

“Not Beyond Reach: How To Share Jesus with the Young, the Deconstructed, and the Non-Religious” with Aaron Pierce

TRANSCRIPT

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

[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Welcome to the Denison Forum Podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, the executive director of Denison Forum. We're glad that you're a part of this conversation. Denison Forum seeks to equip believers to think biblically, to live holy lives and also to act redemptively in every way that we can to move people and to move our world toward a better understanding and a better experience of biblical flourishing, God's best for all of us as we like to say.

We're sitting down again today with our friend Aaron Pierce. He's been a part of the Denison Forum Podcast in the past, but we're glad to catch up to him today. Remind you that Aaron is the International Missions Director for Steiger International, which is a global mission organization dedicated to mobilizing believers who will reach out to others, particularly the emerging generation. Aaron and his brother were raised by [00:01:00] missionaries in Amsterdam. And, Aaron, I'm just giving you a heads up right now. The first question I have for you is tell us the 3 best things about Amsterdam. Okay? So that's coming.

But they were raised in that environment, and they watched their parents the winsome and creative, innovative missionaries trying to reach people who would never get near a church. And that is so desperately needed around the world, but particularly in the West. I think the numbers are now in the United States, like, almost 30 percent or right at 30 percent say that they have no spiritual connection, no formal religious identity at all.

So 1 out of every 3 people is claiming that. Part of what we're gonna talk about today is not only the larger ministry of Steiger, but Aaron has released a new book called Not Beyond Reach: How to Share Jesus with the Young, the Deconstructed, and the Nonreligious. And uh, we'll ask him about the [00:02:00] distinctions between those 3 things.

But we're gonna talk today with Aaron, and today is an opportunity for some incredible equipping and training. Steiger International as well as Denison Forum and Denison Ministries share a passion to train people like you that are listening to this to be missionaries wherever you are.

I was at a friend's church about a week ago who they made the emphasis very clear. Wherever your feet are, that's your mission field, and that you have an opportunity to represent Christ in any and every 1 of those environments, and we wanna help you do that. And Aaron's work in this book, *Not Beyond Reach*, is intended to help you with that as well in a very clear, very winsome, very interesting read. I can tell you that from working my way through it.

But before that, Erin, how are you, and what are the 3 best things about Amsterdam? I told you before, I've spent a few hours in the airport. You made it clear that does not count as having visited Amsterdam.

Aaron Pierce: [00:03:00] That does not

Dr. Mark Turman: So what are the 3 best things about Amsterdam, and why should I and others go?

Aaron Pierce: Well, it's hard for me to say because I was born and raised there, so I was a kid there.

So my ex I mean, I've been there a lot as an adult too. But, you know, so my my experience is a little tainted as because I I see it through the lens of a child. But, I mean, it was amazing for me. I mean, I'd had a very unusual childhood. I caught the subway to go to school.

Like, that was how we went to school. And in uh, the Netherlands, it's very common that young kids go on their own. So, like, me and my brother, 8, 9, 10 years old, on the subway, 20 minutes through the city on our own, joining up with different friends from different parts of the city as we went. It was pretty amazing. So I don't know.

I'd say it was an urban playground. It was amazing, but it I was a kid. My parents you know, there was There was challenging things. My parents taught us, you know, not to go to the red light district, how to avoid the drug dealers on the streets, and all that kind of stuff, but it was a phenomenal upbringing. Amsterdam is an [00:04:00] amazing city.

It's got all the notorious things it's known for, but it's really beautiful. I love it. But, again, I was born and raised there, so it's hard for me to, you know, to think otherwise.

Dr. Mark Turman: Okay. I can just imagine. So I was teaching a group of about 30 parents and grandparents last night. We were struggling. They were struggling. We were struggling with the conversation. How old does your child need to be to go to a public restroom when you're at a

restaurant? How old do they need to be before they can go to the restroom by themselves in a restaurant? And so the idea of putting an 8 or a 10 year old on a subway and sending them 20 minutes across an urban city would probably just blow the minds of most people listening to this podcast.

Aaron Pierce: The culture's changed a little bit.

Right? But, man, it was such an awesome thing. That's a that's a whole separate conversation we could delve into if we wanted to.

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah. Yep. Yeah. That'll be a next podcast on parenting.

Right? And and as a As a father of 4 we're just talking about that a minute ago. As [00:05:00] a father of 4, you'll get to have those thought processes and conversations that are coming, right, if not already there in your house. And so yeah. Okay.

So I gotta ask this. So, if is there a favorite restaurant that when you go to Amsterdam, you're like, I have to eat at this restaurant because it's just the best restaurant there.

Aaron Pierce: There's a I don't know if it's a restaurant, but there's the central train stations right in center of the city, and Across the street is this big building. And, actually, on the building, it said, Jesus loves you, and it's owned by a ministry there.

But at the bottom is this phenomenal cafe, that has a Dutch word that means foolish things. And so that's a place I would highly recommend. It's this cafe right in the center of the city called, It's Dutch, it means which is foolish things in English. That's where you should check it out. I would definitely recommend that place.

Dr. Mark Turman: Well, you just gotta love a restaurant that's called Foolish Things.

Aaron Pierce: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's it's a Christian place, you know, it's a biblical reference.

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah. well, first of all, before we get specifically into your book, just talk [00:06:00] about, for a minute a little bit of your own testimony. Just how god stirred this passion to be um, A lot of words that the Bible uses we could use here. The a missionary, a representative, an ambassador for him, a witness for him. Talk a little bit about how that's really just a part of the DNA, not only of who you are, but of your family and how we really should understand that to be normative for every Christian, not just people like you and me that, you know, are vocational ministers, quote, unquote. But how should we see that as the incredible privilege of every believer?

Aaron Pierce: Yeah. Well, again, for me, it has everything to do with the blessed upbringing that I had with my parents, who lived that missional life and who So, you know, it's interesting because I got to grow up in very secular environments.

I was I was born and raised my first 12 years in Amsterdam, Quintessential post Christian, you know, in every kind of stereotype that you [00:07:00] could imagine. And then as a teenager, we moved to New Zealand, which is literally on the other side of the world, to another highly, if not 1 of the most post Christian progressive secular countries on the planet and went to a public high school and just was immersed in that environment. And I think what was so good about my parents never created this environment where we saw people that didn't know Jesus as kinda others to be avoided, but rather people to be engaged and to be loved and to be pursued. And so I never feared people who saw the world differently. I never, had a sense that they should be avoided, but rather people that we should pursue and love and that they in himself have things that I can learn from and know, to draw from even as I share the gospel with them.

So it's it's this I think a lot of times today In our the way culture's gone and the way Christianity is declining in [00:08:00] influence, the church has often responded in 1 of 2 ways. 1 is kind of like assimilation and, you know, just change our moral theological views in order to adapt to the culture. That's 1 side of it. The other side, which is more of the world that I find myself in, is the side that wants to hide or isolate from the world and and kind of retreat and because the world you know, for valid reasons and for understandable reasons. But what Jesus, of course, did is neither of those 2 things.

He entered into the world and engaged it and transformed it. And so I got to just see that worked out, practiced in my family in a way that was very winsome, and it it really drew me in. And then I had I think as a teenager is when it really became real because I it became something I was doing, and it was very transformational because they saw us reaching my own friends at that stage.

Dr. Mark Turman: Right. And, yeah, just such a great insight. You know, we've come across research recently that says, you know, now [00:09:00] particularly in the United States, other parts of the West, when a person meets a new person, when they, You know, they bump into a new person at the coffee shop, the airport, or anything like that. They now on a significantly larger scale, they see that person as a threat rather than as a potential friend or ally or just somebody to have a conversation with.

Not every time, not every person That feels that way. But at a much higher level statistically, you can see that we are much more suspicious and wary of each other rather than welcoming of each other. Uh, Coming of each other. And I was thinking about this. I was telling you, I flew this morning to come home.

So walking through an airport today and just thinking about, you know, everything that God creates is interesting in some way. And if you believe that if you believe that the world is interesting because God is interesting and God makes interesting, beautiful, wonderful things, then you would hopefully go the next step to say, well, that [00:10:00] would mean that people would hopefully be the most beautiful, interesting thing that you could ever engage with. Right? And not something that we should try to avoid or be fearful of or see as a threat. But so oftentimes in the way that the world has evolved, that's the way we see people rather than having a fundamental curiosity uh, about other people and a desire to care for them the way we would hope that they would care for us.

We've lost a lot of that. Right?

Aaron Pierce: We have. We have. It's interesting because that whole thing of being curious about people and just, like, wanting even, like okay. 1 of the greatest ways that you can connect with someone who doesn't see the world biblically is rather than being fearful or threatened by it, it's just ask them. Well, how did you come to believe that and to be curious about how people came?

Because In doing so, it humanizes them. you see that where they came from often, if you really dig deep and You'll find that there's a lot of hurt [00:11:00] and pain that came there or things that they experienced, and you begin to understand someone not in this kinda 2 dimensional us versus them thing. But as a real person, someone that has fears and hopes and dreams and someone that's a lot more like you than you realized and is just trying to figure it out, and it gives you an empathy and a compassion. And, yeah, they need to know Jesus. Right?

Because Jesus is what will bring the what they're looking for, but it just changes the dimension, the way you interact with people when you approach it that way.

Dr. Mark Turman: Right. Yeah. And that's a great pivot into the material that's in your book itself.

I guess the first question is why did you call it not Beyondreach? Why did that become the title?

Aaron Pierce: I think because for a lot of us, especially people especially maybe older generations that have Kids, you know, parents and grandparents who have kids that have walked away from the Lord, it feels it can feel hopeless. It can feel like This is a generation that is so I [00:12:00] mean, the stuff that we're dealing with you know, transgenderism and secular ideology and all that comes with it, it can just seem, like, beyond reach. And I think the 1 of the schemes of the enemy is to create a sense of hopelessness, to create a sense that, actually, it's impossible, so why bother? And And I think that's 1 of the great schemes that I think particularly for the older generations, for grandparents.

It's like, hey. You don't have an influence in your grandparents' life, so you might as well just be quiet and Move to Florida and just enjoy your life when in reality, you do have an influence. And this is a generation that can be reached, and they are open. So the title is really about a sense of hope. And without hope, we we're not even gonna bother trying.

So that's that's the heart of that.

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah. And it's a great call out, Aaron, I think, is that This to see how the devil is working on 2 sides of this, that he's doing so much to make this generation that I I want you to describe for us in some [00:13:00] ways because that's really the first chapter of the book.

he's convincing this generation that life in itself is hopeless, and we'll get into some of those details. But then he's also working on other generations and people who are believers saying, Well, it's hopeless to try to reach them. So it's you know he's trying to convince us. It's hopeless to try to reach the hopeless, which is A crazy way to think about what he's doing. Right?

And to make us you know, when I when I was working through some of the things in the first part of the book, I thought I got to the end of it, and I was like, okay. Well, it sounds like we've got 3 options which are we can just be angry about it all or as you mentioned a moment ago, we can just be apathetic and say, okay. Well, I'm moving to Florida and, you know, whatever becomes of them becomes of them. Or we can see the opportunity of engagement. And um, and we'd love to get your thoughts.

1 thing we've Studied about this, you know, we typically call it Gen z. People wondering, okay. What are we [00:14:00] talking about? Well, we're generally talking about kids that are about 10 years old right now all the way up to around 25. Again, This group, these generational cohorts as we call them, you know, people heard of baby boomers.

They've heard of the greatest generation. They've heard of millennials and all that. These are sociological terms. They do not have, you know, firmly fixed dates in terms of years. But what sociologists do is they look at trends within a particular group of people, and they say, okay.

It looks like From about this age to about this age, we can say that there are patterns and there are rhythms and there are characteristics that seem to define this group of people. And it's usually if you go and study it sociologically, They're usually about a 10 to 15 year range of age. And the other thing I was encouraging people the other night when I was talking about this is These names are not [00:15:00] determined by some king sociologist somewhere who says, okay. We're gonna call that Gen z. Okay?

What happens is is is sociologists particularly and others, they identify these groups. They look for these trends. They start teaching about it. They start writing about it. They start talking about it.

And, usually, a term just gets thrown out into some of these environments, and it sticks. uh, 1 of the sociologists you can read about is a lady from San Diego State University. Her name is Jean Twing. She wrote a book called iGen. She was really hoping that that would become the name of the generation.

She wanted to be called the iGen uh, because of the iPhone and technology, but that's not the term that stuck. The term that stuck was Gen z. Okay? And, anyway, that's a little bit of the background of how this goes. But Aaron, help us give us a somewhat of a thumbnail sketch of, okay, What should we know about this emerging generation?

And if you wanna expand it or narrow it, fine with that. But, [00:16:00] you talk a lot in the book early on about, hey. It's not like it was in the nineties.

Aaron Pierce: Yep. Yep.

Dr. Mark Turman: and we you know, we both agree that, you know, biblically, Solomon says, hey. There's nothing new under the sun.

So these it's not like these Kinds of questions and struggles have never been on the world, but every group seems to have its own particular questions or emphasis. So how is it shifted? How is this group unique in the way that it's thinking?

Aaron Pierce: Yeah. Yeah. It's great. So, I mean, obviously, you've described it. We the difference between American culture today in American culture in the nineties is that in the nineties, most people would identify as a Christian.

And most people would say that the church was a good thing, an important part of society, and the Bible was a good moral guide. And that was the kind of the cultural context. And it was in that environment that Billy Graham could fill up stadiums and say the Bible says, and it resonated. And right. And so and that was [00:17:00] very culturally relevant.

Well, we've gone through this post Christian shift over the last 30 plus years, and we with that has come a change in religious affiliation, like you mentioned at the beginning, but also a change in attitude towards the church. So it's what once was predominantly positive now is increasingly apathetic to outright hostile, especially amongst younger generations. And the reason for that is that we have it's this generation, the digital natives, This global youth culture generation that is influenced by pop culture and entertainment industry, but, like, at a massive level. They're influenced by Internet stars on TikTok and Instagram and YouTube that are connecting directly with them, influencing the worldview, not just entertaining, but shaping a worldview. And then they're influenced by video games, which is a you know, there was a study that came out not too long ago that said The average 21 year [00:18:00] old male in this country has spent 10000 hours playing video games, which is the same amount of time that you need to match Fine art.

Right? So it's like and so it's a massive place for community and accomplishment and identity. And then the last thing is Pornography, which is the other influence of the culture. And, of course, that's distorting our views on love and sexuality and relationships and all of that. And so those 4 things are coming together to shape a culture, and the philosophy of the culture is largely based on 3, you know, ideas.

1 is secularism, which is not to suggest that everyone is an atheist because, in fact, most people are not atheist, But that faith is private, and so you can believe whatever you want to believe so long as you don't push that on other people. That's the kinda secular mindset. faith doesn't belong in the public sphere. We keep that private. That's the 1 [00:19:00] idea.

And then that naturally leads to relativism, which says there is no absolute truth, that morality is subjective, that It's like a ice cream flavor. You have your favorites. I have mine, but we can't settle it between us. And then the last thing is this idea of acceptance, which In previous generations would have been tolerance, but now it's acceptance. What that means is you all of the things, all people must be accepted, and that Actually, tolerance is not enough.

We must affirm. And and so it creates paradoxical moment in which all is tolerated except the intolerant and all is included except the exclusive. And so this is the philosophies that shape the culture. They're in the universities. They're in the pop culture.

And it's really all comes down to not sorry to be long waited here, but it comes down to the idea of secular humanism, which is the religion of our day. Right? Second Corinthians 4 4 says the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, and, really, the god of this age is secular [00:20:00] humanism. And it's this idea that god has replaced. Man is at the center.

There's no outside authority that can tell me how to live my life. And And where it really comes down to is identity, purpose, and morality is self constructed. And so all our conversations about transgenderism and and the whole LGBTQ movement is a logical outworking of a worldview that says morality, purpose, and identity is self constructed. And so that's the air that we breathe today, and that's the context that we're in, and that's what we need to be aware of as as followers of Jesus.

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah. And really important as kind of a foundational thing from standpoint, if we really embrace ourselves as missionaries, like I said, Even even in our own homes on our own extended family, at our jobs, if we just see every place that we go as a mission field, if you were training to be a missionary and you said, you know what? God's called me to [00:21:00] another part of the world, and I'm gonna go live among these people, and I'm gonna Try to understand them, and I'm gonna try to find a way to bring Christ in a meaningful way to them.

You would go learn the language. You would go understand the customs. You would hopefully study a good deal of the history of the place that you felt called to. what you're arguing is we

need to do that right in our own experience in the in the immediacy of where we are right now because the world changes and changes faster than it ever does, and it has changed in many ways for us in the West, in the United States. It's changed right in front of us in the midst of it.

And technology is a big part of that. I wanna get you to go back and maybe define and clarify a few terms that may not be familiar to everyone that would hear this or even buy your book, which is, So we talk about the world, this being a global youth culture.

Aaron Pierce: Yeah.

Dr. Mark Turman: Talk a little bit about how Uh, we can talk about this at scale [00:22:00] because technology my my pastor used to say, you know, technology can make The world a neighborhood, but it can't make it a brotherhood. from your background, particularly the unique crown of being born in Amsterdam and the ability to move as much as you've been moving around the world. You're part of a generation very much like, My own adult children uh, I noticed that my own kids, they look at airplanes like taxis.

Aaron Pierce: Let's see.

Dr. Mark Turman: know, I I may be the last generation that grew up thinking, hey. To get on an airplane is a really big deal. you have to think about it for days, if not weeks, and, you know, you prepare for it. But my 2 adult children who are 28 and 33, they just look at airports and airplanes like taxis. They don't think anything about it, and the world is like a playground.

Talk about that kind of mindset that the world is just all connected and the goods and good and bad parts of that.

Aaron Pierce: Yep. Yeah. So that's the whole idea of the global youth culture is that we have a global generation of young [00:23:00] people in particular. Now it's beyond young people, but specifically young people who are connected. And they're connected because of the Internet And pop culture, they're connected because world travel, like you said, is far more accessible than it used to be, and we've created this culture where young people all over the planet are influenced by similar voices.

And so I've seen this firsthand. I've seen how young people in Amsterdam are following the same social media influencers as they are in Austin, Texas, or how young kids in Iraq are watching the same YouTube videos as they are, you know, in New Zealand. And so you have this global culture that is not just entertaining, but shaping the values. It's shaping the world view of a generation. And And that global youth culture is largely buying into this secular ideology because that is the religion of the global youth culture.

And so what's interesting is I might live in a post Christian country like the US, But I really am influenced by the secular humanism. [00:24:00] The same is true of a lot of young Muslims in

the Middle East where they live in a Muslim culture, but, actually, They think and act as secular humanists. We see a lot of that in in different parts of the world, which is, on a little side note, actually created incredible opportunities for missions because you can reach parts of the unreached world like the Middle East in different ways because they're influenced by different things. So it's it's an interesting thing there's a a a a a guy in the sixteenth century, I think. His name was Andrew Fletcher.

he said, let me write the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws. And there's this idea that the songs of the global youth culture, the music, the art, the social media influencers are shaping a global culture beyond that's not constrained by geographic or political boundaries. And so it's a very interesting time. This I mean, this has been going on for a while. This really started kinda around the MTV era, right, where MTV was in the eighties all over the world, but it the Internet [00:25:00] and social media has just ramped it up, and so now you have this global culture that's more connected than ever before.

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah. And, you know, technology in in so many ways can be used for ill or it can be used for good.

And as you referenced a minute ago, Tremendous opportunity in that for the gospel. Tremendous opportunity in that for spreading the message of Christ everywhere. And particularly, you know, there's indications that, you know, more Muslims are coming to Christ now than at any other time in history. And a lot of that is because of Access to digital resources and to the gospel, um, to where, you know, they are being able to hear the message of Christianity that would have Never been accessible to them in other ways. And so there's an upside to this as well.

But I think we kinda intuitively know what you mean when you use the word digital native. But just quickly define that What what do we mean when you're talking about people that are digital natives? Because we are in this generation, this group that is between 10 and 25 years of age. [00:26:00] This is the first group to not simply have a television, not simply have a computer, not even simply have uh, access to the Internet. They have access in their pocket many times 24 7 to to basically the entire global world.

Talk about that and what that What does it mean to be a digital native?

Aaron Pierce: Yep. Yeah. Well, I and this is the idea.

I'm I'm a millennial, and so I still remember in my early childhood, the analog days. Right? So I my childhood went from analog to digital. And so in that sense, I can kinda see and understand both worlds, whereas Gen z, they know nothing else other than the digital world that we live in. And so they're It's their you know, it's like learning a language.

They've grown up with it. That's all they know. They can't they it's the air they breathe. And And, you know, It's how we communicate. It's how we form community.

And it's good and bad. Right? [00:27:00] Like, the social the digital things creates connections, but it's a superficiality. There's a, uh, filtered reality to it where everything looks perfect, and I project myself. And I have all these friends, and yet I feel very isolated and alone.

And so there's the good side of being connected and aware of what's going on in the world, But the negative side of I'm seeing a projection of the world, and I'm my life is not adding up to it. So that's why you see Such skyrocketing rates of anxiety and depression amongst younger generations that combined with the world view of secular humanism. And so The this digital natives has create again, like you said already, if we're gonna be good missionaries to the culture, we need to know what's shaping their worldview. We need to know what's influencing them. And because they've grown up in this environment, it's created all sorts of good and bad things that we've gotta navigate with this generation.

Dr. Mark Turman: That's a great place for us to pivot, but kinda talk about from a spiritual standpoint [00:28:00] and the um, the perspective of this generation. part of your subtitle talks about those who are deconstructing. So tell me if I'm thinking in the right categories here.

You talk about the young, in part talking about the young from the standpoint of, well, they just haven't been told. They just uh, it's not that they necessarily have just outright rejected Christ in the gospel. In some ways, they were like me. You know, when I was 15, 16 years old, I had no framework or understanding or clarity. I I had heard of Jesus.

I had no understanding of the cross. I had no understanding of the core message of Christianity. I just had a vague sense of who this guy was that we celebrated at Christmas time. Okay? So some of these people, um, nonreligious and or young, they just need to be told in some ways.

Okay? But let's talk a little bit about those who are, you know, perhaps deconstructing a little bit you use a great kind of a continuum of that people can read about in the book in the first section. Actually, a [00:29:00] really helpful graph of How large portions of the culture looked at Christianity a certain way 30, 35 years ago, but now that has shifted. What is the predominant or large perspective of Gen z when it comes to Christianity?

Aaron Pierce: Yeah.

And And it's a bit mixed, But here's here's how I speak to this. in our country today, we've got those that have walked away from their faith, But we also have increasingly those that never grew up with it at all. And And so, historically, most people did, I'd have some connection to the church, But a lot of people are deconstructing. So the idea of deconstruction, it doesn't have to be

a bad thing. Deconstruction often means questioning what you believe, which honestly can be a very good thing because you can begin to really, Why do I believe what I believe?

And not just because I was told or because my parents believed, but I wrestle with my beliefs. And so In 1 sense, deconstruction can be [00:30:00] a healthy process of growing up, but really what it's often become in our culture today is people are walking away from their faith. They're leaving their faith behind. They're questioning basic biblical beliefs, and and there's all sorts of reason. We could get into what some of those reasons are, but deconstruction is a very common issue.

A lot of Ex evangelicals talk about their deconstruction journey. You if you wanna find some things that'll I don't know. I have people do this, but go on Instagram or TikTok and Do hashtag ex evangelical or hashtag deconstruction, and you'll hear these stories of people walking away from the faith. And it's a very common issue today in our culture.

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah.

And just 1 to be aware of. Again, thinking of ourselves as missionaries and choosing to reject the idea of, well, I'm just gonna be angry about how this generation is acting or thinking, or I'm gonna just I'm gonna buy my RV and go live in the most isolated place I can. Rejecting those 2 ideas and saying, you know what? God's if God didn't think that we [00:31:00] could be useful to him in this environment, he wouldn't have allowed us to be born into this environment. He would not have raised us up.

He would not have brought us into his kingdom through people sharing the gospel. If god didn't think that He could use us as his ambassadors and spokesman and representatives in this environment. He would not have put us here. Okay? So we have the opportunity of engagement and the enormous privilege, like I said, of becoming coworkers with him as first Corinthians 3 says.

But we're dealing with a culture that is enormously, um, all of us in Some ways are both villains and victims. Right? We're all sinners, and we're all responsible for our own choices. And so we are all, in many ways, our own worst And I mean, we are all villains, but we are also victims of what the world and the devil are throwing at us. And what we're seeing a lot even in this Young generation is enormous amounts of loneliness.

[00:32:00] And, Aaron, I'm gonna throw a Texas uh, Uh, reference out to you. You know, when I was in my teens, there was a country and western song, you know, that went, you know, you're looking for love in all the wrong places. And this generation, like many other generations, is still doing that. They're looking for love in all the wrong places. But You mentioned something a minute ago I wanna come back to, which is this idea that love is no longer about tolerance.

It's about affirmation. And this is this is a big, big challenge in terms of being effective missionaries and representative of Christ. Talk about that a little bit and talk about the challenge of that. You reference first Corinthians 5 in your book and other places. This This whole idea of, okay, Jesus was the friend of sinners, but Jesus you know, I mean, I was in this conversation last night with some of these parents.

It's like, It says that Jesus went down to the house of a hated tax collector. He was hanging out with the sinners and the [00:33:00] tax collectors, but we have no reason to believe that Jesus was applauding them for bad behavior.

Aaron Pierce: Exact.

Dr. Mark Turman: about talk about the challenge of a generation that says, you don't love me unless you celebrate everything that I think and do.

Aaron Pierce: Yeah. I think that is the challenge of our day. And it's interesting zooming out a little bit.

our goal is not to convince people of our moral framework or our philosophy. Our goal is introduce people to the person of Jesus and the message of the cross. Like, that is our goal. Right? And what happens is there are things that obscure their view of Jesus in the cross.

And there are beliefs, there are misconceptions, there are lies. And 1 of the great lies of our day is the belief that for you to love me, you must affirm me. That, you know, the the great truth of our culture, and you just said it, is that everyone is looking for belonging [00:34:00] and connection. It's hardwired into us. It's the way God made us.

We were designed for community, and so People are looking for that. But the great lie of our culture is that to be a good friend to someone, to love someone, You have to support their lifestyle or worldview. That's the great lie. And so that is 1 of the lies that we need to challenge and address in order for people to see Jesus for who he really is. It's 1 of the things It obscures the view.

And so it's a challenge. Now first of all, you mentioned already, Jesus is our ultimate example for this. Right? Jesus, he like, in John 4 and the woman of the well, he showed deep compassion and warmth to this woman who A good Jewish rabbi should have nothing to do with, but he never said, okay. Just do whatever makes you happy.

Right? He said he could love the person and yet not affirm their lifestyle. Jesus is our example. And so when it comes to engaging the secular world, [00:35:00] engaging our family who are fit this category. I always say, like, the best way to challenge this lie That love equals affirmation is not necessarily with our words, but with our actions.

Is that I will show you that I love you even if I disagree with you. And I will show you in the way I treat you and that the way I will pursue you and meet you on your turf. but I will not affirm those and and the reason I won't affirm is because I do love you. Right? Like, as a good as I have 4 kids.

And as a good dad, I don't let my kids do whatever they want because that would be I would not be a loving thing to do. Right? Like, if I let my 4 year old do whatever he want, he'd be, like, running on the street by now. You know? So so that as a good Father, I don't affirm anything they want.

And so part of you can talk about it in an intellectual level, but I think more than anything, people need to experience That love, they just say, hey. I don't agree, but I love you, and I'm gonna pursue you, and I'm gonna show you love with my [00:36:00] actions. That's often the way that we have to confront that particular

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah. And I And I think you point out some really great understanding here because uh, it's what I call and and you can be Guilty of this as a Christian. You can be guilty of this as a non Christian, which is what I call all or nothing thinking, which is You have to take you have to take, affirm, celebrate, and participate even in everything that is about my worldview and my choices and my behavior, or you get nothing from me. It's an all or nothing equation for people.

And like I said, you can do that as a Christian. You can take that approach and say, look. No. You have You have to come all my way and think like I do as a Christian, or we have no fellowship. We have no relationship.

Or a nonbelieving person can do that same thing. And, again, this model of Jesus saying, you know what? I love you, and I'm going to I'm gonna continue to love you even if you decide that I'm your enemy. I'm still gonna love

Um, if if you wanna rage at [00:37:00] me for not celebrating everything that you think or do, I'm still gonna love you. And there's a call out here that, Aaron, I think you're doing great job to do this, which is to call out people to say, it's on us as Christians to be like Jesus in terms of initiation and pursuit.

Aaron Pierce: Yes.

Dr. Mark Turman: and and that's what Jesus did. Jesus initiated and pursued us all the way from heaven to the cross and is still pursuing us. Okay? Uh, As CS Lewis called him, you know, the hound of heaven coming it's just a Constant Pursuit. We get tired in that.

We get fatigued in that. We get frustrated in that. And we sometimes like in which I'd love for you to comment on this because you get into this kind of conversation, you'll hear Christians say,

well, Jesus said don't throw your pearls before swine. What was he trying to say to us in that statement, Aaron?

Aaron Pierce: I mean, that's a challenge. when I look at at, And you've alluded to this already a lot, but when I look at Jesus and how he [00:38:00] lived his life and the way he pursued people, The way he I mean, the you think about the very definition of what Jesus did. Jesus left he left the right hand of father, and he entered into our suffering, into our pain. I'll tell you, I think this relates. had a kind of a life altering moment when I was a young adult.

I was in college, and I'd grown up in this great Christian home. My parents were really good because they always had this mentality that you don't have to be a vocational minister to be, like, a real follower of Jesus, so you can do it in any context. And so I studied business, was on my way to law school. I had this vision of politics and whatever, all these things I wanted to do. And then I went on this classic mission trip to Mexico.

To go. You know, 1 of those American church mission trips to Mexico, nothing super profound. But I went on this trip, and once again, as you often do in a trip like this, I the poverty of the world, the brokenness of the world, the injustice, the suffering. I saw all [00:39:00] this, And rather than feeling inspired, I felt overwhelmed, and I went through the season of wrestling with the Lord. And the season of wrestling was like, God, how could you create a world that's so messed up?

How am I supposed to make any difference in this world? How is my little drop in the ocean gonna make any difference? And I wrestled with the Lord on this, and I really you know, went through the season. And God gave me a revelation that really changed my life, which is this it would it was a simple truth I already knew, but it went in my heart. And it's this idea that god is far from indifferent to our suffering.

that he in fact, he sent the most precious thing he had to enter into our suffering in Jesus. And that All pain, all injustice, all evil is the result of 1 thing and that's sin, and there's 1 only 1 hope to that, only 1 solution to that, and that is Jesus in the cross. So when I think about Jesus and the message of the cross, I think of something that enters into our mess, [00:40:00] that pursues us when we weren't pursuing him, that does something we did not deserve. So when I think about those that don't know Jesus And I consider what Jesus did for me on the cross. Of course, it compels me to pursue them like he pursued me.

So that That's where when I think about this, it brings me back to that moment because that changed the trajectory of my life.

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah.

Yeah. It's so good. Yeah. So clear. And that needs to be kind of the heartbeat, the spirit of which we engage. Right? Is that, hey. We love people because we've been loved, and we go toward people, we seek out people because we were sought out. Somebody came in the spirit of Jesus seeking us out, and Jesus is the ultimate 1 who sought us out, and that becomes the motivation.

That becomes the foundation. You know? Like, I think about Paul in second Corinthians 5. He's talking about being this ambassador for Christ, And he says, you know, it's because we've been loved that we want to persuade others. [00:41:00] It's as doctor Denison of our ministry says, you know, it's What we are is beggars helping other beggars find the bread that we found.

You know? And that's that's the privilege. And we get to do that not from a position of superiority, but from a position of humble gratitude. You know? And and that if you really understand this, it's it's like, hey.

There's plenty of food. There's plenty of grace. There's plenty of love. There's plenty of forgiveness. There's plenty of heaven for all of us if if you will come and experience it and receive it in Christ.

With not too much time left to talk, I just I wanna get to to a couple other points. 1 of those being, Aaron, a lot of your book is it's really almost like a field manual for being an effective missionary in our culture and in our country today. But there's a lot of intentionality about this. 1 of those being intentional about, okay. I need to go look for people that God might want me to be a part of their life, and God might want them to be a part of my life.

I need to have some intentional thought about I'm not gonna live [00:42:00] just in a holy huddle around other Christians. So how some advice about how to do that, and then some more advice and guidance about all of us need to understand that we need help in conversation training. of the books that I've recommended I've actually taking 2 teams through this right now. A book written by a guy named David Brooks who writes for The New York Times. The social commentator wrote a book that's been widely accepted as most of his work is, which is how to know a person.

The whole book is simply a manual on how to develop good relationships by having good conversations, and your book is a parallel to that. So talk about how important it is for us as Christians to carve out some room in our life to be intentional about finding these people kind of in the same spirit of what your parents did way back when you were a kid. And then How do we go about this from a conversation standpoint?

Aaron Pierce: Yeah. Good. Great question. [00:43:00] Again, it's the missionary mindset. Right?

And you've said this a lot now. The missionary mindset is an intentional thing. It doesn't happen just organically. You know? It's spontaneously.

It's something where I order my life. I end up on the mission field because I ordered my life that way. So the first challenge that we face in American culture in particular is we are so overscheduled. We are so busy. We are so overcommitted.

And often we're over committed doing good things. We're involved in 18 different Bible studies. We probably need to do a few less Bible studies. That may sound heretical, But in certain context, we need to do a little less of that to create space in our lives, in our schedule to pursue those who don't know him. And so it starts and, again, there's an intentionality to it.

Our motive is to develop real friendships, but there's an intentionality. So Who first and foremost, who's in my sphere of influence? Who's my oikos, a Greek word for household, which can mean people, your neighbors, or your classmates, or coworkers, or people that are just naturally in your sphere of [00:44:00] influence that you need to pursue for a deeper relationship. And, You know, depending on your personality and your gifting, you know, maybe the idea of evangelism is very intimidating to you. And you're thinking, you know, That's for those people that have no problem talking to strangers and they're bold, and that's not me.

And my challenge to you is you don't need to be This crazy evangelist that can talk to a stranger, you can be a good friend that intentionally pursues people in your sphere of influence who do not know Jesus. So start there. Ask God, who do you want? Who's the 1 person? Who are the 2 people that you want me to pursue for a deeper relationship that don't know you.

Start there. And And that's that's a missionary mindset. And and then you can go further with that. Right? there's a lot of other ways where I can expand my OIKAS, where I can be involved in, you know, my kids' sports groups or neighborhood groups or social causes or parks or gyms or [00:45:00] different places Where I'm gonna say this is my mission field. Because the thing is people you can again, I kind of alluded to this already. People are looking for belonging and purpose. That is hardwired into it. And if they're not finding that in the church where they were intended to find it, they're gonna find it at the gym.

They're gonna find it at the bar. They're gonna find it in your neighborhood social group. And if you can go and be there and connect, That becomes your way of befriending people who don't know Jesus, who may not, at this point, be wanting will come into a church, But you as a follower of Jesus can be the church to them. They can meet Jesus, you know, through you. So that's that missionary mindset.

It's your sphere of influences and these places where you can intentionally go to develop relationships with people who would not walk into a church today.

Dr. Mark Turman: Yeah. And And I would just add to that, you know, and that it doesn't mean that it's exclusive of your own interest. Okay?

Matter of fact, that's actually can be a great inspiration. First of all, I'd say is, don't go to any of [00:46:00] these environments just seeking to turn people into projects. Okay. People don't wanna be projects. They wanna be people, and they wanna be respected.

They wanna be honored, they wanna be valued that way. So you don't go in there with any kind of attitude that you know better than everybody else and that these are your projects. Okay? But let your interest in some ways dry you know, hey. You have a sport that you wanna pursue or you have a cause.

You see something in your community that you want to be engaged in to try to make it better uh, a hobby, Any of those kinds of things can be places where you will meet people and have the opportunity to develop relationship. And all of us and that that's why I would recommend your book is you call out some very specific categories. Hey. As you get to know somebody, as you're developing a relationship with them, and as you sense maybe God giving you the opportunity, you can just ask people questions in various categories about their hobbies, about, you know, what they think is [00:47:00] important in life, that type of thing. You give some very Clear and specific examples of that.

I remember being on vacation, like, 2 years ago down at the beach, and I got on an elevator to go up to my room. A lady that was at the same place got on the elevator. She was wearing a sweat shirt from a university I recognize. And I just said, are you a fan? And before the elevator stopped at my floor, She had taken those moments to tell me, oh, yeah.

I live in this town. I love this school. And then proceeded to tell me about what I took to be the greatest hurt in her life, which was the death of her husband within the last year. I mean, she just She was just ready to gush, and she didn't know me from from anybody. But I just asked about her sweatshirt, and And here she's telling me what appeared to be the greatest hurt that she'd ever experienced.

You know? And so people are eager to connect. They're eager to talk. And and at the same time, [00:48:00] we need to develop some real skill in how to have good conversations. Because I would tell people, look.

There's nothing more exciting than sitting down with another human being and having a meaningful conversation. And 1 of the things that's characteristic particularly of this Gen z group, these young emerging folks in our culture, They're very open to spiritual conversation. Right?

Aaron Pierce: Absolutely. That's the thing. They're actually many of them would consider themselves spiritual in a lot of ways.

Now it's not a biblical spirituality often. It's often drawn from Eastern religious thought, but it's this idea of being drawn to spiritual things and seeing that there's transcendent purpose and meaning to things. And so there's so many things in life, everyday life that can be you can use to engage in spiritual conversations. And we don't have a lot of time to get into it, but the idea is that you can go from friendship to spiritual because everything is spiritual and have these deep meaningful conversations that open [00:49:00] the door for you to introduce Jesus in the cross, which is, of course, fundamentally, that's what people need. They need to meet Jesus and understand the message of the cross.

But spiritual conversations gives you a bridge to get there. And in the past, In a Christian culture, when people had more shared assumptions, you could go from friendship to the cross. Now often you need to build the bridge through spiritual conversations to build the foundations on which the cross is communicated. And we I get into how to do that and what that looks like in the book, but that's 1 of the challenges or 1 of the ways we need to think a little differently about reaching a post Christian culture than maybe previous generations.

Dr. Mark Turman: Right.

And that point about, you know, a whole generation that has a whole different set or a largely different set of assumptions that require us to think differently and to build that bridge. And but then to understand that almost Anything that we see and deal with in this world has a spiritual reality behind it, and that includes things like politics. It [00:50:00] includes things are certainly our sexuality, uh, and our and things like science that you deal with in the latter part of the book. All of those Sometimes feel like danger zones and landmines that we should stay away from. They are actually incredible opportunities for conversations that not only becomes spiritual, but ultimately can lead back to Jesus.

Yes. And you call this out in the book as well. There's a need for all of us as Christians to have a clear and a concise understanding of the gospel of the story of the cross and story of Jesus. That's almost like job 1. You know?

It just Tell your story as it fits into the larger story of Jesus in the cross, and there's an exercise in the book for you to do that by just kinda writing out your story in a simple way and how Jesus made a difference. There's a need to understand the cross in clarity and in a way to communicate it when the time comes so that you do communicate it well. But there's a whole lot of other training about how to get to that conversation,

Aaron Pierce: Yep.

Dr. Mark Turman: it I understand [00:51:00] the spirit. I just think it's shortsighted when people say, well, I just wanna talk about Jesus. Well, There's a lot of people not ready to talk about Jesus the way that you wanna talk to him right now, but they might be.

If you build relationship, you build trust, you build friendship with them, you can hopefully get to that conversation in a way that the holy spirit can really use. Aaron, I just wanna I wanna thank you for the book. I just wanna Thank you for the good good work of the book. I'll be recommending it and sharing it with others, and thank you for this conversation. And thank you.

Let us know. We hope that the book does well but it's more about the transformation and the equipping that comes through the book, which I know is what your goal is. Wanna thank our audience for spending some time with us uh, here on the Denison Forum Podcast. And as we always say, if you have questions, Please let us know. You can email us.

Also want to just say if this has been helpful to you, please rate review us on the podcast platform that you use. Share this with family and friends. And, again we are a [00:52:00] donor supported ministry. We are grateful for both your Prayerful as well as your financial support. Our ministry could not exist without your generosity, and we're grateful for that.

And we look forward to seeing you, hearing you in the Denison Forum next time around. Aaron, god bless you, and we look forward to seeing you again.

Aaron Pierce: Thanks, Mark. Appreciate it.