moral is at stake in how I respond to that situation. If I truly hold to principles of charity and hospitality, I really need to deal with that situation as one that carries moral force. Now, that doesn't necessarily settle exactly how I'm going to handle it, but it does mean that it gets handled in a particular way.

And what you just said there, let's say about relieving a situation of poverty, I think that the need to make that distinction between the right and the good becomes maybe even more important. More acute as you're talking about goods that are more abstract. For example, I've heard the word liberty, freedom thrown around, obviously times without number in the last two years, and that is a good.

It's even less concrete, you could say, than relieving a particular instance of poverty. And so how often are people painted as lovers of freedom or opponents of freedom, when what we're really talking about is freedom can be a good. I would even say it is a good, but then you get into some real questions of definition and application, where we're actually, the good, like you were saying about that situation where someone shows up at your door, the good requires a certain moral rumination, a wrestling with how this good is to, the end might be good, but what means are best to secure it.

And even being careful to make sure we define what that good is. Is the good for this person walking away with a pile of material things that I've given to them, or perhaps are there larger relational needs. In other words, the good of caring for my neighbor might fall quite a lot more than just relieving material need and so on.

And so I just, I do think that's important. And I actually think, like you said a moment ago, that the good and the right, that distinction really does map on well to the distinction of principle and practice. What is the good in principle, but then what's right in practice? And the processes by which we consider those, on the one hand, the reflection that we have about the good, and on the other hand, the deliberation that we have about the right, both of those have their own sort of integrity to them.

And you alluded, I think, to the fact that we need, for instance, reflection upon what exactly is the good of liberty. And another one within the past few years is what is the good of health? We use a lot of language about health that maybe doesn't unpack enough the different aspects and facets of health. I mean, what does social health look like? What does the psychological health or spiritual health of a community look like? How do we understand the ways in which we maybe trade off in certain extreme situations, some aspects of physical health against those others? And so those sorts of

reflective considerations will necessarily have to take place if we're going to make good decisions.

And when those have not taken place, often I think you can end up with very premature judgments about what we should actually do. Yeah. And what you just said there about health, I think, illustrates how when we speak about a good, we can quickly discover we're speaking about goods.

Social health is not identical with, let's say, bodily health, is not identical with economic health. And flourishing is a very, it's a lot going on with health and flourishing. And so it just, I think the good, instead of just arguing about what's right to do right now, the reflection on the good can invite us to kind of get back and make sure we know really exactly what we're talking about.

And we might find out it's more than one thing. Yes. And that, I think, also protects us from some of the danger of just seeing one specific threat.

And we respond to that, to the exclusion of other things. I think that's been one of my concerns over the past few years, that there can be a sort of risk avoidance on all sides, that whether we see the risk of government, whether we see the risk of a particular pandemic, that thing can fill our horizon. And all sorts of other things can be excluded as a result.

And a full-on sense of the goods that need to inform our deliberation about what we ought to do, that requires a certain degree of preserving the breadth of the horizon and not allowing one object to dominate it. I am tempted, in light of that, to reflect for a moment on a dynamic that I have seen in the North American political scene, which I regard as quite dreadfully chaotic, and I'm not sure I really want to spend a lot of time talking about it. But, so, one of the things that I've seen happen here in our political scene is that, as political tribes form, goods and determinations about what is right, on a whole spectrum of issues, get lumped together in one sort of political bundle that's our tribe's bundle.

And, of course, I don't think anyone who thinks carefully about politics can possibly just accept or reject such a bundle wholesale. I mean, it's amazing to me how people will perceive that my understanding of what is the good and what is the right, on everything from, you know, it could be foreign policy, immigration policy, it could be public health policies, to issues of sexual ethics in the public arena, to all of these things, all of them just get bundled together in these large ideological conglomerates. And now you are being perceived as the friend or the enemy on the basis of your adherence to those.

And so I just think that kind of political bundling becomes even more unwieldy. Where now, you know, all this stuff being thrown together that actually is quite distinct. So many goods lumped together and so many views of what is right lumped together.

And you've got to sort of take it or leave it wholesale. And the sort of demonizing that can flow from that if you don't accept this or that tribe's bundle. I just think that has, on the relational side of things, made things even so much more complicated and heated.

And we don't need to get into all that necessarily. But that for me has been a very distressing thing to watch in my context here in the US. And what I've seen of that, I think, has, I very much agree.

I think it's a struggle to maybe recognize that there are concerns on either side that need not be incompatible. And there are ways to actually navigate in different ways. I mean, we won't come out to the same position, but you don't necessarily have to go to one of these extremes.

And dismiss the concerns of others. I think this is one of the areas where this has really, I think, been more painful. Is the fact that what we're talking about are things that have a deep impact upon people's lives.

Painfully. And the inability to recognize that there are different people being hurt in different ways by these things. And part of our duty is to weep with those who weep.

That doesn't mean we need to agree with everything that they do in their assessment of things. But to recognize that empathy for people in these situations need not be a zero-sum game. You can be empathetic for those who are really being hit by the virus.

And also be empathetic to those who are experiencing really damaging effects of various measures that have been used. Or other things. And actually being able to step back enough from the need to throw yourself completely into one of these particular lines or tribes.

I think it is just part of our Christian duty to weep with those who weep. Absolutely. So let me ask you, how do we square that kind of empathy and sensitivity to the goods that are being threatened? Or even taken away from our neighbors in their actual context.

How do we hold that together with the kind of patience that is often needed to really get to the bottom of what goods are in play? How they're in play and what the right thing is to do about those goods? One of the things I've heard a number of times is a kind of frustration being articulated by someone who is hurting. They're experiencing what to them they would regard as just a real injustice, let's say. In the midst of all that's going on.

And you and I want to sit here in this conversation and have these nice theoretical discussions about the good and the right. And they're looking at you like, I sort of get this sometimes in pastoral context, they're looking at you like, with all due respect, up there in the ivory tower, this is all fine and good, but I'm down here sort of dying. How do we, there's probably not one right answer to this, but what is, what's a way forward to

communicate that kind of sincere empathy? While also, if I could put it this way, kind of touching the brakes on the speed with which empathy can turn into an insistence on certain policy action or change, if I'm being clear.

Yeah, so I think part of the critique of empathy that has been raised in recent years is helpful to bear in mind here that empathy tends to be a narrowing impulse. That when we empathize with someone, we find it very difficult to see opposing factors or things that seem to be causing pressure as anything more than some evil or bad force that needs to be eliminated. And yet, when we recognize many different people who are worthy objects of our empathy, who are suffering in different ways from different pressures and from things that you recognize are in some ways at odds with each other.

That I think, it challenges us, first of all, not just to be patient in going through processes, but to be patient with people. Because that's a lot of the struggle that we have at the moment to actually deal with people who hold very strong opinions that differ from our own. And recognizing if we're going to deal with these issues, well, we need to be patient and hear out their positions and allow their protest or whatever to, their words of resistance to us, give them weight and hear them out.

So that's one thing. I think also, to go through these processes well, I don't think every single person should be calm and measured. That's not really a healthy approach to these things.

We have strong feelings. But yet, at the same time, it is important that we deal with these issues in ways that don't allow those passions and those heated feelings to drive everything. And we do this more generally within our society when we have processes of judgment that involve some sort of agonistic conflict and combat about ideas and cases.

But yet, at the same time, recognize that there needs to be some impartial judgment. There needs to be processes by which these things are handled that don't just allow passions to rule. I find the same thing when you are in a very difficult situation.

Your judgment concerning those things that would address your situation best are not necessarily things you're going to be thinking clearly about. I mean, I trust myself more to think about issues of euthanasia now than if I were in a position of extreme pain towards the end of my life. Yes.

Yes, a good reminder of the importance of thinking about the principles long before you have to act on them. A couple of things related to what you were just exploring there. So you talked about patience with people.

I confess, that seems to me to assume a certain kind of intuition about our common humanity. Which seems like it has evaporated quite a lot in recent years. I've been a little bit, more than a little bit, I've really been dismayed at how quickly in our current

tribalism, there can be a sense that a person who thinks that way doesn't deserve empathy.

I have no reason to be patient with them because they're just so obviously not just wrong but even evil. And in my darker moments, I wonder if we can get that genie back in the bottle. I struggle to know, I mean as a Christian I care so very deeply about the idea that all human beings are made in God's image.

And even someone with whom I have, I'm really struggling to find common ground, even on principles, let alone practice. That there's still a person with whom I need to be patient and give our relationship time and just keep trying and keep extending that sort of basic human hospitality. That seems like that is maybe not so common now.

And I guess related to that was another thing I was just going to ask is what would you say are some important contexts in which we can build the kind of relational capital with one another? Because I can't necessarily be a neighbor to the world, right? I have to be a neighbor to these neighbors. So what are some contexts in which we could think about building those kinds of, building that relational balance, if that's the right word, between empathy and really agonistically and in a very strong way challenging each other's thinking to think precisely and deeply, not just react. And these issues are issues in which we should be challenging each other.

Absolutely. Because a lot is at stake. And so the idea that we should just be calmly accepting, just agree to disagree, that is not what we should be arguing here.

Rather, I think we should recognize and try and take on board as much as we can the concerns of others. And I like the idea of what some have called steel manning, that you try and understand people's position on the strongest possible term, in its strongest possible terms. And often they won't express it that well themselves.

And so you're trying to have some sort of form for it that takes its strengths. Now, that doesn't mean that you yourself have to hold that position, nor even that you need to articulate the strong man or the steel man form of their position. I mean, you're in a public discourse and you don't necessarily want to argue your opponent's case.

But at the same time, you need to wrestle with those questions yourself. And try and see what they are saying. And then try and understand how you could take those things on board without, you don't need to dismiss your position.

But it would help you, I think, to knock things down to size, part of the threat. It would certainly be my experience that you can learn a lot more about your own position when you take the strengths of other people's positions and try and wrestle with those. So I think that's one thing that I find just an important, that is an important practice.

I think you talked about the relational capital. And you can't just build relational capital.

It's a two-way thing.

You need to earn it. And that tends to happen, I think, in, you have to, when you're speaking things that are controversial, you need to do it with capital that you have. If you're expecting people to hear you out when you've got no relational capital with them, they're just not going to listen to you.

And that, I think, is one of the struggles of so many of our modern media. We don't have the capital relationally with which to work. And so we end up just arguing and fighting with each other.

Now I enjoy having a good argument. But I think the problem is we shouldn't be that, if we're getting that invested within social media, we'll find it's not a context within which you can effectively build broad relational capital that is not just a matter of ideological alignment. So you will be able to have relational capital with people in your ideological tribe.

But since social media is so much about images and ideas, you'll find that beyond that, it's very hard to, if you disagree on ideas, it's very hard to have the sense of commonality and common concern that you would have within in-person relationships when you're actually investing time in each other and doing things for each other, eating together, that sort of thing. Yeah, we're not really, yeah, sorry. Yeah, we're not really neighbors that are best on social media in any kind of recognizable human way.

I was just reflecting as you were speaking there about how the steel manning thing that you mentioned is part of how you build a capital. I'm so much more prepared to listen to someone who's listened well to me. And it's obvious that they can articulate my position maybe better even than I did.

That builds a kind of trust, like you're taking this seriously. Yeah. And I wonder if part of the reason why that is not done is because the goal of many conversations and your comments about social media, I think that's a context that exacerbates this quite a lot.

I wonder if the goal of many of our debates now is not really so much to persuade. I don't even know if the goal is to get people on the same side. Sometimes.

It almost seems as if the goal is a kind of winning the day. And this is maybe a discussion around the time, but I think this is one of those places where Christian virtues make such a difference. I mean, there really has to be a kind of humility that I'm not trying to trample my enemy in the dust.

That's not how I treat a neighbor. And that is always a struggle when you're having these sorts of conversations on social media. It's very hard to climb down from one of those positions without losing face.

And so you want to give your opponent some way to climb down. But then there's also the question of who are you actually having this argument for? Is it for the person that you're arguing with, or is it for people who are watching? Who are hopefully, they may not be vocal, but they're taking things on board. And in my experience, that's the sort of person who gets persuaded one way or another.

And I think, yeah, the environment of social media does make these things very complex. Because so much of it comes down to affiliation, how people read your tone, how people sense how they sense you're coming into speaking into their context. Now, there are so many contexts for these debates.

And there are so many different concerns that people are bringing that you can't address all at once. And so it just seems to me you're going to struggle to get very far with many people on social media. You'll get progress with some.

But the sort of conversation that you can have in a one-to-one setting, that's where I think steelmanning will tend to be more effective. And you can actually talk through things with people. And that can be a conversation between two people that is witnessed by others.

But I find when you're talking to an indefinite audience, it's very difficult. Now, I completely agree with you on all of that. I'm imagining as I'm sitting here a possible kind of objection.

And it circles back into some of the other things I've already spoken about. I think part of the attraction of social media is that it gives us the impression, I think often it's an illusion, but I think it gives the impression of standing at a microphone that has a much bigger audience. And that's important when you feel that the stakes are very high.

So I can imagine someone saying, look, we are dealing with things afoot right now in our world. That it's all fine and well for two local neighbors at a pub to sit and chat about. But that is small potatoes compared to the kind of advocacy and activism that's really needed given, quote unquote, the threat.

And one of the things that I've been trying to figure out as a pastor, not just because I think this does pull people into a lot of social media fights that are fruitless or worse, but just for other reasons too, is it possible without seeming dismissive, again, of real goods that are under perhaps assault, is there a way to help people, even saying this is going to be controversial, but deescalate this view that sort of Leviathan is cruising through the world, just seeking to devour, and we just absolutely must, hashtag resistance. Now, I know that's an awfully big question, and without being more specific, maybe it's not a helpful one, but I have gotten that impression many times in speaking with people, that there are these dark malevolent forces at work, and it's all fine and well to sit and chat with your neighbors, but we need to build a movement to withstand this stuff. I mean,

have you encountered that in the UK? Do you think that that actually is part of what feeds some of these social media frenzies? I think social media, one of the problems is that media tend to create common objects of interest in order to sustain a broader conversation, and it's one of the ways in which nations can get created as communities, the fact that you have media that allow us to have common objects of interest, and so you'll have the news for your particular country, which can be very partisan in some countries, but other countries will have a national news station, and there's a sense of, we are looking at these things together as a country.

Now, that's less so now when we have so many different channels, but there is that tendency with the expansion of media to create ideological entities that can become objects of concern, that are agglomerating all these different things that we experience in our lives under one shared name or one shared rubric. And so I think, for instance, big floppy terms like the patriarchy or racism or liberalism or the state, I mean, these stand for so many different things, but people can read their particular struggles into that big term and then form common cause around those sorts of things. And then every single case, there'll be all sorts of cases that then come up, and they are symbolic flashpoints, they are symbols in which one of the heads of the hydro breaches the waters, and you need to address that, and you join together and find commonality with your common recognition that this is the evil surfacing from the deep.

And now I find, particularly since social media is a context where we are representing ourselves, it's a space where we're forming identities, personal brands, it is an activity in which we feel that our identities are at stake. And as a result, it's very difficult to have these conversations without doing so in a reactive frame, because we feel threatened, and we feel if we don't say the right things, if we don't align with the right people, that our identity will be threatened. And so the more that these ideological entities are being symbolized within specific conflicts and arguments, and the more that our identities are invested in the realm where those are the dominating common objects of concern, the more that we'll find these sorts of problems emerging, I think.

That is just incredibly perceptive. One of the things that has struck me about social media quote-unquote conversations is we are often creating the very thing we're talking about by talking about it. There's now a leviathan.

If you and I are sitting at a pub as neighbors, we could both imagine this whole gigantic thing that's happening in the world, but it's not going to be particularly influential. We'll finish our beer and go home, and that'll be that. But on social media, you can actually create an impression of this sort of shadowy, big, evil thing.

And as you said, then it's a matter of your, actually not just your identity, but your integrity to stand against it as loudly as possible. And then another trickle down of that is that all sorts of things become symbols of either allegiance to that thing or resistance to

that thing. And yeah, that dynamic, I've speculated what would, let's say, a major world event like World War II have been like with social media.

He's hoping we don't have World War III to worry about on that front. But yeah, great point. I do also think something I've found helpful is just to be aware of the degree to which my expressing my opinions on these sorts of things can often be a man shakes fist at cloud.

I mean, these things are happening. I don't necessarily have much power over them. I can deplore the way that things have gone.

I can lament the fact that things take a particular course. How much power do I have to change these things, though? I mean, I can make them worse, perhaps, from my particular vantage point. But to what extent should I invest my sense of moral concern within these things, within which I have so little agency, compared to all those different things in my life where I actually have quite a lot of agency? And so the degree to which people are invested psychologically in these struggles, I think, is an important thing to reflect upon.

I've always tried to think about that myself because there are a lot of different things I can give my time and my thought to. These are important issues. But to what extent are they important issues immediately for me with my agency? What difference is that? How much is that going to weigh in that field compared to how it would weigh in other areas? That is something I have spent quite a lot of time trying to minister as a pastor over the last number of months, is the importance, as Christians, remembering our actual calling from the Lord.

Although I think the seduction, often, of, let's say, a social media platform is, and it gets back to what we said at the beginning about goods, when people feel that things that they treasure, goods they value deeply, are being at least threatened, if not taken away, that is a very disempowering experience. And there is an instinctive clutching for something that gives me a sense of agency against whatever that is. And yet I have had conversations with some of my brothers and sisters here where there's almost a kind of paralysis that comes because there's a feeling that there's a great potential evil that's happening and you want to do something about it, but you're not sure what it is because you do realize that, maybe just throwing up social media flares is not really doing very much.

And so there's this feeling of helplessness and yet urgency at the same time. And one of the things that I've just over and over gone back to myself, actually, and in ministering to others, is to remember that almost none of that is something to which God has called me. And God has called me to any number of things that are right in front of me.

I mean, in my situation, I'm called to be a husband, a father, a pastor, a neighbor, a

friend. Those are actual callings. I don't have to wonder about those.

I don't have to wonder what to do because the work's right in front of me. And actually, the more I'm sucked into all of that, just investing mental time and emotional energy into all that stuff I can do nothing about, crazily enough, there's another evil happening. And that is my, those I'm called to care for actually suffering.

And it just brings confusion. I think that's much of what we're trying to achieve with this conversation. I mean, it's very easy to have one of the many conversations that people have had about what should our government policies be.

And that's really not what we're wanting to discuss. We're wanting to discuss what should my personal policy be in this situation. This might be a good point to pause our conversation for the time being.

We're going to be taking it up again in the next few days. And hopefully getting into a lot more depth and exploring some of the different aspects of our response. Thank you very much for joining me.

Thank you for those of you who have listened. Lord willing, we'll be publishing further podcasts in this series very soon.