

# How to be Christian in an anti-Christian culture

## TRANSCRIPT

Recorded March 5, 2024 | Released March 21, 2024

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**Dr. Mark Turman:** This is the Denison Forum podcast. I'm Mark Turman, executive director at Denison Forum. If you're unfamiliar, or this is new to you, the Denison Forum, as well as the Denison Forum podcast exists to equip Christians to think biblically, to live holy, and to serve redemptively, to make the world a better place for everybody until Jesus comes again.

We sometimes talk about that as being culture changing Christians, people who are salty bright for the kingdom of God so that People will come to know all of the love that God has for them in the life that Jesus makes possible. Today, we are talking with a new friend, Aaron Wren. If he is new to you, let me give you a little bit of an introduction.

Aaron is a consultant and a writer in Indianapolis. He is a senior fellow at American Reformer and a former senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Public Research, a former partner as well with Accenture. He has written extensively on cities, culture. The future of the evangelical church and men's issues.

We're going to get into some of those things with him in just a moment. He's releasing a new book that I highly recommend having just finished it. We're going to talk about some of those things today. The book is called life in the negative world, confronting challenges in an anti Christian culture.

Aaron, welcome to the Denison forum podcast.

**Aaron Renn:** Thanks for having me on.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** So

**Aaron Renn:** And the book has already been released, by the way, so it's, it's out.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** All right. So, it's doing well, I would suspect again, just a really, really accessible, helpful tool for Christians. And I would even say, especially Christian leaders, pastors leaders of institutions really, really helpful in framing where we are.

And maybe that's a good place for us to start, Aaron. That we are living in what the title of the book is all about, the negative world. Even our own founder here at Denison Ministries, Jim Denison has written in similar ways about this. He wrote a paper, even going back 15 years ago, how Christianity has gone from being respected to being irrelevant to now being viewed as dangerous.

You use similar terms to that in terms of talking about how we were viewed positively. After the end of the second world war, 1950 and forward, how we move from being viewed with respect and being viewed positively to being viewed neutrally. I thought that was an interesting insight that I hadn't considered before.

And then how we are now living in this negative context. Describe that for us. What do you mean by the world of negativity toward Christianity that we're experiencing?

**Aaron Renn:** Sure. So America, unlike Europe, never had a state church or an official established religion, but we did have a sort of softly institutionalized generic Protestantism as our default national religion for most of our history. Recently as the 1950s, about half of all adults attended church every Sunday.

That was actually the high watermark of church attendance in America. We had prayer and Bible reading in our public schools. We were adding under God to the pledge of allegiance in God, we trust to our money. And you know, it was, it was basically a Christian normative society at that time. Then in the 1960s, this sort of Protestant consensus began to unravel.

Christianity began to go into decline in America. And it's a decline that has continued to the present day, alas. And so I divide that period of decline into three phases, or worlds, that I call the positive world, the neutral world, and the negative world. So the positive world lasts from, say, 1944, excuse me, 1964 to 1994.

And I want to be clear, this is a period of decline for Christianity. All is not going well. Church attendance is down. The sexual revolution is happening, etc. And yet Christianity is still basically viewed positively in society. To be known as a good church going man makes you seem like an upstanding member of society.

Christian moral norms are the basic moral norms of society, and if you violate them you can even get into trouble. 1994, we hit a tipping point. And enter what I call the neutral world, which lasted from 1994 to 2014, where Christianity is not seen positively anymore, but it's not really seen negatively yet either.

It's just one more lifestyle choice among many in a sort of pluralistic public square. And Christian morality has a sort of residual effect, if you will, in society. Then in 2014, we had a second tipping point. And enter what I call the negative world. Where, for the first time in the

400 year history of America, official elite culture now views Christianity negatively or certainly at least skeptically, perhaps we can talk about that difference.

To be known as a Bible believing Christian does not help you get a job at Goldman Sachs or Google, quite the opposite. In fact, Christian morality is now expressly repudiated by society, and indeed Christianity in some respects is seen as the new leading threat to the new public moral order. All of the rhetoric around, for example, Christian nationalism gets very much at this.

And so this has been a very Dislocating experience for a lot of American evangelicals who are really struggling to adapt to this negative world. And we see the consequences within the church and such.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And would you, would you say that part of what we're seeing in this this new period that's now by your dating, which is really helpful by the way is aware a lot of the fear and anxiety that is coming, especially that we're seeing within the church. Is coming because of this kind of new found hostility that's breeding a sense of uncertainty as well as a sense of anxiety within the church.

Is that part of what's going on?

**Aaron Renn:** Sure. I would say it's very psychologically dislocating. You know, if we go back to the positive world, the kind of paradigmatic organization of evangelical life in the positive world was Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell's organization. If you just think about the very name Moral Majority speaks to a world in which it was at least plausible to claim that Christians spoke for a majority of the country.

Now, it might not have been true even then. But like Nixon's silent majority, it was at least a plausible claim. And again, America had always been this overwhelmingly strong, staunch Protestant nation. And, you know, although actually there is still a plurality Protestant population in the country.

Definitely now down to a minority. And so when you are the essentially historic, you view yourself as part of the historic majority demographic of the country, and very much part of. You know, the mainstream are at the center of the story. And now you find yourself dislocated from that. You find yourself there.

That is a very difficult thing to adjust to. Whereas if you think about it, if you or I moved to say France and we were sort of a minority in France, you know, we wouldn't necessarily bother us all that much because we expect to be that. But I think a lot of times evangelicals have expected that they and their values should be.

Predominant in the culture and now that that is being shot, you know, kind of no longer sustainable to have as a viewpoint. It certainly causes a lot of anxiety. and consternation. Understandably so.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And, and, and really some good handles about expectations and a sense of loss I think pervades some of this conversation and oftentimes people interpret change as loss. And so there's that feeling. One thing Aaron, that's really helpful in your work here is how you attach. Notable figures to some of these things to kind of help us think through them.

If we're, if we're thinking about 1950s and even at least into the early 1960s, if not more, we're thinking Billy Graham and we're thinking how he is this kind of quasi evangelical Pope, if you will as a leader multiple times, you know, recognized by things like time magazine as the man of the year, that type of thing.

And then you see in the seventies as a reaction, I guess, to the pivot that occurred in 1964, you see Jerry Falwell rise as the leader of the moral majority, and we'll get into some of the other names and leaders that you identify as well. But talk about how this is in some way, perhaps was reading this, I was thinking, okay, is, is Aaron trying to lead me to the understanding of, okay, the church has failed for the last 60 years or is that too simplistic of an answer?

Is it that you know, population growth from all over the world has changed the demographic profile of the country. Is it also the case, I think you allude to this some in your book, That where you are geographically in the United States means that this experience of negativity is very different. Can you kind of unpack some of those things?

**Aaron Renn:** Sure. You know, what, what are the things, I would not call the church a failure during this period of decline. In fact, you might even say that evangelicalism itself was a product of that decline, being able to fill the vacuum left over from the decline of sort of mainline Protestantisms. I just had a guest on my own podcast yesterday.

Talking about the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. So if you go back to like the 40s and 50s, a character like Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a mainline Protestant you know, professor at Union Theological Seminary, he was the guy on the cover of Time magazine. You know, these sort of Protestant titans sort of, ruled the scene.

And Neo evangelicalism, as it came to be called, is pioneered by people like Billy Graham was growing. It is sort of emerged in the 40s as well. It was starting to grow, but in the 50s, America was still basically a mainline dominated society. And as. You know, again, this period of decline hit, it really hit the mainline churches hard.

They started losing people, and this was recognized early. There was a lot of research done in the 1970s seeking to understand and reverse this, and they were really never able to do it. And as the

sort of mainline Protestantism receded, Evangelicalism had superior adaptability and was able to essentially grow to replace.

What the place that used to be occupied by the mainline Protestantism as the default sort of expression of Christianity in America. And so 1 of the things I lay out in the book is that there were these different groups or strategies that emerged out of the evangelical church that were responses to these periods of decline.

And I identify three major ones. It's not an exhaustive list. There are other things that are going on. Two were from the positive world and one was from the neutral world. So in the positive world, these were culture war and seeker sensitivity. In the neutral world is what I call cultural engagement. So if you think about again, positive world culture war.

Again, got going in the 1970s with people like Jerry Falwell like Pat Robertson. And this was part of a broader movement at that time that was known as the New Right. You know, up through the 1970s and even into the early 1980s, Evangelicals had been Democrats. You know, Billy Jimmy Carter was the first Evangelical president.

1976 was called the Year of the Evangelical because of he was elected and there was a lot of consternation over what it meant for this Bible thumper Jimmy Carter to become president. He was a Southern Baptist. And but as, as things emerged with this new right movement there was sort of a realignment of evangelicals into the Republican party.

And what the culture war people wanted to do is they saw what was happening in the culture and their goal, their goal was to fight back. They wanted to mobilize politically to take back the country. And again, they, they thought of themselves as the moral majority and that's the religious right that we all know, which is still with us today.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Mm hmm.

**Aaron Renn:** A second group got going about the same time. Which is the Seeker Sensitivity Movement, pioneered by people like Bill Hybels at Willow Creek Church in suburban Chicago, and then in the early 1980s, Rick Warren at Saddleback Church in Orange County. And these people saw that people weren't going to church anymore, but their response is, well, why don't we create a church people will actually attend?

And so the origin story of Willow Creek is that Bill Hybels went door to door in suburban Chicago asking people why they didn't go to church. And he says, I got an earful. And so he, let's design a church people will go to. And this became the sort of progenitor of the non denominational suburban megachurch that we all know.

So, You know, they got rid of these denominational distinctives, you know, stodgy hymns and choir robes. It was more informal. It had contemporary music, more topical therapeutic sermons, that sort of thing. And I think, again, this is with us and we know it well today.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** hmm.

**Aaron Renn:** A third strategy really emerged in the 1990s with the resurgence of the cities under people like Mayor Rudy Giuliani in New York.

There was a key, that was a key moment is, is it really reshaped a sort of landscape of the country demographically? And here we saw people like Tim Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York reach into the cities. And I think there are a couple of ways to think about cultural engagement. One is you can think about it as a secret sensitivity for the cities.

Just as Heibel's and Warren, you know, reached emerging baby boomer suburbia, Keller and his followers reached. People in big cities and college towns and places like that. You can also think of it as the opposite of the culture war, rather than fighting with people all the time, which isn't necessarily that fun for most folks.

They're like, why don't we take advantage of this pluralistic public square to talk to people instead? Let's have a conversation. Let's engage, let's dialogue. And we believe that we can articulate Christianity in a compelling way. In that environment, which they were correct about. And this, this is group is still here with us today.

And so I think you can, in a sense, think of these as having a roughly geographic split, certainly in terms of their leaders. You know, the culture war was more rural. Seeker sensitivity is more suburban. Cultural engagement is more urban. There's also a class divide element with, you know, the, the, the cultural engagers tend to be more upper middle class.

Heavily educated seeker sensitivity off, you know, more solidly, middle class suburban and then again, the rural areas you know, middle to working class et cetera. So there's, there's a lot going on. So I don't want to say these were just purely strategies. These were different groups of people who had sort of different sensibilities.

And all of that. Evangelicalism was never a monolithic movement. Now of course I would also, if you look at the evangelical landscape, it's much more complicated than that. There are churches I think you can slot into these categories, but there are many others. That don't fit cleanly into one or the other.

There are also different, other different movements out there as well, like the emerging church in its era or the neo Anabaptist movement. But I do think these three strategies sort of represent three sort of emphases of how evangelicalism has operated that I think recognize people recognize today. And I think the key is they were all somewhat successful in their own ways.

And, you know, got it, got it something real that was going on.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** And you talk about the adaptability. All of these are in some ways, adaptive strategies and movements in many ways. And I said, very helpful for for. framing kind of where we have now arrived. And like I said, attaching names is really helpful as well. You know, I, I had the experience personally as a pastor during these, this season of, you know, running to Willow Creek and listening to Bill Hybel say things like excellence you know, excellence honors God and it's inspires people, and then, I can remember being a few months later in a context with Rick Warren, who said, you know what, people are turning excellence into an idol.

And we believe we live by the, okay, we need to do our best, but it's good enough. We have a bias for action. Let's go. And they kind of had a healthy tension, maybe in those kinds of things, but they were all pursuing this trying to, to adapt ministry models. In order to carry out what we all hopefully was, was the priority, which was to communicate the gospel.

But they had an expectation. You talk about this a lot. They had an expectation and an assumption that the people that they were talking to, especially those people that were not in church at least had a framework of understanding. They, if they weren't in church, they kind of knew that they probably should have been, or that the society was

**Aaron Renn:** Exactly.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** them.

So a lot of, of what your book helps us to do. Is to, is to now reframe our expectation. So how should we go about doing that? What what in this now new situation of negativity, what should be our expectation moving forward?

**Aaron Renn:** Well, that's a very broad question. Is there something specific you wanted to dig in, dig in on there or,

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Well, when. Is there, is there an expectation when we're talking to our neighbors or when we're working, when we go to work and somebody says, what did you do for the weekend? And you say, well, you know, I, I went to my kid's soccer game on saturday and then I went to church on sunday. What should be the expectation of that person that sits in the cubicle or the office next to me in terms of their possible or likely framework.

About Christianity.

**Aaron Renn:** yeah. I mean, I think there's a lot to that. I mean, one of the things that I say in the book that I think is important is to recognize that we're now not a moral majority anymore. We're certainly a moral minority. Now we're not, you know, we're not a. Tiny group of you know, a tiny

remnant either or anything of that nature you know, there's still tons of evangelical people around the world.

And in many places, it's still, in some respects, a Christian normative environment, Christian friendly environment, depending on where you live. But I think we have to understand that today, sort of like. I think it's just like the early church. You know, if you're Paul writing letters to these early churches, they're under no illusion that they are doing something different than what the Roman empire is doing and what the people in Rome are doing.

And we need to have that same expectation. We need to expect that we are going to be out of sync with a culture. We also need to expect that it may be. A bridge too far for us to think that we can influence the culture, or, you know, the laws of society in a lot of ways that we might want to do. So, and I, I really think electoral politics.

Distracts from this you know, 1 of the things I mentioned in the book. Is Rod Rear's 2017 book, The Benedict Option, which talked about some of this. And, you know, evangelicals basically didn't like The Benedict Option. And as I think back about that there's a bunch of reasons for that. But I think one of them is his book basically came out just as Donald Trump was elected president.

And he had written the book originally on the assumption that Hillary was gonna win. But then Donald Trump wins. And, you know, Donald Trump may win this year. We don't know who's gonna win the election. And the Republican Party is alive and well, you know, and I don't know if it's well, but it's alive. It certainly can win elections.

It can get a lot of things done. And, but I think we can really make a mistake if we conflate. The electoral prospects of the Republican Party with the standing of evangelicalism in America, because what I think we're seeing is a shift towards an essentially post Christian right in America with many younger people.

Tuned into secular influencers is sort of, you know, nationalist online thought, or maybe they're following the hedonistic barstool sports type model. You know, you also have many of the, you know, Republican donors and elites who are not especially interested in things like social conservatism.

And so just because evangelicals are overwhelmingly Republican and may vote Republican and Republicans may win does not mean that you know, evangelicals are going to carry the day in the culture. And so I think, you know, when you're, when you're in that minority position, you really have to be wise and prudential about how you engage.

I don't think you need to put your, you know, light under a bushel or anything like that. But fundamentally, I think it's going to be difficult to. You know, expect other people to go along



with what we might want. And we should also expect that, you know, doing things like mission and evangelism is going to be more challenging because people don't have those categories.

You don't have that latent. You know, again, you're asking people why they don't go to church. There's so much embedded in the assumptions of asking a question like that. The assumption is like, people sort of have this idea that they should be going to church. You know, that there was like a lot of background knowledge of Christianity.

That could be assumed by the culture. Those things are not true today. And so you end up with that and it really becomes you know, if you don't have your expectations calibrated correctly, what you end up doing is you become very apocalyptic. You know, in a culture, you know, I grew up kind of an end times fervor in the 1980s and all about that.

And candidly, I don't think the apocalyptic mindset is especially helpful. I think you can also lash out in sort of, you know, kind of lash out at people if you think it's going the wrong way and this and that. And so I think we need to just, you know, calibrate our expectations correctly. And move forward with that, you know, and I think there's a lot going on there, but I think, you know, we have to, I think we have to realize that, like, we're doing something different than the world is at this point.

Just like the early church was doing something different than Rome was doing. We're not. Doing base, we're not like part of the same project in the sense. And what we want to do is kind of like correct course on society. Society has gone off in a different direction, and we need to understand that.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** right. And we, we need to, you know, it goes in a lot of directions. I think from implication, we, we could possibly foresee the day where you know, the Republican party or any, any political party for that matter might be in opposition to what biblically important. And we could find ourselves.

You know, very frustrated, disoriented and even angry about that. If that's where we're going to link our hopes, but it also goes in the direction. I'm just thinking as, you know, somebody who pastored churches for 35 years. If you're a Christian in a church and your church is not growing the way it used to grow, that you then look at that as your pastors failing or your leaders are failing, that that may not be the case because we may be in an era of negativity that results in churches that may be smaller, but they may be stronger.

I had a, a pastor friend of mine say to me recently, you know, we don't have. The, the kind of attendance that we used to had pre COVID. But the people that are here, especially the young people that are in their twenties and their thirties are more committed than they've ever been. That we've, we've somewhat clarified, and I think you call this out in your book we're seeing

more and more the end of cultural Christianity and it's giving way to, well, there may not be as many people embracing the faith, but those who do take it seriously.

Much more seriously is, is that a fair assessment?

**Aaron Renn:** I think that's a possibility. You know, Rod Rear has made that observation about Europe. That when he meets, you know, Christians in France or, you know, countries like that, that the young people are the ones that are the most Orthodox, the strongest, you know, they're not, you know, living off the fumes of yesterday's culture.

And, and I've actually observed some Generation Z. Guys who are surprisingly optimistic about the future. You know, they're thinking, Hey, it's, it's bad now, but you know, we're preparing for, you know, a harvest decades from now. Some guy when it is in seminary and he's like, yeah, you know, we're in decline now.

And of course there's, you're hearing a lot about a pastor shortage, that there's just a shortage in the talent pipeline. He's all that. It's like, I'm going in here now. Because I'm thinking, I think there's a good chance that, you know, down the road, 2050 or whenever it's going to be, there is going to be another growth cycle and it takes a long time of preparing yourself, you know, to be prepared to reap the harvest when that comes.

And so we're sowing and we're hopes of reaping later. And again, whether his predictions will prove accurate or not, I think it's a very optimistic view of the future. That's not sugarcoated. Either and so it'll be interesting to see what happens when I originally came up with this 3 worlds idea in 2014.

My thought was. There was going to be sort of a blow out, meaning. That as soon as it became socially disadvantageous to be a Christian in material ways, there'd be like a mass number of people leaving the church and we have seen shrinkage and we have seen the deconstruction movement and you cannot understand the deconstruction movement apart from the shift to the negative world.

Right? Whatever. They are telling you, are there reasons for deconstructing changes in the surrounding ambient culture are clearly a major driver of that. But we're also seeing, I think you know, changes within the church, because again, I said that it's negative towards the culture, but perhaps it might be more accurate to say it's skeptical, merely identifying as a Christian does not get you in trouble and society.

The key is that the contents of your Christianity cannot. Materially go against the secular ideologies. So nobody has a problem. Well, it's certainly not in secular society with the fact that the Reverend Raphael Warnock is a senator from Georgia, you know, because he's extremely liberal on all the issues.

You know, nobody in secular society. is giving Pete Buttigieg a hard time about being an Episcopalian. And so I do feel like this idea in which if you bring your beliefs in line with secular society, you will, you can retain your Christian identity and your standing, I think definitely puts a lot of pressure on people to find ways to try to do that.

And I certainly see. That's one of the biggest trends in the church. I don't think there's been as much theological updating, but there's certainly been enormous rhetorical updating, which is why large swathes of the church now talk, you know, incessantly about racial justice or refugees or that, you know, they're extraordinary.

They're as militant as any evangelical has ever been on those topics, but they're topics where they are in a hundred percent agreement with secular elite culture, the areas where they're in disagreement. Amen. They tend to minimize and, you know, even find ways to deemphasize even further than they used to.

So, like abortion, people don't want to talk about abortion. They want to talk about being holistically pro life. Let's talk about care for mothers and all of this stuff. And so I do think that's, that's going on. So we're going to see you know, I think the trend that I see is what I, you know, I call it the main line ization of the church, where essentially the, the evangelical church in many cases is drifting towards cultural synchronization and will probably experience something of a slower decline rather than the blowout.

But I do think, again, there's there are these you know, younger, more serious people. Now, with many of them, I do think there's a question to what extent they're some of their beliefs are animated by a theology versus sort of online, right? Politics. Again, I do think there's some conflating there of a certain populist political stands with being based as they might say.

With, with Christianity, where, you know, I think, I think we need to draw a clear distinction between the political realm and the church, not to say that Christians can't be active politically. I very much affirm that they can, but this merger of you know, essentially Christian doctrine with politics is there are 2 different spheres in which, you know, the, the Christian can operate.

And so I, so, so I do think we're, we're going through this, we're going through this sort of. I think destabilizing period where there's a lot of realignment. There's a lot of shifting there, there is, there is deconstruction and we will see what comes out on the other side. I would certainly expect the, the number of, of the faithful to decline significantly over the coming years.

I expect there to be challenges with a whole host of things, particularly in a lot of financial challenges, you know, is the baby boomers who've basically been propping these things up go away. Many Christian institutions have been heavily supported by essentially boomer money. That's going to cause a challenge for a lot of people.

And then I think things like, is there, are there a pipeline of like high quality people to even leave these churches? I mean, you know, we're seeing. Credible declines in some of these seminaries in terms of didn't say, you know, Gordon Conwell seminary there, you know, lost over half their attendees and a decade, which is incredible.

And they were going to sell their campus. I think they've backed off of that, but they were actually going to sell their campus and things like that. But those are the things that are going to be forced on a lot of these institutions that were built around yesterday's assumptions. And I think we're in a period of uncertainty, which is why I say.

Okay. One of my big themes from the book is the need to adopt the exploration mindset. We aren't like Bill Hybels, where we can just do some market research and design a church, and we're going to get back in business, so to speak. We're in a more fundamentally uncertain time. We have to be more comfortable walking by faith than by sight.

But I do, you know, and so we don't know how it's going to play out, but I do believe there's reason to believe that we can be adaptable again to this world as we were in the past, that Christianity is not having a going out of business sale that even if it were smaller it can still be a sizable number of people who are living faithfully and maybe even take their faith more seriously.

Than perhaps we did in the past.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And you, you call that out well in the, the section on basically a personal response, which is a first and foremost, a call to obedience that Christians are going to be confronted now with, are they willing to pay the cost to retain? a biblical orientation, a biblical worldview. You might want to, if someone would call it Orthodox Christian views rather than an accommodating road road that there's a call to obedience.

There's a call to excellence that I'd love to explore with you. And then also a call to resilience or perseverance. Many of those things obviously have. All kinds of scripture behind them and just all kinds of very helpful reminders about, okay, what could you do personally in this, in this orientation of, of being in a world that's hostile to Christianity in many ways, or negative, at least skeptical.

You can always be focused on this always should be focused on obedience and resilience. But let's talk about excellence for a minute. Why is it so important that Christians. Embrace this call to excellence. It, it kind of has a little bit of a, an echo of Bill Hybels, but it's, it's, you're talking about something different.

Than just what Hybels was talking about. Why is it important that Christians step forward with the idea that in this environment, we need to pursue excellence in all that we're doing?

**Aaron Renn:** Well, here I was somewhat inspired by Mark Null's book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* from 30 years ago, I believe, 25 years ago, where, you know, he's like, the scandal is there isn't an evangelical mind. And if you go again, if you go back to the 1950s and. You would say, well, there was mainline Protestantism, there was fundamentalism, there was this emerging neo evangelicalism, and they had tremendous differences.

Of opinion about things like the virgin birth You know, for example, the liberal protestants rejected miracles. They rejected maybe the divinity of christ. They rejected a lot of things But these people all shared in common a a christian cultural and ethical framework, you know You know moral framework for a society.

They really they all thought adultery was wrong, you know, for example And so in that era, you know, even many quote unquote secular People in the academy, we're, you know, we're still committed to things like, you know, objective truth, they were still shared many, you know, moral suppositions and ethical suppositions with Christianity and today that's just much less the case, you know, even in sort of.

Pure academia and, and forget about, you know, some of these humanities or social sciences where things are crazy, well, always been crazy, but like, even in the hard sciences now, you've got people who are, you know, starting to claim there's no, you know, no real biological basis to sex, you know, for example, things of that nature.

So, you know, the reality is we can no longer rely on. The secular world to provide accurate factual information you know, we can say, well, we disagree on these religious points, but we're going to have all these other things in common. Well, now we have much less in common. So we have to have much more internal expertise across a wide range of areas.

I think that's 1. The 2nd is, you know, the world is just harder today. The economist Tyler Cowen. Wrote a book called *Average is Over*. And the idea is that the middle class is sort of getting eviscerated and we see that, so do you want to get married today and stay married? That's hard. You know, a quarter of 40 year olds in America today have never been married.

A lot of, you know, these older people can't realize like, wow, you realize there's like a enormous segment of millennials and younger in America who are never going to get married and have kids. And so. And that is making its way into the church. And so, you know, Oh, you want to succeed economically today.

There are so many things in this world where it's the degree of difficulty dial on life is just harder than it used to be. So we have to be like, I think about people my age, I was Gen X. I graduated from high school in 1988. When I want to go to college, I'm like, ah, what college do I want to go to? I had pretty good grades and excellent grades.

It's like, ah, just go. Like today, this idea. It's like a 12 year or even more carefully stewarded March to try to get into a college today. It's so competitive to get in even to state you today versus what it used to be. And so it's, it's an enormous, difficult, it's, it's just a more difficult society. And so, again, these concepts are not theological concepts.

I'm not a again, I always tell people I'm not a pastor or a theologian, but when I look at this world, I say, man, we all have to elevate our game. If we think that we are going to survive in this world, you know, in terms of our faith and other dimensions of it.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, it's important to point that out, you know, because we're, we all live in this mindset, this expectation, right? That The world is getting better, stronger, faster and, and therefore quote unquote easier which is not necessarily the case. A lot of the things that we've made advances in are great, but that doesn't mean that it's automatically easier or quote unquote better and a lot for us to think about, but your book also is very hopeful in that there is opportunity in the midst of all of this uncertainty and even in the midst of this negativity you talk about.

How there is a growing sense of, of hope and opportunity for the church and for the gospel. You, you mentioned the, the Gen Zers and their optimism talk about this a little bit from the standpoint you, you call out the idea of pre evangelism which many may not even be familiar with the term. What do you mean by pre evangelism?

And what are some examples of that Christians in churches could embrace?

**Aaron Renn:** Sure. Well, first, I do want to say just in general, that there are a lot of opportunities to reach people for the gospel today. Some of them are flat out a result of the problems in our society. When you look at record drug overdose deaths, declining life expectancy, deaths of despair, despair reveals to people their need for a savior.

And so. The church has always been strong in reaching people who are homeless, reaching ex offenders, reaching people who are struggling with addiction. These are things that will continue to bring people to Christ. And the needs are so incredible in our society, the church can't even hope to, you know, really scratch the surface of what's needed.

But I think that traditional form of, of ministry is going to be particularly effective. I also feel like people aren't necessarily searching for Jesus, you know, use the seeker sensitivity model. I don't think they're necessarily seeking for Jesus, but they're seeking for something. And I really got, I didn't start writing about religion until about a.

You know, I, I saw a decade or so ago, all these young men who were turning to secular influencers instead of the church. And this was even before Jordan Peterson was there. This

predated Jordan Peterson. Jordan Peterson really benefited from this turn and of course became gigantic. And now we see millions of men tuning into Jordan Peterson to Joe Rogan,

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Mm hmm.

**Aaron Renn:** You know, kind of the dubious Andrew Tate, so many of these guys.

And it's kind of embarrassing, candidly, that so many secular influencers have reached hundreds of thousands or even millions of men, and they're looking for, they're looking for something that they're not getting the church. And of course, there are some of them who simply don't want the Christian message.

They're interested in, in kind of an evil lifestyle, but many of them are not. They're just looking for like, you know, the meaning of life or what have ways that you know, Peterson speaks to them. And so I think there's a huge opportunity for us to engage on the big questions. I don't think we're speaking to the questions that, you know, young people have today.

And we need to be more compelling on that point. Now, when it comes to pre evangelism what I'm basically saying with that is, you know, we don't have the cultural categories that someone like Billy Graham could rely on at his crusades, where again, people probably who are there, they probably basically knew the Christian religion, at least something.

Maybe, maybe they had a, they didn't really understand the gospel. They believed it's like, you got to do more good than bad to go to heaven or something like that. But they certainly thought there was a God. They thought there was right and wrong. They probably knew a lot of the Bible stories. They, you know, again, they probably had this latent belief that there was, they should be in church, that there's going to be a judgment day and, you know, you could just preach the gospel at these people.

Well, today, today's young people in ways it's hard for, you know, people like you and I to appreciate simply don't know anything at all about Christianity. They've certainly heard of Jesus, but they don't know the Bible, you know, Oh, Noah, Noah and the ark. What's that? Like, it's really amazing. Like even basic stuff, they don't know anything about.

And. So we can't rely on that and so much like, you know, Paul going to Mars Hill in Athens. He's got to find ways to relate to the existing cultural touchstones and will use that, that people have. And I, you know, I, I call this pre evangelism is you've got to give people the categories. Again, I didn't make this up, but many people probably talked about this, but the idea is we have to give people the basic categories to even understand Christianity and what it is.

You know, you can't just say, you know, today you should invite Jesus into your heart when people don't know anything about that. What would be that people don't even know what that

means. Means they don't have any categories for it. Now, of course, people can always be supernaturally reached by God to the power of the Holy Spirit, any situation.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Right.

**Aaron Renn:** So I don't want to take away you know, God's sovereign ability to act in those ways at the same time. You know, we need to invest some work in, you know, communicating in a world where we can't, can't assume that. And that's where you know, I mentioned in the book that he gets us ad campaign for Jesus that was famous for their Super Bowl ads.

And of course I wrote this mostly about last year's Super Bowl ads in the work that they were doing in the past, they've had a complete management change there, it appears. And I don't like their new directions. I think it went off the rails this year, which is really, you know, So I'm not talking about 2024 Super Bowl ads, but if you go back to their ads from like 2023, a lot of what they were trying to do was present Jesus as relatable.

Jesus is someone who, he gets us, he gets us. Why does he get us? Because he was made in all ways like unto his brothers. It's, it's a message of the incarnation that he became fully, God became fully human, just like us. He can in fact, relate to our weaknesses. He can relate to our circumstances. And that's an important, you know, part of understanding, you know, the mission of Christ, that, that idea that his.

You know, he, he became like us. And so I think that that, and it's like, well, why should you care or want to be? And so I think those are things that are like trying to get people interested, like, oh, why, maybe I should want to learn more about this Jesus guy. Now, again, I'm not defending every single thing that they did.

We're saying that that's the best use of funds ever, but it is at least addressing a legitimate problem in the world. I would say that,

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And, and, and communicates on a, on a broad scale, obviously, and, and hopefully has some value and some impact. You also tell the story from a personal standpoint that really illustrates the power of hospitality. How can just Christians and their personal hospitality opening up their homes you even creating, you, you talk about things like Christians that, you know Operate coffee shops and other types of stores.

How is hospitality potentially a pre evangelism method or tool that really needs to be reclaimed because we live in a very isolated. Lonely culture right now that that presents us with an opportunity to be people who are hospitable in a unique way. Talk about that for a minute.

**Aaron Renn:** yeah. So again, it's, it's a lonely world out there. People are more socially isolated than ever, you know, people are spending all their times on their phone scrolling. They're not



getting together in real life. You know, people even, you know, the way they meet each other to date online is online dating.

It's not even in the real world anymore. And I, you know, I really saw this in New York City and it was very obvious in my church in New York that a lot of the people who were there who would come through the door, you could tell they were looking for some sort of personal connection that they were looking for relationship and for community.

And I think that you know, again, people in this world are hurting in ways that we don't appreciate. They have, you know, they have pains that we might not know. Maybe, maybe they look like they've got their life together. They aren't the drug addict, perhaps, but maybe they are lonely. Maybe they're feeling like, you know, is this all there is in life?

You know, or, you know, they want to be married and they're single and they're frustrated in that. And so I think there are opportunities for us to simply, you know, be a good neighbor to those people. I do think hospitality and you know, again, one of the things we would do in New York, we would occasionally invite, like, my wife and I would invite you know, singles who are part of our church to come over for dinner.

And, you know, New York is not a big invite people over for dinner kind of city. It's, you know, people have small apartments and all that stuff. And, you know, so, but, but, but people always appreciated it. I mean, I have to tell you, people really do appreciate it when it shows like, oh, you actually do care about us.

And so I think, I think those are things. And again, in a world where relationships are declining. If you show a genuine concern for other people that could be there. Now, again, I would just say this idea that you, you invite somebody over for dinner one night and your work is done. The truth is real relationships with people take time to build and require spending regular time with people.

And we don't have the capacity to. Essentially have personal relationships that are meaningful with more than a handful of people. And so I certainly you know, I certainly think that's something we should do, but we should also like, realize that like, you know, just a superficial thing is probably only going to make a small impact in people's lives.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. Did I lose you?

**Aaron Renn:** I'm here. Yeah.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Okay. Yeah. It looks like there's a little bit of a technology freeze that will clean up. Yeah, but helpful. Let's take, let's take this to a, an institutional approach. You, you bring out the, the thing that's pretty well known, I guess, for people nowadays, which is the

distrust of institutions on all levels, not just distrust of the church, but distrust of government, distrust of education almost any environment healthcare.

Talk a little bit about how we need to reset our expectations about institutions. One of the things I took away from the book is just a realization that, you know, what all institutions have corruption always have always will because it has human beings in it. But talk a little bit about why institutions are important and how there's an opportunity in that environment for us to express the gospel and to express the difference that our faith can make as we operate in those environments.

**Aaron Renn:** Yeah. So, I mean, institutional trust is down and there's a good reason. It deserves to go down. You know, our institutions are not performing. And I think there's this idea that like, well, these institutions are critical to the health of our society. Therefore we must stay invested in these institutions.

And I'm like, well, I would agree that they're critical for the healthy functioning society, but many of these institutions are corrupt. And I don't want to, you know, legitimate their corruption. Yeah. By putting my seal of approval on it. And so when we're in an environment in which trust is declining in society.

If we're a church or we're any other institution, then stewarding the trustworthiness of our organization becomes paramount. A friend of mine was the chairman of the board of a Christian camp. And when he took over as chairman, he wrote out his goals. Here's what I would like to accomplish during my term as chairman.

And one of the things he says is, you know, we want to make this a trustworthy place for funds and families, that people will trust us, that we You know, if they're, if their families come here or if we, they give their money here that, you know, we're going to be proper stewards of that. And so that's super important.

And the truth is. That the church has not always done that, you know, that we have had churches that are sort of cults of personality, you know, dominated by imperial pastors. We've got sexual improprieties, we've got financial improprieties, we've got people that haven't handled abuse cases very well.

There are a lot of logs that we need to take out of our own eyes of the church. And so I think. You know, we really, you know, again, it's not that we will ever be free of that because as you say of sinful fallen man, but we have to be working to self consciously steward the, the trustworthiness of our organization.

So that's what I talk about in terms of trustworthiness. So I say that basic trustworthiness. Competence, having people who know what they're doing and are actually, you know, because

we have a competence crisis in America, you know, let's be honest, you know, we're, we, we, we're struggling. That's why with, you know, you know, all these door plugs are falling out of planes and the airplanes blowing out, like what's going on, you know, it's like, it's just like affecting so much of our society as well.

We need to be competent. missional integrity, which is to say, we need to know what the mission of our organization is, and we need to hold firm to that. In this, like, structural integrity, like the hull of a ship, or the fuselage of an airplane. That when the pressures of the negative world bear down, we don't deform.

We don't all of a sudden Pivot in some radically new direction, and that's always the the danger, I think, of evangelicalism. The adaptability means we're often blown here and there by the winds and where we glom onto the next trend. How do we certainly adapt to changing times? Well, at the same time, understanding, you know, here is our mission and understanding what that is.

And holding firm to it because there's a lot of people and I know pastors hear it every day from people who are complaining. I want you to talk more about this. I want you to talk less about this. And how do you say, no, this is what we do. And here's where we are and like, be even willing to let people walk away and say, I'm sorry, we're not doing that.

Those are very, that's, that's important. And then again, I think, you know, as I said, the intergenerational perspective, I think is an important one as well. So many churches, you know, led by a charismatic. founding pastor, and then when he's left, they struggle. And so we need to think about that. We can't be like Hezekiah from the Bible who says, well, as long as everything's great in my day, who cares after I'm gone, which was basically his perspective.

And I think we should care very much about what happens when we're no longer on stage.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And I think there's a really great call out here to church leaders, particularly pastors that you know, there's a lot of pressure, has been a lot of pressure for the last couple of decades on pastors to be experts about everything. And those that could appear to be so, became perhaps more popular.

You, you make a good call out that pastors don't have to be, and shouldn't be experts in everything, but they can leverage the giftedness of others. And they can connect people to others that have expertise that is biblically grounded. But they also have particular depth in terms of a field of study that can be helpful to Christians whether it be in finance or in education or in technology or healthcare.

Pastors don't have to know everything, but they can be gatekeepers to getting people to really rock solid information that. Other Christians are developing. I think that's a lot of what your ministry and work is about and others as well, but that pastors can help connect people to those

resources rather than trying to be the subject matter expert on every single topic, which is just too overwhelming for anybody.

And it's something that we need to think more deeply about. One of these areas that. That you go into at the end of the book is just I think you termed it in terms of getting our sexual, our sexual house in order with just a few minutes left. Talk about that and why this particular area of sexualities, particularly gender is so important for us to think well and to think biblically as well as to think with the best information available to us medically and psychologically, why is that such a critical area for us to really focus on?

**Aaron Renn:** Well, I mean, I think traditionally we would have said that the family is the normative institution in which people build their lives. And that's becoming less the case. We're becoming a society that is post familial. That is to say, large numbers of people are never getting married and not having kids.

We have marriages that are unstable. You know, the divorce rates actually declined a bit. That's mostly because the marriage rate has fallen and yes, if you look at church-going evangelicals, you know, divorce rates are lower. We still have too much divorce. We still have a lot of frustrated singles who are struggling to get married.

And I think the message from the church has been the wrong message. The message has been don't make an idol out of the family. It's been, you might have the gift of singleness. And while I think we obviously need to be a hospitable place in a welcoming place for those who aren't married. We can't capitulate to the culture on post familialism. And if you look at the teachings of, you know, the evangelical church, it's almost all on gender things. It always comes down to things like, oh, is it complementarian or egalitarian and stuff like that. And if you're, but you know what, to be honest, if you're not married, who cares? At the end of the day, the answers are a lot of those things.

The, again, the, the challenges people are facing and like, what are the dynamics of online dating and how it works? Church people don't have a clue. We're not even talking about it. So we're not even talking about how to help people understand the importance of getting married, helping them get married, stay married, have flourishing families.

That's going to be critical in the future. And again, there's so much that we're not even talking about. That's the actual longest chapter of my book. I don't want to go into it all today, but I said, here's so many things that we just basically don't even talk about. And because we're too busy having debates about whether women can be pastors or other things, not that those aren't important debates to be had, or they're not, they're like matters of irrelevance.

But there's a whole slew of stuff we're not talking about. And that's why people are going to Jordan Peterson, because he is talking about that stuff. And the influencers are talking about that stuff. We're not even engaged on the issues.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** And so important for us to have people that will step up and do some really deep thinking and some, some good communication in those areas. You know, Christianity can hold its own. And. And we need people, you know, I love in so much how you call out that evangelicals could learn a lot from our Catholic friends who has have lived for decades in many ways as being this group that's been not always welcome at the table and how they developed institutions and how they had developed their thinking at a greater depth because they just had to, they weren't welcomed into the main flow of of the culture in many ways, like evangelicals were as we just have a moment to finish up here, Aaron, just wonder, what is it that most gives you hope having finished this work and this analysis, what is most giving you hope about where Christianity is in this culture

**Aaron Renn:** There's still a lot of evangelicals out there and they've remained by and large faithful. And so, when you hit, when you're, we're now 10 years into the negative world it hasn't precipitated a mass exodus from the church. And so I think that's something that we can feel positively about. That you know, it, it does not appear, and I always like to argue against this idea that Christianity is going out of business in the United States.

Again, not everything is, is going great, but we're still alive and kicking.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** and maybe that, that gift of adaptability while staying biblically anchored, but adaptable in many ways will serve us well in this, in this new order of things as well. Just again, want to. Recommend to everyone this book that Aaron has released. It's called life in the negative world, confronting challenges in an anti Christian culture.

Aaron, thank you for the book and for the work. Thank you for the conversation today. We hope many, many will pick up the book and grow from it, be equipped because of it. And I want to thank our audience today as well for listening in. We're grateful for your attention. Please subscribe. Rate review us as we often ask you to do that'll help people find the podcast and obviously share this with family and friends as a way of encouraging and equipping them as well.

Aaron blessings on your ministry and we look forward to a future conversation with you. All right.

**Aaron Renn:** Thanks for having me.

**Dr. Mark Turman:** You bet. God bless you. We'll see you next time on the Denison forum podcast.