

# **CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS**

**KINGDOM ETHICS FOR OUR  
POST-ELECTION REALITY**

**David Swanson + Justin Fung  
Stephanie Williams O'Brien  
Lisa Rodriguez-Watson**

**Part 1**  
**TRANSCRIPT**



Missio Alliance

## CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS: Kingdom Ethics for our Post-Election Reality (Part One)

Missio Alliance recently hosted two Facebook Live discussions with leading pastors and thinkers as they reflected on and reacted to the recent national election and shared responses for moving forward. The [first of these discussions](#) featured:

- **Justin Fung** (pastor of leadership and spiritual formation at Christ City Church in Washington, DC)
- **Stephanie O'Brien** (lead pastor at Mill City Church in Minneapolis, MN)
- **David Swanson** (founding pastor of New Community Covenant in Chicago, IL)

and was moderated by Missio Alliance national director Lisa Rodriguez-Watson. What follows is an edited transcript of their discussion; [part two of this conversation](#) features David Fitch, Rich Villodas, and Leeann Younger.

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**Lisa Watson:** Let's begin by having you each describe what this election cycle has been like for you.

**Justin Fung:** We're in DC, so I feel like we're probably hyper-aware of all of the things that are happening. I don't think that we ever actually check out, which is good, bad, and ugly. And, the election cycle still isn't over in some ways; we're still waiting. And that uncertainty, that in-between time that we could draw all sorts of theological parallels to feels particularly weighty.

In a year that already has brought so much uncertainty and instability to the things that we thought we could rely on, we can't just go back to those things. Even the rhythms that we thought we could rely on in the sense of previous elections, there was previously an expectation of, "We'll hear something election night, at least; you'll know even if the results aren't certified." And so even in that, that's just another moment of us feeling like, things aren't what we hoped they could be, or things aren't what we used to be able to rely on. And there's so many things that folks are carrying and so many things that folks are having to grieve and to wrestle with. It stretches us more than we've ever felt like we've been stressed, stretched for about all we could handle. And so that's been one of the constant strains of it.

One of the things that has been really encouraging to me in this season is how we have been there for each other within our community, in that space of knowing that we're not alone even in this season, even in more isolation than we would like to have been in an experience. But I feel like certainly for our church community, there's a sense of, "All right, who are the people that we can lean on? Who are the people that we can turn to in this moment, people we can cry

with together, grieve with together, laugh with together, pray with together. That's been a tremendous opportunity even in the midst a lot of uncertainty and instability.

**Stephanie O'Brien:** I'm super grateful to be able to be here with you all. And I don't envy you from being in DC right now. I thought it was interesting that the topic of the conversation is our post-election reality, and we're not post- yet, at least as we're speaking about this; maybe when people might be watching it later. But I'm in Minneapolis, just a few miles from where George Floyd was murdered. And so this last election cycle, which feels as though it has been going on forever and ever, was significant for us, but it definitely took on a different level of weight after the murder of George Floyd. Not because that was a new incident, but because the way in which the world responded to that was a fundamental shift, of people seeing outright racial injustice.]

I love what Justin said about coming around each other and supporting each other. And even though we can't physically be together, we're figuring out ways to do that. I'm so proud of my community for figuring some of those ways out and being creative in the midst of this. That feeling of "we're in this together" is so crucial. My community is politically and ideologically diverse, and sometimes I talk with other pastors and they say, "Oh, that must be tough." And I say, "Well, your church also has politically and ideologically diversity." And people have said, "You know, that's not a growth strategy for a church." And I've said, "It depends on your definition of growth." And here we are as a church that is diverse about some of these things, but very much committed to being people of racial justice, for instance.

So how do you, how do you bring together so many different experiences and perspectives yet say, we are for what it looks like for our black and indigenous people of color in our community, city, and country to feel as though they are valued just as clearly and as evidently as image bearers as anyone else. And it's just so difficult. It feels like there's a vacuum that is sucking the nuance out of the room, and it has become very difficult when it comes to how we as a community who values having different perspectives politically or ideologically or dialogically, to come into the same space when the nuance is disappearing. That's been a big question for us.

**David Swanson:** I thought about the election cycle on a couple of ways we experienced it in a couple of ways. Mostly locally; our congregation is a multi-racial church in a majority African-American community. And so I think the concerns of folks in our church in terms of experiences with racism that's been ramped up against Asian-American people here in the Chicagoland area related to the virus as well as years-long rhetoric directed against immigrants and refugees, those have all been top-of-mind for members of our congregation. When we hear language about all sort of violent responses, and people buying guns, for many of the folks in our church, there's a memory of that kind of thing. The white backlash that happens historically in this country. So for many of our folks, this is not theory; there's a lived memory of it. And so I've thought a lot about trauma and the impact of trauma, and how we pastor those who are carrying and experiencing some of that. Then more widely in my interaction with white congregations over the past six to nine months, I've been thinking a lot about discipleship, and

how we think about discipling white Christians in particular, in solidarity with the rest of the body of Christ.

For white congregations, whose racial segregation has kept them from knowing the experiences of the rest of the body of Christ and how people are experiencing a moment like this, what's the responsibility for pastors and ministry leaders in those settings to be doing this spiritual formation work so that we're not forming partisan people? We are wanting to form people who when they go to the ballot box do so self-consciously as Christian people who are related to a diverse group of people with a diverse range of experiences and concerns. And for those of us in the privileged majority, what then is our posture towards those sisters and brothers? So those have been some of the things on my mind.

**Lisa: What's been most surprising for you about this election cycle and how you feel it has directly impacted the church's witness? What might this mean for how we as kingdom people continue to live faithfully in a divided world?**

**Stephanie:** There is no easy answer to that question. I was hoping to be surprised that the church would look distinct from the way in which the world, the country, and the partisan politics are responding to the issues of the day. And not to say that there's not been any distinctive moments, but it feels more like we've had our shining moments, and that's maybe it. We have largely kept ourselves either sounding just like the rest of the conversation, or actually just joined in and made some of it worse. So I've been surprised by the lack of empathy, the lack of compassion, the inability to see that that a vote for what makes sense for you might not be best for your neighbor.

This inability to show that we're thinking that way, the lack of thoughtfulness, has been really tough. And conversely, it's been great to see those moments come up where we seem to find ourselves, but it does feel really discouraging to see the way in which—at least the way that the church has being represented in the most public stages—the church doesn't represent the heart of Jesus. And in moments that it does, it feels as though those moments are gone pretty quickly. And so what does it mean for us as kingdom people to live faithfully in a divided world?

I think what's at stake here is our identity as Jesus followers, that the temptation—and I'm using the word “temptation” intentionally—the temptation to envelop ourselves within a political party rather than distinctly looking at ourselves and our allegiance to the kingdom of God is really tempting. Especially right now, because of some of the very public rhetoric of the president, because of some of these very important policies that people feel passionate about, all of that is taking center stage. And I think the possibility that we might lose ourselves and our identity as Jesus followers, distinct Jesus followers is very real. So what we can do to be faithful is to try to just passionately seek after what it means to be Jesus' followers first and foremost, to be allegiant to Jesus. And to recognize that as a person who is allegiant to Jesus, we are people of love.

And to say something such as, “It doesn't matter who's president,” as people who are in the majority culture who have much privilege and power, to recognize that that statement is not the same for me as it is for my neighbor of color. That's not the same statement for me as it is for someone who is trying to figure out what it looks like to have some of their basic needs met. And so regardless of whether or not any leader is going to come in and make any changes that actually will benefit my neighbor, the way in which the public stage is handling all of this is painful for my neighbor. And could I have compassion for that reality, even though we might disagree about some policies? It's nuanced responses that helps us to be faithful to our witness in this time, but it's getting more and more difficult to really clearly state what it means to be after the heart of Jesus.

**Justin:** In the US, particularly in white evangelicalism, we've had a truncated gospel, an incomplete gospel, that we see conversion and the sinner's prayer as the end goal, rather than the beginning of a journey of maturing, of growth, of changing, of becoming more like Christ. And in America in particular, its sort of Christianity has become so co-opted for control and for power and authority in ways that completely run counter to the character of Christ and who Jesus was. And that's a sad. I don't know that it's a surprise; I just think it's sad.

I was watching a clip [from Eddie Glaude](#) from an interview from a year ago. And he was talking about the evils within our system in the US, that they are not unique to us. The sins are not unique to us. But what seems unique and singular to the US experience is our inability to name, to confess our wrongs, to acknowledge our wrongdoings. We are seeing the efforts to begin to name that are slowly coming to the surface. Jemar Tisby's *The Color of Compromise*, David's *Rediscovering the White Church*, *Unsettling Truths* from Soong-Chan Rah and Mark Charles, those are efforts to bring the wrongdoings to the surface.

It's not that we weren't aware of these sins, but in terms of a mainstreaming awareness of and a confession of it, if we as Christians believe in the devastation of sin, why are we so slow to name it, confess it, and respond to it? That has been something that's been the surprise to me. And so I think what it looks like to be faithful in a divided world is not just to come back to Jesus, although that's absolutely where we should start. Yes, let's come back to the character of Jesus and what it means for us as Christians to be the body of Christ. That's what we're called to be and who we're called to be in every situation that we find ourselves in both individually and communally. But let's also acknowledge the context that we're in.

Let's acknowledge the situation that we find ourselves in as Christians in 21st century America; we don't live in a vacuum. And so it's important for us to learn our own history. If we consider ourselves Christians in America, then all of our American church history is ours. And I think of Nehemiah who confessed the sins of Israel, even though he understandably he could have said, “You know, I didn't participate in that. I'm just here trying to do some good stuff.” But he owned the sins, and he lamented and he grieved them. That's an important, that we don't just let ourselves off the hook and say, “Well, that's those Christians, Lord.” We have to say, “We're coming to you with broken hearts and asking that you would form us more in your likeness.”

**David:** I love what Pastor Justin is saying. That's the basic stuff of the Christian life, right? This is what makes Christians unique. It's not that we're perfectly put together or have it all figured out; it's that we're confessional. It's that we're deeply aware of our own complicity and sinfulness. And to echo a little bit of what Justin's saying there, that's the sadness and the heartbreak. I don't want to say I'm still surprised by it, but I think I still am, that our posture is not confessional, that it is still self-righteous, still defensive. And that there is this desire to be exceptional in some ways rather than seeing ourselves as a people deeply in need of salvation, and applying the grace of Jesus even to these sins having to do with racism, or white supremacy, or a church that is not so much divided as it is segregated.

For me, it's important to say it that way, because I think oftentimes those of us in the majority culture talk about divisions as though they just happened to us, that we're on the receiving end of these divisions when in fact we've created them. We've intentionally lived into choices and decisions that have been exclusionary and have consolidated cultural power for our own good and for somebody else's marginalization. The sadness is that none of this is outside of the basic expectations of the Christian life and what it means to be the people of God together. It's just that time and time again, we fail to apply them to these areas having to do with politics or race. We act as though somehow the gifts that God has given us are not good enough. And so we succumb to the prevailing assumptions of our culture.

**Stephanie:** I just finished David's [book](#). What I loved about it was how practical it was, that it said, "Here are the practices that we put in." It's not just, do we think these things in our mind, but as Jesus is always saying, it's about putting the words into practice. And so I loved how for any pastors, any leaders, any people who lead in especially predominantly-white churches, this is not a book to try to make your church more diverse. This is about how to be people who would be ready for the blessing of a more diverse church. And I thought that was why it was so great and practical about. I really appreciated it. And I love the other resources that Pastor Justin mentioned too.

**Lisa:** In light of where we are today on the other side of the election results, which are still officially pending, what do you sense is the call of kingdom people in this season?

**David:** I do think we keep leaning into the spiritual resources that God has given the church. I'm deeply convinced that the work of reconciliation and justice is profoundly spiritual work, and I'm disappointed by how often we try to go about it under our own strength and wisdom. We need to be fasting more, to be honest with you; we need to be setting aside times of worship and listening for the Holy Spirit. We need these seasons where we are intentionally being refined. And as Justin was saying, even repenting corporately; there should always be this language of "us and we," and not "them," in the posture of the church, and a posture of confession.

So we don't come self-righteously at any of this, I want to say this carefully, because I realize that when we talk about spiritual things, that ends up being a sort of privatized spirituality. And that's obviously not what we're talking about today. But again, some of us whose hearts are for

reconciliation and justice can sometimes forget just how deeply spiritual this work is. And so I learn a lot from the African-American pastors and churches in our neighborhood who have been about this for generations and who have this deeply-intertwined gospel posture which is very practical, organized, and mobilizing. And yet it's deeply spiritual.

It's prayer, it's worship, it's nurturing the people of God and our community together. And so I want us to not pick up the tools of our society and our culture, which happen to be pretty pragmatic and pretty violent and manipulative. Our church recently went through Dr. King's ten commitments to nonviolent demonstration that he had everybody sign in the lead up to the movement in Birmingham. And one of the commitments is, never forget that our aim is righteousness and justice, not victory. How beautiful is that, right? That we're not going to content ourselves with the aims of our society. We want something different than that. We need wisdom right now, right? This could be a moment where we get desperate and we just start grasping for things, but the Holy Spirit is available to give us a deep wisdom for this moment that will speak to our broader society, but won't be necessarily drawing from it.

**Stephanie:** The one thing that I would just say is it's really a mistake for us to think that our vote is the most important way we participate in kingdom aspects of being kingdom people. It is an important one, and I hope that people took that opportunity since so many people have not had the opportunity in the past that should have, but it's tempting—agreeing that it's very spiritual—I think that it's a temptation of the enemy to think, just cast your vote. And then you've got to go home and see what happens.

Of course, that's what's happening with the election, but our participation as citizens of the kingdom of God, in the midst of what I often call the little kingdoms of the world extends so far beyond voting into how we interact with our actual neighbors and what it looks like for us to be people who come alongside the things that God cares about in the world. And I think that that can lead us to a sense of apathy or a resentment that we're so powerless in the situation, and we are powerless except for the empowerment that we have in the Holy Spirit. The conscious dependence, as my tradition says, in the Holy Spirit, what does that look like to have that? And then to receive that in that spiritual aspect, and then to let us pray with our feet as we take those steps towards what the Spirit empowers us to do. So that's the thing that came to mind as David was speaking.

**Justin:** One thing I'd add is keeping in the forefront of our mind who we're becoming, and that the fact that who we are becoming is not just a wish dream. It requires intentionality. It requires daily moment by moment decisions. And so, we can look at the election in one way—and I think a lot of people do—as, this is the most important thing, civically, just not even talking spiritually, but civically, as long as I cast my ballot every four years, I've done my duty. No, it is about thinking about your local elections. It's thinking about your board of education, your school board elections, your neighborhood commissioner elections. It can seem like, why do I have to care about that? Because it impacts our neighbors, because it impacts the places that God has called us to be.



So being civically engaged in who we are becoming as a neighborhood, as a church, as a community, requires engagement in the small things, as well as the big things. If you're married, it's not just, "We did the big ceremony which was awesome," or "We did the five-year renewal, that was awesome." But all the in-between, you didn't hardly see him or her. And I think that's absolutely true in our spiritual lives as individuals and as a community as well. It's not just about what do I do on Sunday? It's about, what am I doing Monday to Saturday? It's not just about what am I doing in my quiet time at the beginning of the day. It's, what am I doing every moment of that day? How am I inviting my awareness of God's Spirit in me, working through me in the other person that I'm engaging with?

What does it mean for me to have the eyes of Christ and see the Christ and the other in everybody that I encounter? And I recognize how challenging that is, especially as so much of our lives have moved online. And maybe we just see a name or an avatar or a picture of somebody. We don't see their faces anymore, as much as we used to. And so I think that that has made things harder. But keeping in mind who we're becoming is an overarching principle.

**Lisa: How do you lead a congregation away from individualized and behavioral notions of sin to recognize and confess systemic realities, in which many of our congregations participate like white supremacy?**

**David:** It's so hard. And I do think that for those of us in ministry leadership, if we're not recognizing that kind of hyperindividualism, then we're missing something significant about the call to disciple our people. This individualism, this kind of Western individualism, it forms us to think of ourselves as autonomous beings who can opt in and opt out of particular communities. We don't think of ourselves in a collectivist manner. We don't think of ourselves as belonging inherently to this baptismal community that that is ours and in Jesus. So I think it begins by naming it. I think it begins by really specifically, if you, if you preach, if you teach, getting at that from the platform and the pulpit, it's the water that we swim in.

And so for many of our people, many of those we're called to serve and to lead, they have not been in a space where they have needed to think about this, which is not surprising. That's the dominant culture. So our congregations could become those places where we start to identify the stuff that has been made hidden or concealed by the the broader culture. So I would start there. I would start by talking about it, by pointing it out, I would start by identifying how some of those instincts make it difficult for us to read Scripture in the way that it deserves to be read, how it makes it difficult for us to see ourselves in the way that God calls us to be as a holy temple, as a people, as a family.

But until a congregation starts to grapple with that individualism, it's going to be really hard to get at some of the other things that we've talked about here today. And I don't think that's tangential to this conversation about politics and partisanship, where our primary instinct is to make this decision based on my own discernment. Yes, my own discernment is really important, but it is how is it in conversation with the people of God? How is it mutually discerned with those who have maybe suffered the worst of the status quo in this country? I just don't think



that that most of us from the majority culture, even think to think those questions when it comes to our politics.

**Justin:** Especially when it comes to our practices, the way we think about spiritual practices, can be very individualistic, right? What am I doing or what am I as an individual doing? And I think it's incumbent on us as, as Christians, as leaders, to particularly to think through, how do we, how do we make something communal? How do we get people out of their own heads in some ways? And from my own experience as a worship leader, one of the ways that I'll do that is in reflecting on the Psalms, which is the songbook of Israel and has a lot of "I" and "me" language, but people would sing them together. So you better believe there were folks who thought, "Not this song again," right? "I'm not feeling this." But there was a sense of solidarity with one another of saying, "I might not be feeling this, but I also know that there is somebody in this body who is feeling this." So what does it mean for me not to sing something individualistically or to treat it individualistically as if to say, "If I'm not feeling this, I'm not going to sing it," or, "I love this because this completely speaks to where I am." That's part of our awareness of ourselves, but what if we took it to another level and said, "How do I sing this for somebody else? How do I sing this with someone else? How do I picture and empathize with somebody else as I sing this?" And I think that's one piece of that kind of breaking the mold of "It's only what I'm feeling. It's only what I'm thinking," and beginning to shift our eyes to those who are around us.

**Stephanie:** Yes, starting with the people who really want to learn, helping connect them with these resources; some of us who are connected to Missio Alliance get resources coming into our inbox all the time from organizations like you. And a lot of folks I've noticed, particularly the white folks in my community, when I say we need to talk about what it means to be white, for some of them there's an embarrassment that they don't know what that means. And so, we started an "introduction to whiteness class" for white people and said, only white people are coming to this, because we've got to talk. And let's create some space where we can get to a place of salvation from white supremacy, and how do we practice that when we don't really agree on a definition of that.

We can go with people's hearts and their heads and try to help them make the connection there. I've seen people make that connection, and it's really powerful and really meaningful to see that. I think of Jesus' analogy or his principle in Luke 10 of the person of peace; where's the peace between you and those folks? Let's move towards the white brothers and sisters who are ready to have some conversations. It doesn't mean they won't be defensive a little bit. We all are, right? We all have that fragility, but the people who are leaning in a little bit, let's lean in even more to them and say, "Hey, the temptation is to put something out there,"—I call it slacktivism—Tweet, retweet, or make an uncomfortable statement at a large family gathering. But what about the one-on-one conversations? And what about leaning towards those folks and saying, "Let's talk about this in an individual, one-on-one way," so that we can move from the air we breathe, which is individualism, and move out into a space of looking around and seeing where people are. And I've seen people make those shifts. So I do think that's hopeful. But it's

like anything else in life, if it's a process you need to go through, it's when you're open to it—anybody who's trying to convince their child or their spouse to go to counseling would know this—it won't go super well until it's what they want to do.

But I do think many people are wanting to do that and to have a posture for that. We're tired. We don't have a lot of strength and muscles for that as white people often. So we've got to figure out what it looks like to strengthen that capacity for ourselves, and our friends of color can show us, by example; they don't need to teach it to us by being the people who need to give us the education, but we can look at their lives and say, this is what resilience looks like. And I want to be someone like that.

**Justin:** For communities of color, this is not new. These questions, feeling like a minority, feeling unheard, feeling like we've got to find our own space. That's not new. That's been the reality of our country since its beginning. And I think for us as churches, the importance of remembering what it means to be a body, remembering, when Paul says that if we are a body, we celebrate with those who celebrate. But we also mourn with those who mourn and it's not a 50/50, it's not, "we've got to spend half the time with those who are happy and half the time with those who are sad." If you have a couple of kids and one of them is happy about their business and the other one is wailing, you're not going to say, "I'm spending two minutes with the happy kid and then two minutes with the sad kid," because the need is with the one who is grieving. And so what does it mean for us to prioritize the ones who are hurting? What does it mean for us, even if we might not be aware of the depth of how much the hurt is, what does it mean for us to come alongside, to listen, to support, even if it's not our experience. That's what friends do. That's what a community does. That's what family does. And so I don't know if it's a teaching moment or if it's reframing what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

**Lisa:** When is silence appropriate? And when is silence hurtful?

**David:** I think about the silence question a lot. And I also want to say that I think what Justin just said is really good and important, particularly from a lay person's perspective, because I think this is a common dynamic in many of our churches, where there is a remnant of members who really see the possibility of what it can look like when a church lives in solidarity with the rest of the body of Christ. They've been captivated by this biblical vision, which means they're also lamenting those places where we're not living into it. And they're hungry for their leaders to actually lead in this way. And yet, so often we as leaders choose a the way of least resistance. And I mean, look, I've done it. I do it too. So this is not a self-righteous indictment. It's just to say that when it comes to these conversations about racial justice, particularly in majority culture churches but not only, I think this dynamic also exists in some Asian American congregations, Latino American congregations, depending on the dynamics, in those churches as well.

For example, just plainly say "Black Lives Matter," not as a partisan or ideological statement, but as a statement of solidarity with our sisters and brothers. So you have these lay people who are hungry for this leadership and are wondering, "Do I stay at my church or not? Should I remain here or not? It doesn't feel like there's any movement." That's a real dynamic. And that's why I

have a couple of things I want to say, that struggle is real. But be careful before you disengage too quickly. There's a pastor here on the South side of Chicago who defines racial privilege as the ability to walk away. And I think we need to realize that the ability to leave one church and go to another, to some extent is an indication of our privilege. So what does it mean to steward that; would it mean to stay? Not saying stay in a manipulative or abusive setting, but what if God has called you to stay in that place, to be prayerful, to agitate appropriately, to be the burr under the saddle. I'm convinced that there is always a group of people in any congregation who is ready for this. I don't think you're ever alone. And so I start by saying, pray that God would lead you to other people in your congregation and then pray for opportunities to influence your leadership.

And one of the practical ways that we can do this is by saying thank you and affirming leadership. When we do see them take steps, no matter how small, because the reality is when they take those small steps, they hear from people who are offended by it, right? But oftentimes they don't hear from those of us who are so thankful and who are fed by those small acts of leadership. And so when we proactively encourage our leaders, when we see them wading into these deeper waters, our affirmation can go a really long ways. Then can they realize that they're not on their own. That is not just them, that God has in fact been preparing their church for this moment so that they're moving forward together. And I know many pastors right now feel really lonely in this stuff. They are being convicted. They are literally wrestling with God on this. They are counting the cost. How many people can we afford to lose? How small can our budget get, that's a real thing that's happening right now. And so when those pastors realize that they're not alone, that God has provided a community, even if it's a smaller one to begin leaning into this, I think that can be really, really significant.

**Stephanie:** I love that. This is my burr under my saddle that I'll share with everybody here. It feels like it's convenient for us to be people with an important voice when people want our voice to be important. And then sometimes we don't care about what you have to say. And so I just want to encourage people. I totally support what David's saying, agitate appropriately. If you can speak with your pastor, all of those things; but at the same time your pastor saying something on Twitter or on the pulpit doesn't fix any of the problems actually. And there's a temptation I have—and I'm with this one too—when a leader that I respect says something, it feels like I'm participating, but really I'm just grateful for their voice.

And so figuring out what the difference is between being grateful for your pastor's voice and being people who step out and use your voice and your authority in the name of Jesus to step into places where the enemy is tearing apart people's identity, that is you. You get to do that. That's the priesthood of all believers. As a person who's not really a high church person here, let's do it, get some people together, start reading David's book, get together and talk about different things, and figure out what it looks like to have a posture of openness, to people who are on the fence of trying to know if this matters. And so absolutely it does matter what your pastor is preaching. It does matter what we say publicly. It does, but it only matters so much. If I could say this, we are not as important as we sometimes think we are.

And we are not as important as everyone stepping into their neighborhoods. You're a priest of the neighborhood you live in, you are a priest. What does a priest do? A priest creates a way for people to engage who God is. That's what priests have always done. They open up space for people to encounter the living God, and you get to do that everywhere. And so at the same time, confront what's happening with leaders, but not in lieu of talking about how you get to be a priest to the person who you're living next to who might have not seen another human being in weeks, and an opportunity there to truly step into that amazing role. God didn't have to include us in this mission, but he invited us to be a part of it anyway. And we all get to play. Everybody has to play, not just the people with a pastor title or some other thing that we love to think we're important.

**Lisa:** In many white spaces, I find that a prophetic call to action often gets read as coming from a place of distrusting God's sovereignty, people saying that "Jesus is Lord, so we need to trust Jesus more as a response to naming oppression and justice, etc." especially in the political sphere. How do you respond to this dynamic?

**Stephanie:** Another one of those places where if that is nuanced and gets sucked out of the room all the time would be really helpful. That's my initial thought. I had this conversation with one of my associate pastors just before who said, how do we talk on Sunday in a way that honors Jesus as Lord but respects the fact that we have responsibility with God; Jesus is our savior, but also our leader. And so the participation invitation is so crucial, but with the nuance; the way that it is, I think the challenge we face is that as soon as you say, one or the other, you haven't even gotten the second half of the sentence out before someone's decided, it's about God's sovereignty and we have no...or this person is saying it's social justice and we might not need God.

Well, absolutely not. So I think leaning in and asking more questions, waiting to see what else might be said. There's a lot there in that way, and recognizing the room and reading the room. I think this is one of the problems with social media; who knows who's listening to us right now. And they're listening with lenses that are not the same as mine. I don't know where they've come from or what they've experienced. And so I'm trying to figure out how we can have really rich conversations where it actually is a conversation and not just a proclamation where if someone can't respond or share their perspective, which would be critical in some of these conversations.

**Justin:** Probably for all of us, the unconscious or subconscious image in our head is a sort of a slider between like God's sovereignty and our action. And that's not reality. That's not how God works. It's not, if God's doing stuff then we don't have to do stuff, vice versa. It's all of our action finds its place within God's action. We already know the character of God. We already know the things that God has named as priorities in Scripture, that Jesus has named as priorities in Scripture. We already know we have marching orders. Micah 6:8, Matthew 25, the Great Commandments, we have marching orders. If those form the overarching framework for what we do, none of that is undercutting God's sovereignty. If anything it is contributing to it. And

anything that we do that reflects more of God's character and more of God's kingdom, more of God's love and justice, that is actually backing up a statement of saying Jesus is Lord.

I was reading a tweet from Andre Henry who was responding to the, one of the platitudes that gets pulled out at a time like this, that God is still on the throne. And he said, "I mean, yeah, but that actually should be good news for the oppressed and not just as a way for the oppressor to silence dissent or anything like that." And I resonated with that because if we're saying Jesus is on the throne, then we're seeing a particular kind of God on the throne with particular concerns and cares. And God loves everybody. Absolutely. There's a saying, I think it was Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who said where human dignity is least obvious we need to pay the most attention. And that's how I try to look at situations, at the world, at people and say, what's going on in this situation and how much more do I need to pay attention to it?

**Lisa: We're still in the presence of the most contentious election of our time. And you all are pastors, so pastor us; what do you want to offer us?**

**David:** I don't know that I have anything particularly smart to say about that because we're in the middle of it with everybody else, too. I'm trying to keep in mind those who are going to be disproportionately impacted by any kind of violence, any kind of pushback, any kind of chaos. And frankly, it's not going to be me; I'm going to be okay most likely regardless of who wins. And this maybe goes back to some of what Justin was saying about appeals to God's sovereignty often as sort of a disguise for an approval of the status quo. And so I think that what I would hope that the church and white Christians in particular right now, that we would be listening really closely to the testimonies of sisters and brothers in Christ. And that we would be really curious about people's experiences in the days ahead.

This is the priority for Christian people. The priority is not partisan politics. Now I say that as somebody who's pretty deeply invested in political engagement in my own city, but that's never the starting point; the starting point is our identity as the people of God. And so, as has been mentioned, this is a moment where we're interested in who's weeping and who's rejoicing so that we can be in solidarity. The question is, do we even know who's weeping? And if we don't, then that's an indictment on the decisions that we have made in our own priorities. And so I think for white Christians in particular, this could be a moment where we reflect a little bit and ask, am I so disconnected from the body of Christ that I don't even have a sense of who's weeping and who's being impacted by the rhetoric, by the policies of this moment. That that's deeply problematic, but there's an invitation there too, right?

There's an invitation to repent, to walk in a different way, to turn around and walk in the way that God would have for us. So there's space for lament and repentance, but there's also space in a moment like this for a new imagination to start to be born among us about what God actually desires and wants for us.

**Stephanie:** I think the thing that comes to mind for me is, what does it look like to pursue wisdom right now in everything, every little interaction, everything you're posting on the Internet, every text message, ask God for wisdom, and God will give it to you generously. And we need that all the time. And I think we can ask for forgiveness for when we thought we had enough of our own wisdom to get along and get going. But if it doesn't seem obvious now how desperately we need God's wisdom and not just at an individual level, but corporately as churches, as leadership teams, as people who lead in the corporate setting, as people who lead nonprofits right now, as people who are parenting young children, what we desperately need is God's wisdom right now. The brother of Jesus said that if we ask for it, God will give it to us. So I'm going to bank on that one and consistently put something somewhere to remind me to pray for wisdom throughout the rest of this day and tomorrow and the rest of this week. Because there are so many more actions that will matter than what you put on the voting box last week to the people right around you.

**David:** I love that so much. We are so lacking in wisdom right now. And I think part of that is because we fear a lot of stuff more than we fear God. Scripture is pretty clear where wisdom begins. It's an awe and worship and fear of the Lord. And so I think practically, that's something we can all do right now. We can prioritize the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom, which means tuning down the volume on different anxieties and fears and worries. For some of us, we have real fears and concerns. And those are legitimate. But we can choose to prioritize the fear of the Lord so that we would have the wisdom that Pastor Steph is talking about.

**Justin:** I think an ever-present opportunity and invitation from the Lord is to press in. God has given us whoever we are, whatever privilege, whatever opportunities we have, God has put those in our lives, not for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others. That's the difference between American freedom, which is freedom *from*, and, and gospel freedom, which is what Paul says is freedom *for*, for others. And I think that recognition of the agency that God has given to us to choose for, or against God, for or against others, for or against flourishing, for or against the common good, in all of the situations and places, in relationships with our families, with our coworkers, with our neighbors, those are all opportunities where God is saying, seek me in this, step towards love in this.

We all have those opportunities. And I think one of the challenges in this season—I know that it is a temptation for me—is to run away from the pain, to shut it out, to distract myself, to numb out whatever doom scroll, to eat my feelings. But I think those places where we feel the discomfort, where we feel the hurt, the pain, those are places where God is saying, I'm here. I'm with you. Just be with me. And let me minister to you, let me lead you into new ways of life. I think that's the first step. I think that's part of what Jesus meant when he said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

It's us saying, here's an opportunity. My whole world, or my comfort, has been shaken upside down. But the Holy Spirit keeps moving. The Holy Spirit keeps working. I think about the history

of churches wherever we may have had privilege. And I think about churches all over the world who have much less privileged, who have experienced much more persecution and much more marginalization, much more ridicule. And if God works there, God can work here. So as much as we hate the refinement, bring it on. As much as I hate that feeling of discomfort, bring it on. Because I pray that through that that God would form us more in the likeness of Christ. And there's always the opportunity there. There's always the invitation there. So don't run away from it.

**Lisa: That is a good word. I want to close us with a reading from James 3:13-18:**

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

**May that be true of us. The church in this moment, we have a lot of work to do. And we will find direction at the beginning of wisdom and in sowing peace that comes from that space.**