

Being Christian in today's culture Episode 8:

How does a Christian transform the culture?

TRANSCRIPT

May 13, 2024 | May 23, 2024

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

[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Welcome back. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, executive director of Denison Forum. And we're glad to have you as a part of the Denison Forum podcast today, sitting down again with our cultural apologist, Dr. Jim Denison, Dr. Jim say, hello,

[00:00:15] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I'm glad to see you today. Mark, how are you?

[00:00:18] **Dr. Mark Turman:** doing well. We're glad to have yet another conversation. We're finishing up our series today.

Seems like it's gone pretty fast on what it means to be a Christian in today's culture. Today is the last episode where we're going to kind of wrap all of this up and tie a bow on it. As we talk about the topic of cultural engagement we've been trying to have some clarity conversations that we hope are helping you to think biblically, to live holy and to act redemptively to use your influence wherever that may be.

In your family, in your church, in your community, in your job, wherever God gives you influence that you would use that influence in a way that helps to draw people closer into a relationship with God, what we like to call being salt and light and helping the world to flourish in a biblical kind of way.

Jesus said that he came, that we might have life, have it to the abundant, have it to the full, and that each of us has a part in helping that to become a reality. In every good way that we can to bring the kingdom of God into our world. Today until Jesus comes again, want to remind everybody that what we're talking about on these podcasts are actually built on a foundation of what we call white papers written by Dr. Denison on each of these eight different topics. And you can find those at our website, Denison forum. org. You can find them in the show notes of every one of the podcasts. Would encourage you to go, especially if you're a teacher, a leader, or if you just want to understand these ideas at a deeper level, go back and read those white papers,

there's additional information there, their scriptural foundation, there are other links that might be helpful to you.

And we want to encourage you to go and use that material in every way that would help you to not only be more equipped, but also to equip others. And so you'll find that resource along with these podcasts. We keep talking about living Jesus's greatest and first commandment to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And then from that foundation and from that relationship to love your neighbor as yourself, to create and cultivate biblical flourishing. Let me remind everybody of the things that we've talked about as a definition and a framework for biblical flourishing. We said that there was the embracing of biblical truth and authority.

Out of that, there is a necessity of personal faith in Jesus Christ as your forgiver, as your leader, as your King, that you need to embrace the sanctity of all life, that all of us are created equally in the eyes of God and inherently valuable because of that. We talked about biblical righteousness, things like racial harmony and reconciliation, immigration.

We talked about things like justice and what does it mean to pursue biblical equality? We talked recently about biblical sexuality. We've even at Denison Forum released a new book in this category that we call sacred sexuality that you might want to check out, and then last time we talked about political civility, which we all know will only get more and more needed as we move forward in the coming months toward another national election.

But all of that is really a foundation for us to come and then say, okay how does that look? What does it mean to become active as a cultural missionary that we sometimes talk about that God doesn't want us to be cultural warriors. He really would rather us be missionaries for him and for his message in our areas of influence.

And so that's really where we want to go today. As we talk about being Christian in today's culture. Jim, let's, let's start right there with the idea of cultural engagement. Maybe that term's not familiar to people. What do you mean when you say cultural engagement for a healthy Christian? What does it mean to have what you have sometimes talked about as a cultural missionary mindset?

What is that and how do you get one?

[00:04:24] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, it's a great question and it's a good place to start. Andy Crouch's book on engaging culture really was helpful for me at that point. And it really changed my thinking in some ways that it's not enough to try to understand the culture. You really are called to be a culture change agent in the kingdom of God.

Salt changes what it touches. Light changes the world. And so we know we can't change hearts. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. It's God working through us. But nonetheless, our goal needs to be to see divorce rates go down, to see sex trafficking stop, to see drug abuse go down, to see the culture different because of our engagement with So that's what we're after here.

We're trying to equip Christians to be able to use their influence in the power of the Holy Spirit in a way that makes a practical, tangible kingdom difference to the glory of God. That's what I mean by engaging this. I mean, engaging with a view to transformation, engaging with a view to it being different because we were here.

How will the world be different because of me today? Is the question that I need to be asking that I think all of us need to be asking

[00:05:27] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And Jim, do you think there's some sense in which that idea is just organic or intuitive to what happens in a person when they become a Christian and then how much of it, if any, needs to be intentionally thought out or pursued. You know, you talk about salt, you don't have to tell salt to be salt, right?

Salt just is salt. So in what sense as believers and followers of Christ, is this just simply the natural outworking of what's going to happen if you're becoming closer and closer with God through the Holy Spirit and, and through your understanding of the Bible and that type of thing. And then how much of it we really need to sit down and try to intentionally think or work a plan for,

[00:06:19] **Dr. Jim Denison:** It's a both end, isn't it? It's as we work god works on the one side. There's the fruit of the spirit the tree doesn't have to try to make fruit Does it if the tree's healthy the fruit will emerge and so love joy peace and the others are not Things that I'm supposed to sit down and try harder to do today.

Okay, let's make an inventory. Love, joy, peace, patience. Okay. I didn't do patience very well today, so I'll do better at patience tomorrow. Sort of a thought. And so in the one sense, it really is just the Holy Spirit at work in my life. And my job is simply to be filled with the spirit. It's to be submitted to God.

to the spirit, to be surrendered to the spirit. So the spirit can automatically naturally do what he does through me. Kind of that artesian where all you have to do is open the channel and the water just kind of rushes out as opposed to a flush pump well that you're constantly working to try to force water to the surface.

So on the one side, there is this living waters that flows through us that Jesus speaks of. But on the other side, in the great commission, Jesus told us to go and make disciples of all nations. He

told us there was something he wanted us to do as you're going, make. Disciples, disciple people. Jesus said, I will make you to be fishers of men.

In that analogy, a fisherman has to do something to catch fish. He doesn't wait for the fish to jump in the boat. There are ways in which he has to be engaged in that process. So I really think it's a both and. I think every Christian needs their own Acts 18 strategy like we've talked about. How could I be used by God in my Jerusalem, in Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth?

And those could look differently. What can I be doing to serve the Lord, all the while I'm trusting the Holy Spirit to do through me what I can't do for Him? So the way it boils down to me, Mark, is I think the Lord wants me to do what I can do. He wants me to knock on a neighbor's door. He wants me to send the text.

He wants me to be engaged where I have opportunity and influence, but then I want to trust him to do what I can't do. I can't convict of sin. I can't save souls. I can't change lives. I can't heal marriages. So as I work, God works. As I do what I can do, God does what God can do the old saying is work as though everything depended on you pray as though everything depended on God That's been attributed to Augustine whether he said it or not.

I don't really know I don't think he said everything we think he said but it's nonetheless a good partnership and to me That's the both end How can I make a difference in the culture today all the while knowing that as I work God has to do through me What I can't do And as I'll work, he'll work is I think how this works.

[00:08:38] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So let me, let me see if this, a friend of mine said this to me. Let me see if it kind of gets at what you're talking about. He, like in this case of talking about being a cultural missionary or being engaged. As an active change agent in the culture, he said, look, this is not, this is not about something that you do or something that you check off.

It is a way of doing everything. Is that, does that kind of get at it in some ways?

[00:09:04] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I think so. There's a lifestyle that's a part of this. You know, your greatest opportunities to make a difference are not going to be anticipatable. There won't be things that you could have known ahead of time. That conversation was going to happen to that neighbor was going to pass by in need, or you were going to be prompted by the spirit to make that call or to send that text or whatever.

But on the other hand, in missionary work, there's always a strategy as well. And so there's a way in which I'm seeking to go about meeting need in Jesus name. There's a strategic work here. I think Paul was strategic about his work. Johannes Monk convinced a lot of us, even back in the seventies, that Paul followed the trading routes as he was going around as a textile worker, a

leather maker, as we think of as he was a bivocational missionary, he was going where he could make a living, but it was also going where he could make the greatest difference.

He spent a whole longer, a whole lot longer in Ephesus than he did in Thessaloniki, Thessalonica, as we call it, because that was a very tiny place. He passed Neapolis and Samothrace to get to Philippi, because that was the leading city in that district of Macedonia, as the scripture says. So we're to be strategic.

We're to be asking, how can I make the greatest impact for the gospel, all the while holding that loosely. And letting the Holy Spirit work through me in ways I couldn't have expected. I don't like this, although I think it's right. Henry Blackaby said, when you made him Lord, you gave him permission to change your plans. I don't like that much. I love plans. I love scheduling my day out and checking it off as it goes, but that's the both end, I think. So in one, your, your friend's exactly right. There's a lifestyle. This isn't a turn off, turn on sort of a switch sort of a thing. I'll be a cultural missionary for the next 30 minutes, but there is a strategy that missionaries follow as to how to make the greatest impact, I think, and the Holy Spirit will lead us in being wise as serpents as well as harmless as doves and having it be a lifestyle that also has a kind of a strategic element to it.

[00:10:53] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. So let me, let me chase that out just a little bit further. Can I just think about something as you were, we're walking through that, which God gives us this ability to dream. He gives us the ability to anticipate. He gives us the ability to plan and to strategize. And yet at the same time, the comment that you just made, you know, to make him Lord, to make him King is to give him the right to interrupt your plans.

Which seems to set us up for. Experiences of frustration and disappointment. Okay. So I guess help me understand. I I've, I've got the James and the letter of James bouncing around in the back of my head. But I'm sitting here going, how do I baptize? Or how do any of us baptize our ability to dream, anticipate?

And to plan, how do you make sure that you've baptized all of that so that when the Lord does change what you thought was going to happen, I heard a pastor recently say, anytime you find yourself saying, Lord, I thought that automatically means you're in bad territory. How do we get to this place where we baptize our ability to anticipate and make plans and then not be upset when it doesn't work out the way we thought the Lord was leading us?

[00:12:15] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I would love you to answer that question for me, because that's a challenge in my life as well. Truly is because it's really the both and here again, this balance, you know, I remember mark my first semester at Southwestern seminary, taking a systematic theology class from Bert Dominey. And I remember one of the first days in the class where he said, if you can't handle balance, you can't do theology.

Is God three or one? Is Jesus fully divine or fully human? Does God know the future? Do you have freedom of choice? Is the Bible divinely inspired or humanly written? The answer is yes. To all of those things. And so there's this dynamic tension, as he said, in every significant doctrine of our faith.

I think that applies here as well. You think about Paul as an example, here's Paul writing to the Romans and telling them how excited he is to get to Rome one day and how he's trusting them to extend him on his way to Spain. Even past that, he's got all these plans made up where he plans to go and all of that.

When he's writing that, don't think he had any way to know the way he was going to get to Rome was going to be as a convict, under Roman military escort and as a prisoner, right? And he was going to be in Rome preaching for two years under house arrest. And to our knowledge in the book of acts never does get to Spain now. There's some strong tradition that he was released from the acts 28 imprisonment did make it Spain. But we don't really know that for sure.

And so even Paul wasn't sure he knew what he wanted to do. He knew what he felt like he should be doing. He knew what he aspired to do. But then he was always willing to pivot in the moment to whatever it seemed in that moment was an even better thing. It's kind of like when you pray you ask God for what you want and then trust him for what is best. God always gives us what we want or what is best. You. And so I think that's the balance.

Jesus warned us about the guy that started to build and didn't count the cost. I mean, I think we are supposed to be strategic. We are supposed to use our gifts. We're supposed to invest. Remember the parable of the talents and how Jesus commended the fellow that invested what he had been entrusted with, as opposed to burying and just waiting on the master to turn up again.

And so there's this investing strategic piece of all this, but then there's always the holding of it loose. Knowing that in any moment God's plan could be better than mine. I do think, however, that God uses the strategic planning that we're doing to lead us to next in a way that might not have happened had we not made the plans that we made.

That's certainly been true in my life. Every time God's led us to a significant vocational decision, it always was something we hadn't anticipated. Without failure, it was something Mark that we wouldn't have seen coming, wouldn't have expected, wouldn't have chosen. In that moment, but have we not chosen a back there?

We wouldn't have been in a position to choose B and have we not chosen B then at a few years we wouldn't have been in a position to choose C and so I do think again this both and of this that I'm going to be strategic but hold it loosely. Man plans, God laughs as they say so. A friend of mine says he starts every day with a prayer.

He says I taught him I don't remember saying this exactly but he says he learned this from me where every every day he says lord He says to the lord lord you lead I follow You lead, I follow. And I think that's right. Lord, you lead and I will follow. Now there's going to be a lot of time in that where I'm going to it's a Joel Gregory said, say, stay faithful to the last word you heard from God and open to the next. I don't know that God had to tell me what clothes to put on today. I don't know that God had to tell me where to go eat lunch. Although on occasion he could, could be that there's a waitstaff there that he really wants me to build a relationship with. And if I'll just be open to his spirit, he'll lead me to a place for lunch I hadn't planned to go to.

But I don't think that means that every moment of every day works like that. I think we trust him as Lord. We submit to the spirit. Then we walk through our day. And that's, that's back to your friend's lifestyle idea. And as we walk through the day, we're open to the places where he intervenes, where he directs, where he changes our direction in some way we wouldn't have anticipated and short of that, we're going to stay faithful to the last word we heard and open to the next and keep those two things in balance.

[00:16:13] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Then we have to, we have to get to the place where we're comfortable with that kind of dynamic, right? That we're not living by formula and we're not living by a strict set of rules. We're, we're living in a relationship with God. And that he is accessible to us all the time and we need to be accessible to him.

And, and maybe our goal ought to be that when, when we express our plans to God, he doesn't laugh out loud. He just grins a little bit. Maybe that would be a good, a good plan.

[00:16:43] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That would be success. That's

[00:16:44] **Dr. Mark Turman:** I, as I just kind of was thinking through this, just what does it mean to be actively involved as a as a missionary, as an agent of kingdom transformation.

Part of what came up in my mind, Jim, was some of the things that you and Ryan, your son and others have written and are accessible as a part of our ministry around spiritual gifts. We even have an online spiritual tool where you can based on spiritual gifts that are outlined in the Bible, you can kind of walk your way through an experience that is intended to help you discover with more clarity how God might've gifted you.

How important is that? You know, I, I've have having taught some of those same passages when I was pastoring churches, always wish that there was more in terms of that kind of an idea of God has gifted you to be a part of what he's doing in the world. And I love what you have taught at many different places where God didn't just tell you what to do, but he ordained the time and the place where you would be actually involved with him and active with him.

So there's a calling to both time and place. As well as to a particular activity. Talk a little bit about how spiritual gifts and, and how much of an understanding a believer needs to have about their own gifting and how God has equipped them for certain things. How does that fit into this?

[00:18:09] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up because I think it's really vital to this, to this conversation. If you're employing somebody in a specific place, one of the first things you're probably going to do is test their aptitudes. You want to make certain that they are qualified for what it is you're asking them to do.

To do whatever that job might be, that they have the skills and the training and the background that are necessary in order to do that effectively and it's always been how employment has worked. I think it's the same way in serving in the kingdom. The Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation, I believe, gives us spiritual gifts.

There are a variety of them that are listed three different lists of them, as you know, in the New Testament, maybe 19 or so of them. If you kind of, collate them together into one place, and I believe every Christian has at least one of these. I don't think they change. I think you're given these gifts at salvation.

I think they manifest in different ways, in different seasons of your life and of your ministry. But I think the Lord then leads you according to the gifts that he has given you so that he can use you most effectively and most Now gifts and abilities, not always the same thing. Some people have gifts that align with their natural abilities.

And had they never become a Christian, they might've still been a good speaker. And then once they become a believer, then they have this gift of prophecy. And now the Holy Spirit uses their gifts of spare, their abilities of speaking and anoints their words in ways that wouldn't have been the case. Had they not had the gift of prophecy, for instance, at other times, that's not necessarily the case.

A Dwight Moody. Was perhaps the greatest evangelist of his generation. You would not say that he had the natural abilities of communication. Prior to his salvation experience, he was functionally illiterate. He really, even to the day he died, he really didn't have a great deal of functional communication ability.

You wouldn't think in terms of grammar capacities and things like that. And he knew that. He used to say when he was explaining his ministry, he would say, I know there are lots of men that are more, have more ability than I do. It's just that when I speak, God seems to use me. And so sometimes God does gift us in ways that are not aligned with ability.

Usually I think they tend to go together, but the reason you have to know your gifts is so that you can know how your life can most effectively and strategically advance the kingdom in one, in a particular sphere of influence and opportunity. Now, having said that, I don't know that for 20 centuries, the whole church was waiting until someone like our ministry came along with a digital online spiritual gift analysis tool.

And now finally people can figure this out. I don't know that it needs to be as prescriptive as we sometimes make it. My guess is at least this has been my experience as a pastor and personally Anytime i've taken people through spiritual gift analysis. They've not been surprised They've not found that they had a spiritual gift.

They had no idea God had given them that's not been their experience the spiritual gift analysis process has typically been just more a way of confirming a way of clarifying, a way of perhaps enforcing or reinforcing, but not so much that they found a gift that they took prior to that had a, and no idea was true in their life.

Usually if you, you kind of know these things over time, the bottom line is how does God seem to use me?

[00:21:16] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Mm.

[00:21:17] **Dr. Jim Denison:** What are ways in which I have the joy of the Lord in serving him? And what are ways that when I do things, God seems to use me are the things that you do that other people, say they benefited from. Are there places in your life where when you do that, you seem to have a special sense of God's leading of God's blessing of God's anointing.

Are there just places where you feel like you fit where, man, when I'm doing this, I really think I'm my best self. I'm really doing the thing I was most made to do. All of those I think are expressions of discovering your spiritual gifts. One last thought is once you know with greater clarity, what your gifts are, you know what to say no to.

[00:21:57] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Mm.

[00:21:59] **Dr. Jim Denison:** If I'm not gifted to teach, then it's easier to say if someone asks me to teach that may not be the place I'm supposed to be serving. Doesn't mean you can't teach a lesson at some point, or even teach a class, if you're called to do that. And maybe you have the gift of encouragement. And so you're to be a teacher primarily to encourage, or it may be that you have the gift of evangelism.

And so you're teaching this class primarily to do evangelism in that context, wherever that might be. So not trying to say you would never teach a class without the gift of teaching, but

stereotypically, you would know if this isn't my gifting, then maybe that isn't my calling quite so much. And you have to know what to say no to, so you can spend more time saying yes.

To the places that you do have that anointing of God. So yeah, I think to make the greatest impact on the culture, to be a, to be someone who engages culture most effectively it's, I think it's really vital to know what to say yes to Warren Buffett says the difference between successful people and really successful people is really successful.

People say no to nearly everything. And I think there's some truth in that. And the gifting of the Holy Spirit helps us to know what to say yes to and what to say no to.

[00:23:01] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right. Yeah. Really helpful. And that just that idea that I've heard you and others talk about, you know, that necessarily mean that it's going to be something easy or something that just becomes so so, so rote for you that you don't have to think about it. It could be very, something that's very hard, but you have a sense, like you said, that you fit in doing this, that you become perhaps very energized or more alive when you do this with and for God.

Then other things and that there can be things that at times are completely out of all of your comfort zones, but you just have a sense that God really is still calling you to do those. Those there's, there's certainly scriptural precedent to that, which is one of the things I also wanted to bring up early in this paper, you, you point out what in some ways I call the unpleasant ground rules of serving with God, which is He seems to always tilt the odds against himself and against his people.

You call up the examples of Moses as he went to deal with with the oppression of, of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. You talk about David and going up against Goliath and Gideon going up against the Midianites. And I, even recently, I've talked to some other Christians who are like, it just seems like God always either causes or allows the odds to be stacked against him and his people.

Is that just always the way it is? And, and how do we not get frustrated or discouraged by that when it feels like it's just not a fair game,

[00:24:34] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, we live in a fallen world, you know. We are behind enemy lines here. I mean, scripture's clear that Satan is the god of this age. And we ought not be surprised, you know, it doesn't mean that you have to go around trying to find ways to be persecuted. Roaring lions don't need your help in finding prey.

And so we ought not be surprised when there are lions out there. I'd not be surprised when Satan is on the march. And when we're in this spiritual battle, like not against flesh and blood, but

against principalities and powers, that's just how the world is. This fallen world is, that's just the way, and has always been.

From Adam and Eve to the present, we live in this fallen world and we're we're ambassadors in a foreign land, we're sojourners, as scripture says, this is not yet our home and we're really, as C. S. Lewis says, we're really behind enemy lines here, we've been parachuted in, and now we ought not be surprised when the enemy is all around us, but the way the Lord redeems that is to make us more dependent on him than we would otherwise have been. One of the ways I really do believe God wants to use the opposition that we face is to cause us to realize we can't win this battle ourselves. It's Paul's thorn in the flesh, where the Lord didn't remove it because he wanted to redeem it. And the way he redeemed it was to cause Paul to be able to say, when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Joseph you get after his enslavement and his imprisonment is a very different Joseph. As he's dealing with his brothers than the Joseph you got before all of that. Now the vision's still there everything the lord said he was going to do in Joseph's life He did in Joseph's life, but Joseph himself was a very different person Wasn't he on the other side of the opposition that we're thinking about right now?

and so I really do believe God, I don't know that he necessarily intends the world to be as fallen as it is by some overt act of his own I think that's just the expression of human nature and a misused human freedom We ought not be surprised by it, but we ought to use it to redeem it. Every time we're tempted, for example, we need the reflex that says, okay, in the moment of temptation, I have to bring this immediately to Jesus.

If I could defeat this myself, I probably wouldn't be facing it. The enemy doesn't want me to know that. He wants me to think I can beat him myself, so I'll get in the fight and get dragged into the quicksand until it's too late to get out. And so the moment I'm tempted, I need to redeem this by using it to turn it into prayer.

Turn this opposition into opportunity to say, Lord, I'm being tempted by X. So I'm asking you to fill me and empower me and control me and give me victory in this moment. And when we do that, the opposition becomes the opportunity for God to show off and for the Holy Spirit to be empowering in our lives.

Erasmus said, Satan hates nothing so much as to be used as an agent for good. So let's let Satan hate what we do a little bit today by using this fallen world as an opportunity to trust God in a way we might not have otherwise. The sin of presumption, the sin of thinking, I've got this, I can figure it out.

You know, is is ever with us. And God wants to use the fallen world to disabuse us of that notion on a regular basis.

[00:27:30] **Dr. Mark Turman:** You and, you and I remember another professor at Southwestern seminary, Dr. Jack McGorman. He used to say when he was teaching Greek that if, if you're not trying to do something that requires God's involvement in power, then you're not living in the place you should be living. If it, if it doesn't require a dependence upon him, then you're not yet where you need to be.

Not to say that God is intentionally setting everything up to be on the status of a miracle. But it does mean that we need to be in a place that God has to be involved or nothing of real value, nothing of eternal impact is actually going to happen if he's not involved and we're dependent upon him in that way.

[00:28:12] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's right. I had a mentor that said, attempt something so great for God, it's doomed to fail unless God be in it.

[00:28:17] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah,

[00:28:18] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I really think that's right, you know,

[00:28:20] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And how do you, how do you get up every day and think about it that way? Right. And on a personal level that if God's not act, if you're not cooperating with God and letting him direct you through the spirit, then. That can start with something as simple as how healthy your marriage is, that it's, it, it's not going to be as healthy as it could be, or you're not going to parent well, or you're not going to be a good friend or an employee.

If God's not in it, you're not going to be the person and the light and the salt that you could be and should be in that moment and in that relationship. So we need to think about it, at least even on that personal level. Jim, one of the things you call out in this book is the the very important work of Richard Niebuhr.

His book, his book, Christ and Culture. You talk about the options that Dr. Niebuhr laid out in that about how Christians are sometimes tempted to withdraw from the culture because it is so toxic. We see this happening in the Christian church on many levels where some Christian communities just accommodate the culture and just say we're just.

Supposed to be people of grace. And we're supposed to, to bend our understanding of scripture to whatever the culture is doing at that moment. There's some that pursue what I call bifurcation, which is what I've heard you talk about. We, we have our spiritual life on Sunday and we have a different life on Monday and Tuesday.

You call that one that I hadn't thought through as much, which is what I kind of call cynicism, which is yes, we'll be involved and we'll try to do all the good that we can, but we know it's not really going to make a difference. In the long run. And then the last one is this idea of what I would call confident faith or confident transformation that God really is in the midst of us.

And he is really at work through us. If we work with him and allow him to do that, how do we, how do we stay focused on that idea of that we actually are being transformational agents with God? Especially when we see other parts of the Christian community that may have adopted one of these other mentalities or strategies.

How do we stay in that focus?

[00:30:26] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, that's a great question. My first thought is to say there are times, of course, and you know this, I'll just say it, times when each one of those is the right way to be, you know? You need a Christ against culture model when it comes to pornography. You ought not to be watching pornography so you can then be involved in somehow changing the pornographic industry.

An alcoholic does not need to be going to bars so he can witness, you know? There are places in our lives that we need to be withdrawn, need that Benedict option almost, that kind of withdrawal from the culture. There's an accommodation of the culture, a Christ of culture, when it comes to using technology.

We're using the technology right now that anybody would be using to do this, whether they're doing it for the kingdom of God or not. And I don't know that there's a Christian wifi and a non Christian wifi. I think that there's just a, we can accommodate that. We can use it. There's a Sunday and Monday to life a little bit.

And that's the way I'm going to be involved in Sunday school may look a little different than the way I'm going to be involved in an operating room. I'm not going to be a different person. I'm not going to have different values, not going to have different language, but it's going to be a different skillset.

And there's going to be some differences in that. I think there is a Christ in culture and paradox where we're trying to use the culture to advance the kingdom, where we're wanting to be involved in habitat houses for the sake of building habitat houses, but also for the sake of sharing the gospel and hopefully leading people to an eternal relationship with the Lord where they live in a mansion, not just in a habitat house.

And so I think all of those have their place, but it's the overarching goal. To be the Christ transforming culture model that is the hardest one to maintain. And I think therefore the one that

is the easiest to give up because that transformational model really does want to see divorce rates go down, really does want to see immigration dealt with in a redemptive way, really does want to see fentanyl use.

Plummet and does want to see sex trafficking in and really does want to see systemic broad change Transformational difference that we need to be praying for and working for and settling for nothing less than and boy that gets discouraging Really in a hurry, it gets discredited. It's easy to pull back from culture.

It's easy to be two people. It's easy to do the other models. But man, when you really want to see the world be different because of you. I mean, how many times did William Wilberforce lose on the House of Commons before finally his anti slavery legislation was adopted? Scores of times, as I recall, that Clapham sect just kept incrementally and Year by year, making progress, just short inch by inch progress until finally came the great day.

And so it's the water breaking the rocks very gradually until finally. And so I think there's a discouragement that fits into that. And I also think there's that balance we talked about before that as I work, God works, I'm going to do what I can do, but trust God with the results. It may be that the ultimate transformation we're after, it's not anything I get to live to see.

It may not be anything I can measure on this side of eternity. It's that planting trees you'll never sit under, sort of a thought. It just may well be that God's using you as salt and light, and the salt doesn't know it because it gets dissolved. And the light doesn't know it because it gets diffused.

And at the end of the day, God's using you transformationally in ways you're not even aware of. So you keep your eyes on him, you keep trusting him, and every single day you volunteer for duty again. Every single day you come back to it. Every single day you get back to the calling that you have, and trust him with that calling, and then know at the end of the day he's Lord.

He's the king. He's in charge, and he's gonna use us in ways we don't know that we could otherwise be used. I think

[00:33:59] **Dr. Mark Turman:** just, that becomes an act of faith, right? It becomes Absolute act of faith that we can't see or know all that we might want to see or know in any given moment or in any given day Jim, one of the things you a quote from the paper that I would encourage people to go read. It says this as you were writing, seldom have we, speaking of Christians, seldom have we been in a majority in any nation or culture.

When I read that, I thought Okay. But should that be our goal? And, you know, obviously there's been a lot of conversation and there's even movies out right now about America being a

Christian nation. It should, it become a Christian nation if it's never been, or at one time was, but isn't now, should we go build another Christian nation?

Is that even a, is the pursuit of Christianity and a Christian culture being the majority? Culture in a nation. Is that the goal that Jesus has for us? Or should we think about it differently than that?

[00:35:04] **Dr. Jim Denison:** we should see it differently than that. We certainly want every single person to know Christ. I want every American to have a born again salvation experience with Christ, and if that were the case, then obviously we would be a majority Christian nation. We'd be a nation in which the majority of the population were Christian.

The vast majority, obviously, all of them, if all of them came to faith in Christ. And so, certainly on one level, I want that to be the case. But then being the majority of the nation is just a byproduct. That's a consequence, that's not the goal. The goal here isn't to get to 50 plus one. The goal here is not to accumulate some voting block or to create some kind of majority presence for legislative purposes.

Here are some such as that. I can't see Jesus ever attempting that. I don't think that that was ever Jesus desire was that his followers be a voting kind of political sort of a movement in a way that required majority status to be effective. And I don't think that's even in our history been the case.

There've been times when. Certainly across Christian history, when you would say the majority of the culture was Christian as it could have perhaps been understood at that point in time. But if you're thinking in evangelical terms, if you're thinking in the way of a born again salvation experience that we're thinking of, then not.

I think historically, has that been true and certainly never been true in American history that the majority of Americans have had a transformational saving relationship with Jesus as best we can tell right now. So, yeah, our goal is for everybody to know Christ, but it's not as a means to some other end to some political strategic end that we want that to happen.

to be the case. If we're doing that, then we're using God's kingdom to advance our kingdom. We're using the church to advance our agenda. And even if we think our agenda is God's agenda, at the end of the day, Jesus said, my kingdom is not of this world. If it were, he would have done it very differently, as he said.

That's why you render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and you render to God what is God's. We're ambassadors in this fallen world, and the ultimate purpose here is to prepare people for eternity. This is the dot before the line. I was once speaking at a youth camp, back when I did that, back in a previous life.

And the name of the camp, I remember, Mark, was called The Dash.

[00:37:13] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Hmm.

[00:37:13] **Dr. Jim Denison:** And ask what does that mean? And they said, on a tombstone, you have a birth date, a year, you have an end year that you die, and the dash is in the middle. We're in the dash, here. I thought that was really cool. We're in that time between birth and death, and we want to redeem this as best we can, knowing that the other number's coming, if the Lord tarries.

And then eternity. Right? And on the other side of death is one way to measure it, it's something the medieval theologians used to say. If you can imagine a tiny bird, they could take a, in its beak, a tiny particle of the earth and move it to the moon and deposit it on the moon once every thousand years. Tiny particle of earth moved to the moon once every thousand years. When the entire earth has been transported to the moon, Eternity will have only begun.

[00:38:02] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Hmm. Wow.

[00:38:04] **Dr. Jim Denison:** And so really at the end of the day, this is a means to that end, isn't it?

[00:38:09] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Hmm.

[00:38:09] **Dr. Jim Denison:** And building majority blocks for political purpose and making the gospel the means to that end as as noteworthy as that might be as well intentioned as that might be.

I could certainly think of legislative hymns for which having a majority status could be enormously helpful. Thinking about abortion or defense of marriage, things like that. But even all of that. At the end of the day, if it's a means to an end, then I'm not doing the gospel. It doesn't end unto itself. C.

S. Lewis warned us about preaching the gospel. And the guy said, because it's good for you

[00:38:39] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Hmm.

[00:38:39] **Dr. Jim Denison:** become a Christian because of these practical consequences. If you do, he said, the gospel is either true or it's false. And if it's true, then you should trust it because it's true. Now, yes, it has consequences for which we're grateful, the purpose of the preaching of the gospel is to say, this is Trust it because it is true and not for some other reason.

[00:39:07] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, so, so, yeah, so important to make that the foundation of who you are. Jim, you, you were talking even in another article that you wrote recently about the

Christian distinctive, the, the belief that Christians have that not only is Jesus Lord, not only is he savior and King, but he's the But he actually lives in each person who is a Christian.

Each person who is a Christ follower has the spirit of Christ in him and no other faith system in the world claims such a thing. And I, I've heard you speak about this and we, we've talked about it in this podcast series several times, but let's, let's talk a little bit before we finish up today about just how real it is.

That Christians are totally incapable of fulfilling their part of God's purpose and plan without the power of the Holy Spirit infusing and empowering all that they might do. Talk about that distinctive doctrine. We don't just believe that Jesus was God. We believe that Jesus is God and that he is actually in each of us empowering that which he wants us to do.

How do we understand that better?

[00:40:28] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. Christ in you, the hope of glory, Christ in you. Not just Christ for you, but Christ in you. Colossians 1 27, the hope of glory. First Corinthians three, that when you trust Christ, your body becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit. And it's by the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ is alive in us and through us.

And there's just this incredible sense in which we are empowered and inhabited by this God who incarnates himself that just as he was incarnate in the flesh is what that means in his own body, 20 centuries ago. Now he's incarnated in 2 billion bodies. And that's why I said you will do greater things than I did.

He doesn't mean that a qualitative sense that we'll do miracles. He couldn't have done. He means that I think in a quantitative sense that the body of Christ, first Corinthians 12:27, where the body of Christ hands and feet and eyes and ears that now 2. 2 billion Jesus's. walking around on the planet. Just you and me are doubling the number of Jesus's that there were 20 centuries ago in Nazareth.

And so there's this miraculous sense that buddhism doesn't claim and hinduism judaism. Islam certainly would not claim In fact, they would reject this idea that the god of the universe if they even believe in a single god as judaism And islam does would live in us Would consign or deign to live in our fallen flesh and in our, in our finitude and, and, and make us his temple and live in us and through us.

But it's only by that power. That we can do the things of God. It takes the spirit of God to do the work of God. So one way to explain that, I suppose, back a number of years ago, I was living in Midland, I was driving this boxy van that we had purchased because we had small kids and then Janet got a minivan and that was a thing that we had and needed to have.

And I had this other van and I was driving along one day and I saw a 1965 Mustang fastback for sale. White candy, apple red interior right there for sale. When talked to him about it, they reconditioned it. Everything was good to go. They convinced me. So Janet was willing for me to take leave of my senses and we sold the old van and I bought the Mustang.

One of the greatest days of my life. I eventually sold that car eventually because I wanted to stay married. I made that decision down the way, but one of the things they didn't ask, I didn't think to ask was how, how accurate is the gas meter? Okay. is the gas gauge. Didn't think to ask that. So it has about a quarter of a tank in it.

When I purchase it, I drive it home. The next day I'm driving it to First Baptist Church in Midland, my first day in it. It says it's got about a quarter of a tank. I run out of gas on the side of loop 250. Even though the gas gauge says I have a quarter of a tank of gas, I ran out of gas. Not a good way to start with this new possession of mine that one could accuse me of idolatry in owning, I suppose.

Had to call my wife, which was not a happy day for any of us. Had to get all that figured out. Now, one of the things I learned, yet again, personally, what everybody, I guess, knows intellectually, was cars are made to run on gas and they don't run on anything else.

[00:43:27] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Hmm.

[00:43:28] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Now, if there's no gas in the tank, you could still use this vehicle for some purpose.

It's just as beautiful sitting on the side of the road or sitting in your garage or sitting in your driveway. I still think it's a phenomenal looking vehicle. You could push it places, I suppose, and do things with it. You could live in it if you had to. You could have meetings in it. All kinds of things you could do with it without gas.

What you can't do is what it was made to do.

[00:43:53] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Hmm,

[00:43:54] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Because if it doesn't have the fuel it was designed to run on, it can't do what it was designed to do. Back to C. S. Lewis who said we were made to run on God, and like a car was made to run on petrol, as he calls it, can't run on anything else, we were made to run on God, and we can't run on anything else.

[00:44:11] **Dr. Mark Turman:** hmm,

[00:44:11] **Dr. Jim Denison:** that's why Jesus was so insistent, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses. In Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth. It doesn't send them out into Acts 3 until they've been at Pentecost in Acts 2. It's only when they're filled with the Spirit that they begin to do what they're called to do.

Self sufficiency is spiritual suicide. And it is one of Satan's most subtle temptations. Somebody listening to this podcast, Mark, I'm guessing is probably somebody that really does want to make a difference for God, really does want their life to matter for the kingdom, really does want to use their gifts and their opportunities and their influence in a way that'll glorify the Lord.

So Satan's going to come along and if he can't talk you out of that, if he can't talk you out of wanting to do what I just said, I think you probably want to do, he's going to try to get you to do it in your strength. He's going to try to get you to be an American Christian. And we Americans are all about self sufficiency.

We're all about self reliance. We're all about looking out for number one and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps and trying harder to do better and getting up earlier and stay up later. We're all about that rugged individualism. You know, I'm reading a series of Western novels right now. It's been really fascinating.

The guy that writes them has lived in the West his whole life and he really knows what he's talking about. And he's got this phrase. He uses a lot that in the West, everybody rides their own horse and shoots their own snakes. And I think that's really true, having been in the West some myself, that it's really how that kind of rugged frontier, independent, I mean, that's how the West got settled, right?

From that entrepreneurial, self reliant, self sufficient sort of mentality. But that is not how the Christian faith works. We've said it already today. You can't convict anybody of their sin. You can't save a soul. You can't heal a marriage. You can't change a life. Only God can do that through us. But as we work, he works as we build a relationship with our neighbor.

He then uses that relationship to speak words through us. Maybe we didn't know we would say that it'll bring them to a place that we couldn't have brought them. It's in this conversation, Mark, I've been praying before we had this conversation and heard myself say things I didn't plan to say that I really think is the Holy Spirit working in and through my life.

But still I had to prepare for this conversation, still had to plug in the data and the digital material here and be able to do this to put ourselves in position. To be used by the Holy Spirit to do things that he alone can do. So, man, it's this balance we've been talking about this entire conversation, but can't emphasize it enough.

If I could put one thing in a pill and make every Christian in America swallow it, it would be spirit reliance versus self sufficiency

[00:46:48] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Hmm.

[00:46:49] **Dr. Jim Denison:** because I think that's the cardinal sin in evangelical Christianity today.

[00:46:53] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And you can, I know I'm guilty of it. You can, you can hear it when you get around Christians that they're constantly talking about and asking for praying for that God is for them. And that's not a bad way to think in and of itself, but that idea that Christ is in them and that he is available to them on a moment by moment basis is something that we can learn from other.

Parts of the Christian family, how to follow that example more because we, we are so much about asking God to bless what we're thinking about and what we're coming up with instead of saying, God, we want it to be what comes from you through us. You know, and, and another, I started with a good friend, Christian leader recently, he said, you know, I'm all about asking God for help, except when God brings it through another human being.

I, if it comes to me. You know, internally through my spirit or through some other kind of supernatural means, oh, I want God to help me all along. Cause I know, I, I know intellectually I need his help, but if God chooses to deliver it through another Christian, requiring me to be humble in front of that person, I don't like that part.

I don't, I don't like receiving it in that mechanism

[00:48:05] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I'm happy to give that help. I just don't want to

[00:48:06] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah. Yeah. And which is, which is kind of ironic that we don't want to, we have problems receiving, especially from other Christians. When the whole essence of what it means to be a Christian starts at the moment of receiving, it starts at the moment of receiving grace for your sin.

And so, you know, when it shows up, we have to be willing to humble ourselves that it shows up in the way that God wants to deliver it. And most of the time, in my experience, it's been from another human being. And, and I need to be ready to receive it in that way. regardless of, of how much that might require me to humble myself.

Jim, you wrap up this, this conversation in this paper on cultural engagement with a very powerful quote from Watchman Nee. Not a name that many Christians perhaps hear, at least not

on a regular basis, tell us who Watchman Nee was. And why we should listen to him when he talks about just this journey of letting Jesus truly be Lord and King of our life.

Let us, let's finish on that note.

[00:49:15] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Great. Watchman Ni was a very, very significant Chinese Christian leader, died in 1972 born in 1903, I think, early part of the 20th century. His parents were believers. He came to faith at the age of 17 fairly miraculous. I mean, every salvation is miraculous, but it's really unique things that happened around his own experience in coming to faith in Christ and almost immediately abandoned his own career goals and felt himself called into ministry.

And from that point forward was a writer. In fact, his collected writings are 62 volumes. If you can imagine this collected letters and books and treatises and teaching he spent the last 20 years of his life under Chinese arrest. The communists had come into power after 1947 and he was seen as a threat.

He was arrested in 1952 and died in a prison in, in, in a Chinese communist prison in 1972. The basic thing he was about his entire career was helping Christians live in the power of the Holy spirit. It's what he called the normal Christian life. And the thing I most appreciate about his writing, about the emphasis of his ministry was that living in a way that allows God to use you miraculously is normal Christianity. That's not just for the apostles. That's not just for the clergy. That's not just for the most spiritual person you've ever met. That's God's intention for every Christian. Every believer is to live a, that is the normal Christian life, is to be fully empowered, fully used, to be manifesting fully the fruit of the Spirit, to be working fully in the gifts of the Spirit, to be being used as God used the Apostles, to be being used as God used early believers in the book of Acts, God hasn't changed.

Anything God can do, then God can do now. Now there's some excesses. In some of what he wrote, as with anybody else, you wouldn't agree with everything that you see there. He gets accused of perfectionism. There are places where he takes this normal Christianity, normal Christian life to a degree that would cause you to think that he almost thinks you can live without sin.

And I don't, I think 1 John would make that clear. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves in the truth that's not in us. So, there's some perfectionism you'd want to be a little worried or concerned about in some of this writing. But in the total, the idea that the normal Christian life is.

To be empowered, filled, transformed by the Holy Spirit, and to be a change agent so that the culture is different because of you. That's what God intends for every believer. That's what the

normal Christian life is supposed to be. And that's the call that I think we're talking about together today.

[00:51:48] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Absolutely. And I want to just share this quote, let let this become to all of our listeners, maybe your prayer for the day. These are the words of Watchman Nee that Dr. Denison included, it says a day must come in our lives as definite as the day of our conversion. When we give up all right to ourselves and submit to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ.

There must be a day when without reservation, we surrender everything to him, ourselves, our families, our possessions, our businesses, and our time. He goes on, I'm going to let you read the rest of that by going and downloading this white paper. On cultural engagement at denisonforum.org, you'll find not only Watchman Nee's quote, but Dr.

Denison's full paper on this subject. And you'll also find the pathway to any of the other previous white papers and, and podcast conversations that we've had on what does it mean to be a Christian in today's culture, to work with God as a cultural missionary, infused and empowered by his spirit to be the salt and light that he wants you to be in every place that he sends you and allows you to be a part of in your world today.

Even if you feel like it's a really small environment, you never know how God is going to change lives, including yours in that environment. So thank you for being a part of this podcast series and conversation with us. Thank you, Dr. Denison for For just helping us with these conversations to think biblically so that we can live holy and act redemptively.

Want to remind you that you can also find other resources at denisonforum.org, including our newest book on sacred sexuality. And you'll also find a recently released paper that Dr. Denison wrote on what does the Bible say about marriage in heaven? And how should we understand that? And so many other topics that we hope that you'll follow along.

I want to thank our donors for their support, for all of you, for following us and for your prayers, as we continue to make biblical resources available to Christians in an accessible way through our donors and through digital platforms. We'll see you next time on the Denison Forum Podcast.