

20.08.29 Goodbye My Tribe Hour.wav

Sarah McConnell [00:00:04] It can be a difficult decision for anyone to walk away from their religion. But what if your father was an evangelical preacher, you were expected to choose the same path. And yet you still walked away?

Sean Connable [00:00:16] You know, this was my culture. This was this was who I knew. And it's not just a matter of deciding, OK, I don't believe this anymore. When you leave, it's like getting out of a cult us person. That way, you you're gone from Virginia Humanities.

Sarah McConnell [00:00:35] This is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. And today we explore one of America's largest religious movements: Evangelicalism. Later in the show, the Latin American influence on the evangelical left. But first, Vic Sizemore grew up as a staunch evangelical. His father was a conservative evangelical preacher, and Vic was destined to follow in his footsteps. But instead, he joined academia and is now an English professor at Central Virginia Community College. His book, Goodbye My Tribe, chronicles his journey away from fundamentalist religion.

Sarah McConnell [00:01:16] What prompted you to become disaffected with the religion that you grew up with?

Vic Sizemore [00:01:22] Well, it was a process that actually began in my childhood being raised in the home of a fundamentalist Baptist preacher. I was expected also to probably follow him into the ministry. And that was a pressure I felt all my life. And in studying scripture and going to school and learning science, learning history, I just began to realize there are things within my religious upbringing that just did not fit with the world as I was coming to understand it.

Sarah McConnell [00:01:58] Give me examples of little moments early in childhood when you thought, well, why do we believe that?

Vic Sizemore [00:02:04] Well, we we believed in, you know, the one of the tenets of fundamentalist Christianity is the historicity of biblical miracles. Just one example. You know, in Joshua, the son stands still and doesn't move. So the day can be longer so the Israelites can continue to defeat the Emirates. When you learn the reality of cosmology, you just can't make sense of that. Even children have trouble making sense of that. But you just told you know, it happened. You have to believe it happened. I think fundamentalism in general, but specifically my own experience of it was very authoritarian. You did not question the authority. You might have the questions, but you didn't openly express them.

Sarah McConnell [00:02:51] Do you remember periods in your childhood of how you did have very fundamentalist beliefs and how for a while they were dear to you?

Vic Sizemore [00:03:01] I do remember I mean, I, I did have fundamentalist beliefs. And the ones that the ones that I held on to the longest were the ones that frightened me the most. You know, if I did not if I did not properly ask Jesus into my heart to be my lord and savior, I was going to burn in hell forever. And, you know, you live with this fear because if you are not living the proper life according to what you're being told in Sunday school, you might not be saved. You might not have done it right. You might have to try again because you might be in danger of going to hell. So I can remember a number of times as a child,

you know, lying in my bed and just praying to God, please make this the real time because I don't want to go to hell.

Sarah McConnell [00:03:47] You didn't really turn away, though, from fundamentalism in childhood at all. In fact, as you said for a long time, you thought you're going to go into the ministry yourself or become a missionary.

Vic Sizemore [00:03:59] I did not ever want to do that, but I felt like the pressure I felt was OK. That is the one high calling. That is the one thing that I can do. And anything else I do is going to be something less, something not really worthy. It's that you became a Marine. Yes. Because that that came in a second. A close second was, you know, go into the military because fighting for your country was almost as good as being a minister.

Sarah McConnell [00:04:29] What was your experience as a Marine like when were you a Marine and where did you serve? And along the way, what did you notice about what you were learning in conjunction with your own fundamentalist beliefs?

Vic Sizemore [00:04:43] Yes, I joined the Marine Corps Reserves in 1986 and I was activated to serve in the invasion, Operation Desert Storm, Desert Shield. And during that time, we went to the Philippines where we trained, and then we went and we sat on a ship in the Persian Gulf. Eventually we went in country. And during those experiences, that's when I became sort of this enchanted with what I was doing as part of the United States military. I didn't see it as protecting freedom. I saw it as just being a part of an empire. The force of an empire.

Sarah McConnell [00:05:33] Did your feeling of I don't feel good about this part of my role as a Marine conflict with your views on fundamentalism?

Vic Sizemore [00:05:42] It didn't really conflict with my views on fundamentalism, but it did with, you know, what it what does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to live a life that is modeled on the life of Jesus Christ? It definitely did conflict with that, which, you know, Christ was a peacemaker. Christ said if someone hits you, you don't hit back, that, you know, there is an argument for pacifism. How I was not a pacifist. I'm not a pacifist now. But you know what we were doing didn't feel to me like like a Christian thing to do, and I you know, I had also grown up learning. We were the Christian nation. We were the nation that was doing good in the world. Everywhere we went, we were there doing good. And I really struggled with that.

Sarah McConnell [00:06:34] What are the core values of fundamentalism and evangelicalism and how do those values differ from what most of us understand as mainstream Christianity?

Vic Sizemore [00:06:48] I think the original core beliefs of fundamentalism and, you know, you have to believe in order to be a Christian, they believe this, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, substitutionary atonement, so he died to actually pay for the sins of the world and his physical, bodily death and resurrection. And then the historicity of the biblical miracles which we talked about and the inerrancy of the Bible. Everything in the Bible is factually true, historically, scientifically true. That is that is a core tenet of fundamentalism. That's not a core tenet of all evangelicalism. So when I when I describe my tribe has conservative, white evangelical, it's not all evangelicals who believe those things. It is it is just the very conservative ones.

Sarah McConnell [00:07:38] You know, you wrote this book. Goodbye, My Tribe, about leaving this fundamentalist culture emotionally and spiritually. Did you have to actually come out to your family that way?

Vic Sizemore [00:07:51] Well, my father and I, we we didn't have the closest relationship. He was always how to doing the work of the gospel. He was out preaching. He was out. And I did not see much of him in my childhood. So we weren't close. We didn't really have those kinds of discussions. But I do remember in the mid 90s, sitting down with him to have a conversation, to try to talk to him about the fact that this this turn towards the prosperity gospel, which is another part of fundamentalism that really just doesn't fit with the teachings of Jesus, that if you if God loves you, you'll be rich. And my my dad said to me, like his church had a they were trying to get people like young professionals who were moving into the town who who were, you know, who were better off. They were they were going after them. They were trying to get them to join the church. And I and I just mentioned. I said, you know, this is this doesn't seem like what Jesus would want. You know, there are plenty of needy people. And we got into an argument and he eventually just said to me, do you think I've been I've wasted my life up there? And at that point, I just decided, you know, I'm not going I'm not going to engage this with him anymore. So I didn't ever again.

Sarah McConnell [00:09:16] When you write Goodbye, My Tribe. How has that manifested itself in your own life? In what ways inside you and through your actions, have you left the fundamentalist culture that you were steeped in?

Vic Sizemore [00:09:30] Right. I never I never go to church now, and I don't know that I ever will. My wife and I, we visited a couple of churches. We visited a Christian church, is a very liberal church here in town. And we visited a Unitarian church just for this sense of community and for for people who who believe the same things we believe. And it just wasn't comfortable. So I probably never will be a churchgoer again.

Vic Sizemore [00:09:56] But I was until the early 2000s, I even though I had I had left, I still took my kids are still took my kids to to church and on Sunday mornings and I still sat there and it was just, you know, this was my culture. This was this was who I knew. And it's not just a matter of deciding, okay, I don't believe this anymore. When you leave, it's like getting out of a cult. I suppose in that way, you you're gone. So you have to find something else which which I have done really in my friends and colleagues in academia.

Sarah McConnell [00:10:35] The town where you are is Lynchburg, Virginia, and that's the same city where the son of Jerry Falwell has taken over from his father as president of Liberty College, a giant university in the evangelical movement. What do you see happening there? What does it feel like?

Vic Sizemore [00:10:53] Well, what I see happening there is no one. The online school, which operates as at least with the model of a for profit college or university, is just raking in federal student aid money, hundreds of millions of dollars. So it's it is flush with money. It is building like crazy at the same time. It is. And this isn't necessarily the entire student body or the faculty, for that matter. But Jerry Falwell Jr. himself is a staunch supporter of Donald Trump. He himself, in a lot of ways behaves like Donald Trump and gets himself in the news for saying and doing things that are manifestly unchristian.

Sarah McConnell [00:11:40] Why do you think the vast majority of evangelicals have supported Donald Trump when he is not religious, not fundamentalist, and in spite of some of his actions that run counter to fundamentalist beliefs?

Vic Sizemore [00:11:54] I was already working on the essays in this collection when Donald Trump started running and then when Donald Trump was elected. And that really surprised me that fundamentalists came out in support of him in the way they did, and maybe it shouldn't have. But one of the things that I can remember being taught is the means don't justify the ends. That's called situational ethics. And that is not a Christian way to live. I had that beat into me as a child and then they turn around and do this. They support Donald Trump, who not only is not Christian, he pretty much lives his life in a way that flouts pretty much all the instructions of Jesus Christ. But what he promised them, they made a deal with the devil. What he promised them was conservative judges, which there are two main issues are their religious freedom, which they define as you know, they they do not want to, as a business, have to offer birth control. They do not want to have to hire LGBTQ people if they do not want to. They they do not want to make wedding cakes for same sex marriages, those kinds of things. They worry that those kinds of things are going to be taken away from them. And then abortion making it illegal, not not making it go away necessarily, but making it illegal. And Donald Trump is they they are not unhappy with with what he is giving them there.

Sarah McConnell [00:13:26] Well, Vic Sizemore, thank you for sharing your story and your insights on with Katrina.

Vic Sizemore [00:13:33] Thank you to Sarah. It was a pleasure.

Sarah McConnell [00:13:42] Vic Sizemore is an English professor at Central Virginia Community College. He's also author of *Goodbye My Tribe: An Evangelical Exodus*. Coming up next, the Latin American roots of the evangelical left movement. Most people associate the politics of evangelicals with the religious right. But the first evangelical U.S. president was actually Jimmy Carter - a democrat. David Kirkpatrick is a religion professor at James Madison University. And he says evangelicals aren't all politically conservative in his book, *A Gospel for the Poor*. David looks at the influence of Latin America in the rise of the evangelical left. David, you write about the evangelical left who's in the evangelical left, and how does it differ from the right?

David Kirkpatrick [00:14:43] That's a great question. And you're right. When most people think about evangelicals, they think of political polling. They think about presidential campaigns. And I'm really looking to tell the story in my book, *A Gospel for the Poor*, about the global background, perhaps two stories that people are more familiar with. And so when I talk about the evangelical left, there's a moment in 1974 when almost 2500 Protestant leaders gather in Lizanne, Switzerland, invited by the influential Billy Graham. And so this large gathering of Protestant leaders gets together and Billy Graham invited them to accelerate the evangelization of the entire world. But instead of doing that, leaders from Africa, Asia and Latin America got on the platform and began to disagree quite strongly with taking direction from Americans and taking directions for how the plan would go forward. So in one prominent example, Rene Padilla, an Ecuadorian theologian, got on the stage at Billy Graham's invitation and he said Americans export racial and class segregation around the world as they seek to evangelize. So that was really, in my mind, one of the most significant climaxes for the evangelical left when they gained a place at the global stage and said, we're not going to be lockstep in loyalty with what white conservatives are looking to do in the United States. So it's a movement that is

theologically conservative. They might agree with someone like Billy Graham on theology, but socially more progressive in issues of politics.

Sarah McConnell [00:16:26] Could you also call the evangelical left in Latin America a biblical social justice movement? Is that going too far?

David Kirkpatrick [00:16:36] I think they would agree with that. And that's at the core of evangelical identity would be agreeing that what they call the great commission, this commandment from Jesus to go all around the world and make disciples of every nation. And the disagreement and part of what this story is about is that just a spiritual commandment or is there something also social about it? And so the Latin Americans, Latinos in my story, they are arguing that there is an equal social mandate there as well as a spiritual mandate. And this is what they called Misiones integral or integral mission. That is, that justice or social justice is fused together with that spiritual mandate. And what made people nervous, like Billy Graham and other white evangelical Christians in the U.S., is that they didn't want to be distracted from this personal conversion. They had seen some evangelical movements go leftward politically and then become less self consciously Christian and their identity. And so this was part of the battle was actually over a pretty particular theological ideas of what exactly did Jesus mean when he sent Christians all around the world. And of course, this matters in part because now there are more Christians living in Africa, Asia and Latin America. So the voices from those places is actually voices from the center of Christianity, rather, from from the margins.

Sarah McConnell [00:18:01] Is there a key passage in the Bible that is sort of the guiding force behind the evangelical left in Latin America?

David Kirkpatrick [00:18:10] Rather than saying there's a key scripture passage would say there were key political and social moments that are going to shape an entire generation. So the Latin American evangelical left is the same generation as Pope Francis. And those who also developed theologies of liberation like Gustavo Gutierrez. And so they're drawing from a shared set of social and political stimuli. They're drawing from the Cuban revolution and the Tummy coming out of that. They're drawing from student protest movements that are shaking the world in the late 60s and early 70s. So the people that I got to interview in places like Costa Rica and places like Spain and in Buenos Aires, Argentina, they would say they were reading their own context and then looking to scripture and finding motivation.

Sarah McConnell [00:18:59] You grew up in an evangelical household. During what era? And what was that like?

David Kirkpatrick [00:19:05] I grew up in a wonderful home. And thankfully, you know, for some people, when they look at their heritage, they are able to note something like hypocrisy or something like that. My parents were very devout in the sense that they took it very seriously and they took the words of Jesus very seriously to welcome the stranger and welcome minorities into our household. To our home was often a center for refugees and those who are newer immigrants into the country. So that was a heritage I appreciate gaining from my parents. But. One of them, the motivations and interesting pieces of this story is that when I was younger, we had a picture of a young boy from Africa on our refrigerator. And this was, of course, simply one of many stories where evangelicals would sponsor children. Right. A very important piece of many of these evangelical humanitarian organizations. And what I didn't know is that actually in this book, I chronicle the influence of these Latin Americans and Latinos on those global humanitarian organizations. And I

argue in the book that their ability to pitch themselves or market themselves to white American evangelicals, like my family, was directly tied to the stories and the influence of what's happening in the book.

Sarah McConnell [00:20:18] Have you seen some of the evangelical left in person when you've lived in Mexico?

David Kirkpatrick [00:20:23] Absolutely. So the book, one of my favorite parts of writing this book, Gospel for the Poor, was that it took me to three continents. I was able to do interviews and archival research all across the world. And so it took me to one of my favorite places, Buenos Aires, Argentina. I was able to spend eight days with the most influential theologian in the global south, whose name is Rene Padilla, who I mentioned earlier. And one of my favorite stories is I was having lunch with him and a man named Kike who told the story of how he used to be addicted to drugs and alcohol, and he would walk down the streets in Buenos Aires and the doors of stores would close in front of him because he would cause so much chaos. And he said every door closed in front of me except for the door to Rene Padilla's Church. And he said eventually a second door opened to me and that was the door to Rene Padilla's home. And all throughout this conversation, we're speaking in Spanish. And he said, I wasn't looking to find God, but I found God at that table. And Rene turned to me in English and he said, David, every human need is a mission field. And that was really an interesting moment for me, thinking about this idea of Mision in take it all that for people like Rene Padilla. They were shaping their mission around the ideas of human needs. And that was something that he was passionate about when he talked about the evangelical left. He wanted that to be mainstream evangelicalism.

Sarah McConnell [00:21:47] How strong is the evangelical left? How widespread and strong is it? And how did it grow? By whom and where did it spread?

David Kirkpatrick [00:21:57] We had a high point for the evangelicals. Last is going to be the 1970s. So we're going to see evangelicals for McGovern, who, of course, loses his presidential election. But then the first born again president in the United States is not a Republican, but a Democrat, Jimmy Carter. And yet, as the 80s move forward, the Democratic Party is increasingly suspicious of those who are identifying as evangelical, wanting to dissent on issues and perhaps gender sexuality issues like abortion and, of course, on the religious right. There really isn't much of a home for someone who's critiquing ratio. You know, in class segregation, issues of American foreign policy abroad and American what they call imperialism. And so they're really going to be diffused into other organizations. They're going to be often politically homeless. And today, you might find the most prominent members of the evangelical left in organizations that wouldn't be necessarily evangelical left, explicitly humanitarian organizations like World Vision, which has over a billion dollar budget. And as an evangelical humanitarian organization, you might see them in student organizations like Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, which is one of the largest college Christian ministries in the world. And those aren't necessarily evangelical left organizations, but ones that create space for them to exert influence.

Sarah McConnell [00:23:17] So where are we now with the evangelical left? We don't really use that word in America, right. We talk about evangelicals and we associate it automatically with the evangelical right. And most of us, I would imagine, don't know how to distinguish one group from another.

David Kirkpatrick [00:23:35] Right. And this is one of the problems with political polling right there. When most people think of evangelicals, think of a box on a political pole. Do you consider yourself an evangelical? And when many Americans check that box, they're simply thinking, I'm not Catholic, conservative, myself, Christian, and I'm conservative. And so this isn't accounting for, for example, evangelicals of color. Many influential American evangelical organizations are now led by Asian-Americans and also by Latinos. And so I've written and I argue that the story is much more complex than we might see it on cable news and that we're actually at a crucial moment for American evangelicalism, where many evangelicals of color are asking themselves, do they have a home in these churches and in these organizations where perhaps there is pretty explicit support for President Trump and for things that they may feel uncomfortable with, their religious beliefs, you being used in public. So we're. We had a really interesting point, I think, especially for increasingly influential Asian-American and Latino evangelicals who have been largely the growth of evangelicalism in the last decade or so. Where are these evangelical of color going to go? Are they going to continue to find a home in these traditional denominations and organizations? Are they going to do something new?

Sarah McConnell [00:24:55] Has there been any movement among evangelicals in response to the social justice movement we've seen this summer in America?

David Kirkpatrick [00:25:04] We have seen very interesting soul searching among organizations that perhaps would be surprising to observers. For example, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Judy Greer, said the phrase Black Lives Matter and talked very openly about the issues of racism and white supremacy in Southern Baptist Convention, which is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. And so many white American pastors have been wrestling much more deeply with issues of race, in particular with the black white divide, what W.E. Dubois would call the color line. And I think actually that that white American evangelicals could learn a lot from this story that I tell in the Gospel for the Poor, because these issues and battles, these erupted in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. In the aftermath of these fierce student protests, many white American evangelicals were wrestling for the first time with issues of race and class and inequality and injustice. And there are pieces of the story that really influential evangelicals like Billy Graham and John Stott learned from the main characters in my book that I think that many would be helped by today were so close.

Sarah McConnell [00:26:24] But don't you think most Americans really have no full concept of who their Latin American neighbors are or fellow U.S. citizens from Latin America?

David Kirkpatrick [00:26:36] I do. And you know what? That is a key part of the history of the United States is really overlooking some of our closest neighbors overlooking countries like Mexico, overlooking Latin American neighbors. And that's part of what motivated me in telling this story, is that the influence of Latin Americans, Latinos on a story like the story of evangelicalism around the world has not been told. And in fact, sometimes it's been told in a way that's not correct. Giving credit for the ideas or movements that actually were led by Latin Americans. Those ideas instead are given to someone like Billy Graham or another white American leader. Of course, the largest minority group in the United States today are Latinos as well. So this is not a story of let's look over here at something very, very far away. But this is who we are as Americans as well. This is part of our story, and I think there's a lot to learn.

Sarah McConnell [00:27:28] David Kirkpatrick, thank you for sharing your insights on With Good Reason.

David Kirkpatrick [00:27:32] Thank you so much for having me. It was a pleasure.

Sarah McConnell [00:27:37] David Kirkpatrick is a professor of religion at James Madison University. He's also author of *A Gospel for the Poor: Global Social Christianity and the Latin American Evangelical Left*.

Sarah McConnell [00:27:52] This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

Sarah McConnell [00:28:01] Welcome back to With Good Reason. At Virginia Humanities, as we continue to live under the threat of Coronavirus. Day after day. Sometimes it can feel like a hopeless situation.

SFX [00:28:14] [NEWS CLIP] And now to the latest on the coronavirus. The United States is reporting the highest number of deaths in a single day.

SFX [00:28:20] [NEWS CLIP] Now to the staggering new number from the CDC warning that as many as 200000 lives could be lost by Labor Day.

SFX [00:28:27] [NEWS CLIP] It's all the changes happening as we overcome this pandemic. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, anxious and stressed.

Sarah McConnell [00:28:33] Definitely discouraging. But my next guest finds hope in the teachings of religion and thinkers from the past. David Salomon is an English professor at Christopher Newport University. He says there's a kind of reset button built into each of the major Western religions. An opportunity to stop and reflect on who you are and where you're going. And for David, the pandemic has given us all just that, a chance to press the reset button.

Sarah McConnell [00:29:04] David, what is your take on what we should make of this period where we've all been isolated in our homes? A lot of people lonely and confused. But all of us struggling to decide whether this is a fresh start or the awful beginning of something we can't fathom?

David Salomon [00:29:23] Well, I mean, of course, every every end is the beginning. And one of the things I think that we can learn from this is, is that has given us an opportunity really to hit what I call a reset button. And it really does give us that opportunity to kind of stop and reflect and contemplate and do some some really deep self reflection about who we are as as human beings, how we treat the environment and how we might change in the future coming out of this.

Sarah McConnell [00:29:55] Do you think most people have embraced that also as an opportunity to reset, or are they just sort of felt confused and waiting for the next shoe to drop?

David Salomon [00:30:06] Initially, I think that was certainly the case. I think there was a sense of of shock when we first went into the lockdown in March. And people didn't know what to think. And then as it went on over time, I think that really folks started to become more thoughtful about what was going on, about what they were doing.

David Salomon [00:30:27] I know that as I went through my my day at home working remotely, that oftentimes I really slowed down. I'm a New Yorker, a native New Yorker. And so I work quickly and I walk fast. And I notice that when I was doing things around the house, which I mean, a lot of people started doing a lot of home projects, myself included, and I just slowed down because it was like, well, what what's the rush? Do it slowly. Do it thoughtfully. Think about what you're doing and and move on from there. And so, I mean, I've been replacing all of the boards on my desk there. Fifty one of them. And it's been so hot in Virginia. It's been hard to work outside. They've been working at it very slowly. And I think pre pandemic, I'm not sure I would have had the patience to do it that slowly.

Sarah McConnell [00:31:18] Right. And of course, then there are the haves and the have nots. They're the people that were able to isolate without fearing financial self-destruction and the people who never thought they had much of a chance to to look inward. Right?

David Salomon [00:31:33] Yeah. That that that that's a serious issue that also, I think has arisen from this is that the the distinction between what you, as you call the haves and the have nots has really become clear, especially to the haves, and that in combination with the rising consciousness about racial injustice has caused us all, I think, to kind of pause and think about our our place in society and our place in this culture and our relationship to those folks. I know that initially when I was going out at the beginning of the pandemic, I mean, I'm the one who goes out and does the food shopping on Saturdays for my family that I was very, very aware of thanking the folks who were still working in the supermarkets for for for walking, showing them that appreciation. And I think we need to do that. I think we need to be more appreciative of each other.

Sarah McConnell [00:32:31] I did love the blog post you wrote in April on Reset and the feelings that you had about what some of the great philosophers and thinkers have said about this moment to really cherish and reflect. Could you share some of the people whose writings and conversations with one another from the past inspired you?

David Salomon [00:32:55] Sure. I am essentially a scholar of the history of religion and spirituality in general. I was raised Jewish, but I have spent most of my career studying the history of Christianity. And I found it really interesting when I started to think about it that each of the major Western spiritual traditions have some built in reset button. In Judaism, there's something called the Schmitter, which is basically every every six years.

David Salomon [00:33:26] The seventh year is a time for reflection. It comes out of the agricultural world. When you would leave the field that you were sowing every six years in the seventh year, you wouldn't let it grow fallow so that you could have it be reinvigorated on the Christian calendar. Of course, there's the 40 days period of Lent, which is a time of fasting and penance that leads up to the Easter holiday. And on the Muslim calendar, the month long observation of Ramadan, which is a time of spiritual reflection. So it became really clear to me that this is not something which is terribly new. It's just in our secularized society. We've moved further and further away from it. I remember growing up as a kid in the Bronx on Sundays, everything was closed. Regardless of of of what was going on, Sunday was a day to spend with family and to reflect. And, of course, for her. For those in the Christian community to attend church. And we've moved so far away from that now that it's it's it's it's big news when a big chain like Target announces that they're not going to open on Thanksgiving Day.

Sarah McConnell [00:34:41] Right.

David Salomon [00:34:41] I mean, whatever happened to taking a rest?

Sarah McConnell [00:34:43] And the joy or satisfaction or comfort that comes from knowing we're all doing the same thing at the same time?

David Salomon [00:34:51] To be sure. I mean, there's something to be said for community participation and community engagement in that way. I mean, it's it's one of the things that drives people oftentimes to congregate, to celebrate and pray and rejoice together. I mean, that, of course, is something which now many people are really missing because we don't have that opportunity. It doesn't work the same when you're looking at little boxes on the screen and assume call.

Sarah McConnell [00:35:24] I was struck in the recent blog post that you wrote about a poem by Wilkie that came after he was instructed by an artist friend to carefully observe the Panther to help him get over his writer's block. What led you to reflect on that episode between these men?

David Salomon [00:35:45] Sure. I had I had been reading a recent book by Rachel Corbett called You Must Change Your Life, which tells the story of the friendship between Rilke and the French sculptor, Auguste Rodin. Rodin is most famous people would know him as the sculptor of the thinker. And 1901 Rodin actually hired Rilke to be his amanuensis, his secretary. And one day, Rilke confided in Rodin that he hadn't been writing that he had some kind of writer's block. And Rodin suggested that Rilke go to the zoo and Rilke says, Well, what will I do there? And Rodin told him, Look at an animal until you see it in two or three weeks may not be enough. Well, the result was Rilke's 1902 Collection, The Book of Images, which in Crute includes that famous poem by Rilke called The Panther, where he watched the panther moving back and forth in its cage. Do you mind if I read the poem quickly?

Sarah McConnell [00:36:42] I would love that.

David Salomon [00:36:43] His vision from the constantly passing bars has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else. It seems to him there are a thousand bars and behind the bars no one. As he paces in cramped circles over and over. The movement of this powerful soft strides is like a ritual dance around a center in which a mighty will stands paralyzed. Only at times, the curtain of the pupils lifts quietly. An image enters in Russia's down through the tensed, arrested muscles, plunges into the heart and is gone.

Sarah McConnell [00:37:24] And then a few years later, it was interesting that Rilke actually remarked he was. He was writing a letter on the work of the French impressionist, Paul Cezanne. And he mentioned while painting a landscape or a still life, he thought Cezanne would conscientiously persevere and for the object, but approach it only by very complicated detours. And I think that's really what we have been going through. This is a series of complicated detours. It's it's almost as if our our collective G.P.S. has been stuck for four or five months now on recalculating, trying to figure out how to get where we're going. And for so many of us, with the future being so unclear and there being such a lack of clarity as to what's to come next, that's really unsettling.

Sarah McConnell [00:38:16] You know, that gets at something that I feel. I just feel that I'm not taking the time to reflect, that I feel changes and I feel moments, but I'm still just sort of caught up in the whirling dervish that is daily life, even though I'm pleased that that life is slowed down. And I've smelled more roses.

David Salomon [00:38:37] Yeah. I mean, one of the ways that I've approached it is by reading some of the writers, some of the thinkers who were writing during other really stressful times in our modern history, in particular in the work that I've done in the Seven Deadly Sins. I use a lot of the work of a largely English novelist and Paul Valery, the French poet who were both writing before and during World War One and then on into World War Two. And of course, in the midst of all of that, there was another global pandemic that we until recently, I think had forgotten about.

Sarah McConnell [00:39:16] You mean, the Spanish flu?

David Salomon [00:39:17] The Spanish flu. Yeah.

Sarah McConnell [00:39:18] What could D.H. Lawrence in Sons and Lovers and Lady Chatterley's Lover possibly have had to tell us about stopping and reflecting?

David Salomon [00:39:28] Lawrence was really it, from my perspective, quite a genius. And in his writing, particularly in his essays, where he writes about the connections that we have with each other as human beings, the connections that we make to nature and to the world, and how we in many ways are or are losing that. In fact, in one of his very last works, a book called Apocalypse, and it just essentially was set out to be his interpretation of the Book of Revelation, although it really didn't end up being that way. He mentions at one point in the early pages of the book that we've lost our sun, we've kind of lost our focus, we've lost our center, and we need to regain that. And he's writing that 1930.

Sarah McConnell [00:40:16] So do you think that this period, again, where there's been so much trauma and loss of life, but also a powerful pandemic reset opportunity? Do you think it will yield something fresh?

David Salomon [00:40:31] These have been some pretty scary times. And I know oftentimes in the evening when I switch on CNN and I'm watching what's going on in the world, it is very disconcerting, very upsetting. And it leaves me with a feeling of hopelessness. And I think that one of the things that the challenges that we really have to deal with is how we cope with that, how we challenge ourselves to remain hopeful when it seems as if all hope is lost during the riots, after the George Floyd murder. Oh, my gosh. I mean, I just felt like where are we going? What is happening here? And as human beings, we have to figure out how we can take control of the situation and whether that meant participating in marches, of protests or writing about it in public kinds of ways. That's the way that we tend to control things as human beings and regain some hope. But it remains a difficult a difficult challenge that that question of having hope. I. My father, where we're coming up on the one year anniversary of his death next week. And I have many times in the last six months thought to myself, I'm glad he wasn't still here to see this because I just don't know what he would have thought. I mean, he lived and grew up in New York City and lived there most of his life. And when that picture was on the front page of The New York Times with a mobile hospital set up in Central Park, the first thing that went through my mind as my father would never believe this. It is such a shock, but I think we need to it's a matter of holding on to what makes us human. And really, if there's something that goes through sort of runs through all of the material that I've written in the last year, it really is this this reexamining what makes us human and how we can relate to each other better as human beings.

Sarah McConnell [00:42:46] David Salomon, thank you for talking with me and With Good Reason.

David Salomon [00:42:50] Thanks so much. Thanks so much for having me.

Sarah McConnell [00:42:55] David Solomon is an English professor at Christopher Newport University. Coming up next, how to teleprojected pastors are changing evangelism in America. Evangelical America is changing and not just its politics. For instance, new digital technologies are making it easier to reach thousands of worshipers at once. Sean Connable is a lecturer in communication studies at Christopher Newport University. And he's made it his mission to find out how these new technologies are being used in America's churches and what it's doing for the politics of the faithful. This interview first aired back in 2017.

Sarah McConnell [00:43:46] Sean, you've been looking in to the new ways Christianity and digital culture are mixing. What does religion look like on the Internet these days? What are you seeing?

Sean Connable [00:43:57] I think it's a really kind of weird blend of face to face interactions, like we would consider the day to day church and things as simple as online services. So the entire service recorded with service times where you go and at three o'clock on a Thursday evening, they have an online service where you sit down in your pajamas and your cup of coffee and you watch church.

Sarah McConnell [00:44:23] Can they have big audiences?

Sean Connable [00:44:25] You don't really know about the online services unless you attend that church or attend its Web site. So it could be as many as you know, a few hundred people could be thousands. I mean, who really knows what else? In the physical spaces, multi-site churches where you go in to and you sit down in an actual sanctuary and they lower a screen to the floor and they project the pastor broadcasting from another site onto the screen. And so he looks like he's standing on the stage in front of you.

Sarah McConnell [00:44:52] And that has to reach more people in disparate locations?

Sean Connable [00:44:56] Yeah. I think that's part part of this, what we would call the multi-site church model. It's this idea of trying to get away from the traditional megachurch, these huge kind of centralized buildings and putting together kind of small little on claver and different communities. And they're all connected to the same place. So in my hometown, there is one of these multi-site churches and I, we walked into one of these churches on a Sunday morning and they lowered the screen to the floor and the digital man was talking.

Sean Connable [00:45:23] And he asked a question and people in the room raised their hand as if he could see them. And midway through the service, there was a technical glitch and he got frozen and this really kind of outlandish position and it took a minute and a half for anyone to come up and kind of do anything. And when they did, the people around me were shaking their head like we're waking up from a dream. And when they left, your hand looks like it was a good that was good church today. Man, I'm so glad I was here. And I looked around and my wife looked me. So what happened? I have no idea what we just experienced. And so that's kind of where we started. Now, we've looked at several multi-site churches. We're working on trying to say, what is this kind of multi-site movement and

what does it mean for us when we blend the kind of the digital world and the physical world of of practiced religion together? What what comes out at the end of that?

Sarah McConnell [00:46:13] How many such multi site churches are there in America?

Sean Connable [00:46:18] Hundreds. And it's a growing movement. And if it's done well, then each one of those sites has a pastor that meets people face to face. The churches that we're going to that we're concerned about are the ones that don't really have that, like, for instance, in one of the churches that we attended. Everyone was talking about how the pastor loves you, how much, how glad he is that you're here. What's really, really interesting is you investigate that church. You never see the pastor. There's no way to contact him. There is no way to ever get to know that person outside of the performance that you see on the screen. I mean, some of these churches have, like, for instance, ministers of production, like an entire production staff, people with steady cams. The entire thing is a performance. There's dance and there's music and there's lights. And there's absolutely nothing asked of you. And that, for me, is what's concerning.

Sarah McConnell [00:47:11] I'm curious. Throughout the past election season, did you hear many of these digital pastors refer to current events and politics, or are they mostly preaching the word of the Bible?

Sean Connable [00:47:23] It's a little bit of both statements saying, you know, I don't I'm not going to ask you to take a political stance. But there is one party that believes in protecting the lives of the unborn and the other one that does not. So they're creating these kind of implicit arguments that the entire election should be focused around this one issue. And I don't think it's a new phenomenon. I think it's been going around for a while. I mean, you look at organizations like Focus on the Family. You go on Focus on the Family and you start researching issues. Let's say, for instance, the SCOTUS decision on same sex marriage focused very much, spoke out against the SCOTUS decision, was telling Christians, here's how you should respond in the face of the SCOTUS decision, pushing a narrative of how we should be concerned about our religious liberties and how your church is going to come under fire because of this decision, a very, very isolated narrative that people can't escape if they don't leave that Web site. And it's kind of corresponding partners. It just upholds this idea that they're under attack. It upholds this idea that their values and the values that have formed the, you know, America as a culture are now under attack when that's not necessarily true.

Sarah McConnell [00:48:36] How many people do you think are more like you, deeply faithful, but seeking a more balanced viewpoint?

Sean Connable [00:48:45] I think there's a lot. I think there's or if nothing else, there's a growing community. I think that if anything, that's one thing that this election has kind of brought to the fore is that you're beginning to see a splintering of voices within the evangelical community. I mean, for decades, you're talking about a political voting base that voted on basically two issues, family values and same sex marriage. And the research proves that what you're looking at now, you began to see the evangelical community splinter a little bit. There was a fascinating article that came out just a couple of weeks ago by a guy named Russell Moore, who's in charge of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. And what that is, is kind of in some ways, the organization's kind of ethical arm. Russell Moore actually published an article. And I never as a Southern Baptist, never thought I would see this happen where he says maybe we need to remove ourself from politics, maybe we should step back from political engagement as a

religious community and start living as a cultural minority, that we shouldn't be trying to be the majority voice. We should be the voice in the wilderness, if that makes sense. And I think part of that comes back to why evangelicals are involved in American politics to begin with. I mean, the amount of influence that you see now stems from the late 70s and the early 80s when evangelicals were looking at our culture, American culture and saying, where have we gone wrong? I mean its the end of the 70s. Things were a little bit crazy. And so they said we need to reinvest ourselves in becoming the the religious and the moral voice driving American politics. And what you find now is they're standing in a saying, well, maybe we've gone too far. Maybe politics is affecting us more than we want it to. I think the concern that comes from evangelical communities in terms of their interaction with with politics is they're beginning to not be able to see where one ends and the other one begins that the two have been married together for so long that you're beginning to see, for instance, God preached on the Senate floor and politics preached from the pulpit. And that's the real concern that I think you're seeing within some evangelical communities is are beginning to look at that and say, I don't know if we can go that far.

Sarah McConnell [00:50:58] Sean Connable is a lecturer in communication studies at Christopher Newport University. Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the University of Virginia health system. Pioneering treatments to save lives and preserve brain function for stroke patients. UVAhealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan Nation. The original people of the land and waters of her home in Charlottesville, Virginia, are production team as Allison Quantz Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis and Jamal Millner. Aiden Carroll is our intern. Some of the music is by Blue Dot Sessions. For the podcast go to WithGoodReasonRadio.org. I'm Sara McConnell. Thanks for listening.