

An invitation to "The After Party": Reframing Christian engagement in politics with David French and Curtis Chang

TRANSCRIPT

Recorded January 8, 2024 | Released January 11, 2024

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 your host today for a conversation that is very timely as we talk about politics in America around the topic of a new resource called the After Party: Toward Better Christian Politics that has been put together by three good friends: Curtis Chang, David French, and Russell Moore. Let me introduce two of them who are joining us today.

Curtis Chang is the founding executive director of Redeeming Babel, and host of the Good Faith podcast. He is also author of the book, *The Anxiety Opportunity: How Worry is the Doorway to Your Best Self*. Curtis bridges the worlds of secular institutions and theology. In the former world, we'll get him to explain that term, he is the founder and CEO of Consulting Within Reach, a firm serving non profits as well as government agencies. In the Christian world, he is a consulting professor at Duke Divinity School and senior fellow at the Fuller Theological Seminary. Curtis is also a former senior pastor of the Evangelical Covenant Church in San Jose, California.

Our other guest today is David French, columnist for the New York Times and author of the book *Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore a Nation*. David is also a graduate of Harvard law school and a constitutional lawyer. He is also a war veteran having served Operation Iraqi freedom, where he was awarded bronze star. Gentlemen, welcome back to the Denison Forum Podcast. We're glad to have you today.

[00:01:42] **David French:** Thanks so much. It's a real, real treat to be

[00:01:44] **Curtis Chang:** I always love our conversations, Mark. Thanks for having us.

[00:01:47] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Well, we're excited to be supporters and partners with you in this new endeavor. Curtis wanted to just let you set the table for us about the backstory of what is being called The After Party. I know there is actually kind of a long story that leads to the origination of this just as a little bit of my own connection.

I joined Denison Forum just about two years in this role. As executive director, which was just about the time that the Good Faith Podcast was being launched by you guys as well, and started listening and learning and really being blessed by a lot of conversations around a lot of things, but particularly around politics.

But thank you for that work. But what's the story behind The After Party?

[00:02:31] **Curtis Chang:** Well, this story really is a story of friendship between David and myself that goes back 25 years and plus, and it has carried over from our past friendship into, as you said, this podcast that we have done. podcast, and David is still a monthly regular guest on it, even if he's not the regular host, and I call him the founding That's right. You're the founding friend, the founding friend of the Good Faith Podcast.

But anybody who had listened to the Good Faith Podcast from its very beginning knows that one of the persistent themes we covered was the ways in which the evangelical church large swaths of it has gotten hijacked politically into really toxic forms of political engagement and then the next question was well, what do we do about it. And we were we've been talking about that on the podcast and then David came over to stay and have a time of just some vacation, but as well, some planning at my house a couple years ago.

And it was on one of these walks along a beautiful trail on the California coast that we as we just really got deep into the subject, we realized that a huge part of the problem was that there was no resource to equip churches and pastors to stand against this political hijacking and to understand why this political hijacking, let me just say really quickly, it's because I'm a former senior pastor, as you said.

I know instinctively that if I preach about politics, even if it's like I have it, I have my Bible completely lined up. It's Jesus centered. If I just preach about politics on Sunday morning, I'm setting myself up for a Monday morning of hell where my inbox is going to be filled with just the 10 percent of people who are already radicalized on either left or the right, and they're going to really have problems with what I say.

And so as a result, most evangelical pastors have coped with our political upheavals of 2016 and 2020 by just trying to white knuckle their way through it by ignoring it by, or at least like

ignoring it on Sunday morning by not talking about it, not preaching about it. And it's hoping that I can just make it through another election season.

I understand why they want to do that. I understand those temptations. The problem with that is then what that means is you are ceding the political formation of our people, the spiritual formation of our people's politics to secular forces then because we're not, teaching them anything else where you're ignoring the subject of politics and therefore they're getting their spiritual formation then from secular news sources, and that's a big reason for the toxic polarization is simply people are not hearing a more Jesus centered view of politics because the pastors feel like I can't touch this subject.

And so we resolved on that hike that we needed to do something about that and I'll let David tell sort of more about what we decided

[00:05:23] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Okay.

[00:05:24] **David French:** Yeah. So basically what we're talking about, and this is, I just want to dive straight into some of the objections that people are already raising to the project. What we're talking about is not a project that says Christians must vote this way, or Christians must support policies A, B, C, D, E, F, and G.

There's a lot of content, Mark, out there like that. There's just a ton of content going all the way back into the 1980s when I was growing up and we had what was called worldview training. I'm sure you probably remember some of that. A lot of that was very focused on substance. What should we think?

So it's a Cold War. What about the clash between Communism and Capitalism? Right. Or, and then, know, there's a question of what should Christians think about nuclear weapons or. You name it. And then, of course, you had the issues around abortion or religious freedom and things like that coming up. And so we were taught constantly

this is what Christians should believe politically on substance. And I know that for Christian friends on the left, they would receive a different worldview training, that would, you know, in many ways reaffirm their commitments. In a way, again, all of it, or much of it, not all of it, much of it, thoughtful, interesting discussions of what Christians should substantively believe, like which policy should you advance.

What was not discussed was how you should do it. That was just not discussed.

And so what began to happen over time is the ultimate policy outcomes when it came to politics became king. They became everything, right? And , how you get to the policy outcome became much less important, much less interesting to the point where we're now in a stage where you see an ends justifies the means mindset and ends justify the means worldview that victory is almost like baptismal waters, whatever you did to achieve the victory, the victory itself baptizes those actions and turns them you know, good because they help achieve a result.

But that's not biblical and no other context of life do we treat things like this. So, for example, a Christian businessman, if his business is struggling and a little bit of consumer fraud will really help him. You know, achieve business success. Well, no one would say, well, you know, you got to compromise, lie to your customers just to, you know, get through your current financial crisis.

Lying is not ideal, but bankruptcy is worse, right? Nobody, nobody says that. But in politics, we make those kinds of compromises all the time. And, you know, Christians should not be making those compromises and, and so what we began as we were fleshing this out and we saw this political moment that enormous amount of what was driving American division and bitterness and rage was no longer, hey, I'm pro life and you're pro choice, although that's the big, that's a big one.

It does drive a lot of division, or I'm for greater religious freedom and you're for lesser religious freedom. It was, you lied to me. It was, you threatened, you threatened judges that we love, or politicians that we love. your side burned cities, your side stormed the Capitol, you know. So again, what you're looking at is what really starts to get people furious at each other, are these actions that really are indefensible, indefensibly immoral actions that are being inflicted on our opponents for a quote, unquote, greater good is really ripping our country to shreds, and it's not the way of Jesus. It's not the way Scripture talks about the how Christians should interact with each other, much less the wider world.

[00:09:16] **Dr. Mark Turman:** and it's something that you see kind of all over the place, because like you said, you know, I, so I became a Christian in 1980, and right about that time abortions were really skyrocketing very much in our country, and our church just felt like it needed to try to do something, and so it offered a Just the main goal of it, I think, was just to help everybody understand this is what abortion is.

And not very much at that point about what we could do about it, but it was simply you need to know what this is, and you need to start praying about it. We need to ask God what he would have us to do about it. But that's about as far as it went, and it was helpful. It was disturbing. It marked me in a way that has continued to shape my engagement in that issue having helped out in a number of crisis pregnancy centers those kinds of things But there wasn't a lot of how

[00:10:12] **David French:** Yeah.

[00:10:12] **Dr. Mark Turman:** even yesterday I was in a conversation with member of my extended family And he came around to this issue and he said, you know what, I just, in all of this confusion, I had to go back and just simply say, okay, some things are just clearly right and some things are clearly wrong. And we can, we can talk about policy beyond that, but we have to start here and we have to come back to this idea that the ends never justifies the means. And we just have to start

[00:10:43] **David French:** cannot, I cannot do something that is clearly wrong, even if I'm trying to achieve something that is clearly right.

[00:10:50] **Curtis Chang:** and just to

[00:10:51] **David French:** that's a, that's a core element.

[00:10:53] **Curtis Chang:** illustrate David's point of that we are in The After Party here, the curriculum is trying to shift Christians to the Jesus how of politics versus the what of politics. I mean, if you just look at the Sermon on the Mount, which is the sort of distillation of Jesus's teaching. I'm sorry, there's just very little to nothing in Jesus teaching on the Sermon on the Mount that you can draw a straight line to any policy position on one side.

Even abortion, that I, like you, am pro life. There's nothing on the Sermon on the Mount that is a straight line to a pro life policy position, right? Jesus isn't talking about that. But there is. Matthew 5 30 44, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heavens.

Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. That's a how. , that applies to the how of how we're going to engage In any politics, but including, say, the politics of abortion or any other issue, is we're going to have enemies, they're going to persecute us. Our posture, if we are rooted in Jesus, is to love them and pray for them.

That is clear line. There's no fuzziness there, there's no inference there that's needed. It's a straight line that you can draw from Jesus to how we engage in politics. And what The After Party curriculum is trying to do is call people back to these very clear non controversial, I mean, at least non debatable, really, ways in which that Jesus is telling us, this is how you're supposed to act in the public square.

[00:12:23] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And what I love about that Curtis is there's, there's not the word except

[00:12:27] **Curtis Chang:** Yeah, you're right. Only if it helps you win. Yeah.

[00:12:31] **Dr. Mark Turman:** or you feel like your threat is big enough to warrant you to have an exception, you know, and we see this, right, we see this in the early chapters of the book of Acts where they take Stephen out and he becomes the first martyr.

And he's not railing at them. He's praying for them. He's trying to be like Jesus, even in the moment where they're taking his life him. Curtis unpack a little bit of the details of what y'all have created in terms how does the curriculum work? And if you could even just paint us a picture of if you could have it exactly the way you envision it.

How would people engage with this material? What would they expect? What should they expect if they sit down with you, with David, with Russell Moore, and they sit down for these conversations, how would you ideally love to see that go?

[00:13:24] **Curtis Chang:** Thanks. That's a great question. So just to be clear what it is, it is a small group curriculum. For those of your listeners who under, who know sort of Christian curriculum, they may be familiar with something called Alpha. Alpha is this sort of video based curriculum that helps turbocharge evangelism.

And it's meant for small groups to go through together. So, think of what Alpha did for evangelism, the after party wants to do for politics. It becomes the go to resource. If you want to deal with it, deal with politics. The After Party is a trusted resource that a pastor can sponsor into their small group setting.

And a small group setting is really the ideal setting for these political conversations. It's not Sunday morning, which is a one way limited conversation where somebody is bound to misunderstand what a preacher says from a front or just, you know, Take exception to it. We know that political polarization gets best moderated and healed in face to face embodied conversations with people you know.

So we want to inject politics, spiritual formation on politics into that much more conducive setting of small groups. So this could be a weekly Bible study. This could be a Sunday school class. This could be a men's prayer group, a women's prayer group, whatever, wherever small groups are getting together.

Those small groups are also looking for content. And so what we're providing is a six session content. So it's six sessions, each session is about an hour and a half. You basically all sit around a computer or a large screen, hook up to play it. And it'll take you through five minutes of teaching from David.

Then it'll tee up a six minute small group conversation topic. Then another five minutes from Russell. And then maybe an individual reflection for five minutes. And then I'll come up and teach, and then we'll have a final exercise for everybody to do. So it's highly interactive, facilitates and structures conversations, so you're not just passively listening, but you're listening and then discussing and trying to apply.

And it's a plug and play that there's no, the leader doesn't need any training. The leader doesn't need to do even very much prep. They just need to follow the instructions. And it's, again, it's video based, that sprinkles in conversations, interactive exercises and so forth.

And it's six weeks now we're very clear six weeks. It's not like you're going to, know, Completely reformed the American church in a through to through a six week session, but it gets the conversation going And it starts to make the conversation be possible safe and structured around Jesus and Jesus center teaching Not just hey, here's what I heard Blank news channel and so forth.

So I think one ideal scenario that I think I would want to encourage your listeners to consider is that let's say the pastor is it out there listening or you know, your pastor, this might be something that interests your pastor.

Consider as a pastor inviting, I don't know, eight to 10 of people who you think are most mature, most ready for it, have this kind of conversation in a healthy way that you trust and our leaders are like relationally, like as lay people, the kind of leader type influencers in your church, you as a pastor, gather those eight people and say, invite them.

Hey, I want to go through this curriculum for six weeks. I'm going to lead you through it. It's not going to take much of prep on my part as a pastor, but I'm going to just sponsor and host it. And then go through it. Now you're going through it and afterwards, now hopefully you've had a positive experience.

You've vetted the material so you can now recommend it to other small group leaders and other small group contacts and you've got a now a cadre of eight to ten people who have your back as a pastor who kind of like know what you're thinking know what you're doing and who if people start spouting out like pastor so and so has gone all woke.

We're all MAGA or whatever in whichever direction You've got eight or 10 people who are like, no, no, no. What the pastor's after is what we went through through The After Party curriculum. It's about centering our politics on the how of Jesus. So that would be one very natural way I think this could get rolled out in the church.

So we've got this and then we've got other content that's coming. think it really starts with a small group curriculum. And , then we've got follow on curriculum that we're going to be releasing in the 2024.

[00:17:25] **Dr. Mark Turman:** All right. Thank you for that. I, yeah, online and easy to use.

[00:17:30] **Curtis Chang:** Free.

[00:17:31] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah. Free online and easy to use. And

[00:17:34] **David French:** And you're going to have shorter segments, larger, you know, not everything you might look at. Six 50 minute video segments and go, man, I'm out on that. That's long as Lord of the Rings. But there's going to be, there's bite sized elements. There's the full meal it's in. And really, I think people can get a lot out of it.

even if they consume a little of it. But we encourage people to consume the entire thing because there is a theme to it, Mark, that I think is really important as a shaping exercise of how do we put Micah 6 8 into practice in our lives. Which is, as many of your listeners will know, Micah 6, 8, What does the Lord require of you?

Oh man, what is good is to act justly. So we cannot forsake justice, pulling away from the political process and leave justice to everybody else. That's not our call. We are to act justly. To love mercy, some translations say love kindness, and to walk humbly. And so what we're talking about is how do you harmonize all of these three non negotiable moral obligations?

To seek that justice, to act justly. To love kindness, which is completely countercultural politically and even more countercultural politically is to walk humbly because sort of any idea, any, anything that betrays or gives off the notion that I don't know for sure how to solve this really difficult problem is sort of seen as a weakness or sort of seen as squishiness when the reality is, guess what, we don't know definitively.

We don't definitively. definitively. How to solve a host of really difficult issues. And so humility is, should be, and for many of us, just a necessary precondition for engagement. We shouldn't be walking into conversations with friends and neighbors saying, This is how to solve the Middle

East, Mark. I've got Israel in Gaza, and even worse, if you don't agree with me, you're either an anti Semite or an Islamophobe, and that's the way we do things now, when the reality is, I should walk into a conversation and say, Mark, this, what's happening in Israel, in Gaza, is heartbreaking. I, I don't know the solution.

Here are my ideas for what based on, you know, my experience or knowledge or here are my ideas for what Israel can do, what the Palestinians should do. But I also want to hear yours because you know what? I don't have all the answers here. We need to collaborate and to communicate with each other. And that's a totally counter cultural to our political engagement right now.

Mm

[00:20:17] **Curtis Chang:** Mark, I want to kind of jump in on that and just say so that David's emphasizing one of these of our two key themes with humility, which is absolutely bedrock. It also raises the other bedrock theme that runs through and defines The After Party. And in fact, gives the name explains the name for The After Party, which is hope.

It's really humility and hope, which defines The After Party curriculum. And the reason for the hope is so important is. So many of us have placed our hopes in politics. Now that somehow politics is going to solve all of our problems in the world. And of course, politics ends up disappointing us and failing to keep that.

And then we end up redoubling. Well, then if we really, really win maybe then politics will solve our problem. And so we're not saying don't care about politics, but we are also saying, don't put your ultimate hope in politics. Because our ultimate hope for when the world is made right is not when we, our side, wins the next election.

That is not the biblical vision for when the earth gets restored, is when side A or side B sweeps into and controls all three branches of the American government. The biblical vision of hope is not rooted in partisan politics. It is rooted in what we call The After Party, and by that, we mean that what is happening after all of the secular, all of our sort of earthly politics, and I want to be clear what I mean by earthly, but all of our temporal politics fades away, and Jesus the king returns to earth from heaven to bring the kingdom of heaven to be fully implemented on earth. That's the biblical vision for when all is made right, when the restoration of all things happens. And that is often described in the Bible as a party, as the wedding feast of the Lamb. And that's the party that we place our ultimate hope on when Jesus returns to restore all things.

All of our current

It's not that we're saying don't get involved in them, or they don't matter. But we're saying don't put your ultimate hopes on either side because they will disappoint that. The Bible is clear, our ultimate hope, right? We are, that we are looking for, longing for, its ultimate arrival and consummation of victory is the Jesus kingdom, the wedding feast of the Lamb, when he comes to reunite and repair all things so that's the hope and so if the humility is I don't have all the answers Hope is Jesus has the final answer and therefore let's get reoriented correctly with both of our where our humility and hope ought to be anchored on

[00:22:52] **Dr. Mark Turman:** well, and what I hear in that Curtis is maybe one more H, which is I'm humble. I don't have all the answers. I am hoping for this ultimate restoration. And in the meantime, I want to help. I want be part of

[00:23:07] **David French:** Oh, I love

[00:23:08] **Dr. Mark Turman:** solution. I want to, you know, I got teach on what you're talking about just yesterday leading a small chapel that we're a part of and this is part of Paul's first prayer in his letter to the Philippians, by the way, he's writing from jail. But he tells them, I'm praying that you will learn to see what is best and choose what is best, so that you'll not only do well now, but you'll be ready when Jesus comes again, when the second advent comes.

And that's your ultimate hope. And it just reminds me of how much, and I've heard you guys talk about it and others talk about it. How we seem to have turned our politics into an idol. And Curtis, I just want to kind of ask you to unpack that a little bit. I heard you say a couple of things.

Number one is we got to talk about your book on anxiety not quite a year ago. And you, your book on anxiety has an interesting thesis to it that anxiety can actually be. powerful means of spiritual formation which I got to tell you, I don't think I've ever had that thought before reading your book that, that could be the case, but I also learned in my own experience that there's a real connection between anger and fear.

[00:24:20] **Curtis Chang:** Yeah Yeah,

[00:24:22] **Dr. Mark Turman:** large environment called politics how anger is actually being driven by fear and causing us to create an idol out of this thing called politics that we think can save us and we've lost the understanding of its limits what done. We've, am I on the right track in terms of

[00:24:44] **Curtis Chang:** absolutely. Yeah. So the way I would put it is, what is anxiety? Because I think let's just state the obvious. Everybody is feeling anxious, everybody is feeling

anxious about our political moment, our political year ahead of us. Why? And why are people feeling anxious? The essence of anxiety is the fear of some future loss.

That's what anxiety is, when we fear we're going to lose something in the future. All right, so this is why we have to actually be willing to go through anxiety and why if we try to figure out ways to banish anxiety, we're going to end up creating idols. And the reason for this is because we, loss is inevitable.

Loss, we, we have to actually get to a place where we're not trying to avoid loss, but actually we're willing to go through loss. That's a big thesis of my book, just at kind of the personal level, is to reframe anxiety from something that we avoid, that we have to somehow come up with schemes or techniques or values that banish away the fear of loss.

Because when we say, I can't experience any anxiety, we're saying, I've got to banish away any possibility of loss. Now, why is this, how is this connected to politics? Because a healthy politics in any society, but especially a democratic society like the United States, has to be able to tolerate loss.

That's actually the definition. That's, if you ask some political theorists, they would say that's almost like the kernel of democracy is the ability to tolerate loss. That each side says, you know, if I lose, I will consent to this loss, and I, because I, we can, you There's gonna be another election because there's guardrails that the winning side it can't just trample over me willy nilly and over all of my rights, right?

So crucial to democracy is the ability to endure loss which turns out is the very necessity we need to go through anxiety. So it's all connected, right? so we have to be able to we say you know what the way to we go through anxiety is not by making politics an idol that somehow is going to banish away any possibility that my side can lose.

Rather, we have to engage in politics in the same way that we have to engage with our personal anxiety, which is I may lose things, but God is still in the end going to be able to hold me through those losses. Not avoid those losses, but through it. And that's really pastorally my message to a lot of your listeners.

Like I get it. We're anxious. You're anxious that you through this political season may lose something you value, and that is really possible. And my message, our message is god is still God. Through that, God will still hold you, will still hold us through that loss. It's still doesn't mean we might not experience some losses, maybe even some very painful losses, but we don't need to like kind of look to some human political party to insure us from loss.

That's God's job to hold us through loss.

[00:27:32] **Dr. Mark Turman:** really the opposite definition, right? Of a totalitarian or a dictator type thing is, is I have to win every time I have to win and there's no room for loss. And I'm not going to allow it. That's a great insight. I want to continue to give our people some sense of what kinds of things they're going to hear The After Party.

I, I heard you guys talking about this in a different forum and David, you were talking about how we got here to this place of so much , not only anxiety, but just outright anger with each other. And you talked about something called the big sort and then the law of partisan, the law of partisan,

[00:28:12] **David French:** law of group, group polarization. Yes, the big sort and the law of group polarization. Yeah, this is really important stuff to understand and I want to emphasize something here because a lot of people when they hear our politics are broken, it's too toxic, we're too angry with each other, etc.

A lot of people when they hear that two things happen at once, they'll say, yeah, you're 100 percent right and it's all of their fault. And then the other thing is, sometimes people will feel like. They're personally attacked that Hey, look, I really care about the border. I really care about life. I really care about Ukraine or Gaza, you name it.

And I'm passionate and now you're taking my passion and calling it toxic. Right. And so people will sometimes feel personally attacked. And they often, you know, when they look at this situation they feel as if when you're critiquing the political structure of the, or the political culture of the United States, that you're just scolding people.

Right. But what's happening is actually very human and understandable that we're all prone to it. And so at what we make very clear in the curriculum is each one of us is prone to it as well. We're all vulnerable to these in different ways because we have different personalities like of the three between me and Russell and Curtis.

I'm the most combative of the three, and I'm very drawn to that, and that's a temptation. So number one, we're saying. We're tempted by all of this as well. Number two, we're saying what's happening. It's not that it. What's happening is a very human response to some phenomenon that are out of your control, and there are two of them.

One is this big sort, and that means that people are living around like minded communities more now than since we've been measuring this metric for generations, and that means that you are

less likely to live and work with people who disagree with you politically than any time in modern memory. And so now you're going to have a lot of listeners who are saying quite rightly, that's not me.

You know, maybe you've got a listener who's a conservative at Harvard and feels very alone, like where are their like minded folks. But as a general matter, the average American is spending a lot more time around like minded people. And that's a very important factor, and this is because of a lot of reasons to do with mobility with the way hiring at the way, corporate movements have changed, the way hiring practices of change itself.

You have a lot more ability to kind of especially for college educated people to live where you want to live around the people you want to. Live with than you did in the past when IBM might, for example, just send you from town to town as they often did. So what happens when you live with people of like mind?

What happens is there's a phenomenon called the law of group polarization. So you're living with a lot of like minded people. My neighborhood, for example, is 85 percent Republican. So I live around a ton of Republicans. What happens when you live around people of like mind, you become more extreme.

When people live and interact with people of like mind, this was a phenomenon recognized, first recognized by Cass Sunstein in 1999 and has been just really reaffirmed by study after study. When like minded people gather, they become more extreme. And so, because there's no one there to sort of push back and to say have you considered this or have you considered that, you're constantly reaffirming each other, to the point where, Mark, this is crazy, but true, if a group is together long enough, by the end of the deliberation, sometimes an entire group can become more extreme than the most extreme individual was, at the start of the deliberation.

That's how you can reinforce each other so much. And so what's happening then is you're living around people of like mind. Lots of good reasons why people want to do that. It's kind of pleasant. It's kind of nice, you know, people share your values, but as they live around people of like mind, they're becoming more extreme without even realizing it because in their context, they're in the mainstream.

In the context of their community, they're in the mainstream and you can recognize it in your opponents all day long, you know, so I have been, I grew up as, I grew up Republican. I've been in conservative my entire life. I can give you chapter and verse on how I've seen the left become more extreme on a number of points.

And I guarantee you, Curtis can sit here, Mark, who comes from a different ideological background to me, and he can tell me chapter and verse on how the right has become more And this has been measured. It used to be, we had a sort of a much more bell shaped body politic with this big middle, moderate middle and very small extremes.

That's really changing. It's becoming more flattened, heading towards a U with ideologically more people at the extreme ends than in the recent past. Now. To be clear, one of the big mistakes that we make about each other is we consistently think the other side is more extreme than it really is, but at the same time, it is also true that the two sides are becoming more entrenched in many ways on many issues, and that's a product, not of one side or the other sort of reaching greater enlightenment.

It's the side of both sides reaffirming each other in their closed bubbles, and that creates a real problem.

[00:33:51] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And when I hear that it, that sounds David, like a wonky take on what I think all three of us would say was the positive nature of fellowship when you get into a church or a small group and the mutuality of that small group is in part intended to help you to stay committed to the Lord. That would be a positive expression of that experience, because I, when I hear you describe that, I'm like it, we hear this new term all the time, echo chambers, we get in our echo chamber, right? I don't know that I keep asking myself, did I intentionally put myself into an echo chamber? And if I'm in one, how do I know if I'm in one?

[00:34:34] **David French:** That's a great, great question. A lot of us are in echo chambers completely inadvertently, I, I am in a neighborhood that I moved to for a better school for my youngest daughter. That's why we moved it here. It's beautiful. We're much closer to this wonderful school that she attends.

That is, by the way, quite ideologically and racially diverse. The school she goes to my neighborhood is not and we did not. We did not go there and say, you know what we want in our house. We want our house to be. To meet all of our family's needs and we want everyone around us to be Republican. That's not how we decided.

It was just the best house and the best location that met our family's needs. The next thing you know, I'm like, Oh yeah. And this neighborhood is almost 100 percent Republican. And when something like that happens, I think, there are obligations on us once we learn that this is a real phenomenon, what we're describing, to take actions to stop it so that we don't just kind of get caught in the tide, you know, we're not just swept away in the current.

So there are a few concrete kinds of piece of advice we have in the curriculum and where we say, number one, be very intentional about seeking out opposing points of view that are smart. And in other words, seek out the best expression of the opposing point of view. There are ways, I know a lot of people go, no, I, I read a lot of stuff from the left.

Well, what are you reading? Well, they're reading all the worst stuff from the left. And it's 100 percent reinforcing everything they believe on the right. But I could guarantee you I could give a person two or three pieces written by some of my really brilliant colleagues at the Times that I disagree with.

Um, But are extremely thought provoking, do not fit any right wing stereotype of left wing thought and would, if you have an open mind at all, start to really challenge some of your assumptions and make you really search and examine yourself as to why you believe what you believe. So it's really as incumbent upon us to seek out the best expression of the opposing points of view.

In other ways, I've just been very lucky because we have a very politically diverse small group from my church. That spans from people who wanted to vote for Bernie Sanders if he'd won the Democratic nomination to people who are unapologetically voting for Trump, right? And yet we are a very united group of people and we love each other.

And help each other in times of need and this small group is a source of real delight and meaning and hope in our lives. And it's very, very politically diverse. Not everybody's able to find those kinds of friendships, but you can find thoughtful points of view that you disagree with. And I guarantee you, if you do that intentionally, it humanizes your opponents because you'll begin to see the heart, the best of them, the best of their heart, and it also causes you to question some of your own assumptions. Because I guarantee you, we're not all right about everything, and I need to have my assumptions questioned all the time.

[00:37:42] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, and it's a reminder and the work that you guys have done in preparing this, just reminds me of something I remember being attributed to Timothy Keller, which is to say Republican, Democrat, there's good things about both of them, but the kingdom of God operates at a different level. It operates at a higher level. And if you're not willing to embrace that idea, then you're probably going to intentionally put yourself repetitively into an echo chamber.

Curtis, it, it, this kind of sounds like a similar premise to your approach to anxiety, which is, well, we would all agree that the way we are conducting our politics is a platform that is expressing our discipleship, our current level of spiritual formation.

Is this course and this project an attempt to actually say, Hey, your politics can become a mechanism by which your spiritual formation grows and deepens? Is that in most ways the ultimate goal of this? Is that at the end of it only know how, you'd be a better

[00:38:45] **Curtis Chang:** we grow when we submit everything to Jesus. We grow when we smash all of our idols, to use the Old Testament language, or we bring all of our gifts, all of the things that we are holding for ourselves, we submit and bring them to Jesus in sort of the way the magi brought their gifts to the baby Jesus, right?

That picture of the manger. And really, this is what our logo of The After Party is this picture of The donkey and the elephant bowing down before the Star of David, the manger. Because that's, that's what discipleship submitting all of what we cling on to so tightly to give us something we need.

To give us our identity, to give us our future, security and so forth, is when we submit that and say, no, no, Jesus is the one who gives us to that. And in this moment of time, in 2024, politics has assumed this role of idol, which is somehow supposed to give us our identity. Right? So it's, it's who are you?

Are you Democrat or Republican? It's is our identity shaping force and also it's supposed to secure us for our future from, for our future loss. Like, oh my gosh. My side must win or else life is going to be a disaster and so forth, right? So that should tell you those are telltale signs of an idol in play.

An idol is when we find our identity in something, right? And another way you find your identity in something is like I am this and I cannot possibly imagine you know, my friends being the other side, I can't imagine my child marrying somebody of the other side, right? That's when you know, you're taking your identity from something.

And that's a politics has taken that role. Like, you know, there are people who are like, you know, I'm willing to have my kid marry a non Christian, but if they married a Republican, that's a no go. It's like, it's that identity for me, for me to people. So that's, that's a sign that an idol has taken place.

Or again. We think about this year and we think if my side loses this election, you know, the future, there's no future. That's a sign we're taking our ultimate hope in an idol. And so absolutely, politics in this day for many, for many of us is the moment of discipleship where we can repent from our idols, repent from placing our highest hopes on partisan identities and partisan promises and partisan victories, and say we're going to put our identity and our highest hope on Jesus.

And that's, that's the invitation of The After Party.

[00:41:11] **Dr. Mark Turman:** David, I heard you say, oh, I don't know, a couple of months ago in a conversation I was listening to that you actually kind of have a structure of thinking when you go into a voting booth. And you and I, before we started, had a little conversation about this. You know, the I think part of what's going on in our world right now, as we anxiously step into another presidential cycle I keep hearing in the back of my head that verse that says, you know, some people's sins go before them and are very clear and very prominent and they lead the way and then other people's sins trail behind, they're more hidden until later and there's that kind of thinking or that kind of concern but you were talking a minute ago and it's like, Hasn't politics always been dirty and aren't all politicians dirty?

And so we're never going to be able to trust any of them. So this is just, let's do the least worst thing we think we can do. So, so when it comes to the, the tension, the real life tension of character and policy and other things that get involved in this. How, how would y'all teach people in the party to walk through that kind of the practical, okay, I got, I, our system is set up to where I might wish I had three or five choices, but I usually only have two. So how do I work my way through that? In a biblical practical kind of way,

[00:42:41] **David French:** Yeah. So there's a lot to unpack there. So let me just start with the politics has always been dirty talking point, which I've heard all the time. All politicians lie. So therefore essentially don't make me condemn my liar because you've got a liar too. Right.

And so all politicians lie. It creates a massive rationalization superstructure because Well, it is what it is, right, Mark? I mean, all politicians lie. Your liar versus my liar. And, and so what it does is that furthers this notion that politics is its own thing separate and apart from everything else.

And what Curtis and I and Russell are trying to do in The After Party is say, no, it is not. It is not that politics is its own thing that is separate and apart from everything else. Do you think business is somehow the world of business and commerce is somehow clean compared to politics. What are you talking?

I mean, business is cutthroat. Business is nasty. Goodness. Talk to any academic who spent a lot of time in higher education. Talk to him about how pristine the system of education is. No, every single human institution is full of what? Humans. And so they're all going to manifest human flaws. Now you will see them manifested in different ways, depending on sort of the different context.

Some flaws will be more highlighted in some area in some ways and in some areas and others. But this idea that politics is sort of uniquely dirty, and therefore, really, it's kind of naive and foolish for Christians to try to come in and introduce virtue into this sort of inherently dirty enterprise.

And if you do try to , introduce virtue into this inherently dirty enterprise, you're somehow going to be hurting your own, you know, you're going to be hurting yourself. You're going to be hurting the church because that might mean policy losses or whatever is really the wrong way to view politics.

It's a arena where fallen human beings. Interact on matters of great import. That's business. That's the church. That's education. That's every institution that exists. And in all of those institutions, what should Marcus, what should be the sign, the fruit of the spirit, the fruit of the spirit, kindness, peace, patience, gentleness, joy.

You know, you go through all of this and there's no asterisk that says except in politics. because you might lose. That's not the asterisk. And again, at the same time, it doesn't say and to preserve your ability to exercise for the spirit withdraw from politics. So it's not saying because it's just too hard to show virtue in politics Christians shouldn't be engaged in politics. No, what Christians do is introduce the way of Jesus into every arena into every sphere of life. And so what The After Party trying to do is to show Our best ideas, and again, 'cause we don't want to, you know, we don't wanna be raging hypocrites here and say, well, everything is complicated except for our view of how politics should be conducted.

And we've got that nailed down. The After Party's are best, our best assessment of how to bring the way into of Jesus into this incredibly contentious and consequential area of life. It's our best idea as to how to do that. And a lot of, one of the reasons why I think the small group format is really good is because it will give room for people to push back against us to look at our conversation as a conversation starter, not the conversation ender is sort of the approach that we're taking.

And so, and then the other thing that I think that is important about our curriculum is that we realize that we're all, we're different, we're different people, Curtis and I, we have different temperaments, Russell, Curtis, and I, we have different temperaments. We have different backgrounds. We have different upbringings.

We're prone to different kinds of sins. We're more vulnerable to different kinds of sins. And so one of the fun things about the curriculum that I actually really enjoy is how Curtis really took the lead in constructing this curriculum. The sort of matrix of how we're trying to move from different predispositions into the category of disciple.

So my predisposition politically is I'm a combatant. I'M somebody who wants, you know, I, I, I tell the story in the, in the curriculum that even when I was a little kid and my, my dad, who was a university professor, would have his students over to the house. I would listen to the students conversation and as a little kid, I would hear somebody say something I thought was wrong and I would go try to set him straight.

I can only imagine a college students reaction to like this little kid come ridiculous, but that's. That was my predisposition. We have other folks who are more predisposed to be cynical, for example. Or you know, different kinds of predispositions, but we're being called out of our predispositions and into this posture of discipleship, into this posture of being somebody who's a learner, who learns.

And so I think it's really I think a fun thing about it, just because I always think these sort of like exploring personality, exploring different personality quirks and tendencies is, is kind of fun. But I think a fun thing about this is, hey, look, we try to meet you where you are. You're not all, you're not all the same mold.

You have different kinds and, different dispositions. And, hey, let's see how we can pull all that is good out of that disposition and abandon as much of the bad as we can. We can never abandon all of it, but abandon as much of the bad as we can.

[00:48:37] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Thank for that. Curtis, I want to give you the, the last word.

[00:48:41] **Curtis Chang:** What? I get the final word. Awesome.

[00:48:42] **Dr. Mark Turman:** you have the last was talking with Dr. Mark Yarhouse a few weeks ago, and he said in some of the work he's doing, trying to help people work their way through a lot of complex and confusing issues around sexuality.

He said, you know, my goal is that people would adopt three ideas. One is that they would be biblically anchored. That they would be compassionate, remembering that they're dealing with real people that have real struggles and that we would be civil that is. And when he, when he used the word civility, I thought of you guys, I thought of Dr. Denison, and I thought the definition of civility would be that the fruit of the spirit is always in harvest. always needs to be in harvest.

Curtis, I'm just wondering what is your thought or our idea right now? We will know that we've been successful in this project if this happens. Do you have a definition around that as a closing word for us?

All

[00:49:36] **Curtis Chang:** I think we'll know we're successful if most pastors at least have no that to deal with politics and the toxic polarization in their congregations, they know they have a play, another play to run. They may not do it. You know, look where we know every church is complicated. Every pastor has to weigh their own situation.

So we don't know like how many churches are going to end up adopting this, how many small groups, even how many participants, but I want most pastors to know you don't have to try to white knuckle your way. through another election season by simply ignoring it, trying to pretend it's not happening, and then in the end, ultimately, like I said, letting secular forces shape your people.

There's a play to run. Just go to the afterparty.org After party. org. You can see how you can sign up. It's free. There's cost. Like I said, minimally try it out. Maybe go through it for yourself, just as an individual, just to vet it. And then if that feels like, Hey, this is actually pretty good or pretty helpful, then invite, you know, five to 10 of your most trusted leaders to go through it with yourself and then see where it goes from there.

But don't, don't neglect shepherding your people. And in this year, 2024, shepherding your people means shepherding them through this election season, where there are wolves, there are wolves on the left and on the right, who want to hijack, want to take, and want to consume our people for their ends, both on the left and on the right.

You as shepherds, don't let them do that. Do what it's, and it's, do what it takes. And it's going to involve some cost. It doesn't maybe involve you going, preaching on Sunday morning, but it involves you taking some action, right? Because that's what it, that's what John 11, the shepherd has to be willing to lay down something of themselves in order to protect their flock.

Protect your flock from the political predators on the both left and the right. And at least consider as one of your your tools shepherding tools is the after party. So check us out at afterparty.org

[00:51:38] **Dr. Mark Turman:** right. Thank you for that. And we'll put that in the show notes with a link for people to be able to get to as well. And just reminds me of that admonition for pastors that they are to entrust these things to faithful people who can pass them on to others as well. And we're going to pray for and work for the success in that way.

Gentlemen, thank you for being a part of the conversation. We love what you do and the way that you do it. With kindness, with humility, with the fruit of the spirit. We're excited to be supportive partners and to be in the game with you. And we look forward to our next conversation.

Want to thank our audience for taking time to listen as well as always. We encourage you to rate, review us. platform. And we'll see you next time on the Denison Forum Podcast.