

# How does the Bible apply to today's politics?

## With Kaitlyn Schiess

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### TRANSCRIPT



**NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.**

[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Welcome back to The Denison Forum Podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, Executive Director of Denison Forum and host for today's podcast conversation. I want to remind you that the Denison Forum and Denison Ministries exist to ignite a movement of culture changing Christians who use their influence for the kingdom of God. And we know that that's why you're tuned in, and we appreciate you being a part of this conversation.

Today we are talking with one of the emerging theologians, and spokespersons in our culture. Caitlin Schiess is a writer, speaker, theologian. She is the author of a previous work called the Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Our Neighbor.

She is also a regular co host, if you've followed a podcast by the name of The Holy Post, which is hosted not only by Caitlyn, but also by Phil Vischer and Skye Jethani. You'll find her regularly

on that podcast. She has had writing that has appeared in the New York Times, Christianity Today, Christ and Pop Culture, Relevant and the Sojourner's Resource as well.

She is currently a doctoral student in political theology at Duke Divinity School, and she lives there in Durham, North Carolina. Today, we are talking with Kaitlyn about her new book, *The Ballot and the Bible*, the subtitle of which is *How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics and Where We Go From Here*.

This book is an amazing resource and very accessible for all readers. It is a weaving together of American history, scripture, theology, politics, and community. I think you're going to love the book, but also this conversation with Caitlin. We're glad that you're on this conversation with us.

Kaitlyn Schiess, chess, help me with your last name. I've been

[00:01:53] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** That was good. That was good. Schiess. Yeah.

[00:01:56] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So i've listened to Phil Vischer your colleague at the holy post and he says it so fast every time I listen to the Holy Post that I'm like, I don't know any more about it than I did at the beginning. So the right way to say your last name is Schiess, right?

[00:02:12] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yep.

[00:02:13] **Dr. Mark Turman:** All right. Good deal. Well, welcome to the Denison Forum Podcast. Thank you for having a conversation. We look forward to talking in a minute about your new book, *The Ballot and the Bible*. The subtitle is intriguing as well, *How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics and Where We Go from Here*.

And thank you for the work, but tell us a little bit about you and your background, people that may listen to our podcasts that are less familiar with you. Tell us a little bit about your journey, your adventure. How did you end up being where you're at doing what you do?

[00:02:47] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah. Well, thank you so much for having me on. I'm excited to have this conversation. I grew up in a Christian home all over the country. My dad is in the military, so we moved a lot, but Basically, wherever we lived, my mom worked at the church, so I was the kid that was, you know, had the parent with the key to lock up, so we were there all the time, and had a really positive experience in the church.

I was cared for, I learned Scripture, I watched my parents really faithfully follow Jesus in practical ways, like I never doubted that they really believed that Jesus Christ had lived and died

and rose from the dead, and that put demands on their time and resources, and the way they cared for people.

And then when I went to college, I thought I was going to go to law school. That had been my plan for most of my kind of young adult years. And at the end of college It's a long story, but in a very kind of stereotypical way, I got kind of voluntold into being a youth leader at camp for middle school girls and had no interest in doing that.

And then after a week of that, I really had a both a profound experience of God really kind of confronted some of the idols that I had been really holding dear of kind of success, academic success by worldly standards. And also had this profound experience of ministry and was really surprised by how much I wanted to spend my life learning Scripture, teaching Scripture, being involved in the lives of Christians and non Christians and telling people about Jesus.

And so very end of college made a kind of surprise to everyone in my life, I think switch and decided to go to Dallas Theological Seminary after I graduated. And all of that was happening during the 2016 election and I was at Liberty University, which was very involved in the 2016 election. We had a lot of politicians on campus.

We had a lot of conversations about the election on campus. And so at this time when I'm kind of making a change, a kind of career change, There's also a lot of conversations about something that I've spent the last few years studying. I was a politics and policy and then a history major. And I start seminary in 2016 and a lot of my peers at the seminary who are going to go be pastors, some will be counselors or Bible study teachers, they're all experiencing the election and asking questions about "What's my role in this?" It doesn't feel like it's totally separate from what I'm doing because it's impacting the people in my church, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know what my role is in this.

And I took a class early in seminary called Spiritual Formation for Contemporary Culture. And we were supposed to have a unit on politics that we never got to because the lovely Professor Barry Jones, you know, was long winded and did not get to everything we were supposed to get to. And I finished the semester and I said I need to learn that.

I really want to think about spiritual formation in our political lives, and so he was gracious enough to do a directed study with me, and basically from that directed study on, I've just thought, I think this is the rest of my life is studying this stuff. I'm really interested in how we read scripture for our political lives, our spiritual formation for our political lives.

And at some point in seminary, I realized, there are great resources in the Christian tradition in other times and places than my own and I need to spend some more time studying. I applied to a

bunch of PhD programs because I thought I just need to keep learning. It's always been oriented towards the church for me, but I felt like there are resources out there I need to learn.

And so now I've been, I'm in my third year of my doctoral program at Duke and have gotten to take political theory classes outside the Divinity School, theology classes that have challenged me and stretched me and always kind of oriented towards this question of, what can we say theologically and biblically about our common life together?

[00:06:09] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Great journey. Love some of the work coming out of Duke Divinity School, Richard Hayes, and some others, just some phenomenal thinkers and some really great work. And having just finished a doctoral program a few years ago myself, that same reality of there's some really great materials and some great thinking, some great books and conversations that really can encourage us, and you point out several of them. We'll get to those some of those in the book that really just were very helpful to me as well.

But some people will know you as a part of the host team for the Holy Post and people recognize obviously the name Phil Vischer. My kids still talk about Veggie Tales and all of those kinds of things. How did you end up in that environment?

[00:06:54] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yes. So, my first book I wrote in 2020 was about spiritual formation and our political lives. And Phil heard about the book on Twitter, reached out to me, wanted to do an interview. And the funny thing is, we did the whole interview. He kind of likes unsettling people. You may have... You know, heard that?

He kind of likes, you know, poking at people or kind of being sarcastic or funny. So I thought the interview went really poorly because I just couldn't read him and I wasn't sure how it was going. And we finished the interview and he says, You know, Caitlin, a lot of authors are not good talkers, but you're a good talker.

Do you want to keep doing this? And I was like, sure, thinking he's never really going to follow up on that again. And that was three years ago. And the last three years of my life have really been, you know, positively shaped by both getting to spend time with him and Skye and Christian and learn from them.

But also it's been really great while I'm in a doctoral program to have a big chunk of my life that is oriented towards the average person in the church and the questions they have and trying to articulate things in a way that they can understand. And I've seen some of my peers, you know, be a few years into the program and have just lost all sense of what normal people think about or the words they use.

And so it's been really fun and good for me to be involved in something that we really care about bringing good theology and good biblical studies to people, but kind of meeting them where they're at and not kind of you know, getting lost in the weeds, but really asking some practical questions about what those things mean for our lives in the world.

[00:08:22] **Dr. Mark Turman:** We highly recommend the Holy post is some great conversations. And yeah Vischer is unique and brings a level of energy and fun to a podcast that is unique in and of its own way. And so we would greatly recommend people follow you. And the others on the Holy Post, some really great conversations and things that happened there.

I'm curious. I'm going to guess that you would be properly described as somewhere in the millennial to Gen Z borderline right in there. And your book that we're going to talk about has been out now for a couple of weeks and kind of wondering a couple of things.

One is what's been initial reaction to the book that we're going to talk about in terms of the use of the Bible in politics and what is your read on just how your peer group is responding to politics now, having come through all that we've come through in the last five to 10 years now, COVID experience, political unrest, heading into another election cycle.

And for context, let me just say this. I was in a conversation with probably five or six people about your age group in millennials, and we talked about a couple of things happening in the political landscape at that moment. This conversation's 10 days ago, and that's why two or three of them said, "And that's why we don't watch the news. That's why we don't pay attention. That's why we don't want to get involved in all of that" because of the chaos that this story, this event was revealing.

What's the way that it's trending from your perspective as we go into this next cycle of political election?

[00:10:03] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah, I mean, one of the reasons I wrote this book was because I felt like people my age, especially evangelical Christians my age, had been really disillusioned by the 2016 and the 2020 elections and honestly felt like, I don't want to watch the news, but also I just don't want to be engaged at all because what I've seen is power corrupting people.

I've seen people make compromises they shouldn't make. I have felt kind of betrayed by leaders I trusted. And so I just think maybe this whole thing is too messy. It just is bad for you. It will corrupt you. And in some ways they're discerning something true, that it really does have the ability to change you and shape you in ways that are counter to the gospel.

But what I wanted to do was say, well, maybe there are examples other than just our immediate history of real faithfulness in political life, and what can we learn from that? And what does it look like to not only have good theology and read Scripture well, but to be the kind of people that can do difficult work?

It will be challenging. It really does have the potential to, to warp you in some ways, but what does it look like to be faithful in the face of that? And I've seen, I mean, I've seen people my age who also are really engaged politically and maybe have just kind of switched the party that they think is the right one and they're still kind of really involved.

But I think in general a lot of people my age are kind of just exhausted by the whole thing and they're really disillusioned with the idea that it can do anything good, you know? They've seen people say, Hey, join our cause, write a letter to your congressman, do this, and then it just feels like nothing ever changes.

And so part of my desire has always been to kind of widen our scope and say, well, it's not just the last 10, 15 years, there's, there is more to the Christian faith than just what you have seen, but also then to say you know, there are resources that will help us. There are other ways of doing this and we can actually learn from people that we might not be inclined to learn from.

There might be examples that we can sit at the feet of people in other times and other places. And maybe one of the things we can learn from all of that is that it really might be difficult at the national level to to keep your soul intact and do this well. But what if we looked at politics in a much wider way?

What if we said, what does it look like for me to be really involved with my local city council? Or just to build a relationship with my next door neighbor? Or to see what tangible, practical things I could cooperate with people of different faiths, Christians who disagree with me, people from different backgrounds, and we could work together on some tangible practical things in our community that will still be challenging.

We still need resources to know how to respond and what policies are faithful and what it looks like to be a faithful Christian in that context. But we haven't often paid a lot of attention to those things. We've paid a lot of attention to who do I vote for president? How do I make the biggest change at the biggest level?

And maybe actually in our own history, we can see examples of people at smaller levels who were faithful and did things that now we see the effects were really great. You know, the Civil Rights marchers who were just in one little town trying to get one little thing fixed, and it looked like it was failing, actually affected change that has benefited Americans for generations now.

So could we look to that history and see, actually, maybe my small act of faithfulness in my community could actually be really fruitful, and maybe it is worth being involved in it, even if it doesn't look like the examples I've seen in the past that I really want to critique, that I really think are worthy of some scrutiny.

Maybe there are other things that could help shape our life together.

[00:13:31] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, such a good word. It seems like we've lost that idea that all politics are local because of technology. Technology has brought national and global politics into local living rooms and communities. And really kind of taken over the conversation. And as some people have said, brought national conversations into local school boards, which is a, an interesting phenomenon that we're struggling with in some ways.

And I'm curious one question before we jump into the book. One other question is based on what you just said, which is: What do you think are the pros and cons of I've heard other people talk about kind of this political cultural fatigue that you mentioned a moment ago that just, we're just kind of worn out with the whole thing. What could be obviously some negative outcomes of that?

But what might be some pros or some benefits to us growing collectively fatigued with the rigor and the frustrations that we've all experienced over five to 10 years?

[00:14:32] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean. The negative part seems kind of obvious. It's just like we're worn out. And also I think when we're exhausted, it's a lot easier to manipulate people, to use fear, to kind of incite them towards policies or towards supporting politicians that aren't actually the best options for them, but they're scared and they're exhausted.

That's definitely the downside. I think one of the positive things about this, and you see this in American history too you know, kind of the early social gospel era, there's all this enthusiasm for like, we can remake the world to be like the kingdom of God. And a lot of Christians today look back at that and see that as a really positive movement, and there are some really positive things about it.

There really were orphanages built and hospitals built and people created really good social safety nets for people who were vulnerable. And then, you know, two world wars and the Holocaust and nuclear weapons happens and people are very disillusioned and very exhausted. And what comes out of that is a lot of theology that, you know, sometimes went too far, sometimes overemphasized sin in the world and didn't see enough possibility for faithful work.

But some of those theologians were saying, Actually, some of your optimism about how you could just change the world to be exactly like the Kingdom of God, it actually made you do bad things. Like maybe some of your realization that this is really challenging and difficult actually will give you the humility to do the work that you need to do.

I think about Reinhold Niebuhr, who talked about how actually it's not the self interested politicians that are actually the real threat here. What's actually really scary to him is the people who think they're the white knights that are going to save the world and don't realize the brokenness of their own hearts, don't realize that actually you might have great intentions and you'll still hurt people.

We live in a broken world and you're a broken person and you're not going to be able to just make everything perfect. So does that not only give you the humility to kind of change your approach to this, to recognize that I might not have all the answers, actually. I might try and do good things and actually do wrong.

But also, and this is where, you know, post the social gospel, you have the Civil Rights movement. I think what distinguishes the social gospel from the civil rights movement is actually this emphasis on resurrection. So many of the Civil Rights activists were saying, Look, we might not actually see justice in this world.

We want to. We want things to change. We're going to march. We're going to protest. But we actually believe that what Jesus said is true. That we will be resurrected. That God will make all things right. And that hope in eternal justice and eternal peace and flourishing allows us to be free to do good faithful work now without having to cut corners we shouldn't cut or make compromises that we shouldn't make or sell our souls in the process, because we know that God will ultimately vindicate us.

So we can fight, we can do good work, we can exhaust ourselves in a good kind of way. But we don't have to sell our souls in the process, and I think the exhaustion a lot of us are feeling now, if a good pastor, a good Bible study teacher, could hear that and say, Well, let me show you the end of Revelation.

Look at this really beautiful picture that we are awaiting. How can that be a real comfort to you? And how can that actually shape your political life to be more faithful than it's been in the past? You don't actually have to do everything. You can do good work, but the world is not on your shoulders.

Actually, Jesus has promised to return and make everything right.



[00:17:37] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. It's such a good word. Makes me think of that seemingly out of place statement at the end of first Corinthians 15, where Paul talks extensively about resurrection and then says, remember, everything you do in the Lord is not in vain. So stand fast, stand firm. And we struggle sometimes, right?

Especially in our culture and within the context of our democracy. This idea that, you know, as Christians we're called to serve and we're called to stand as clearly and humbly as we can for God's truth and grace. But we're also called to sacrifice and sometimes to suffer. And we want to try to run away from those pieces if we can.

[00:18:15] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah.

[00:18:16] **Dr. Mark Turman:** We like Paul's invitation to share in the fellowship of the resurrection, but not so much the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ sometimes. But let's spend some time with the book. I think I am really drawn to this book, not only because it's well written, it is very accessible to people, but also because of the big themes that it combines.

It combines what many people that listen to a podcast like this will love, which is Scripture and theology and in significant deep thoughtfulness about the Word of God and about what Scripture says as it forms our lives and our thinking and in all areas, but particularly this one.

It's a great dive into American history and gives us a longer perspective than just, you know, what happened last week or last year in terms of our country, and many of us are somewhere between interested and making idols out of our politics, our government and the building of community.

So it weaves all of those things together. But I want to start at the end if I can, you make an interesting statement. "We are a Bible haunted nation." What do you mean by that?

[00:19:30] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah. What I wanted to communicate really was, on one hand, we can rightfully look around and see church attendances down, there's less kind of public expressions of Christianity than we've had in the past, right? We don't have as many kind of Bible reading in public schools, or we don't have the Ten Commandments posted as many places, or,

but in other ways biblical language has so deeply shaped our political life, in part because, in distinction to many other modern nations, America was founded at a time in which there was great interest, kind of a revival of interest, in the Bible shaping what our whole political structure looked like. And so, our founding is shaped by biblical language.

And then it's always been important to us, we're again kind of a rare modern nation that is both deeply religious, but never had a formal state church, and so we haven't had the kind of easy relationship between government and church that some other nations have had and then have had to kind of wrestle with in the, you know, increasingly modern period.

But, it's always been really important to Americans that their leaders know the Bible, that their leaders are Christians, and that has, well, that has waned to a certain extent more recently. It's amazing how much power it still has.

I give some examples in the book of more recent biblical quotations. One being when Joe Biden recently, you know, quoted from Isaiah, here I am Lord, send me to talk about the American military. Or Mike Pence who kind of appropriated some lines from Hebrews and kind of changed them to be about America. We should fix our eyes on old glory instead of on Jesus. Both of those to me are signs that people are still hungry for the idea that their politics means something deeper than just the conflicts of the moment, that it's grounded in something truer, that there's some sense of transcendent and transcendent authority even.

And so we still have biblical language that sort of shapes our public life. We still have people, even people who are not Christians, who would say I'm attracted to the idea of that language having power, or at least giving me this sense of transcendence. I mean, I was taking a class this last semester, not in the divinity school, a very not Christian class in the gender studies department.

And at one point someone used the phrase new wine and old wine skins. And we had a whole conversation afterwards because everyone was like, well, where does that phrase come from? And no one knew, they had all heard this phrase. They just didn't know where it was from. I'm like the lone theology student there.

I was like, oh, this is my moment. Like, I can tell you where this is from. So that was a reminder to me of like this language has been used so often in our public life that we've often detached it from its original source. People still have this sense that it's like powerful language, especially if you go to the King James Version, that sounds really kind of weighty.

But we're not necessarily going to pull our Bibles out and say like, oh, is this a correct interpretation? People just like the feeling our politics means something deeper or has some sense of authority. And so in some ways, I think Christians like that. We like the idea that our Bible is used in all these political ways.

And I want us to just kind of pump the brakes a little bit and say, well, what does it mean that Scripture that we really care about has been kind of watered down to just this kind of powerful

language that we can appropriate for any political goal? Should we maybe think more critically about how it's ended up that way and how we might question its use in public instead of just saying, Oh, I'm so glad the Bible was used. I'm so happy. The Bible's in public. We might want to ask why. Why does that matter to us and what might we respond to that use with?

[00:22:49] **Dr. Mark Turman:** I'm going to ask you in a minute to overview and walk us through the journey of the book because It's both a journey of American history and a journey through some of the most familiar what you might call catch phrases of the Bible.

So I pastored churches for 35 years and I'm very intrigued by this same idea that you'll, you will see scriptural phrases and sentences and words, perhaps because of their, not only because of their scriptural ingrained nature in our culture, but because of their poetic nature and preachers like me and several of my colleagues, they've even done sermon series over the last 10 to 15 years of no, that's not in the Bible. You know, they quote Hamlet.

It was, it surprised me just learning this recently. Second only to the Bible, Hamlet and Shakespeare, particularly Hamlet, is the most quoted, most read, most published piece of work next to the Bible, which is astounding in some ways. But many people would hear Hamlet's words, to be or not to be, and think that came from the Bible, right?

And we use, as you so well document and walk us through this in the book that there's so much of biblical language like that. And then it's interesting when you get into experiences like you just talked about where people use some phrase or some aspect of the Bible and they don't have any idea what its origin is, what its true larger context is.

And so I want to talk about that, but walk us through, kind of just give us an overview of how this book unfolds. And then I really want to spend a lot of time camped out down there in Jeremiah 29, because that's just such an intriguing place for the book to land in many ways.

But walk us through the journey of what this book does.

[00:24:40] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah. So really what I wanted to do with the book was, have a resource for thinking about how we should interpret Scripture in our political lives, but not jump into like the immediate questions of the moment, not just come in and say, okay, well, what does Scripture mean for Roe v. Wade was just overturned.

Like let's talk about that. Or let's talk about the student loan decision. Or I instead wanted to say, I think it's important for us to have tangible examples to think through together in our churches and our families and our communities. But, to have most of the examples in the book be

distanced enough in history that maybe we can have a little bit of distance from them and the temperature is a little bit lower.

Hopefully no one is fighting at their Thanksgiving table about the Revolutionary War anymore. I think we've kind of dealt with that. But to give those examples to help us both kind of think about what we inherit as American Christians. We inherit certain ways of reading the Bible. But also to have these tangible examples to think through together.

And so I start the book with a phrase that people may have just heard in the most recent GOP debate, a city on a hill, which is from Jesus Sermon on the Mount, and kind of gives some history of that. Both its original use in American history in 1630 with John Winthrop's speech, a model of Christian charity.

But then how it kind of gets picked up later in American history, go through the Revolutionary War. That was actually the example that started my interest in the book, was I read a sermon from a loyalist priest using Romans 13, you know, be subject to the governing authorities, against the Revolutionary War, and I thought, that's such an interesting, I hear Romans 13 used all the time by people who I think would be uncomfortable with this use of it in the Revolutionary War era.

So that, that's one of the chapters. Go through the Civil War, as I said earlier, the social gospel and then some more modern examples Reagan's economic policies and kind of the capitalism versus socialism debate that, you know, a ton of Christians were publishing about in the 70s and 80s, through to kind of Cold War era and thinking about eschatology, through to Bush and Obama, and then as you said, the last chapter.

Some of the more recent, but then also kind of going back in history over how we've thought about Jeremiah 29. And so both, as you said, wanted to kind of give a, you know, examples throughout American history, but also wanted to make sure I covered things like Romans 13 was really important. Jesus's words given to Caesar, what is Caesar's really important.

A lot of the passages that deal with kind of the construction of Israel and kind of what do we do with those passages in our political life today, especially because, like I said, the founding of America, there was a lot of interest in the Hebrew Republic and the idea that we could kind of take from the Old Testament picture of political life today.

So I wanted to kind of cover some of those important things. One of the kind of feedback examples I have gotten the most often is someone saying, Oh, there's so many other things you could talk about. And it's true. There are way more passages that have relevance to our political life that I could cover.

There's lots of interesting things in American history I could talk about. But just wanted to give some representative examples to people to say, Okay, let's have a conversation about what Romans 13 means. But let's not just talk about it in the abstract, because what's happened throughout Christian history is Christians have had political situations in front of them and they've had to figure out, does this apply? How does it apply? What do we do? And we're going to have to deal with that too in the heat of the moment. But how could we learn from how Christians have responded in the past?

[00:27:49] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. Talk about that a little bit from the standpoint of you know, in our work at Denison Forum, so much of what we're trying to do is we're trying to exegete and understand Scripture well and properly, but at the same time exegete and understand our moment in history and put it into its right context.

We often try to come back to this phrase about the tribe of Issachar who understood the times and knew what Israel should do, which kind of speaks to that idea of executing both your Bible and the culture and times in which you live. Talk about that what is sometimes you might call an intersection, sometimes a collision, and how Christians need to be committed to both of those things.

Not just buried in their Bible in what we might call a holy huddle, but also not so versed in the culture that they know little to nothing about the Bible or how it might be speaking to their context.

[00:28:47] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yes. Yeah. I mean, and that is really, even when I started the book, I wasn't sure exactly what I would find in these historical examples, but if there's anything I found, it was people both needed to know how to interpret. God's word, and they needed to know how to interpret God's world and their place in it.

And what kind of role do I have? One of the examples being, you know, there were early Americans, this was a common thing in other countries too, but it was especially common in America because early colonists were making this dramatic journey to a new land, to kind of draw on images of Israel and say like, we are this chosen people, God has given us this land.

And it's easy with some hindsight to look back and think, Well, were you able to justify harming Native people because you said God has given us this land and you didn't actually have a direct word from God saying this is the land that God has given you? So we might look at that and go, I don't know that you were correctly seeing yourself in the story.

I don't know that this was the right passage to grab in this instance. But then you'll see enslaved African Americans in our history going to the story of the Exodus and saying we are the

oppressed people and God is a liberating God that cares about those that are oppressed in a very literal way.

Like we are enslaved just as Israel was enslaved. And we can look at that now and go, yeah, you saw yourself correctly. You were in a similar position as Israel and you found comfort in knowing that God saw them and God sees you, and you used that story in a really faithful way to seek real justice in the world.

That same story of the Exodus was often used by those early Christians in America who said we're coming to a new land, who saw the places that they were coming from as really spiritually dead. And so this is our Exodus into this new land. What they didn't see correctly was that, yeah, that story is powerful for thinking about God as a liberating God.

But what you missed is that in your Exodus, you also enslaved people, and that's not really faithful to this story, that God is a liberating God who cares about the crushed and the oppressed. And so you understood God's word to a certain extent. You saw that this story is not just dead history that has nothing to say to us.

You saw that it really does matter for our life today. But you missed something, in part because your sin kind of warped your perspective. That's consistent throughout American history, that people who have you know, motivation to want, there's financial motivation in, throughout American history to enslave people.

That strong incentive and the fact that it was so culturally accepted in your community blinded you to the reality that actually this story says something about you and you're not actually in the position of the oppressed here. You're in Pharaoh's position and God has something to say to what you are doing to God's people.

That's really crucial and there's nothing that I can say in terms of like a list of exegetical rules to make you see that. There are still ways in which you have to understand that story well in terms of interpreting Scripture well, but you can understand the text incredibly well and still miss what it means for you in this moment.

Tons of slaveholding Americans in that period read the Exodus and understood hypothetically what it meant, but missed that it had application to, to what they were doing that was really deeply evil. And so the same is true for us. I often use that example and people will say like, well, I'm not enslaving anyone.

It's like, well, if they were blind to something that seems so obvious to us now, we have to really look hard at ourselves and say, how have I been shaped by the world that I'm in and what seems normal here to miss the word of the Lord? In my context, how have I just accepted the kind of social situation that I'm in as it is?

And I'm actually, even though I'm reading the Bible every day, I'm missing what God is saying to me. And I do think history helps us a lot with that because it does force us to recognize that if people got it so wrong in the past, we can get it wrong too. And then there are people that were really faithful. And what did we see about them? What made them different? How were they faithful in ways that I can model today?

[00:32:36] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, which is a one of the great kind of clarion calls of this work of yours of this book is the call to humility. I found myself when I was reading through several of the examples that you're talking about that there's a line in the movie Titanic about the captain of the Titanic where James Cameron has him say everything that he knows is wrong when it comes to how he's guiding the ship, right?

Everything that he knows is wrong. And you'll hear this in our current conversation within our culture about sexuality. You'll hear people from both sides of that conversation saying to the other side, You just can't, you're not seeing what I see as obvious whether you're contending for the historic, you know, Christian understanding of sexuality and marriage, or people who are contending as Christians on the other side, saying you're just not seeing this in the most clear, it's an obvious way.

And so there's just a huge call for humility when it comes to walking into these conversations. And sometimes we're not seeing much of that humility is in the way that we should. Right.

[00:33:43] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:33:45] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So, tell us a little bit about who you were thinking of as the primary audience of this book, because I'll just tell you as a pastor, I'm like, this is a great resource for a pastor and for a church leader. Because one of the things that it illustrates so vividly is the power of scriptural language. The power of scriptural language to form us both for good and sometimes for evil. And can you talk a little bit about that? Who's the primary audience and. What did you learn about the power of Scripture and the way we use it when you were writing this book?

[00:34:24] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah. Well, I'm glad to hear that because I really was thinking of people in churches, but also especially pastors, Bible study teachers, people who are at least, I mean, I get this a lot even as someone who's not, you know, I'm not a pastor in my church, but I

do teach Sunday school and I do Bible studies in my church and I'll get all these questions of like, okay My aunt on Facebook posted this verse in response to some political question.

How do I respond to this? How do I think about this? And I really wanted it especially to encourage pastors and people in churches to recognize that it's not, there are response to the misinterpretation of Scripture in public life should not be to get the Bible out of public life, which I understand why people might have that response.

They might look at the examples I give and go. It's too messy. People abuse it too much. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches at Duke, or taught at Duke, where I'm at now a few years ago wrote a book about scripture and public life that he kind of provocatively says at the beginning, we need to get the Bible out of the hands of American Christians.

Just, they have misused it, they have abused it, let's just not, just get it out of their hands. have proven that they cannot use it well. And I understand the people who feel that way, especially when it comes to politicians. Like we're just done. We don't, pastors shouldn't be talking about public life in the pulpit. Politicians shouldn't be quoting the Bible. I understand that.

What I instead want to say to, especially to pastors and ministry leaders is I think instead our response to the great misuse of scripture should be we read it more. I want the Bible in the hands of American Christians. I just want them to open it.

Too often they've had it in their hands just as a weapon and not to really submit themselves to the word of God and have a posture of expecting that it will surprise and convict and comfort, yes, but also in ways that are strange to the world that we live in. And so I really wanted it to be, you know, hopefully encouraging to people to say, Get in the word more.

I just want people to read the Bible more. And often what happens is, a political situation confronts us, and then we run to our Bibles later, and we say, Okay, what are the applicable verses? Let's go to a concordance. Let's look up some verses. And I instead want us to say, Maybe you're in Genesis for six months, or you're in Jeremiah for the whole year.

You will have instances in those texts that speak to the political situation that you're in. Let's spend time together, in community, reading the Word together, and have that shape us and form us. And so the book is really oriented towards people who are in churches reading the Bible and trying to figure out how do we bridge these conversations.

Let's get some tools for thinking about this well. And part of it is, as you've said, that the language is incredibly powerful, not just powerful by those who will misuse it, but powerful in



really positive ways. I have been in Bible study rooms with people in churches where we said, there's no way we can ever have a conversation about politics.

It's too divisive. It's too difficult. We just can't do it. I've been in rooms where we're six months into reading Jeremiah, and something that is in Jeremiah directly relates to some political situation happening in our world, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have an incredible, actually really fruitful conversation about what this text demands of our lives in the world today.

We don't often have those conversations when we come in ready to fight, but we can have those conversations when we're sitting in a circle together, submitting ourselves to the Word of God, and humbly asking questions about what it looks like in the world that we live in today to take this really seriously.

And because I so strongly believe that can happen, I wanted people to have more resources for thinking about how to do that well together.

[00:37:56] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, it is great in that way. It reminds me of what happened in church on Sunday where I went to church. The pastor was preaching on the importance of the Bible from that well known verse in 2 Timothy 3, 15, and 16, and, you know, he started off by reminding us of what we're seeing in our culture relative to biblical literacy, that the Bible is the best selling most unread book.

[00:38:17] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah.

[00:38:19] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And, you know, there's going to be some kind of accountability that we have to think about in terms of how much access we have to the Bible in all kinds of ways, particularly digital now. And yet, we're not reading it with the kind of fervor and consistency that we should. And that needs to change.

And I walked away from my pastor's comments on Sunday going, you know, I want the Bible to be what it says in Timothy. I want it to be fully profitable in my life for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training. All four of those things. I want the full profit of it. Not just a utilitarian use for my ideas or some other plan. And that's exactly what you're talking about in this book.

Let me dive for a moment in the time that we have remaining into a couple of these examples. Particularly the example, render under Caesar. Part of what you talk about in the use of that phrase, render under Caesar, the things that are Caesars this idea of a two worlds theology and how we may in recent years have gotten off track in our thinking around this idea of there's two

different worlds with two different sets of rules and that's how we can explain our behavior. Talk about that a little bit.

[00:39:37] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah. Yeah. It's funny. I think it's like pretty characteristic of our Bible interpretation habits that Jesus says a very strange kind of cryptic thing to a difficult question. And then we take that and build like a whole theology about, you know, our public lives based on this kind of strange answer to a kind of difficult question.

So I think it's important to remind people, right, like Jesus is asked, should we pay taxes to Caesar, by a group of people who both have kind of different responses to that question that they're looking for. And he knows that if either way he answers, he could face some pushback. He's either going to say, yes, pay taxes to Caesar.

And the people who are anti the Roman Empire and are wanting kind of Jewish statehood back will be upset with him. Or if he says, no, don't do it, then that's treason. And he could get in trouble for that too. And so he gives this kind of cryptic answer given to Caesar, what is Caesar's, and to God, what is God's, based on the fact that the coin that's presented to him has Caesar's image on it.

And we have then taken that, especially in the last few years, it's been a pretty common thing for people to say. As you said earlier, we can kind of just take these phrases and completely pull them out of their context in the narrative they're in or the letter they're in, and it's just a little catchphrase.

Give unto Caesar what Caesars is shorthand for, in the political world, do whatever you want, because the rules are different. In the God world, you know, when you're in your pew at church or you're in your personal life with your family, there are certain rules. You turn the other cheek. You know, you express kindness to people, but in the world, you play by the rules of the world.

You give unto Caesar what is Caesar's. And I think instead of seeing a real strict separation between our personal and our political lives, what Jesus is saying is actually really showing that he can't answer this basic political question without reference to God. Actually our political lives and our personal lives are really deeply intertwined.

He can't respond to this political question without saying, yes, you have earthly obligations to human authorities. This is echoed in Romans 13 when Paul says, be subject to governing authorities. And Paul does the same thing that Jesus is doing here, which is good. It's all one, you know, word of God that says, yes, you have these obligations to earthly authorities, but also those obligations come couched in your larger obligation to God.

And there will be moments when those obligations conflict. That's completely possible. This is like Acts 5:29. We must obey God rather than human beings. There have been moments in church history where faithful Christians, an example that I often go back to is the confessing church in Nazi Germany who said, no, actually our obligation to Christ trumps our obligation to political authorities.

And we will not go along with the acquiescing church that said, yes, this is fine. So, I really think what Jesus is saying there is both connecting those obligations and saying yes, there are differences. What you owe your children and your family is different than what you owe the larger community that you're in.

But they're not separate obligations. They are deeply connected. And I think really the lesson for us there is not just to kind of... Go back to the context and say what was Jesus really saying and how does this fit with a larger theology of authority and Scripture? But also then to say I want us to be kind of instinctually wary of catchphrase Bible verses of any time that it's like, oh, I just I have this short little phrase similar to Romans 13 I can say Romans 13 in a crowd of Christians and often I don't even have to give you any of the specific verses or tell you what they I they just know Romans 13 is shorthand for obey the government.

Give unto Caesar what a Caesar's is shorthand for there are different roles in our political lives. And I want us to interrogate any time we've kind of turned Scripture into a shorthand like that, especially in politics.

[00:43:02] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, my one of my early Bible teachers when I was preparing for ministry he had a rant one day about the problem of bumper sticker religion.

[00:43:11] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yes.

[00:43:12] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And I had a bumper sticker on my vehicle at that point. So, I went out to take it off and how we sometimes just grab something for our own agenda particularly out of the powerful words of Scripture. And don't really think about its wider meaning and importance. And like you said, interrogate that.

This chapter on Jeremiah 29 and the use of Jeremiah 29 and the formation of our larger theology was particularly intriguing to me. Let me set the context for this. For six or seven years ago, pastoring a church, thinking about what's going on in our culture, trying to speak to some of these things in a way.

I was talking to one of my mentors ministry and preaching mentor and just talking about what, where would you go in Scripture or what would be good places? He said, you know, I just think you need to preach Jeremiah. I think Jeremiah is one of the most insightful parts of the Bible for where we are right now.

It's always useful, but particularly right now, some of the things that people encountered in the story of Jeremiah, the experience of Jeremiah himself, the experience of exile. Talk about this powerful phrase because, you know, every time we come around to May or high school, college graduation, Jeremiah 29 11 is the most frequent verse cited when you're giving a graduate their gift, right? That may be all right in some ways, but just talk about how this particular chapter and even sections within this chapter really have a profound experience of influencing our thinking and theology when it comes to culture and politics.

[00:44:48] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah, this, it's one of my favorite things to talk about because it truly is something that I remember being in high school and first reading this passage and being really excited about it and reading other people, reading Tim Keller on this passage. And it's fun now to be like I'm going to write a dissertation basically on this passage.

So it's fun to know this is just a lifelong passion of mine. It's really interesting that we put so much focus on 29 11, for I know the plans I have for you, but there's so much more interesting things in this letter to the exiles. And it's really early in Christian history that these particular instructions to the exiled people of God to seek the peace and prosperity of the place into which God has brought them to build houses, to plant gardens, to have children and families.

These instructions to exiled believers To the people of God from early in Christian history have been used as a picture of our political life, Augustine really important early church theologian has this You know goes back repeatedly to this passage in his kind of mammoth City of God That's like history and theology and for someone interested in political theology a wonderful book to spend time in. And he has this whole picture of, this is kind of what the people of God experience politically always, in any kind of circumstance.

You are always in a certain sense exiled because the world is not as it should be. And you live under another authority than the rightful authority that you will one day live under. And he's reaching for this passage to describe something that was kind of a new question early in the church for Christians to grapple with.

Not only a new question for Christians, because for the first time for the people of God. There really was no kind of going back to the kind of nationhood or the statehood of Israel. It was, well, now Christians live under all kinds of authorities. What do we do with the fact that we have ultimate authority, ultimate obligation to God and God's authority, but we are going to try and be

faithful, you know, people that belong to other communities? What does that look like? And how do we think about the relationship between those two authorities? And so Augustine takes this passage and says, these are the instructions for you. Seek the peace and prosperity of this city. Actually, the kind of temporal goods that you want to seek the ability to live peaceful, good, flourishing lives, you share those desires with people who are not believers.

And so you can work together with them to create a good flourishing community. Christians throughout history then use this in all sorts of different ways. I spent some time talking about Calvin who had a really interesting interpretation of it, but especially I think there's been a lot of interest in this passage in just the last 10 or 15 years.

When I first found it, it was so encouraging because I was kind of sick of seeing a culture war approach to Christian faith in public where it was, it's us versus them. We've got to fight for the ground that we need to keep. There's nothing good on the other side. We can't learn anything from them.

They're not doing anything good that we could kind of recognize as common grace. It's just all bad and we're the good guys. And so to see in this passage, a picture of faithful Christian life that wasn't so concerned about defending our ground, but really just wanted to seek a flourishing life for ourselves and for the communities we were in was so exciting.

And kind of, the reason I wanted to end the book with this is I've seen a lot of Christians in recent years be really excited about this passage, but I think kind of overemphasize the exile part of it, overemphasize the communal part of it and say maybe for Christians in our world today, we just got to hunker down.

We got to focus internally. We should just build a flourishing church. We should build flourishing families. It's too messy, both it's too challenging and it really threatens the integrity of our souls to be involved in our larger public lives. And so let's just not, let's focus internally. And I wanted to end there to say, okay, that beginning part of the letter to the exiles, the build houses and plant gardens and have families, that's important.

Actually, for us to be faithful Christians in public life, we need the solid foundation of spiritual formation and good communities. We need to think about the internal lives that we're building. However, those instructions to the exiles end with, seek the peace and prosperity of the city into which I have brought you that pushes the people of God.

outward, an orientation that we've always had. The very beginning, the first conversation that Abraham has with God is, yes, I will bless you, but you will be a blessing to the nations. And so I think this one passage and the fact that it's been interpreted quite differently throughout

American history, or not American history, all of Christian history, should really you know, provoke us to spend time with it, to really think through, okay, this does have something to say to our political lives.

Let's look at how Christians have interpreted it throughout history, recognize that as they were shaped by their political context, we will be shaped by ours. And then ask some hard questions about how do we fulfill both ends of these commands. How do we build the kinds of churches and families that can sustain us in a difficult world?

And then also, what does it look like to seek the peace and prosperity of our larger city in a way that's faithful and in a way that actually brings flourishing to them and doesn't see them as kind of the enemy that needs to be defeated?

[00:49:36] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, I just love this whole conversation and such a really rich telling of the story. And like I said, a journey from Augustine through Calvin to Brueggemann and Keller and others. It's a mouthful all in itself, really. But again, very accessible, even for people that are not living in the worlds of theological training like you and I have.

It's still very accessible and a very good understanding of some of the realities of where exile theology really does apply to us. And yet at the same time has a particular way because the reason the Bible is relevant is because God never changes and because human nature doesn't change.

Thank you very much. And so therefore, whether it's in Augustine's time or our time, there is real meaning and application. And I love this call because it resonates with something that we talk about a lot in our ministry, which is it's not the idea of pulling back and becoming isolationists and, you know, circling the wagons and living in separated communities apart from the world.

There's some good in that, and that's been practiced in Christian history for sure, but it's not really that call. And it's not a call to be cultural warriors but we have really started focusing on this idea that we are called to be cultural missionaries. That idea of blessed to be a blessing and that, that is the better way.

And there are, there's always going to be aspects of wanting to pull back and there will always be ways of being tempted toward unholy activism. But if we could see ourselves as missionaries. We would take on a different approach. It, am I in tune with you in that way?

[00:51:22] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yes. No, that's such a great way to put it, of, it's not us versus them, but also, there are challenges. Like, let's not be naive about what will be difficult about this, but

really, I mean, I feel like a lot of the conversations I have with people in churches and Christian schools is there are specific political theology questions we should ask and answer, but at the end of the day, a lot of it really does come back to just, do you believe that the way of Jesus holds up in public?

Could we go back to that? Let's remind ourselves of the truth of the gospel and say, that's still relevant for our political lives.

[00:51:55] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And something you talked about in this chapter as well, it's just. How God is a God of general grace, but also of particular grace and that we can be, we can join him in that idea. That the people we most disagree about are still people made in the image of God and worthy of our respect, our love and our consideration.

Right.

[00:52:17] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Yeah.

[00:52:19] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So yeah, just again, I get talked so much about this cause all of these topics woven together, particularly just really intrigue me. Let me give you a final word. What's your hope for this book? If you could just kind of sum it up. If this book's out there in, in the next six months, six years, what are you really hoping you spark in people, particularly in Christians, as they engage with your work?

[00:52:45] **Kaitlyn Schiess:** Honestly, I feel like my greatest desire in general, but especially with this book, is that people would be in conversation about Scripture and their public lives with real people in their community. I'm about to spend the next four weeks doing a Sunday school class based off of the book for my church.

And it's really sweet to me, first of all, that the first time I'm really kind of talking in this, in a, you know, public way about the book is with my people and really have a strong desire that people who are teaching Sunday school classes, people who are pastoring and preaching can read this and have it shape the kind of community that, that they have, the kind of conversations they have, that it gives them some language to root our very real disagreements about our public life, which are totally legitimate in our mutual submission to the word of God and our kind of humble seeking of what God would have us do here and now, which will be different in different churches in different places, which is why I love I'm doing this class with my church is I hope that people read this book, recognize that one of the things that's been consistent throughout our history is it's going to take leaders in particular communities to say this is what the Word of God is saying to us here and now, it's not going to be the same in every place. The Word of God is the same, but what it really demands of us in this time and place will change. And so that's really my

hope, is that people in community, in diverse community, can read Scripture together and discern what would God have us do here and now? What does faithfulness look like here and now? And have that conversation really be rooted in both their community. And really in their submission to the Word of God.

[00:54:19] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, such a good word. And again, just as my pastor said on Sunday, not only reading Scripture for yourself, but letting scripture read you. Letting it read and challenge you rather than it simply being a way for you to advance your own thinking. And so that's just so good.

I want to put in a word right here. When you finish your doctoral dissertation on this passage, I want to be an early reader. And we'll come back and have you for another conversation because it yeah, Jeremiah 29 and all of these passages are so, so important, so rich as all of Scripture is.

Kaitlyn, thank you for this. And we pray that the book does very well, lands in the hearts and ears of many believers and others and helps to strengthen the work of the kingdom of God. Thank you for what you're doing and what you're going to continue to do. We're grateful to have you on the Denison Forum Podcast.

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