

Israel's options, the pope's blessing, and the incredible reality of the incarnation

TRANSCRIPT

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[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Welcome back to a special edition of the Denison Forum Podcast. I'm Doctor Mark Turman, executive director of Denison Forum, sitting down again with Doctor Jim Denison, our cofounder and CEO as well as cultural apologist. Good morning, Jim. How are you?

[00:00:20] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I'm well, Mark. Thank you. So glad to be back on this conversation with you today.

[00:00:24] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Well, glad to have you with us in this season.

Merry Christmas as we move steadily into the celebration of Jesus's birth. We're gonna talk about that in just a moment. You've written some things in that category and that theme, and we'll come around to that in a moment. But we're gonna talk on two or three topics today that are top of mind for all of us and certainly matters of significant biblical import as well as really something what we might call a prayer list that we can work our way through. But let's talk a little bit about where things are in the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

You've written on that recently and even in last night's news that more and more major global shipping companies are shutting down operations in the Red Sea. I don't know that any of us really thought that would be a part of this conflict. I know I am somewhat confused at times about why the Houthis have become a part of this conflict and are the ones now interrupting international shipping, both of cargo as well as of fuel and fossil fuels, that type of thing. Tell us kind of what your read is of the situation right now and particularly this aspect of the interruption of commerce and shipping in the Red Sea.

[00:01:43] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, yeah, it really does illustrate the fact that you can't predict the future. You know, who would have thought on October seven with all the horrific atrocity of that

the actual more practical consequence to most of us that don't live in the Middle East would be what we're just discussing right now with a group most people have never even heard of, a group that's been around for a long time but until now has made no global headlines of any significance.

Gunnison. So, what's going on in brief here is that there's a Shiite group called the Houthis. They were founded by a person named Hussein al Houthi, and that's why they get their name, who died back in two thousand four. They're in Yemen, which is on the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. That's its own state.

It's the poorest state in the Arab world. It's mainly dominated by Sunnis and by those that are sympathetic to the Saudi government, the Saudi people, which is the behemoth to the north of Yemen. Well, the Houthis are opposed to that. They're Shiites. They're much supported by Iran.

They're very much an Iranian proxy. They want Yemen not to be controlled by the Saudi government or by the Sunnis. They are very much you call them a Jihadist, very much a radicalist sect in Yemen. They've been engaged in the civil war in Yemen for a long time. They control about a third of the country now mainly to the west.

They started in the north, but mainly to the west of Yemen right now, which puts them in position to be able to control a shipping lane that comes around Yemen and into the Red Sea where as much as a third of the global commerce that comes through shipping passes. They're perched right there on that little corner of the Arabian Peninsula, and so they're able to use pretty crude means and mechanisms to bomb, to attack with missiles and drones shipping that comes back and forth through that area. Well, why would they be involved in this? They're a long ways away from Gaza and from what's going on relative to October seven. Well, they see themselves as being connected to and consistent with the Palestinians in Gaza And there's and specifically with Hamas.

They're supported by Iran just like Hamas is. And so when all of this happened and especially when The IDF responded to October seven by its incursion into Gaza. They've decided to play their part to try to distract Israel, to try to get Israel to fight a multi front war by attacking shipping that is destined for Israel, started by attacking Israeli ships, specifically. Then they broadened to ships that they thought were destined to or leaving from Israeli ports, and now it's pretty much anything that comes by there. They're they're attempting to attack anyway.

Most of the missile attacks have been thwarted by other technology, but some have been successful. They've been able to strike missile attacks commercial vessels making their way through. So a ten nation coalition led by the United States has been put together to try to deal with this. The reason, Mark, it's not as simple that's just coming in and bombing Yemen or

bombing the Houthis or whatever is that we want to preserve A kind of a stable ceasefire, a fragile ceasefire that has been in possession in Yemen for a number of weeks now Between the Sunnis and the Shiites, between the two third and the one third, they don't want the US and others doesn't wanna restart the civil war there, doesn't really wanna restart an insurrection and create an actual third front against Israel per se. So it's a kind of a challenging thing.

How do you repress their attacks on commercial shipping traffic to a degree that makes that traffic safe Without reigniting a civil war is really the challenge that's unique to this specific conflict and is much more relevant to those to the rest of us relative, as you said, to oil that comes through fossil products and really commercial shipping that makes its way through the Red Sea. So it's a conundrum of sorts. And it's another example of how unpredictable the future is and how a small terrorist sect can really affect the larger world in ways you wouldn't have thought possible.

[00:05:27] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And another indication that someone like Iran is stoking this that With without the instigation, leadership, and resources of Iran, this group probably wouldn't have the means or the ability or possibly even the motivation to become involved. Have you seen anything in terms of the size and scope of the Houthis in terms of number?

[00:05:50] **Dr. Jim Denison:** don't know that numerically. I don't know that numerically.

I'm sure that's knowable. I just haven't happened to look into that myself. It's a good question. I do know it to be a small group relatively, and Yemen to be a small country relatively, and as I said, the poorest country in the Arab world. So that's part of the reason, I guess, there have not been a larger story on the world stage.

They have not had ambitions. Outside Yemen itself, Yemen's not been significant to the larger geopolitical issues of the day. The Saudis have felt that they have been able to get this fairly well under control, this kind of civil war going on down there. And so while the Yemenis are obviously the victims of this on a significant level, so the rest of the world hasn't been all that relevant. And it's another example also, Mark, of how groups that for most of their history have only been focused on one specific geography now are becoming significant to the larger world.

We've seen recent evidence of Hamas inspired terrorist activity in Europe, some even in the United States. It's now possible to radicalize through the Internet Muslims all over the world or people that aren't even Muslim but are sympathetic to their cause So that the ideology of these small groups and the means of radicalizing through digital technology makes them a global threat in a way that just hasn't been the case previously. And so we're living in a different world now on a whole lot of levels.

[00:07:09] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And I think the whole story really illustrates just how globally connected we are you know, where, like you said, this small group is now affecting a major part of global commerce and is another indication. I had a conversation earlier today that here in the town the suburb that I live in, the city council was approached this week asking by Palestinian Americans to pass a resolution in support of a ceasefire in Israel.

And so we were talking through that. I just thought it was an interesting there's not a large Palestinian group in the place where I live, but they were significant enough to come and ask the city council to become involved and to express a voice. There was no action taken, but it was interesting that they came. So it's just indicative of the fact that The world is a much smaller place and much more interconnected than we ever used to be. Globalization is a reality that We continue to have to wrap our minds and our understanding around.

[00:08:12] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Like Thomas Friedman said years ago, the world is flat. There's some good news in that as well because that does mean you and I have a megaphone to be able to use our influence for Christ in ways that weren't true previously. I mean, Mark, there was a day when you and I couldn't have this conversation in a way anyone could listen to Unless we could get invited onto someone's radio program or we spend a whole lot of money to buy radio airtime or something like that in order to be able to make what we now call podcasts that didn't exist a means by which we could get a conversation out to the larger world. The articles that I write every day, the special edition I just finished writing over the news out of Colorado relative to president Trump and ballot and all of that would have had to go through a publication process that could take eighteen months.

I've done books over the years that took eighteen months from the time that you first spoke to the publisher to the time that you got a contract, to you wrote your first manuscript, and it went through editorial, and then it went through layout, and All the stuff it takes, and it could be twelve to eighteen months to get your words into print in a way that somebody could see. If you could get a newspaper editor in your town to let you publish. It could take several days to even make that happen, to write an op ed to the editor or whatever. Whereas now, anybody can post to Facebook, they can post to x, they can use their own social media to be able to get their opinion out to the world. So I guess that's the good and the bad, isn't it?

That we do have a global megaphone and a platform that enables us to advance the great commission in ways that have not been possible heretofore, and we should take advantage of that where we can.

[00:09:39] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And so whenever we're frustrated about how things around us, even globally, are influencing us in negative ways, We need to remember that we have greater influence potentially, and we need to be really careful about how we do that. We talk a lot about

speaking the truth in love And you know, Peter giving us that admonition to always be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have, but The very next line saying to do that with gentleness and respect.

And it's not just what we say, but how we say it being critically important. Let me shift your thoughts a moment to the immediate crisis that continues relative to the hostages that Hamas is holding after the ten seven attack. What comes to mind, Jim, biblically when you're thinking about the role and the responsibility of The Israeli government in this case the interest of these now a hundred or so hostages that continue to be held versus the greater interest in necessity of responding to the attack that they endured. If you were in the ear of the leaders in Israel right now trying to work their way through this, What kinds of things would you how do you balance that as a national leader, as a government? You know, I'm thinking of the father of one of the hostages that was mistakenly killed by the IDF who said you killed my son twice.

yoU killed him by not protecting us from this invasion and now through this accidental shooting. How would you advise a world leader in that situation?

[00:11:18] **Dr. Jim Denison:** aNd as you know, Mark the reason it's such a challenge just that there really appear to be two conflicting biblical principles at work here. On the one side, we believe in the sanctity of every individual life that every person's created in the image of God and is loved by God. As Augustine said, God loves each of us as if there were only one of us. And so you run that out as the only answer to your question And the only real issue that should be before Israel right now until they get the hostages back is getting the hostages back.

Of course, that's how their family are going to feel in their friends and those that are close to them. If I had a son or a daughter or granddaughter that was being held hostage, of course, that's exactly how I would feel. Israel is founded On that principle of the sanctity of life and democracy that comes out of that and very much that biblical motif that's central to the Israeli culture, to Israeli, a sense of itself very different from a Hamas approach that sees civilians as a means to an end of accomplishing Jihadist goals. In their ideology, it's nothing to use civilians as human shields and to use hostages as a means of accomplishing a larger political or even Jihadist purpose and because they just don't share Israel's conviction that every person is uniquely created and sacred. And so because we believe that, then that would be the answer to your question.

It's from the time hostages were taken. That becomes number one. And until we get all the hostages back, we do nothing else. Now that could be done, apparently. Hamas keeps saying that if you'll declare a permanent ceasefire here, that we'll give you the hostages back, that you could get them back today if you do that, if you withdraw all the idea from Gaza, probably have other conditions as well that we would give you back the hostages is what they keep saying.

Now You'd have to wonder whether they'd really do that or not. Or once you withdraw the IDF, now do you have to make reparations? And once you've done that, what else do you have to do? What rebuilding do you have to do? What other concessions?

What other Palestinian prisoners would you have to release? You could get to a place where they keep drawing this out. And so we ought not assume that just because Hamas says, we'll give you all the hostages if you withdraw and declare a cease fire, that they would do that. But just you could say Israel should at least try. If that's your only question is how to get the hostages back, you do everything it takes, whatever it takes to get the hostages back.

Well, as you know, that competes directly with another biblical principle, which has to do with the idea of protecting your citizens, the eye protecting the innocent of not just getting back hostages, but protecting those who are not yet hostages. The idea of self defense is in scripture. The idea of leaders caring for those that they lead and Serving those that they lead, washing their feet, and protecting and caring for them is a biblical motif as regards how leaders are to serve those that they lead. And in that sense, Once you cede to their demands over hostages, you make every Israeli a potential hostage. Once you do anything to get them back, you legitimize Hamas, and there will be more ten sevens.

Of course, there will. They say there will be. I mean, they've said that that this is not the end but the beginning of their desire to do what they've done. You make everybody in Israel that's within reach of Hamas's missiles, and that's all of Israel a potential next victim. And now you're trading the lives of eight million people or six million Jews anyway, and it'd be hard to differentiate Arab from Jew, I would think of your Hamas, but six to eight million people for the hundred or so hostages which are there.

And now you're sacrificing the future of the country for the sake of this number of people. Now you're you're subjugating the people that you're that you're charged with protecting and guaranteeing a better future. You've abdicated your duty if you're a leader in Israel for the sake of this number of hostages, which are there. That's why, Typically, democracy say we don't negotiate with terrorists because once you do, you make everybody else a potential victim of terrorism. And so there are these two biblical issues that have to be balanced, so that's why IDF is doing what they're doing.

They're pursuing both goals at the same time. They're doing they can to eradicate them all so they can't threaten Israel in the future while seeking to find and protect the hostages. And those two things ultimately can't be done. If it's anything to the good of this two part strategy, it is that Hamas knows they have to, on some level, protect these hostages to maintain some level of leverage with Israel. If they just killed them all, if they just murdered all their hostages, well, then IDF is under no inhibition, to move forward to eradicate Hamas even more fully.

So you would think, anyway, that IDF has some ability to do both things at the same time because Hamas would want to protect the hostages at least on some level. One thing I'll add, however, as the hostages that have been freed are now being interviewed And some of that's getting out into the press. We're now learning more and more about how horrifically Hamas has been treating these hostages. Now we're getting stories not only of physical abuse and withdrawal of water and food and things like that. We're hearing stories of rape.

We're hearing stories of horrible atrocities being committed against even the hostages that are surviving. And you'd have to, of course, fear that that would be the case with the hostages that remain. So It's just a horrible, horrible, horrible situation, but I guess what you'd have to do, answer questions, balance both of those. Protect the main while trying to liberate the individuals as best you can. And at the end of the day, those two things can't ultimately be done either of them as well as attempting to do both of them at the same time, but that's what Israel has to try to do.

[00:16:37] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right. Yeah.

Very, very complex situation. Let me give you one more question on this, and then we'll move to a second topic. But just The idea of dealing with a group like Hamas who has openly declared their intention to try to eliminate Israel from the map. And the challenge of dealing with someone who is not dealing with you in good faith, which was really the premise of ten seven in the first place, that Hamas was pretending to be working with the Israeli government in ways that they could coexist and live side by side in reasonably peaceful ways. They we now know that they were acting in very deceptive ways.

[00:17:18] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Mhmm.

[00:17:19] **Dr. Mark Turman:** What does the bible tell us about relating to, People and people set on evil in that way whether it's personally or as a government when you know that the other person is not does not have a history of acting in good faith and has an agenda that is bent on The destruction of either you or the organization that you represent and stand for, does the scripture give us any guidance about How to position ourselves when we know that we're dealing with somebody with that kind of an agenda and they're not willing to operate in good faith. They may do it for a while to try to control, manipulate the situation, but they're not really interested It in long term peaceful resolution.

[00:18:07] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, you're right.

They're not. I mean, they've made that clear with their founding charter back in the eighties forward. There's also a doctrine that in the way that some jihadist Muslims understand Islam,

which legitimizes lying to non Muslims to advance Islam. That's actually a doctrine that most Muslims would completely reject that, completely disagree with that, but radicalized Muslims Interpret some of the Hadiths of Mohammed as a as saying that you can do so either to protect your life from a non Muslim an infideler, an apostate, you can lie in that case, or you can lie to advance Islam. And so what they were doing in lying to their faces the Israeli officials about wanting to work together, as you said is in some jihadist mind something that they're supposed to be doing, That they're actually following the tenants of their worldview in so doing.

And so you've got your question on even that systemic kind of foundational level. Three thoughts that occur kind of in response to that. The first is the biblical insistence on discernment, on praying for the For wisdom from God on appreciating the gift of discernment, seeking discernment seeking to be wise as serpents as well as harmless as doves, Seeking to understand the hearts of those people with whom we're working seeking with God's help, with the leadership of the Holy Spirit who knows every human heart, who can read our minds and knows our thoughts, seeking his wisdom and direction so that we respond to people in ways that are based on truth and seek redemptive purposes. Scripture says of Jesus that he didn't give himself to them because he knew what was in them. He knew what was in their hearts, and we can pray for wisdom to do the exact same thing.

You're thinking of Peter with Ananias and Sapphira, how the lord enabled him to see past their deceptions and to expose the lies that they were telling. You can think about the kind of miraculous ways that the lord exposed the deceptions of the Jewish authorities that were wanting to kill Paul and enabled him to be able to see the truth of that and respond accordingly. And so first of all, we wanna be praying for wisdom and discernment to be able to speak in truth and hear things in truth and discern in truth. And then second, we want to be praying for God to change the hearts of people on the other side of this. Every Saul can be a Paul.

I know those were always both of his names. Saul was a Hebrew name. Paul was the Roman name. But, Yeah. Saul of Tarsus can become a Paul the Apostle is what I'm saying.

Like, God can change any human heart. God can move in the heart of any person with it. It's always too soon to give up on God. And so we're praying for Hamas. We're praying for changes of heart and mind.

We're praying for God to do what we can't do. And then as we do that on a third level, We're responding to people that we believe are not acting in good faith in ways that Jesus sets out in Matthew eighteen. The first thing we do if we believe our brother has sinned against us is we go to them. We don't talk about them.

We talk to them. Not allowed to slander, not allowed to gossip. We go directly to that individual. And Jesus says, if they hear us, then we've won our brother. If they won't hear us, if we still believe that they're lying, that they're acting in bad faith, then we bring two or three others along with us.

If they won't hear that, We bring it to the church, Jesus said, if it's in a congregational setting. And if they still want to hear us, then we essentially move them out of the fellowship of the body. We hand them over to Satan, Jesus says, meaning that we move them out of communion with the body. That's what you do inside a church setting. You could apply that principle to say that if I believe a person's acting in bad faith and they won't come to terms with this, I bring others into the conversation, we still can't get to a resolution that we believe to be trustworthy, then I'm gonna keep praying for them.

I'm going to choose to forgive them, which means that I pardon what they've done. It doesn't mean I forget what they've done, and it doesn't mean I empower them to keep on doing it. Biblical forgiveness is the decision not to punish. When a governor pardons a criminal, he doesn't say the crime didn't occur. He chooses not to punish the crime.

We turn them over to God. We let God deal with that. We choose not to punish to the degree that we can in an interpersonal way, but that doesn't mean we empower them to keep hurting us. That's that fourth step in Matthew fifth to eighteen where we have to separate ourselves relationally from them because we just can't trust them anymore. And nothing we've done has been redemptive.

They have not been willing to come to those terms. So we have to put ourselves in a position where we can't continue to be victimized by them even as we're praying for them and asking God to work and to change in their hearts and lives. One last thought. I'm not suggesting that Matthew eighteen applies to every situation, including legal circumstances. I'm not suggesting that if somebody has acted in bad faith and a legal consequence, that we should not prosecute, we should not seek legal I'm not saying that, that we shouldn't seek legal remedy.

It's not what Jesus is talking about. In Matthew eighteen, he's talking about interpersonal relationships. It's the same thing when he said if he strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. That's an interpersonal conflict. That's not to say if he steal something from you or if he acts in some legal way against you that you should not seek recourse and trust that to the courts and to the processes of Civil society, not saying that.

But in an interpersonal relationship I seek to build relationship to be redemptive. If the person's unwilling to respond, then I won't let them keep victimizing me even while I'm praying for them and seeking discernment from the Holy Spirit in the relationship myself. So Now the challenge,

of course, Mark is doing all of that, is, Lord, give me discernment, give me a heart to pray for them, give me wisdom in responding in ways that don't further exacerbate the situation, throwing water on a grease fire as it were allowing them to continue to victimize, empowering them further, but at the same time trusting God for redemption. God can work in that and through that. It's hard.

I'm thinking right now of some personal stories I'm thinking right now of conflict that I've experienced over the years, some of which has never been resolved because the other party was simply never willing to do that. You can only go so far if they're not willing to come toward you. They just weren't willing to do so, not willing to admit the reality of the story, not willing to seek justice here or some kind of a redemptive outcome. So at the end of the day, you've done all you can do, And you trust them to God, and you ask God to do what you can't do, and just trust his redemptive grace.

[00:24:16] **Dr. Mark Turman:** right. And as Paul admonished us in the book of Romans, I think, to as far as much as within you, as much as you can control, be at peace with all people. And to follow in the steps of, You know, Jesus who we celebrate is the prince of peace during this season that we start from the premise of we want to be people of peace. We want to ask God to make us peacemakers as well as peace lovers, and that we start from that premise with a respect and regard for every person, even if they don't have that same regard for us. And that that becomes the place that we start from as we discern our role.

Let me pivot our conversation to another story that you've written about recently that was from an article based in The Wall Street Journal. Recent action by Pope Francis to bless Those who are in irregular relationships which in this context has to do with things like same sex attraction, same sex marriage and possibly others. That'd be one of the questions I have for you. Can you kinda give us a short summary of What this story is about in terms of what Pope Francis and the Catholic church has articulated this week about blessing . They make some clarifications about this is not blessing in terms of sanctifying marriage among same sex individuals.

Describe what is going on in this action of the pope, And and maybe even what's the positive side of this before we get into some of the levels of concern? What do you think Pope Francis and the Catholic church are trying to communicate. and I love the way you preface this, by the way. We have a lot of really good and wonderful Catholic friends. I come from a Roman Catholic family myself, the Roman Catholic church has and continues to be a blessing to the world on many, many levels, and we want to say that straight out and very clearly at the beginning.

But what is going on in this, doctrinal statement that pope Francis and the church have has released this

[00:26:21] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, here's some background that I didn't put in the Daily Article that I used in to it just because of space limitations.

Pope Francis came into the papacy from a pastoral background. He's always been known for that. That's always been kind of his heart, to live a very humble life, to be a person who primarily is a caregiver. In another life, he would have been a pastoral counselor, a hospital chaplain or somebody who ran a rescue mission or something like that. That's just always been his heart.

That's been his spirit. And so when he became pope, there was a sense the part of what he was going to try to do was present a softer, more compassionate, more gracious side of the Catholic church to the world. Pope Benedict came into his position out of a very strong doctrinal position, a very strong theological position. And so he was seen very much in a as a theological expert, but not so much as a person. Not that he wasn't a gracious individual, but that wasn't really the edge of his leadership so much.

And that was what the pope wanted to do. Remember him washing the feet of prisoners early on. You remember him early on, eschewing the trappings of the papal offices for very humble kind of apartments, that sort of thing. And so that's just his heart. Luis Palau, who's now with the Lord, who grew up with Pope Francis.

They knew each other as across the years. And he said that was always who he was. He was always a person of a very gracious, compassionate, humble spirit. And so that's, I think, what he wants to be as pope. And so, as part of that, early on, he wanted to project to the larger world that the Catholic church wanted to be a hand of grace to the culture.

So when he asked questions about homosexuals, he would say, who am I to judge? and that was a famous statement that he made saying that's up to God. That's not on me. I'm here to love people. I'm not here to be a critical judge of individuals.

I'm here to be a person who offers grace was kind of a response he wanted to make. He wanted to say that the church wanted to be more inclusive of individuals in same sex attraction and relationship than it had been, wanted to be more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals and having the church be more supportive of them as it could be. And so out of that, in recent months, some clerics out of the United States have been writing to the Vatican asking for clarity as regards what its specific future leadership was going to be in this context, more specifically, same sex marriage, but then more generally, LGBTQ relationships. And so the pope's been corresponding on some of that, and there's been a great deal of concern on the part of some of the more conservative clerics in the United States relative to this trajectory. And so it was out of all of that that a doctrinal office issued a statement earlier this week that sought to clarify where the pope was and where the Vatican is in all of this.

And what the pope apparently hopes will kinda be his last word on this subject. He just turned eighty seven last Sunday, and so, he would like this not to be something he continues to have to deal with. They've tried to thread a needle here is what they have sought to do. In doing so, they the initiative really kinda seized upon a particular way of ministering to people in Catholic clerical terms that is not really understood this way in the larger public. A priest can convey a blessing on an individual.

And in so doing, what's happening is, Unlike a Baptist minister, a Protestant minister, what's being done here is that God, through his church, And more specifically, the representative of the church in the guise of this specific priest is offering his favor and his well-being and his best to the individual who comes to seek that blessing. It's almost a liturgical act of sorts. This in history has been done with pets. There have been bless the pet Sundays even now where pets are brought and receive blessing from the church. Um

[00:30:03] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right.

[00:30:06] **Dr. Jim Denison:** structure and all that happens within it.

And it's not just a generic sort of wishing well or approving, seeking my blessing in the sense of seeking your approval for something. It's kind of A liturgical act of blessing. Well, that is done biblically with very little thought toward the conditionality that could be done in that context. When you bless a home it's not thought that you have to, first of all, know everything that's happening inside that home. You have to be you have to pass judgment on every action that occurs inside You can bless an individual without even really knowing them if they come to the priest and ask to be blessed today.

You could say, I'm dealing with a difficult situation. Can you pray for me? And you can say, Lord, please bless this person as they're making this decision without even really knowing what the decision is. There's an unconditionality inside this liturgical act of blessing. So the initiative that the declaration seized upon was, Okay.

Let's do that in the context of irregular relationships, which apparently would mean a couple that's living together but not married. It could be that's probably what they mean, but it could mean other sexual relationships. And specifically, it says, those in same sex relationships. Let's bless them. And in that sense, what we're saying is, God favor what you can.

Bless them as you can. Bless them. Help them as you can help them. If they're having financial issues, if they're having physical or health issues if there are other ways that you can't no one's perfect. Heterosexual marriages aren't perfect.

If I'm blessing a heterosexual marriage, I'm not endorsing everything that happens in that marriage. Not asking God to do that. I'm asking God to bless that marriage as he can, to bless them to the degree that he can and to use them as he can. And maybe this is a way of even helping that person in that same sex marriage come closer to the Lord, come closer to the church, and maybe come out of that same sex relationship ultimately one week one might think. And so maybe we can bless them in that way and continue the pope's desire of having the church be more inclusive, be more gracious, be more compassionate, while at the same time, and the document makes this very clear, not changing the church's official position on marriage.

Marriage, as you know, Mark, is one of the seven sacraments of the church. And the church makes it very clear, and this document makes it very clear that the sacrament of marriage is reserved for one man and one woman within the sacrament of marriage itself. The document and pope Francis has made that clear. The document makes that clear. So maybe, to summarize, that's how the church cannot change its position on marriage and yet be more inclusive and gracious to LGBTQ individuals and other individuals is by clarifying that priests are able to bless them without marrying them as it were.

Does that make sense? It's it's a thing unique to Catholic theology.

[00:32:50] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah. It's very, complex in many ways. Having read through the entire declaration myself, I found myself like you said, he's attempting to thread a needle, which is Not easy to do where the push and the pull the tension of theological concerns versus pastoral concerns.

As I was talking with a Christian psychiatrist recently, he said, you know, I'm trying to live out my life along three pillars. One of them being conviction that the Bible is true and accurate and Correct in all that it says and teaches, but I also want to be compassionate to individuals, and I want to be a person of winsome grace that expresses the love of God for all people but yet is has the boundaries of conviction to it. And then the last one being civility that I want the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. I want that to come through whether I'm focused on the theological Correctness, the doctrine side of it, or on the compassion side of it, I want all of it to be wrapped in the fruit of the spirit. And that is Enormously important and incredibly challenging to live that way.

And when you're doing it at Scale as someone in a position like pope Francis has to do it becomes really challenging because it starts to sound like, Well, you're talking about some kind of a liturgical blessing, but then not really a liturgical blessing that it's not gonna be in the same category as the sacrament of marriage within the context of a Catholic understanding or even a broader understanding perhaps. But it is gonna be something that is done with some liturgical Expression, particularly as it relates to priest as the official representatives of the church and by

extension of Christ. And perhaps the major concern that you raised as you were writing about this is the way it will be reinterpreted

[00:34:56] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Mhmm.

[00:34:57] **Dr. Mark Turman:** by others,

[00:34:58] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yep.

[00:34:58] **Dr. Mark Turman:** which can't really be you know, laid so much at the feet of pope Francis or others, but is still a legitimate concern, right, about how how this will be characterized in different settings, in different churches, by different priests, and certainly by different individuals. That's obviously a major concern that it will be characterized in a way that was not intended by the pope and by his by his other leaders.

And then it just the idea the kinda complicated idea that I picked up in reading through this about what we mean by blessing and what the Bible teaches about blessing. They go to great lengths to talk about god's descending blessing upon us, Our ability to bless god in the expressions of worship and the ascending part of that, and then the horizontal sense of blessing in which our ability to bless others. I guess, in thinking just about that, just the biblical Concept of blessing or are how do you look at that? I guess, it'd be my question is we have seen that more certainly in liturgical traditions like the Catholic church of, like it's not as common in a Protestant setting for people to have their homes blast or their pair their pets blast, that type of thing. There's in your understanding, is that Something biblical that we should be more focused on like our Catholic friends.

How do you understand just that concept of blessing?

[00:36:31] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah.

It's a great question. And I think you've gotten to the heart of the issue, Mark for the rest of us, for those of us, the Catholic or not, that are wanting to speak the truth in love in the space of this culture. I do understand why they chose blessing as the avenue by which do what they've done because that's consistent with their history. As you said, there's a descending blessing from god to us, us sending blessing from us to god, and Extending blessing from others to others, which is all in scripture. And and the document, as you said, spells it out in exegetical terms, goes to great lengths to do so within the context of biblical citation and that sort of thing.

However, in the larger world, to bless means to approve. It just does. I mean, it just you know, I mean, even the dictionary definition, as I said in the article, means to approve. If I came to you and ask you to bless my decision, I'm asking you to approve it. I'm asking you to rubber stamp it.

I'm asking you to endorse it. I'm not asking you to just Look for the good that is within it and wish the best for it. You know? When I asked Janet's father To bless our engagement. I was asking him not just to support what he could or to act with favor, but to approve it, to literally permit it to endorse it as it were.

That's just what it means. And so, there's just no way This is not going to be interpreted, especially by those that want to, as saying, see, the church has taken another step away from you homophobic, bigoted, prejudiced, narrow minded, discriminatory people out there, and now you're even more on an island, now you're even more a minority out there. That is just going to happen. It's already happening. And that is even more gonna be how this gets understood in the larger culture, I'm afraid.

Well, I'm not just afraid. I know that that is happening and will even happen more. It will cause us to even more have to do all three things that your friend suggested while we keep our convictions with compassion and civility and pray for god's help in doing it. But to your other question, Mark, it's really interesting question, the degree to which we all should be blessing in the Catholic sense homes or pets or things that we're not able to unconditionally approve or whatever. My struggle with that is going to go to the very heart of what we understand God's presence in the world to be.

As you know, in the Catholic tradition, there's this belief that God gave the Bible through the church, so the church is the means by which scriptures to be interpreted. And by that, we understand the scripture to be interpreted through the creeds, the dogmas, the councils of the church, through the pope as the ultimate representative of Christ on earth, in the seed of Peter and through those people who are in liturgical succession of authority, and that would be the priest going all the way back again to Peter in Matthew sixteen and all of that. And so when you're asking God to bless your pet, you can ask the church to do that as God doing that, as the hands of Christ as the visible representative of the invisible Christ. And when you're asking for God to bless our home As which would be an appropriate thing, obviously. God, would you please bless our home?

Would you please protect our pet? Lord, would you Help my pet if it's going through a health crisis. Would you please keep it safe? I think that's entirely appropriate to pray for God to do that, to pray for God to bless your home or to bless your business that you're beginning or something like that. If you ask the church to come along and do that in a Catholic context is just another way of doing that.

God, would you do this through the church? Because the church is the means by which you interpret your word and you act in the world. Now no Catholic, I don't think, would say that's the only way God acts in the world is through the church, but that's a very specific way he does. One of the reasons I'm not a Catholic in all due respect, and I completely share your statements and wrote them in the document of Great gratitude for the Catholic church on so many levels. That's one of the reasons I'm not a Catholic, because I don't agree that God interprets his scripture entirely or even specifically through the church and its dogmas and traditions and through papal authority and leadership, I think God interprets the scripture he gave by the power of the spirit.

I believe in the priesthood of every individual believer as well as the priesthood of all believers. And I think that God can, by his spirit, lead us to interpret scripture. That's why I believe in sola scriptura and sola fide and sola gratia. That's why I would be a Protestant. So I don't think it's a bad thing to ask a priest or a pastor to bless a house, but I don't think it's as necessary as if I thought they were the visible representative of the invisible Christ, as if I thought that they were literally the hands of Jesus in the world today.

So to me, it's not as necessary as a Catholic might think it is. I don't think it's a bad thing to do, but I wouldn't see it as having the same level of authority or the same level of urgency as a Catholic theologian might. It's a difference of opinion relative to how I understand the role of the church in the world in the Catholic sense of the church.

[00:41:10] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right. And lots to think about.

Your article that people can find on our website does link to this declaration if people would like to read through it, it takes about a half an hour to work your way through it. And it's fairly intense and dense in some ways. You have to kinda carefully think through what, Some of the definitions and things that they're saying. If you're not Catholic, it could be a bit more challenging. But it's understandable to anybody if they want to go and to read it and understand what the pope and the Catholic church is trying to say in this.

And like I said, they are trying to balance theological integrity with compassion and civility, and that is a challenge for all of us.

[00:41:51] **Dr. Jim Denison:** And I'm glad they're trying to balance it. We all should be trying to balance it. Do you

[00:41:54] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Absolutely. It also as I worked my way through it, it just I could hear the voice of your wife, Janet, coming back in that favorite admonition of live a life that God can bless. Live a life that God can bless.

However, you know, We may wanna talk about the definition and expressions of what blessing is. The first and foremost admonition to all of us should live should be Live a life that's based in Christ and anchored in the Bible. Live a life that God can bless and a good place for us to kinda move toward.

Before we go, I wanna just talk a minute about Christmas. You wrote a great article for church leaders about not only the story, A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens that's a hundred and eighty years old this Christmas.

Somebody asked me this question, so I'll ask it to you. Have you do you have a favorite rendition of A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens Is that you've either read or seen, particularly seen. There's been a lot of revisions of this story done on film, done in theater, done in a podcast setting. So I'll I'll set this up for you. A couple of years ago, I was flipping channels on Christmas Eve night after the kids had gone to bed, and I came across James Earl Jones and Martin Sheen reading A Christmas Carol with occasional choir backup infusion, But just the voice of James Earl Jones and Martin Sheen was beautifully and powerfully done.

Do you have a version of A Christmas Carol that is your favorite?

[00:43:31] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I don't. Actually, I'm really not an expert in that space.

That's It's not something that over the years has been real important to our family or been a tradition for us, but I'd vote for a James Earl Jones on anything that he's willing to speak into. I don't know anything about his faith. But If he is in fact a believer and we're in heaven together, he's not gonna have that voice because god's gonna give it to me is is my position. And so, that that's my position on that anyway.

[00:43:56] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Well, Jim, part of what you wrote about Christmas has to do with the incarnational nature of the miracle of Christmas. I remember years ago when we were in seminary together you as my professor one of the professors there said something along the lines that if you can believe in the incarnation of Jesus, all the rest of the story of Jesus gets a lot easier to believe in. Just this miracle of God becoming one of us. I remember my first trip to Israel where one of the tour guides who was not a Christian said, I can't be a Christian because God would never stoop that low. He would never become one of us.

And that was the real challenge of his faith at that point. But even in the introduction, you talked about the background of Charles Dickens writing A Christmas Carol, and how his own experience as a person really colored the way he wrote that story, and many of the other things that he wrote. Just talk about a little bit the wonder, the majesty, the credible reality of this

Christian distinct reality that God became one of us, as you say, so that we could be one with him for eternity. Unpack that a little bit for us.

[00:01:15] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. I'm so glad we get to do that because that really is the miracle of miracles. It just absolutely truly is. You know, the miracle of resurrection, obviously, is something for which we're so grateful to celebrate every year, the miracle of Jesus' return, his creating the world as Colossians one says, All of that. But then when you think about this I heard it done this way.

If you were to take hundred eighty six thousand two hundred thirty two miles per second. So you get in the spacecraft and you blast off. Okay? And in a couple seconds, you're past the moon at nine minutes are past the sun, four and a half years or to the closest star to us, alpha centauri. You go for a hundred thousand years to get to the edge of the Milky Way galaxy.

You go for, some would say, twenty seven billion years to get to the edge of the universe. We can measure with our telescopes today. Who knows what's beyond all of that? And yet the Bible says in Isaiah forty that God measures all of that with the palm of his hand. And now The immensity of the one who created the universe can reduce all of that to become a fetus and be born as a helpless, defenseless baby.

The only baby that chose to be born, The only one that chose to come into the world, and that's how we chose to do it. Could have come any way he wanted to. Jesus didn't have to come as a baby to die on the cross, could have come as an adult and died on the cross. He didn't die as a baby. We know very little about his life as an infant, as you know, we know the story from when he was twelve, and then we skip all the way till he starts his public ministry around the age of thirty.

We know very little of any of that. And so, really, you could argue that there's really no theological reason he would have to enter the world that way. He could have showed up if he'd wanted to any way he wished to do so. He chose to come in that way as a fetus to be born as a baby. The only baby to choose his parents, and he chose peasants instead of kings And royalty, the only baby to choose the place of his birth, and he didn't choose a palace, but you've been there, that cave, that dank, smelly, underground cave.

The only baby to choose is worshipers, and he chose not priests and rabbis, but field hands who were ritually unclean, couldn't even go to synagogue or to the temple, chose all of that for us. I love the way CS Lewis puts it. Said if you wanna get the hang of the incarnation, think how you would like to be remade as a slug or a crab.

[00:03:55] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah.

[00:03:57] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Love that phrase. I think he's exactly right about that, and did all of that for us.

So you'd ask, but why did he do that? Why didn't he just show up at the age of thirty? Well, to me, anyway I mean, the Bible doesn't answer that question in chapter and verse, but to me, It's a way of, I think, illustrating what Hebrews says about Jesus, that he was tempted in every manner like us. We are yet without sin. That he entered into the fullness of the human experience from birth all the way to death, that he took our flesh upon him in every dimension of what that means and how that works so that he could fully be the god man and fully be the atonement, the sinless sacrifice for our sin.

So that's how I understand his decision to do it. But whether I understand it or not doesn't really matter. What matters is that I embrace it,

[00:04:43] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah.

[00:04:44] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That I never lose sight of it, and I never cease my awe and wonder, Mark, he would do all of that again just for you, Just for me. If there'd never been a Christmas and I was the only human on the planet, he would do it all again just for Me. I've heard it said, the next time you wonder if God loves you, go to the cross. And that's true. But I think you could also say the next time you wonder if Jesus understands you, go to Christmas.

[00:05:18] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Wow.

[00:05:19] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Go back to that manger

[00:05:20] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah.

[00:05:21] **Dr. Jim Denison:** and understand he entered our condition in every dimension of it, As Irenaeus said, to become one of us, that we could be one with him.

[00:05:29] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And

[00:05:30] **Dr. Jim Denison:** of Christmas.

[00:05:31] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah.

Such and so many things to think about. It also just reminds me of what I heard a pastor say one time about the apostle John. But Just thinking about that he chose to come this way when he

could have rode a star down to the earth, and as he made, in some ways, do at the next coming. But the story being presented us in such a way when we're going through the Christmas story, we're always telling the story of Mary and Joseph and how they chose to respond in faith and trust toward God. But there's an element in here, as this pastor pointed out, in which Jesus trusted Mary and Joseph.

He entrusted himself to these unknown young peasants and trusted that their faith would lead them to care for him in his helpless way, in his helpless condition, in a way that would enable him to move on and ultimately become that savior. What an incredible compliment to them and in some ways, god gives us those kinds of compliments as well. Just entrusting us with The ability to have this conversation about him and to use technology to communicate about him, he's entrusting us with a partnership that really ought to just give us a sense of joy and wonder and encouragement and a sense of value that he entrust us with being his partners in that same way.

But let me pivot from cradle to cross, and let me set it up because that's the other point that you were writing about. One of my siblings moved to the state of Alabama this spring, And he was telling me called me a couple of weeks ago.

He had been out looking at Christmas lights in his new neighborhood, and he said, I don't understand. Nobody has A nativity scene on display with their Christmas lights, they're only putting white crosses out. And he said, I don't understand. Did I miss something? Is there a new rule about we need to put the cross out at Christmas instead of the nativity scene?

And so we had an interesting conversation about that, but we sometimes get wrapped up in the, what I call the quaint side of Christmas around the birth of Jesus. And your article, you did so well pointing out how it leads us to the idea that Jesus this baby was born with the purpose of dying, which when you hear that, sounds cruel. It almost sounds like there's something maniacal about god the father. And we have a lot of questions understanding the righteous wrath of god against all sin, and how that comes to be and intersects at the cross. But help us get our hearts around that, not just that he came so that he could understand us from birth through death, but the significance that he came with the purpose of sacrificing himself as the only legitimate sacrifice for us.

Talk about that a little

[00:08:33] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. Thank you, Mark. That's such an important thing to understand, and something that we often just kinda walk past, as you said, and, grateful for it, but don't really understand it. Not that we fully can understand it. But there's some logic at work here that I think it's important for us to understand.

First of all, the Bible says the wages of sin or death the consequences of sin or death. It's not that god is arbitrarily, meanly deciding that. Why couldn't he just let us off with a warning if he wanted to? Why does someone have to die because of the sins that we commit? That seems unfair, doesn't it?

If I back into your car in the parking lot, I hope I don't have to die for that. If I'm late on a payment, I hope the bank doesn't make me die for that. So why in God's economy are the wages of sin death? Well, sin cuts us off from God. Sin cuts off our relationship from a perfect God.

He can't tolerate sin in his presence, or he can't be the perfect God that he is. Well, God is the source of life. That's why Jesus said he came to give us life and life more to the full, life more abundantly. When we cut off our relationship with god, we begin to die. you cut flowers off at the root to put them in a vase, they begin to die.

You've cut them off from the source of their life. Sin cuts us off from the only source of life that we have, which is God. And so the consequence of that sin, the result of that sin, the wage of that sin is going to be death. That's the first point to understand. So second, because that's the debt that we owe, that's the wage that comes from that, the only way in which god can be holy and forgive that debt is if somebody else pays it if we don't.

Either I have to pay the debt myself, have to pay all my debts myself, or somebody else has to pay them for me, or the court or somebody just has to decide to be gracious. Well, god can't be gracious and overlook sin and still be holy. Can't be holy, holy, holy and pretend it didn't happen. Can't be holy, holy, holy and act like it never occurred. You just can't do that.

His justness requires that sin be punished. So I can be punished for it myself, which is why the wages of sin are death, and now I'm cut off from God forever. Now I'm spending eternity separate from God in hell, or somebody else can pay the debt for me. Either I owe the debt on this house or somebody else has to pay the debt for me. I doubt the bank is just going to forgive it.

God can't forgive it because he's holy. Problem is, Mark, no one else can pay my debt because they have their own debt to pay. It's like you had a hundred dollars in your pocket. You owed a hundred dollars, and I owed a hundred dollars. You can't pay my debt because you have to pay your debt.

Once you've paid your debt, you have nothing left to pay my debt. The only person that could pay my sin debt is someone that's never sinned. Well, there's no one that fits that criteria except Jesus. Muslims don't believe that of Mohammed. Buddhists don't believe that of Buddha.

Confucianists don't believe that of Confucius. Jesus is the only sinless human that's ever existed, the only one that ever could exist because he's god in the flesh. And so in order for my sin debt to be paid, a sinless sacrifice had to be made in its place. And so that's what Jesus came to do. He came to die in my place to take the punishment I deserved for the death that should have been mine.

That's what he as a sinless sacrifice came to do. He entered the world for that very purpose. That's why Revelation thirteen eight says, Jesus is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. From before the beginning of time, before God made the first humans, he knew that they would sin. He knew that Jesus would have to pay the debt they owed so that they could then be forgiven and restored to relationship with god.

That's the economy as it were. That's the logic behind Jesus' atoning death, and that's the ultimate purpose for which he entered the world, is so we could then die for the world. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. It sounds a bit little macabre to say that baby was born to die, but that's what that baby chose. No one chose it for him.

He chose it for himself. He made that decision for us before he chose to enter into our world through incarnation so that he could die for us in atonement. And that's the reason he came, And that's why he's the only baby that chose to die. None of the rest of us chooses that. We didn't choose our birth.

We certainly you could choose the timing of your death, But you can't choose whether or not to die. Jesus is the only one that could choose whether or not to die. he could raise Lazarus from the dead, if the Lord could take Enoch to heaven without ever having died, Jesus could have lived on this planet without experiencing physical death. He chose to die and chose to do it in the most horrific manner possible so as to demonstrate the depth of God's love for us, the depth of his understanding of our pain, and so that he could atone for the sin that we could not atone for ourselves. That's the rest of the miracle of Christmas and Easter as we keep them together.

[00:13:30] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And that's, you know, and that's why they should always be kept together.

Because in g Jesus not only chose to be born, he also chose to die because he was on a a particular eternal mission. And that is Christmas. That's and it's not only Christmas, it's also Easter.

And it is all together, and we need to understand that reality as becoming a part of his kingdom, that that's what it's all about. And we're grateful to be able to have two different celebrations, but it's really one continuous celebration.

And as we wrap up this podcast, the last one for us this year, we would just say to everyone, we hope that this gift of Christmas that we've been talking about, this gift of god's love in Christ to pay for our sin so that we could be one with him for eternity. We pray that that gift has been received by you. And if not, then you would really seriously think about what we've been talking about.

If you want to know more, please email us. You'd like a Bible, we'd love to send you one. You can reach us at info at Dennison forum dot org. It would be our privilege. It would be our joy to talk with you more about what it means to believe in Christ as your forgiver, as your leader, as your king as we've been talking about today.

And we would love to share God's word with you. We would love to help you understand more and more about this gift that is the gift of God's love in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sin and the gift of eternal life with him. Jim, I just Don't know what else to say other than Merry Christmas to you, and thanks for being a part of this podcast as well.

[00:15:08] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, Merry Christmas to you and yours as well, Mark. Aren't we blessed to get to do this, to get to do this together, and then to celebrate Christmas with children and especially with

[00:15:17] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yes.

[00:15:18] **Dr. Jim Denison:** especially with grandchildren.

[00:15:20] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Especially. Yes. And so God bless you, and God bless to all of those who've been a part of our conversation today. We'll see you in twenty twenty four.