

# When politics get extreme, what should Christians do? A conversation with Tim Alberta

## TRANSCRIPT

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**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 Mark Turman, executive director of Denison Forum. We're gonna sit down today for another interesting and, I think, very needful conversation. We're joined today by our resident cultural apologist, doctor Jim Denison. Jim, could you say hello?

[00:00:21] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Glad to be with you today, Mark. Thanks for the privilege. Very excited about the conversation today.

[00:00:26] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. It's gonna be 1 of those lightweight topics that we like to take up all the time. Right? But I'm gonna introduce our guest in just a moment, but as a way of kinda setting the stage. Jim, you and I have grown up Been done ministry for the last 4, 5 decades in the era in which we were taught back in the seventies that You don't bring up religion, and you don't bring up politics in social environments and particularly at parties and churches.

You don't bring those topics up. But today, we're living in a world where it's not just [00:01:00] politics or religion. It's politics and religion, and we see a lot of people taking 1 of 2 courses. That's the only thing that they wanna talk about, or they're Too afraid to talk about it anywhere, including around their own family dinner table. So that's kind of the world that we've come into.

The purpose of the podcast in many ways is simply to reclaim politics as an important platform for our Christian witness, that we find ways to talk about both our faith and our political engagements in a way that's not driven by fear, but is driven by faith. And so our guest today is the journalist and author, Tim Alberta. He is an award winning, journalist and best selling author. He is a staff writer at The Atlantic. He formerly served as chief political correspondent with Politico In 20 19, many of you may remember he released a very widely acclaimed book called American Carnage.

He is a pastor Your son hailing [00:02:00] from Brighton, Michigan. We'll get into that with Tim in just a minute. He is a student or was a student at Schoolcraft College and then later, Michigan State University. Interesting that he notes that he had planned to become a baseball writer, which, Would have taken us in a great conversation today, but uh, the Lord redirected his steps into covering other things and uh, has written for no less publications in The Wall Street Journal, The Hotline, National Journal, and National Review. Tim released a book about 60 days ago that is stirring a lot of conversation in this election year.

The book is entitled The Kingdom, The Power, and the Glory, American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism. Tim Alberta, welcome To the Denison Forum Podcast, we're glad to have you.

[00:02:48] **Tim Alberta:** Mark, thank you very much for that introduction. And Jim, it's great to be with you guys. I'm excited for the conversation. And if And if at any point this gets too bleak, we can we can turn to baseball. [00:03:00] Just say the word, and that

can be that can be our escape hatch.

[00:03:04] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Hey.

We're down here in Texas, man, where if you don't believe in miracles, you didn't watch the World Series last year. You just didn't follow. The Texas Rangers Going 11 and 0 on the road. I mean, by good you know? So, uh, I'm grateful.

And now as long as we don't talk about the Cowboys and stay with the Rangers, I think we can probably be happy

[00:03:23] **Tim Alberta:** Understood. I'm

a uh, I'm a long a long suffering Detroit Lions die hard, and uh, I'm still

licking my wounds. I'm still matter of fact, I actually my brother and I went out to San Francisco for the for the NFC championship game uh,

couple of weeks ago Because we because we told each other, we said we might never be in this spot. We waited 30 plus years to get here. So, uh, you know, but we might never see this day again. And so I'm still reeling from that. So, yeah, we'll we'll skip all the football talk.

[00:03:51] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I bet you'll be back next year. I've got a lot of hope for you guys.

[00:03:54] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah. And spring training opens for baseball in just a few days, so, you know, Hope springs eternal. Right?[00:04:00]

[00:04:00] **Tim Alberta:** Yes,

sir. right.

around the

corner.

[00:04:02] **Dr. Mark Turman:** well, Tim, let's let's talk a little bit about your recent work.

I noted in the book when I was reading through it that it took you 4 years to complete this project. Anything of that magnitude is It's just astounding in many ways. But tell us what it is that you were really going after for those that may not have encountered the book yet. What was the need, the opportunity, even the threat, I might say, of what you were trying to get at when you put this project together?

[00:04:31] **Tim Alberta:** Sure. So I think this starts just with the basic axiom of write what you know. And in my case, what I know is the evangelical church.

I was I was raised inside of the church. My my dad was a pastor in the EPC, the evangelical Presbyterian Church. And you know, from from for as long as I can remember I was, You know, when I say raised inside the church, I mean, literally, physically raised inside the church. It was it [00:05:00] was it was our Our home, it was our community. My mother was on the staff.

She led the the women's ministry at our church. And so, most of my weekdays uh, after school doing homework, you know, bible study, bringing dates to Wednesday night church when I later on, actually when I was to going to community college, I worked as the janitor at our home church. So it was you know, the the church was

really my my home. Yes. It's it's it's, You know, you you yeah.

In fact and I even I think I mentioned this in the book. I can't remember because my brain is sort of turning to scrambled eggs at this point. But when I was a little kid, I carved my initials into the brickwork of the narthex in the church, And those and that's, you know, that was, like, over 30 years ago that I did that, and they're still there today. So, yeah, I mean, the the church is a big a huge part of of who I am, and it's a huge part of my [00:06:00] family's story. And, you know, I kind of went on this this journey as I got older, And I guess the best way to describe it is that it was a journey that as a as a believer that kind of started on 1 track and then at some point split and went on sort of parallel tracks.

And those parallel tracks were On the 1 side, drawing closer to Christ, becoming more and more convinced of the authenticity of Jesus and of the need for him in my life and becoming more intimate in my walk with him. And then on the other side, simultaneously becoming a little bit more disillusioned about the church itself, and not just my church, But the church becoming a little bit skeptical and at times downright cynical about the institutions [00:07:00] of organized

evangelicalism in in this country as I saw it. And so that had always, I don't wanna say always, but that had throughout my adult life been the balancing act for me as I got married, as I started a family as I found a church in the Washington DC area. I was always struggling to sort of reconcile those 2 realities. And then I think particularly in more recent years as I was covering Republican politics very in intensively, and that was what my first book was about, was really about the collapse of the George w Bush Republican Party and the rise of Donald Trump. I think what I was seeing in the at the intersection of evangelical uh, activism and republican partisan politics became even more troubling to me. And I and I think it was becoming more and more apparent to me that there a real problem here. [00:08:00] Guys, I just didn't wanna be the 1 to have to address it. I I I didn't I didn't myself feel uh, qualified or or called, I guess, to go out of my way to address the problem, probably for the same reason that a lot of people, you know, have shied away from it. But, ultimately it took a family tragedy in the form of my dad dying very unexpectedly and then, experiencing some some real ugliness and unpleasantness at his funeral uh, with people wanting to use that occasion to argue politics with me uh, and kind of, you know, have it out with me over some of my political writings. That was kind of the the the key tipping point moment that sort of left me feeling convicted that, okay. Maybe I maybe I do need to write something about this. Maybe I do need to take this project on. And, You know, that's that's sort of the whole that's sort of the whole origin story of [00:09:00] the book.

[00:09:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah.

There's there's a powerful autobiographical nature to this book particularly at the beginning. And maybe if if we don't learn anything from the book, we ought to learn that, okay, Politics really should not be at a funeral, and and that that is a triggering event. as You know, Jim's been a pastor for 25 years. I was a pastor of churches for 35 years and just reading through that Experience for you just pained me deeply of being in a moment um, you know, both Jim and I lost our fathers when we were pretty young and and in unexpected ways. And just uh, I just I just was paying for you having that experience in the midst of losing your dad.

And and so that was that was something I took away just because how how can we pick our moments so poorly sometimes. And so, just really felt a a lot of sadness for you in that moment. it does become the triggering event, but then[00:10:00] you start to lay out basically the the 50 year journey. Uh, And I was talking with a fellow pastor who had also been reading your book. He said, you know, I I I was twitching because I felt like I could have written most of this book because I lived this book, and I had exactly that same kind of feeling.

I came to Christ in 19 79, 19 80, and then entered ministry about 2 years later. And everything that you cover in this book basically has been my lived experience. Jim, did you have Some of that same feeling was this you you think Tim covered your lived experience over the last few decades in the in

[00:10:41] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. Definitely parts of it. No doubt.

Yeah. I came to Christ in 1973 in Houston, Texas. Our church was very conservative. We had Paige Patterson, Paul Pressler in our church, which in Southern Baptist life was kind of a presage of what would come with the so called conservative resurgence. It started in '79.

I taught on faculty at Southwestern Seminary back in the eighties [00:11:00] when the controversy, as we called it, was very much raging. Russell Dilday was, in so many ways, my spiritual father, my mentor, eventually fired from his position at Southwestern Seminary by the conservatives or fundamentalists. And so I've personally been through a good deal of what Tim is describing here from a political and denominational point of view. The place where I guess I've been a little different than the churches I pastored, the work I've done over the last 15 years as more of a cultural commentator or cultural apologist, I've not really been very much in some of the Sides that Tim described so eloquently, so so I think accurately in the book that have been, I think even much further to the right than my experience, my lived experience had been relative to a political kind of a spectrum. I know we'll get into this, but those that believe that, for instance Donald Trump was really God's answer for America, that they see him as a Cyrus kind of figure, that they're grateful not just for his policies, but even for his personality, for who he is, and for what he is and all that [00:12:00] gets represented out of all of that that Uh, you and I come across on occasion.

That's not been my lived experience myself. I've not been really a part of churches or organizations that have moved in that direction. I've known about it more than I've seen it. Uh, Robert Jeffress has been a friend of mine over the years. I've followed the careers of others that have been over in that world much more than I had been in that world.

And I've certainly not paid a price for not being in that world like a lot of the pastors that Tim describes, who have had to pastor churches that that have been so riven by this, that have been so, so divided by the politics of recent of recent years. So in 1 sense, yes. In another sense, no. But certainly watching this happen even if I've not lived through it on some personal level as somebody in the book have.

[00:12:42] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah. Thank you for that. And, Tim, thank you for the context of your personal story that gave rise to this book. But paint the context that uh, you have in the book of the movement of evangelical Christians and Their engagement with politics over the last 50 years, I we [00:13:00] we could spend hours tracing that out. But give us some of the high points that really, frame the context for where we are today and some of the challenges that we're facing today.

How essentially, how did we get here in terms of some of the key milestones from the early seventies to now.

[00:13:18] **Tim Alberta:** Sure.

I think at the heart of it, guys is a message that that if it sounds familiar and if it seems like what I'm talking about is from a news cycle today or, you know, from something you saw last night you know, CNN or something. It's because the the the, I think, the thematic consistency of it and the effectiveness of it, it continues to be proven out, which is, You know, you go back to the early to mid 19 seventies, and a lot of folks discovered the power of this message of this Christian America that we inherited [00:14:00] is being taken away from us, that we are meant to be a a godly nation and and We were designed to be a country not just sort of loosely informed by Judeo Christian ethics, but really sort of governed by a Christian sensibility. and In the early to mid 19 seventies, you have these folks who are looking around and they're recognizing that the country that they have idealized is slipping away from them. And there are legitimate arguments for that.

Right? That you you look at court rulings, taking prayer out of public school, and legalizing abortion. You look at the drug culture and the pornography culture and the sexual revolution and the divorce rate spiking and, [00:15:00] the the sort of the the demise of the nuclear family. you you can understand how there are uh, good faith uh, concerns that are that are that are festering in this period. Right?

But I think what happens is that You have ambitious, opportunistic people who spot those concerns, and they they exploit them. They figure out a way to to prey upon those concerns, really to weaponize those fears of of civilizational collapse. Right? That this idea that, well, this is meant to be God's country, but they, They being the pagan, secular humanist progressive, you know, outsiders, they, the the the the godless Democrats, liberals, whoever, you know, they wanna take it from us. They are waging an assault on [00:16:00] our values. They are trying to kick us out of our own country. And if we don't do something about it, if the good, God fearing, bible believing Christians don't stand up and fight back, then we're going to lose our country. I think that message which was so incredibly potent, 50, even 60 years ago, you know, we we are we are still dealing with its potency today. Uh, It's and the remarkable thing is that there I talk about the thematic consistency. There's a rhetorical consistency.

I've been amazed Even just in the last 5 or 6 months covering uh, the Republican presidential primary, when you hear some of the rhetoric from some of these candidates, including but not limited to Donald Trump. It it is almost, in some cases, identical to the rhetoric you would hear from Jerry Falwell senior and other leaders in the moral majority leaders in the conservative resurgence inside of the SBC. [00:17:00] So that idea, I think, has proven itself to be 1 of the if you were to understand just American life across the board, American politics, American culture, American social change in the last, you know, 3 generations. I think that that idea of of Christian America being under attack and then not just being under attack, but then this question of, well, How then shall we respond to it? What is the appropriate Christian response? Um, That has been to me 1 of the dominant narrative arcs to explain what has gone on in this country in the last, you know, again, 60 years or so.

[00:17:42] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And, Jim, react to that some this idea that is now commonly being talked about in wider and wider circles of Christian nationalism the idea of theodicy that we see in pretty significant ways uh, I would say within the old testament and the the story of [00:18:00] the Israelites. And then how that you how you don't see that emerging uh, as a predominant idea within the New Testament and within the Christian story. Talk about talk about how that idea of theodicy leads to or has led us to Christian nationalism.

help us understand what Tim's talking about in that.

[00:18:22] **Dr. Jim Denison:** And I'll try to do it briefly, course, as as we all know, we could have a very and have had in the past long conversations around all of this.

Really, it's kinda like a merry-go-round where I think where you get on is where you get off, So to speak, if you come in as Tim is saying saying that this nation was founded by godly evangelical Christians to be a godly evangelical Christian nation, that you measure everything that's happened in the last 50 years or the last 200 years against that, and you ask yourself what you need to do to get back to where you were intended to be. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord. And so as scripture says and so now that was originally intended for the nation of Israel, but we pick it up and studied over in our context. So if that's where you start, then I think that's where [00:19:00] you end. And I think a lot of well intentioned, well meaning people get there, and I understand that.

I mean, George Washington made it clear that religion and morality are indispensable supports to this nation. John Adams said our our constitution was intended only for a a moral and religious nation and is wholly unsuited to the governance of any other. But as I've studied that pretty carefully, Mark, I myself am convinced Now what the founders had in mind was a consensual morality, which as Tim says comes out of a Judeo Christian worldview, but was not expressly understood to be a Christian nation for the simple reason a nation can't be a Christian nation. A Christian is a person who's trusted in Christ as their lord. Well, a nation can't do that.

A nation can't have a salvation experience. A nation doesn't have a soul. A nation can't be a Christian nation. A nation could be a Muslim nation If it adopts Sharia law, and there's 3 different versions of that, but whatever version they might do, you could even perhaps develop an old testament theocratic sort of a nation on Mosaic Law, the [00:20:00] 613 laws of uh, that they come out of the Torah, for instance. But you can't really do a Christian nation, And that's why the founders were pretty clear about that.

Got a quote in front of me from the 17 96 treaty with Tripoli. It's signed by president John Adams. It says, The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion and has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religious, or tranquility of Muslims, and he goes from there. We've got a letter from George Washington being grateful for the Jewish Civilians in the United States and promising them that they would have

the same right to equality as anybody else. And so Because I do believe America was founded within a consensual morality.

Because I do believe that that morality has certainly moved in dramatic ways as Tim's described with the sexual revolution, with postmodern relativism, with all that we're seeing right now. Because I do believe that there has been in recent year a growing movement to believe that evangelical Christian morality is homophobic and [00:21:00] bigoted and dangerous and All of that. I understand why a lot of evangelicals do believe that this nation is under attack. It needs to get back to its godly evangelical roots, but I don't believe that you can make a good historical case that America was founded as a Christian nation and indeed that any nation can be a Christian nation. And so there's this kind of blurring sort of a thing.

You've got a David Martin approach that would say that that I'm wrong and that America was intended to be a Christian nation. I'm aware of that. I just think he's wrong on the merits, but I do, at the same time, understand the concern that many evangelicals have as they see the trajectory of the culture And want to do something about it and aren't sure what to do about it. And if political organizing, if voting for candidates, If engaging in this in this context from a political point of view is a way to get there, then you could see the appeal of that to a lot of people. And I think we've seen that in recent years in ways that may be well intentioned and some that may not be well intentioned, and that's a conversation we could have as [00:22:00] well.

[00:22:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Tim, as you as you trace this out over the last 5 or 6 decades, it feels like, as I was reading through your book, that There's a significant intensification over the last 10 to 12 years even to the place of what we would call militarism.

what seems to be, in in my understanding, kind of a an all or nothing mentality. I've and I really like to get both of you to to try to comment on this idea that, In in our politics in this country, it's become this all or nothing mindset for a lot of people, not for everybody, but for a lot of people. And, Tim, you described this in a very effective way in terms of now now we see things as not just as as opponents, but we see them through the lens of good and evil. Can can you describe that for us? And then, Jim, would love for you to follow on and comment on that as well.

It's just What what is that phenomenon, and then what's dangerous about that phenomenon in [00:23:00] our context? Tim, what do you think?

[00:23:03] **Tim Alberta:** Sure. Yeah, Mark. You you you hit the nail on the head. That that has been, I think, the most dramatic change that I have observed in the last boy, I mean, really, especially in the last 4 or 5 years is the is, You know, again, even prior to writing this book, I'd spent my entire life steeped in the subculture of conservative white republican evangelicalism and and then, you know, had spent prior to to to embarking on this book project, had spent over 10 years reporting professionally reporting on that intersection of conservative Republican



evangelical movement politics. The thing that I had never picked up before but that I can't escape now is that willingness to process everyday partisan political [00:24:00] disputes through a lens of good versus evil. It is no longer red versus blue, conservative versus liberal, republican versus democrat. It is good versus evil, and it is often good versus evil in conversations with people that would stun you. So so for example, I was having a conversation A couple of months ago, this is not in the book, but this is just a conversation I was having in the course of my everyday reporting. This was with an individual who I have known. This is someone who is I would consider to be 1 of the more reasonable And and intellectual members of Trump's sort of, not inner circle, but circle and someone who I think would be a leading candidate to potentially be chief of staff in a second Trump administration second Trump White House. And this person in the middle of a conversation about uh, immigration politics had sort of stopped me and said, well, you know that this is and this was even [00:25:00] before the most recent senate bill was released. This was just talking broadly about what's happening at the border, what, you know, Republicans and Democrats might do to try and fix it. I covered immigration politics as a congress reporter years ago. So I know the issue pretty well, and I know where the where the kind of touchstones are and and where the leverage points might be in any kind of negotiation. And And this person stopped me and said, will you understand though that this is no longer, you know, what the conservatives want or what the liberals want? This is not about, like, the the the the Bush era McCain Kennedy bill or the Obama era gang of 8 John McCain, you know, effort. Like, no. No. No.

Like, this is This is an invasion, and this is this is an invasion that democrats are using as a way to extinguish the light of the country. And sort of I I said, well, hold on. What what do you mean by that? And the conversation from there basically spiraled into this very dark conspiratorial place [00:26:00] where the phrase good versus evil was repeatedly invoked to and and I mentioned that just to say that I think for many serious Christians who are listening to this, They might view some specific issues that that that intersect with our politics such as abortion as a very clear good versus evil issue. They they they view the the the termination of pregnancy, the taking of an unborn life as an evil that must be fought against.

Right? I understand the thinking in on a on some specific issues like that where you don't even view it as a political issue. You view it as a moral, as an ethical, as a spiritual issue. I think setting that to the side, what I'm the reason I'm raising the anecdote I'm raising is that we are now way beyond some of those narrower ethical, moral, spiritual [00:27:00] issues. We are to a place now where so much of what I observe in the book is a willingness to assign in sweeping terms uh, a demonic uh, deviant, set of ideals and impulses to those who disagree with us on anything at a at a sort of partisan political level.

And to me, that is probably the most startling component of the reporting that I did because I just genuinely was not expecting it. It was something that I didn't go in anticipating to to encounter. And I think When you when you when you composite that sort of mentality, that sort of rhetoric

over historic, parallels and understand how rhetoric like that has been used uh, religious rhetoric has been used, good versus evil, to justify horrible crimes against humanity, to justify genocide, to [00:28:00] justify ethnic cleansing, to justify violent identitarian conflict at a at a horrible scale, that's what really gives me pause. And and I I hate to sound alarmist here, but but it it it's not just encountering the rhetoric and being startled by it. It's understanding and contextualizing the ways in which that rhetoric can take us to a very dark place very quickly.

[00:28:25] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Got a lot to think about there. Jim, I I would like you to react a little bit to what Tim's sharing. You and I have talked before.

In many ways, having all 3 of us live through the Reagan era, we have a lot of esteem for that and rightly so in many ways. Sometimes I think we may romanticize it some. But, Jim, you and I have had conversations in the past about Ronald Reagan's relationship with Tip O'Neil, who was a political rival in some ways. You might wanna comment on that. But Just this idea what happens when we in in my interpretation of Tim's [00:29:00] work overlay the idea of good versus is evil.

We know that the devil is active on many levels, maybe all levels in and that there certainly can be those Expressions of evil that find their way into our politics clearly. But what's your sense of, Are we overplaying this good versus evil lens in the way that we're engaging in politics now?

[00:29:25] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. First of all, I'd I'd agree with Tim.

Unfortunately, he and I would both like for him to have been wrong with what he just shared. But You look at the stats and a higher percentage of Republicans and Democrats consider the other party dangerous to America's future than ever before. In the history of polling, A higher percentage on both sides do not want their children to date somebody from the other party than ever before in the history of polling. So we really are at this place of demonizing the opposition, whatever the opposition issue might be, whether it's the border or anything else. And So different as you're seeing from the [00:30:00] Reagan era.

I remember Chris Matthews writing some years ago kind of a biography of of his experience, With Tip O'Neill and Reagan and all of that, there was some specific issue that was in the currency of the day, and Reagan wanted O'Neil in the house to support his position, and O'Neil said to Reagan, well, but if I do, I need some guarantee that the Republicans won't hold that against my members Later on in the election, the next day, as I remember Matthews recalling the story that was delivered to Tip O'Neill's office 435 handwritten notes from president Ronald Reagan asking the members of the house to support his position, And with a guarantee, it wouldn't be used against them later. And you talked about the degree to which they go out drinking in in Irish pubs after they would have these knockdown drag outs during the day, that sort of thing. Just how different all of that used to be, and we have lots of anecdotal stories that still are out there. I saw last night on 1 of the news programs how Lindsey Graham and Richard

Blumenthal were on together, and they were discussing the [00:31:00] thing they had in common relative to Ukrainian funding and all the things that are going on at that day.

So we're certainly in a different position than we were there. Now I'd parse it out a little bit in this way. I think we absolutely start with issues for which there is a moral right wrong in the minds of many, and Tim pointed to that with the abortion issue and the belief in '73 with Roe v Wade that this was pushed into a national position in a way that was unfair. It was by unelected officials and the justices and was on some way an imposition of an of an unbiblical immorality around life itself. And so right and wrong gets painted relative to the abortion issue.

Will you move that forward? And if you're gonna be supportive of that, well, then whatever your party supports must be of the same kind of immoral worldview. In order for you to continue to have that position, it's kind of where this goes. Whether it's uh, same sex marriage with Obergefell, whether it's LGBTQ kind of ideology, whether it's the so called equality act, which has been very much a concern for a lot of [00:32:00] us, whatever that might be. If you disagree with me on abortion, well, then you're wrong on life, and so what else are you wrong on? And that goes both ways.

The other could say, if you with me on reproductive freedom, if you believe that the state has the right to impose uh, its own legislation on a woman's most private, most personal health care decisions. Well, then what else are you wrong on? So we start there, And we watch the divergence growing and becoming incredibly uh, more emotional as this comes along the way. But, Mark, 1 other thing to mention, 1 of the reasons I think this is working so well for both sides from a political point of view. Goes back to some some advice I've received back when we started this ministry in 2009.

Was talking to a good friend of mine who'd been engaged in political advisement over the years in a number of ways, and he was talking about how we're starting. I mentioned he asked, well, how will you get money. And I said, well, we'll be donor based. And he said, well, who's your enemy? And asked, well, what do you mean?

And he said, well, to raise funds, you do 3 things. You convince people they have an enemy. You convince them they can't defeat their enemy. [00:33:00] Then third, you convince them you will defeat their enemy if they'll give you money or vote for you or whatever it else you want them to do. Well, we've chosen not to do that.

As you know in this ministry, we've chosen we we pray to be speaking biblical truth to cultural issues in a way that doesn't have a partisan kind of divisiveness and and and agenda, I hope. I hope. I I pray. But nonetheless, you see that. You see that sort of threefold strategy working through history?

Every time I've been to Israel, the 35 times I've been to Israel, you go through Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum. You see it in the rise of antisemitism. You see it in what Hitler did with the Aryan super race going back to Nietzsche relative to the Jews. You see, with what Hamas did on October seventh, you see Tim's point that what starts as rhetoric becomes reality very quickly. And it's critical for us to understand that if we who follow Jesus are going to be serious about that, then we have to learn how to love our neighbor as ourselves.

No matter who that neighbor is, no matter what they believe, [00:34:00] no matter what position they take, in a way that speaks the truth in love. Until we can do that, we can't expect the blessing of God. We can't expect God to use us in a transformative way. We can't be the change we wish to see, and we become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. And if I keep going, I'm gonna start preaching.

We'll have to take an offering, but believe

[00:34:19] **Tim Alberta:** Keep going. Keep it. I was

just I was about to give it I was about to give an amen from the cheap seats. That would

[00:34:24] **Dr. Jim Denison:** well, there you go. There

[00:34:26] **Tim Alberta:** was as good as it gets.

[00:34:28] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, thank you. Rhetoric becomes reality, and we have to be aware of that.

[00:34:31] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. Yeah. And and something for us to pay a lot of attention to.

Tim, your your book is obviously a lot about white evangelicals, and the subtitle obviously pointing to extremes. I reviewed it again yesterday where you make it clear, hey. We're talking about this group of people called evangelicals, particularly white evangelicals. This is hundreds of millions of people within this country, And you you make it very clear. This is [00:35:00] this is not a monolith even though when you turn on the evening news and you're watching, you know, 15 to 30 minutes of news, You only get very big categories and and very broad descriptions.

But let's let's talk a little bit about you know, you cannot characterize evangelicals in 1 broad statement that there certainly are people that are in this, what we would call, extreme right, and there are people on the extreme left. I wanna maybe touch on that for a moment as well. But Help us understand that we have to think better, and we have to think deeper when it comes to describing evangelicals and understanding that there there are a lot of people that would call

themselves Christian and evangelical who are not on the extreme. Can you kinda unpack that a little bit for us?

[00:35:53] **Tim Alberta:** Yeah. Of course. So I I as I I think I'd have to go back and look. I think it's on the second page of the book or [00:36:00] maybe the third page of the book. I I try to go out of my way very early in the prologue to make that point clear, Mark, that, you know,

we're dealing with a a massive community of individuals here and that there are that there's a a vast spectrum of behaviors, attitudes, motivations you know, so so you can't you couldn't stereotype these folks if you wanted to, because it's it's especially relative to Trump uh, which I know where we are now, it's become easier and easier to process what it means to be an evangelical through the not just a partisan filter, but almost through

a Trump filter because

We see the exit polling in Iowa, and we look at the the public polling available to us, you know, tracking the horse race, and we see, the the the overwhelming [00:37:00] support that Trump has among self identified white evangelicals, and we say, okay.

Well, you know, that's what it means to be an evangelical now. There's a couple of things that I think are are worth mentioning. 1 of them really goes back to Jim's point a minute ago about abortion. 1 of the clearest trend lines that I've seen in my life both as a as a Christian, as a member of the evangelical world, and also as a professional political journalist is the degree to which abortion became a gateway drug of sorts for for your everyday Republican voters, for your everyday evangelical voter who is not super partisan, not not ideologically supercharged. They're not wired to have a a whole suite of of uh, well defined partisan political views, But they do have a pretty firm view on abortion. And because they have that view, [00:38:00] a biblically informed, call it a even a hard line stance on abortion in some cases. That view then sort of puts them in a league with 1 of these 2 parties. Right? And once you are in league with 1 of those 2 parties, I think particularly in this modern era that maybe we date back to the post 9 11 era or maybe that's the post Obama era from January of 09 onward. Whenever you wanna think about kind of the hyperpolarization in the country really taking hold and and squeezing us and and and pulling us farther and farther apart with seemingly with each passing election season. That abortion question became less a individual policy prescription and more a marker of tribal identity. And so to Jim's point, you know, if if [00:39:00] my side is fighting evil on this question, then they are fighting evil, period. If if I am standing for good on this question so and what what I noticed happening was There's this term in the military, mission creep, where it what what starts as, like, a seal team 6 operation to blow up a munitions hut in some in some province somewhere. It starts with that operation, and the next thing you know, it's the entire military waging war on the whole continent. Right?

Mission creep. That is what abortion has felt like to me inside the evangelical world that there has been a that that that that abortion was almost the to mix metaphors here and probably doing so ineffectively, but that, that abortion was almost like that battering ram that that that knocked the doors open. And then once inside, a A lot of evangelical voters sort of found themselves [00:40:00] almost subconsciously or unwittingly attaching themselves with the same devotion, the same the same fervency, the same moral and and and spiritual certitude to all sorts of other issues Uh, that are, you know, at best, I think peripheral. So, you know, whether it's whether it's tax rates, whether it's foreign policy. I mean, I share an anecdote early in the book about my dad officiating the funeral for a young marine who died in Iraq in 2006, I believe it was, and, and how there was this huge firestorm in my very conservative community a very, very conservative, very Republican, very patriotic community Because there were democrats um, uh, I think a few locally, but also some statewide.

I believe even the governor at the time, Jennifer Granholm, who was a democrat, who had wanted to come to the church for the funeral, but the [00:41:00] family and my father had made it known to them that the the democrats weren't welcome at this church service. And then and then in his eulogy, my dad sort of took this opportunity to rail against Democrats for for calling Bush to bring the troops home and and basically said something to the effect of, you know, like, how dare they do this? Don't they know the effect this has on on the morale of the warriors and everything else. And I can remember being a young man and thinking, Like, Is that it is maybe he's right. Maybe maybe maybe there is a maybe there is a legitimate spiritual call to support the commander in chief in a time of war.

And they you know, I I was young, and I'm thinking to myself, okay, you know, my dad's a very sophisticated theological thinker. And and so but then but as I the farther I got away from that [00:42:00] episode it just it it it became clear to me that there was a, that that what had happened there, and it wasn't just isolated to, you know, the the war in Iraq or George w Bush, But that that sort of the I think the abortion issue because it was so meaningful to my father at such a at such a personal, profound level. He believed to his core in the right to life and and believed to his core that abortion was a moral wrong, that that the the sort of tribal membership that he had gained with Republican politics as a part of his identity because of the abortion issue was now beginning to eclipse some of some of his I don't wanna say some of his critical thinking, but it had basically become an all or nothing proposition. You you you felt as though This was now a 0 sum game where if you were to cede any ground to Democrats [00:43:00] on the question of the legitimacy or the efficacy of the war in Iraq, then you were ipso facto ceding ground to them on the question of abortion as a moral wrong, that that that that you that it couldn't be 1 without the other. And, anyway, I know I've run a bit far afield of the of this question of

the nuances and the diversity within the evangelical world. But what's interesting to me is that I think the reason why it's so important to mention the abortion issue in the context, Mark, of that question is When you look at the polling still and you see, okay, you know, uh, 80 percent give

or take of white evangelicals saying that they will continue to support Trump and that they will vote for him. I think that that is derived almost almost directly from the abortion issue and from from the continued conviction on the abortion issue. what a what a pollster can't measure is with [00:44:00] that with that individual respondent who says, yes. I will be voting for Donald Trump. That's that respondent may very well find Donald Trump to be repugnant and might very well find the current Republican Party in this iteration to be kind of reprehensible, and they are voting for the party less as an affirmation of its values or or or its policy propositions across the board and more as a rejection of what they see as extremist policies taking root in the Democratic Party. Or they might be someone who is casting a single issue vote because of the abortion question, but otherwise finds politics to be just sort of a sorted and nasty business that they want nothing to do with. I guess my point is that what I've discovered pretty consistently is that you do continue to see a a real diversity of views within the white [00:45:00] evangelical world on a lot of different things. But Some of the things where there isn't a lot of diversity, there is such there there is such a concentration of opinion and and of conviction that it tends to then almost dull the the diversity or or dull the perception of diversity and nuance uh, that that we might otherwise see in that world.

And I'm not sure if that I'm not I hope that makes sense the way that I've described it.

[00:45:30] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Because it it it feels like that we've Abandon any belief that there can be nuance that it has to be simple black and white. Jim, would would love for you to comment on this. Should Christians always be thinking that everything is a matter of right and wrong? is that the only way or the primary way, the exclusive way that Christians should think about everything, including their politics.

[00:45:57] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's a great question.

And this really moves into that space right along [00:46:00] the kind of spectrum that Tim's described so well. I, myself, over these recent years, have run across so many evangelicals, for instance, who make a broad distinction between Donald Trump the person and Donald Trump's policies and would absolutely not agree that we need Donald Trump the person, that he's Cyrus, that we need somebody with that combative personality, that We need someone who's so unpredictable and therefore gives us a strategic military advantage. I'm aware of those that do agree with that. In fact, I could quote some people that do agree with that, that do want Trump the person. And the book describes some of them, not just Trump the policies, but I'm aware of a lot of folk who really don't want Trump the person, who very much think Trump the person Actually, undermines Trump the policies on significant ways and really wish that Trump the person weren't really the issue that it is, but really do support Trump the policies, as it were the policies for which he's well known primarily, putting enough justices on the Supreme Court to overturn Roe v Wade, starting there as Tim says and then going forward from that point.

And so really a spectrum there. And those folks feel pretty frustrated when they [00:47:00] think that everybody thinks That they must be like the people who agree with Trump, the person and show up at the rallies and are part of this kind of more I I don't know what to call it, but really uh, certainly a more this sort of a position in some of this, I suppose you could say. How do we look at this then from a biblical point of view? We make our decisions based on 3 Basic factors. In philosophy, we call them channels of epistemology if we wanna be fancy about this.

It's the rational, the practical, the intuitive. We do math rationally. We start cars practically. We like people intuitively. I think God uses all 3 of those.

We make our decisions in all 3 of those ways, and we wanna process things in ways that hopefully bring about a conjunction of those 3 factors. So on the rational, I believe there are some issues for which there is very clear biblical right and wrong guidance in scripture. I do believe that about sanctity of life. I absolutely do believe in myself that life begins at conception and that God considers life to be sacred from conception, But I also believe not only in [00:48:00] the right to birth, but the right to life. I believe in the biblical sanctity of life, and I think that goes to justice.

I think that goes to racial equality. I think that goes to gender equality. I think that goes to a wide variety of issues. Tim Keller's pretty good. Used to be pretty good at describing how, Some biblical values looked at Democratic and some look Republican, but all of them need to be biblical.

I'm thinking in those terms. So, Mark, I think there are some issues which we can evaluate rationally from a biblical point of view and say this is right or this is wrong. There are others that would come at practically. We can't really say the Bible has a position on the Panama Canal Treaty. We can't really say that the Bible comes forward with the 1 position on whether uh, Texas is being invaded and therefore states' rights should contravene federal rights and whether the federal government has a right to dismantle the wire that's been that's been built by the state there.

I don't know that the Bible can give us in fact, I don't think it can, obviously, give us rational right and wrong. So we're gonna come at Practically, [00:49:00] what seems to make the most practical sense within where we are. And then a lot of our decisions, I think probably the lion's share of them, get made intuitively. I like somebody. I don't like somebody.

I vote like the people that I'm like. There's a tribalism that's part of human nature, and I go with the people that go with me sort of speaking. And Lot of our decisions that we think we're making rationally and practically, we're probably making intuitively based on our own personal experience or the relationships that matter so much to us. So all gets kinda put together. But back to where you started, to the degree that we can parse these things out and as we so often say, try to think biblically and act redemptively.



That's what we need to be as believers. We need to be asking what does scripture say. If it does in fact speak to this, it speaks to it as a preceptor, it speaks to it as a principle. Let's do our best to think biblically and act redemptively in ways that honor God more than around tribalism. That's the challenge for us, and that's the opportunity in a day like this.

The darker the room, the more obvious the light.

[00:49:59] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah.

[00:50:00] So so helpful in that. we could keep this going on for a long time, but have just a couple of questions that we probably have time remaining for. 1 quick question I want to see if we can get to is Is Jim this starts with you. Tim describes it well, this Cyrus uh, idea about Donald Trump. Jim, as a as a biblical scholar talk just briefly about that principle that God does sometimes use or at least works through people who are not Christians, people who are not living a godly biblical moral life style.

how should we think about or apply that as Tim describes in his book to Donald Trump? Can we even know that in the midst of a situation as New Testament believers? What's your thought?

[00:50:48] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's first place to start is to what degree can we even really, with with legitimacy, make our own decisions here that Say he that an individual is or isn't Paul for today or let [00:51:00] alone a Cyrus type figure, but you absolutely are right. I mean, clearly across Scripture, God uses people whose personal character, whose personal theology you wouldn't endorse. You wouldn't teach that to somebody, and yet God uses that person, whether that's Cyrus, whether, That's even how God used the Roman Empire to get Paul to Rome, how God used Felix and Festus to Keep keep Paul alive.

A lot of the New Testament we have because God used Roman, what we would say pagan, probably polytheistic individuals, Emperor worshiping individuals to advance his kingdom, straight licks with crooked sticks. I think God redeems all that he allows. But relative to mister Trump specifically. I'm very reluctant myself to come along with any individual, whether that would be Donald Trump, Joe Biden, anybody else and say that we can, with certitude, say that God has raised this person up to be an individual like this for this time. For me to say that I know God's mind to that degree, For me to say that I am certain that God is doing x in this world, [00:52:00] whatever x is, is something we need to hold with a great deal of humility, I think.

But specifically to mister Trump and to Cyrus, I'm aware of the argument that says America needs somebody like Cyrus. I could see that logic. I could see a person arguing that America needs a bold, strong, unpredictable uh, individual, And their personal morality is not as relevant to their public performance. I don't agree personally that that is where we are as a country, but I understand the logic of that. But I'm very reluctant to say God has raised them up to be that person today.

And I'll go 1 step further, Mark. I myself Do not believe that in American democracy, we should distinguish between the leader's person and their policies the way that often is happening today. We didn't used to do that. Tim points out in his book, there was a time, for instance, when Baptists were very frustrated publicly about president Bill Clinton's personal moral failures, And we're making the case that it's difficult to lead effectively as a president if a person's personal morality doesn't align with their public [00:53:00] policies. I think that's just human nature.

I think there's an enormous dissonance that happens when you say to me, do what I say, not what I do. And when you say to me, I'm going to accept what you do, so but I'm not going to follow who you are because what you do comes out of who you are. I believe in and I go back to FDR who believed that the most significant role of the president was to be a moral leader, was to be a moral figure for the country. I believe our country was set up that way. Back to George Washington where the commander in chief or the chief executive possesses an enormous moral sort of leverage in the culture, and so I myself would not want to make whoever the candidate is a massive distinction between their person and their policies even though I'm aware of those that do.

But I'd be pretty strong, Mark, And wanting to insist that whatever we think about that, we are not bring forward the argument that I can say with certainty that god is doing x, whatever x is in this space. That God is essentially endorsing this individual or that God is endorsing [00:54:00] this disparagement or this Diversity between person and policies, whatever the political issue might be. I think we need to hold that with a great deal of humility. I can even say, I think God is telling me this, or I believe that I'm being led to do, but I've gotta be really careful about saying God says, God is whatever the is Yes. Remember Yogi Berra 1 time when the batter got to the plate and crossed himself before he took the first pitch uh, Berra smiled at him, at least the story goes, And so let's just let God watch this 1.

I'm not certain God is as involved in every issue as I would like him to be or that I can read his mind as well as I would wish that I could, and I wanna be very careful about speaking for him in play. He speaks for himself pretty well. God's good at. God's still omnipotent. God's good at speaking his truth, and I don't wanna be in a position of speaking for God in a way that God himself hasn't.

Think we need to be very careful. I think we've lost and Tim says this in the book. We've lost a great deal of our moral, I think, credibility in the culture By [00:55:00] the degree to which we have tried to come forward and speak for God. And when religious leaders have attempted to do that, their own personal immorality has come to light. We've given so much of the why to what we have claimed to be true in the larger culture.

We ought never say to somebody, do as I say, not as I do, and believe that what we say can have the power that we wish that it could.

[00:55:21] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah.

Yeah. Helpful. Helpful. Uh, Just a little bit time left. Tim, I wanna bring this last question to you and and bring it into real real life practical terms here, which is okay.

There's a lot of commentary floating around right now as we move toward the next presidential election. Hey. I don't like either of these choices. And we're seeing the rise of This thing called the no labels group and that type of thing. uh, if you were advising your dad's Church or any church for that matter, group of believers of, hey.

You know, we have the system that we have. We don't necessarily have the system that we want. We Don't seem to have the candidates [00:56:00] that we want, and we are confronted with a binary choice. What would you say Christians ought to do? Should they just pray and make the best choice kind of, uh, what's commonly called the lesser of 2 evils pathway.

I've heard no less a person than Robbie George who teaches on this daily. Say, you know what? I I wrote in candidates over the past 2 presidential elections. I've heard other significant Christian leaders say, you know what? I'm just gonna stay home, and I'm I'm not gonna vote.

what would you advise Christian people who care, what do you think is the the right pathway? Is it just a lesser of 2 evils thing? Hold your nose and vote either side. What's your thought?

[00:56:43] **Tim Alberta:** Well, I'd say a couple of things, Mark. You know, I I've made my living for a number of years reporting on these elections and analyzing them, but certainly never advising anyone on how they should be voting. And and even in my capacity as a as a brother in Christ. I would be reluctant [00:57:00] to get too far over my skis in advising Anyone what what they ought to do.

I could I could probably only comment on on how I, as a Christian, as a as a dad, as a husband, as a citizen, how how I approach times such as these, which is to say that the first step, it seems to me, is recognizing where one's citizenship truly is found. And uh, and and if we believe that our citizenship is truly in heaven, that we are called first and foremost to the kingdom of God and not to the kingdom of America, not to the kingdom of some cultural tribe or political party that that ultimately we derive our identity from Christ having transformed our hearts. Once we what as a starting place, if we can sort of establish ourselves there, then [00:58:00] I do think it becomes easier to process uh, at all 3 levels. I wanna make sure I got this right, Jim. It was rational, Practical and intuitive.

Right?

[00:58:10] **Dr. Jim Denison:** very good. Yeah.

[00:58:12] **Tim Alberta:** I think it becomes easier at all 3 of those levels, Or if not easier, at least it becomes a little bit less stressful perhaps to then process the choices in front of us. I am a big believer. I've always been a big believer. This predates the 20 24 death march of Biden versus Trump.

I've always been a believer that there's no such thing as throwing away your vote. People will often reduce it to well, it is a It's a binary choice. So if you're not voting for 1 of these people, then you are by default voting for the other. I I reject that. I I I I actually believe that the vote is a beautiful thing and should be treated as such.

And so, in my own life I try to reject false choices as [00:59:00] it pertains to our politics. And that is not just rejecting false choices in terms of the 2 major parties at the ballot box, But rejecting false choices when it comes to the arguments this week around the senate immigration bill or when it comes to false choices Being argued around the the impeachment trials of Donald Trump or the January sixth rioting or Any of the so much of the dumbing down of our political system owes to the I said it earlier, the same phrase, the kind of 0 sum mentality that you you must You must side with with uh, 1 of these 2 tribes. You cannot possibly fall somewhere in the middle. And I just reject that sort of thinking. And I guess if I could offer a piece of encouragement to to any Christians who are listening, who find themselves Troubled by the choices before them, not just the choices at the ballot box in November, but the choices [01:00:00] culturally Uh, the the choices in media that are foisted upon them.

Well, I I do is it MSNBC or is it Fox News? Well, Does it have to be 1 of those 2 things? Can you in fact discover for yourself prayerfully a a different way forward? My sense is that even if that answer you guys proves unsatisfying in the short term, That if all of us or at least a lot of us at some scale were willing to do that uh, and to apply that thinking in our everyday lives to our political decisions, to our cultural and social, consumption decisions that we would then, in the longer term, find ourselves in a place where we didn't feel so tortured, and we didn't feel so trapped between, you know, bad options. So there's a I think there's a long road back in our politics to reclaiming a a a better, more sane place [01:01:00] but it's not going to be It's not going to happen this fall. Right? And and save save save for some intervening event. We are we are, in an in an ugly, bruising election cycle that almost no matter what the outcome, We are assured in the short term of more of more civic unrest perhaps of more violence. that short term reality should not Eclipse our long term civic aspiration of of moving our body politic toward a better place. And I think that that That aspiration as citizens of of this world and as citizens of this country must ultimately be informed, As I said at the outset, by our citizenship in heaven and by taking our cues, not from a republican platform, not from a democratic platform, but by humbling ourselves and and trying to trying [01:02:00] to read the bible and trying to uh, trying to pray, trying to to to process uh, what the Lord wants for us as being way upstream of our politics.

In other words, as I say at 1 point in the book I think the great the the great crisis in much of evangelicalism today is a tendency to view our faith through the prism of our politics rather than viewing our politics through the prism of our faith. And I think that if we can get that right, if we can get that piece of it right, then it's gonna solve a lot of our problems.

[01:02:40] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. That's a that's a good word and and aligns with what we are trying to do at Denison Forum, which is to help people think biblically, to live wholly and to act redemptively everywhere they can, including politics because it is a wonderful platform for us to be engaged in. We We talk about this often at Denison Forum. we have an an [01:03:00] opportunity as Americans, as people who get to participate in a political process.

We have opportunity and responsibility on a scale that most of the world is envious of, and and uh, certainly, the Biblical writers and Christians never knew anything of this level of freedom and opportunity of engagement. And so We have a lot to be grateful for even though we have some significant problems. And as you said probably a long road back to something that's better than what we've experienced the last number of years.

Tim, wanna thank you again for just being a part of the conversation. Thank you again for the book.

Would encourage everyone to pick up Tim's recent book, the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory, American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism, it's an important, important work and is helping a lot of conversations. Doctor Jim, as always, thank you for your participation. Mostly wanna thank our audience for taking time to listen to us. Thank you for your prayers. Thank you [01:04:00] for your support financially.

We are a donor supported ministry. We're grateful for all the ways that you are helping us along, and we pray that this conversation has been helpful to you as well. Please rate, review us on your podcast platform, and share this with others as God leads you to do that. We'll see you next time on the Denison Forum Podcast.