

## Faith Angle Podcast with Sen. Ben Sasse and Rev. Sam Ferguson: When A Senator Goes to Church

### *Official Transcript*

Josh Good:

Twice elected US Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska tells us some fascinating things in today's conversation like when and how he starts the work day, how many Elmers are in his Lutheran circle of grandparent farmers, how as an elected official he's used church going on Sunday mornings, and how he looks back differently now on the stretch years of early parenting.

Ben Sasse is sometimes called the intellectual of the Senate in the vein of the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan whose desk on the Senate floor he now occupies. Before his 2014 election, Ben was the youngest college president of Midland University and he holds a PhD in American history from Yale University and a BA from Harvard College.

He's also the author of two bestselling books, *Them* in 2018 and just a year prior, *The Vanishing American Adult*. He currently serves on the judiciary, budget, finance and intelligence committees. Conversing with Ben is the Reverend Doctor Sam Ferguson, who in 2019 became rector of The Falls Church Anglican, a DC area church where in 1791 George Washington served on the vestry.

Sam's predecessor served as director of the church for an astonishing 40 years. And before he was called to lead the church, Sam served for eight years on staff in various capacities, including a Timothy program aimed at equipping young pastors and church planters. Before that, Sam coached high school basketball in Philadelphia and served on staff with fellowship of Christian athletes. He holds an MDiv from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and MPhil from Cambridge University and a PhD from Southeastern Seminary.

He's also the author of one book, the *Spirit and Relational Anthropology in Paul*, which argues we are not ourselves by ourselves, that we need each other to be faithful disciples of Christ. Two true heavyweights today, friends with some links to their incredible productivity in the show notes. Pull up a chair and as the old phrase goes, come on up to Mount Olympus or at times today, even Mount Zion.

Ben, curious about the book you put out in 2018, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal*. I've been reading it and I mean, I think it's making a bunch of really important, interesting points. I think the most interesting thing that struck me is you wrote this in 2018 and I find myself thinking, how would it sound now? And you have this quote from Alexis de Tocqueville at the front of the book towards the end, which he just says, "If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve."

And obviously in your book, one of the big things you look at is the loneliness epidemic, how it affects even life expectancy and our tribalism. So I'm just curious, looking back four years later after publishing this book, going through COVID and seeing some of the things in our culture seemed to get a little more tense, how would you write this book now?

Ben Sasse:

Thank you for the question. And thanks for taking time with me. I don't want to dissuade anybody from reading it, but I think the book probably needs a pretty heavy rewrite. Some of it is because of COVID and the isolation. It is human. We are political animals in the small P sense of meant to be relational animals. And so many people have been through so much isolation. Parts of it at the very beginning, legit, and then lots of it just weird now.

I think the consequences of it are huge because you can only have a republic and politics is not your most interesting topic here. It's certainly not mine. But you can only have a republic of people who are parts of small platoons that are more important to them. You have to be able to rank order your identities and know that maintaining a framework for ordered liberty which is some of what power structures need to do are essential in a world East of Eden post-fall. But there's no way that power-centric relationships can define your identity, your meaning, your key neighbors, your animosities, your loves.

Those have to be things that fully vibrant souls choose to do. And so people need to be doing a lot of that associational Tocquevillian stuff, because freedom from matters, but freedom to is more interesting. The question is not just what bad stuff do I not want to happen with the world, but how do I want to redeem the time? Where do I want to spend my energy? Who do I want to break bread with? And we need a lot more of those kinds of associations and the tribalism that we could see coming in 2014, '15, '16 has grown. It's been exacerbated.

But then you lay a pandemic on top of it where a whole bunch of people who still had a lot of neighborly thickness had that either taken away from them or they mis-prioritized risk such that they stopped associating. So I think a lot of people are living even more online lives. I'll pull up here. But I would say that one of the things I'm dissatisfied about with them when I look back at it is I talked a good bit about the media ecology, the sea in which we swim of people moving more and more online and yet, I feel like that section is both too long and yet not persuasive enough.

I think the substance underneath it is more important than I thought it was when I wrote it. So I want another swing. I want another at-bat to try to talk about why it matters a lot that you use the digital world to augment physical embodied relationships, not replace them. And lots of people have decided to allow the digital world to crowd out flesh and blood communities. And that's disastrous for our souls, for our theologies, for our polity, et cetera. But our civil society needs a lot more hugging. And I don't mean that in like a lazy, don't yell at each other, I just mean humans need hugging.

Josh Good:

Can I ask a quick follow up to that? So the section you had about journalism in the book was I thought, partly because of the project I'm working on these days were together involved in here, the most interesting and really rich. I mean, you talk about how many people are actually watching cable news. It's not that big a number you say compared to the whole country. Can you talk a little bit about that, about how many people are deeply motivated by cable news, by political poli-tainment, as you put it, junk food. And what does that say about sort of the extremes in Twitter and otherwise versus the core of the country?

Ben Sasse:

Yeah. So less than 2% of people are really heavily engaged with political news. And I just don't think enough Americans understand that. They think that this is the base experience and they're... The individual median American voter, citizen neighbor thinks, "Oh man, that cable stuff is nasty." Unfortunately it's the dominant view that everybody has in the world and I'm weird that I'm the one person who doesn't want to watch political screaming cable. Nobody wants to watch that crap.

So I think it's useful just to have a little common data underneath us. The way I think about it is there is a crowd out of the middle happening on two dimensions in America. One of them is ideological, but the much more important one is attention or engagement. And so if your X axis is political ideology from progressive left center, left center, center right, far right, whatever we want to call it, we've gone from 26% of Americans defining themselves as moderates 25 years ago. 26%.

They were higher propensity voters than people right and left of them. Today, it's 7% of Americans who define themselves as centrist or moderates, and they're less likely to vote than people right and left to them. So the crowd out of the middle on an ideological dimension is very obvious. The much, much more important equation is if you have a Y axis and you have political addiction at the top, healthy, middle brow people in the middle. One sheer for politics. We need a framework for liberty, but I sure as heck don't want to make my primary community in life. Be political weirdos.

That middle is evaporating because the bottom is exploding, disengaged people. So we've got addicts at the top and disengaged people at the bottom. Neither of those are healthy for a republic. The middle is what we need. We need lots of middle brows and they're falling off a cliff. Something like 70% of Americans pay no attention to politics.

But the part that you would call addicted has grown from eight to about 14%. And the left has had a pretty consistent 8% of folks for over a decade have been highly attuned to politics and pretty far left. What Donald Trump saw and is exacerbated is over the last five or six or seven years we've gone from one and a half to about six and a half percent of Americans that are on the right and highly engaged in politics.

Now back to your question on cable. The most watched cable show this year is Tucker Carlson had one episode in May of this year that had 3 million and 30,000 viewers. I think that most watched evening MSNBC programming is Lawrence O'Donnell hit about 1.4 million once. And pretty consistently Anderson Cooper is the most watched evening CNN program at about 800,000.

Maybe 3.03 million people sounds like a lot of people if I'm selling at the lemonade stand down the street. 3 million customers would be pretty great. But we're a nation of 330 million people and that's not getting to 1% of the public. You put all these programs together and they're less than 2% of the public. We could do similar demographics on the tiny, tiny, tiny share of folks that drive political Twitter. Maybe I'll give you one fact on this. 19% of Americans are on Twitter. 60% never look at politics.

So 40% of 19% is less than 8%. And something like 85% of all tweets come from less than 3% of the people. So we've got less than 1% of people that drive political Twitter and yet they belong in a ward. This is not representative of the public. This is the far, far, far, far extreme of a bell curve. And the vast majority of two standard deviations in the middle don't want anything to do with that. And yet we don't have enough media ecology shared facts to know that the atypical folks drive the conversation.

Sam Ferguson:

That's fascinating, Ben. One of the things that brings to mind is as a pastor I have in my church the same bell curve. And so you've got your people, your outliers that you're getting emails from and you're hearing from who are living in these media spaces, which may be toxic, some more than others. It's hard not to be reactionary. And my pressure is always pastor your middle 80 to 90% that you don't really hear from.

So I'm curious as a leader, how do you discipline yourself? If a huge part of this portion of America is disengaged, how do you engage them as a leader? How do you hear their voice?

Ben Sasse:

So if I can take a little bit of liberty, I'll answer your question, but I want to both also just foot stomp the premise of your question, which is wisdom requires figuring out when you're trying to love your neighbor. And if you have a large flock like you do, or if you're in public office and the vast majority of the people are not speaking up, it's super important to come up with some deliberate strategies to figure out how to not be reactionary. How do you not spend your time responding to the very atypical folks?

I think that we should define this as the very online, very angry of both the right and the left. They are far more alike than they're different. So it looks to the world like the tribal divide in America is between polarized right and polarized left. It's not true. The very, very online, very angry of the far left and the very, very online, very angry of the right, they are roughly the same people. And there's performative stuff driving them and demonstrative, anger, not fighting for actual policy outcomes that benefit their neighbor very often.

So I think it's very difficult to keep the first things first substantively and to decide in my day job, I'm on the intelligence committee and I'm thinking a lot about the technology race with the Chinese Communist Party of 2030 and somebody's not going to call my office screaming about that today, and yet I need to try to keep that and workforce and future of work, and the disruptions of the digital economy, which is great for consumers, but pretty disastrous for stable long-term production and therefore it has implications for community building and for civil society.

How do you decide to keep the adiaphora the adiaphora? And for you, how do you preach the gospel and let a lot of the rest of the stuff that's downstream be downstream. For my job. I need to tell the truth about what I'm working on, what I think the biggest challenges are the nation faces and then vote my conscience and let people being angry or not about it happen later. And it turns out if I do my job faithfully about the things that are the priorities, those voices of a half a percent here or a percent there that are really angry, they're constant in the equation.

And most people want to be represented by somebody that's doing the long term, not that. I'll give one more example about engaging the public in Nebraska. When I first got elected, I'm one of nine out of a hundred in the Senate who's never been a politician before. And when I first got elected, because I'd been living on a campaign bus for 16 months and my kids were 12, 10, and two at that point, and we'd done town halls in all 93 counties, multiple times, I thought when I first got to office, I should keep doing town halls in that format. And again, this is now early 2015.

So part of it was schedule wise. It was harder to hit normal times in a work week because I'm in Nebraska chiefly on weekends and I'm in DC on the work week, but also tribalism in America started to really spike in 2015-2016. Normal people don't want to go to town halls because they fully understand that there are like 40 people there. Maybe when I was a candidate, I'd have two or 300 people at some of my town halls, but when you're in the office, you might have 40 people. 35 of the 40 people came there to scream bloody murder, hoping they'd get a viral video they could post on social media.

So there's only like five people who weren't there to perform. And they're kind of mad, those five are, but their time has been taken over by people who just want to scream. So we've had to work, and I do a lot of work events. I've driven Uber. I drive a garbage truck. I do ag manufacturing. I've vended Husker sporting events, vended some concerts. We do water stations at marathons. And when you find different ways to engage people as they're living their life, politics comes up as issue nine or issue 12.

Well, those are the kind of people that you most want to represent because people who think politics are issue one, they don't actually get America very much. So you have to come up with a disciplined way to manage your time, I think, and to manage your emotional bandwidth, not to respond to the atypical loudest people because most people don't want you to be responding to those people. They want you to be explaining constructively what are the challenges the nation face in a rank ordered way.

Josh Good:

On the topic of ordered loves along that way, have you found in being in Congress for, what now, eight years, that others who are also called or choose to serve in public office end up... What was the phrase you used? Talking like jackwagons all the time in order to get a bigger podcast audience, or have you found that there are people who have ordered loves who can sort of call off the edge of those bell curves? And I guess more specifically, when it comes to not only politically like leaders and pastors, but also to journalists, what is it that gives you the core to not write the piece that gets the extra views because it's talking about woke politics as opposed to foreign policy?

Ben Sasse:

Yeah. Maybe let's distinguish between office holders and journalists, because I don't think I have a great insight into how to parse the journalist motives question in a world where clickbait incentives are so paramount. I get why it's hard to be faithful in that lane. I have a few thoughts about it, but I'm definitely not expert. In the calling that I have, I would say it's mixed to your question.

In Italian politics, healthy people, mostly don't run for office because it has been so debased. So it's a big danger in a democratic republic if the incentive structure is for people to act weird in politics as opposed

to try to steward the calling in a trustee sense for a limited time. And then George Washington called the not-for-profit that helped fund medical care for retired revolutionary soldiers.

They called it the Cincinnati Society, Ala, the Roman emperor that willingly laid down power and went back to his farm. And that George Washington decided he would follow in his model when there wasn't a constitutional term limit and he quit the job after the second term in December of 1796 writes his farewell address. That ended up being the most read document in American public life for about 75 years. Not the declaration of independence, not the constitution, but Washington's farewell address explaining what laying down power looked like.

We need more people in politics that have that kind of impulse. And right now our problem is the incentive structure is towards short term grandstanding. The grand stands are tiny. There aren't a lot of people in these grandstands, but there are more and more people who are performing for cameras to get sound bites, elected who do this.

So a lot of my buds are leaving right now. Some of my closest friends in the Senate are Pat Toomey, Rob Portman, Richard Burr. You have a lot. Lamar Alexander was kind of a mentor to me before and he left last cycle. Healthy people who want to get stuff done, but don't really want to act like DC is Hollywood for ugly people. They're not trying to get a quippy little viral video for Instagram. The incentive structure works against that and works for more performative politics. I won't name names, but they're obviously a bunch of people in the house who are not very serious about their legislative staffs, but they really want to grow their comm staff and their social media staff.

We need more places that are healthier., And I believe I'll make one small policy slash procedure point here. If we had fewer cameras in this institution that would be more incentives for people to act a little more like adults. I mean, I guess it's probably worth just saying too given the audience that you have this podcast, I would say that as a Christian, it's pretty important to me to take seriously and to have accountability in my life. The command that we not love power. The commandment against idolatry is real and it matters and this should be a servant leadership calling where the electorate and the moms and dads back home are the people who are paramount.

And they send you here as a delegate for a short period of time to try to steward the institutions that are necessary in a fallen world where broken centers want to take your stuff and invade their neighbors. But this shouldn't be anybody's center of attention. This should be a servant community that's a little bit boring trying to focus on the long term of power maintenance and a republic, if you can keep it.

Sam Ferguson:

Yeah. I remember when I was in middle school, I had a government teacher make us watch CSPAN one day. And I thought, this is the most boring thing I've ever seen. And that's a far cry from a Senator tweeting with a Hollywood star having a tweet off. I hadn't heard that, that Washington is Hollywood for ugly people. That's a funny line. There's a thread here I want to try to pull on a little bit. It has to do with just laying down power. You also use the term calling when you're kind of juxtaposing the journalist with what you and your colleagues do.

I'm curious, there is this thread through the Bible where God chooses to use the weak and the small, right? The calling of Abraham, right? He's a nobody. Israel is a tiny little nation, and of course, Jesus from a backwater is crucified and Paul goes into court then, and he just kind of says, "Look, this is foolish. The cross of Christ is foolish." And there's this strange inversion of power.

Now, of course, that doesn't mean you can't seek important positions in the world, but how do you navigate that in your own heart and your own life? When you think about wanting to make change, wanting to have an impact, and yet you're in the halls of power, Ben, how does that work out? How do you think through that?

Ben Sasse:

Yeah, so I want to fully acknowledge that there are temptations and you need accountability, but this institution is so broken that it's not hard to remember that this is not how things are supposed to be. So going back to Josh's line a little bit ago about rank ordered identities, I am a sinner saved by grace, right? That is not the final thing to say about me that I'm a sinner because justification means in a legal standpoint, I've already been declared to no longer have those liabilities and progressive sanctification heading toward glorification means the sin that still lives in my members is not the ultimate truth.

One of my kids is named Augustine. It's a bit theologically heavy for an 11-year-old, so we call him Breck. But the Augustinian Lutheran deep in my soul says [foreign language 00:22:39]. I am guilty and yet I am justified. And then the question is now, how do I redeem the time? What are the callings that I have as a way to live out a life of gratitude to God by trying to serve my neighbor. And when I rank order those institutions, my obligations as a husband and my obligations as a dad are much, much closer to my identity than a temporary job, right? This is not my life plan.

We believe in vocation, the callings from God in a plural sense, but usually in the modern specialized economy in which we live. People have only one major source of income. And by Senate ethics rules, I can't have any other source of income. So I have one job, but it wasn't the job I had nine years ago and it's not going to be the job I have again at some future moment.

It would be weird to me. Again, acknowledging that temptations exist, but it would be weird to me to have too much of your identity wrapped up in a job that you didn't used to have and you're not going to have again in the future. So the question is, how do you love your neighbor by redeeming the time and trying to do the most you can to be faithful in this space? Which is George Washington's silver frame. Washington's golden apple at the center of the silver frame, which Abraham Lincoln unpacked even more beautifully.

Back to the freedom from, freedom to, the silver frame is the way we maintain the framework of order, liberty by power, but the golden apple at the middle are those things you choose to pursue with your life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. It's a custodial job. And I mean that in the best sense. I'm a conservative, I'm a Republican, I'm a Senator, I'm a football addict, I'm a Nebraskan, I'm an American, but these aren't eternal identities. The eternal identities we have are the fact that we've been adopted.

We would gladly be door keepers and slaves in the kingdom of heaven as opposed to being banished from that kingdom that would be an unbelievable blessing and we get to be sons and daughters that are given a seat at the table. And that table is a table where Trinitarian relational, interpersonal love overflows not because God was lonely or desperate, but because the Trinity was so perfect in his creative majesty, Calvin's language about the theater of God's glory being this universe.

We get invited into that feast. That is glorious. Who the heck would want to say, committee process about statute X, Y, and Z because fallen centers need to be restrained in this way and there are externalities about environmental degradation and so we should pass this clunky rule that will help by 4%? Why would you ever regard that as the most interesting place? Doing your job to repay a little bit of gratitude. And then you want to get to a place where people are breaking bread, voluntarily. Compulsory institutions, can't conceivably be that interesting. Voluntary institutions where people are loving their neighbor and choosing to love, that's where the action is at.

Josh Good:

It sounds like been a very important point for any of us is to have our identities and our loves ordered, and also to be able to do battle with our own egos, right? So there's going to be certain callings or certain ways you can steward a calling that can get you a lot of attention, vis-a-vis social media. And then there's certain moments where you have to forego that in order to do the right thing. I'm curious as a Christian, as a husband, as a family man, as a churchgoer, everything you just said a moment ago, it suggests a man who's pretty aware of who he is. Are there disciplines you have in your own life to help battle that kind of... You think of the disciples having the argument right around Jesus like who's going to be first in the kingdom of heaven, right? Are there disciplines you have to help tame your heart, maybe reading or church going or talking with your wife? How do you keep on top of your own heart in that area?

Ben Sasse:

I feel like you just teed up a big, fat fastball for a nerd. Thank you very much. So number one is Sunday morning is the fortes to the place to come. We have our own meal. We have our own language. We have our own calendar. It's pretty fricking awesome, right? I mean, the week doesn't exist in nature. The day is going-

Sam Ferguson:

Amen.

Ben Sasse:

... on its own axis. The month is the moon and fertility cycles. The year is the earth around the moon. The week doesn't exist in nature. And we had to weep about how fricking cool that is. And it isn't six days of work and then we get a rest anymore, it's that the whole story is accomplished on Sunday, and then we get to live six days of gratitude. We can work really, really hard in those six days, but we're never actually going to accomplish stability in the world.

And so then we get to get back to the eighth day being the first day again. So our holy day not being at the end of the week, but being at the beginning and then we get to go out and try to live and be civilly



righteous, which we always... Civilly, maybe we partially succeed, but we don't fulfill the law. And it's because we're not trying to earn it, we get to live a life of gratitude.

So bucket one is I'm not fully a Sabbatarian, but I lean in that direction and sort of anchoring your calendar around Sunday and then six days in response. Bucket two, I'm a freak on clock. So I try to go to bed by nine or 9:30 and one of my grandpa's just to show how boring Germans in Nebraska could be in farming communities a hundred years ago. My grandpa, Elmer married to Elda. She had nine siblings, seven of them girls. One of her brothers was an Elmer. Another of her sisters married a third Elmer. And another of her sisters married a Delmer. So at our family reunions, we had three Elmers and a Delmer.

These people all believed as farmers that every hour of sleep before midnight was worth two hours of sleep after midnight. And so they said nothing productive had ever happened in the world at 1:00 AM, but a lot of really productive stuff happens at four. So in about 1999, I decided they were right. I'm now five years post-college. And I went from being a night owl who would sleep as late as you could get away with sleeping. I decided to just like on the spot, September of 1998, I guess, I told you, '99 a minute ago, I converted to an early to bed early to rise guy.

So 4:00 to 7:00 AM is super structured in my life. I spend 4:00 to 5:00 cranking through team emails and looking at my calendar for the day, giving response to everybody and stuff they need feedback on. And then I try to turn my phone off about 5:00. I don't always succeed, but I try to do a long cycle from 5:00 to 7:00 in the morning. So whatever. The most important thing is, I want to get done that day. I try to do from 5:00 to 7:00 when there's no interruptions and no digital distraction, whatever.

And then depending on whether it's my... My family comes to DC about four months a year, and I commute for about eight months a year. If my family is not around, I hit the gym at 7:00 and I crank till 7:45 or 8:00, and I don't start my public life until after 8:00 AM every day, even though I've been working since 4:00. If I'm in Nebraska, we might have family worship and breakfast between that 7:00 or 7:30 time.

But then I have an accountability group of guys. So there are five or six of us who've been in each other's business for 30 years now. I'm a workout addict because to your point about not being reactionary to stuff that people are thrown into your inbox, if I didn't have the emotional escape of fitness a couple times a day... Anyway, that's more than enough for you. But yeah, I have a whole bunch of disciplines, some spiritual, some physical, but the most important part is that I think our identity as sojourners is way, way out in the future. And if you believe in the eschaton future, then you can respond this day and this week with the habits and the rhythms, without the desperate Sisyphus rock up a hill, 666 sense of, "I'm going to accomplish it."

You're not. We live in 777. So the sort of paraphrase of Luther sometimes when he would be looking over at Melanchthon, handwringing, love God and do what you want, not with an unaccountable conscience, not without other wise people in your life and in your business. But if worldly time has two elements, my urges in this second and social media crowding into my life. And oh, but that's probably not enough. So let me build a resume. Let me make a name for myself. Let me accomplish stability in the

world by building all this stuff, that's going to transform the world in five or 10 months or five or 10 years.

I think those two impulses on time are exactly wrong. My urges and my resume, I think Christian time works exactly the opposite. Eschaton future, I've been adopted though I didn't deserve it. And now I can respond by praying, "Give us this day, our daily bread." And what am I trying to do to be disciplined to love my neighbor in return thanks these six days until I get to Sunday and let it all fall down, because I never built stability.

Josh Good:

Thank you. I mean, maybe speaking out of turn here, but it seems like there's a book idea in there about the disciplines. It's kind of where the rubber hits the road. How do we tame our own hearts?

Importantly, if you're a journalist listening to this right now and you thought you were going to be comforted by Ben Sasse's personal habits in the morning in the early hours, sorry, 4:00 to 5:00 AM, deep work. 5:00 to 7:00 AM, no phone. Eventually hit the gym. Geez.

Ben Sasse:

It's funny that you said deep work, because if you want to just talk about common grace wisdom... I know nothing about the guy's theology, but Cal Newport is super helpful. So if I can just do a book report there.e anything from Atomic Habits to Cal Newport on deep work, I'm all in.

Sam Ferguson:

I have another theological question and then I want to get to a question about just what you're looking for when you show up at church on Sunday. But I want to hold off on a second for that. But back in 1951, Richard Niebuhr wrote his book, *Christ and Culture*. And it's been really influential for how people think about the relationship between the church and culture. You mentioned a few times you talked about you're going out knowing you're not going to perfect this world. And yet at the same time, you need to redeem time. You have a sense of responsibility to steward your gifts.

How do you think through... I grew up in area near the Amish so you have the anti-Baptist really withdrawing. It sounds like you're kind of floating in a Lutheran reformed stream, a little bit of two kingdoms, little bit of maybe neo Calvinism. I know this may be a bit of a nerdy part of the conversation, but I'm curious when you go out into the world, how do you manage your hopes for seeing the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven versus kind of a bit of an escapism that would say, "You know what, this is pretty bad." Is it even worth trying to improve?

Ben Sasse:

Wow. There's a lot in there. So let me say, first of all, I think both neighbors are super interesting and we're spending time on, but I do think that Christ and Culture is a badly overrated book. I think the five typologies in there are just so much less useful than if people started with a little bit of eschatology debates explicitly. And I don't want to upset anybody in your listing audience, but let's be a teeny bit provocative. Obviously, amillennialism is the right answer to a post world. And really amillennialism is a subset of post-millennialism, but it's the part that doesn't exaggerate our ability to accomplish things.

So I think textually a post-mil position is better than a pre-mil position, but then you got to subdivide post-mil based on whether or not we are the actors who matter most. And I think we're told in the gospels again and again to approach the kingdom as little children. So we aren't the all sufficient power brokers that make this happen. And so when you went nerdy on some of your theological categories for a minute, I have gotten in super trouble with my comms team and my day job in the past for having been asked a question that was probably meant to be a softball sometime. Where do you place yourself on a theological continuum?

And I responded that I was a Lutheran Calvinist. But the truth of the matter is I think one of the great counterfactuals of history would've been if Luther and Calvin actually had met, because I think the divide between them is tiny compared to the Gnesio-Lutherans or the anti-sacramental subset of the reformed.

So I grew up Missouri Synod Lutheran. I'm very, self-consciously three forms of unity, Heidelberg guy now. And there obviously wasn't orthodoxy at the end of the reformation about what your eschatological positions would be. But I think to quote BB Warfield, the old Princeton polemicist, and again, I'm being a little bit facetious here, but Warfield would say everybody's reformed on their knees, meaning that when you're actually praying as a Christian, you believe God accomplishes it all.

And then the question is how do I respond to the fact that he has accomplished it all past, present, and future? And that's too true theologically, but it is also true in how the kingdom comes. And so it would be strange for us not to believe we have obligations and duties to live a life of gratitude to God from your catechetical documents, the chief end of man. Well, I guess, it's Westminster, but it flows.

Sam Ferguson:

That's how Anglicans wrote it.

Ben Sasse:

Well, the Anglicans wrote it. But is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. It is a unitary verb. It's is, it's not they are the chief ends of man. And so we're bringing glory to God by enjoying him in learning to love our duty when it's not natural to love our duty, because we can't bring about salvation and there's still a whole bunch of sin that reigns. Reigns is maybe too strong of verb, but present in my members. And so I want to do work that benefits my neighbor, but it's completely impossible to do that work if you overvalue your ability to make history and to make the future.

So you can neither be escapist because that would be to be unfaithful, nor can you be... There are theological terms for this, but they're all super nerdy. Overvaluing your ability to bring about the kingdom. And the disciples constantly thought when Jesus was telling them that he was bound for a cross, they still said, "But I get it. I get it. But can I be deputy assistant secretary of transportation in the kingdom?" Because we're going to Jerusalem and we're establishing this crap right now. It just seems farcical.

Sam Ferguson:

Thank you, Ben. I want to kind of pivot here to some questions about the church. It strikes me in the warp and woof of the New Testament. Jesus comes announces the kingdom. Just talks about the kingdom, a ton in the gospels. Almost never mentions the church. Three times in Matthew. The rest of the New Testament, Acts to Revelation, it seems inverted. Talk of the church explodes. Talk of the kingdom fades. And it's not that these two realities are opposed to each other, it just seems as some have said that... I think George Ladd looked at the kingdom creates the church and then the church exists almost like an embassy bringing in the kingdom and testifying the kingdom.

I'm curious as the church gathered on a Sunday morning, the congregation coming together. When you walk into this thing, this expression of new humanity, that does run by a different calendar has a different Lord, has a different timestamp and is eschatological in its outlook on things. You walk in and there's important current events happening. And I'm speaking now from a pastor in the Washington Metro area. There's stuff going on about the sanctity of life, whether that's related to abortion or gun violence. There's questions about race going on. And maybe not just generally, but specific issues in our nation.

I know as a pastor, most of my people are reading these things. I got to be honest. I don't quite know sometimes how much to weigh in. I mean, this specific text I'm preaching on isn't giving me specific data for how to weigh in specifically on a political or social issue. You come in as a parishioner. Maybe we are ready to start your week. It's the first day of the week. What do you want to hear from a pastor on Sunday? Do you think a pastor should touch on these issues? What do you think the church should be doing on a Sunday morning to speak directly to matters in our world? And that may be too broad of a question, but I think you know what I'm getting at.

Ben Sasse:

Yeah. I don't want to be dismissive of those who do think that the text speaks in a very, very tightly linear way to current events, but humbly, gently, I think they're wrong. We have an obesity crisis among us. Does the Bible say anything about how we should steward our body as a temple of the spirit? Of course. But do you have the competence or the calling to speak to the latest debate about macros, about what percentage of your diet should be carbs versus protein versus fat? It just doesn't flow from the text.

I don't think that the text really says much about some of the trade offs inside a particular piece of legislation either. So you use the language of embassy. I think you asked more than two things. You asked two that I'll flag here. One is the language of embassy and the other is what do I want to hear when I get to service on Lord's day? I guess the first thing to say is that an embassy is kind of home, but it isn't really home, right? If you are at the embassy in Baghdad, a place I've spent a lot of time, you are on, in legal sense, *du jure*. You are on American soil, but you're still in Baghdad.

And so you don't, as an American really feel at home, even though being in the US embassy in Baghdad means that you're at home. You're not really at home. You're at a place that legally is home. It's a foretaste of home. And I think it's really important to recognize that what's happening in that embassy is we're getting a little bit of our food from there. We're getting a reminder of our culture and our language, but at church, we are there coming to the table to lay down our arms.

We don't have to be at battle with people. In your congregation if there are people that are for Republican policy positions and Democratic policy positions, they come to your sacramental table on Sunday morning and none of that stuff matters on that day because we're laying down our arms to speak the truth and love, and to give a foretaste of the kingdom that is already, but not fully here yet. And so there are crucial questions in politics that we should debate about, but we should have lots of room for adiaphora about how you weigh the unintended consequences of second order effects of poor implementation of policy, because what's really going to happen when every heart has been made new and when every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess, we're all going to be supercharged souls that now animate in a way that you won't need any power policy to regulate this stuff.

So we need to come on Sunday morning and see the image of God in the other people even if we might differ with them about the particulars of how a policy would play out. We're not jockeying for under secretary positions. We should feel alien by anybody who is shouting, "We have no king, but Caesar." And that's how our political parties talk. And so what I want as a parishioner on Sunday morning is the dialogical nature of worship where you, Sam, in your office, and I don't fully know in the Anglican tradition, if you do this, we don't in my Presbyterian reform tradition, but I wish we did, the old Lutheran congregation I was a part of as a kid, the pastor would turn forward and back all through the service. All through the service the pastor is sometimes facing us, sometimes with us facing up toward the front.

Why? It's because he has a dual office to sometimes be a congregant speaking with us and sometimes to be speaking for God. And so the elements of the service, there's a call to worship, and we respond with a song of adoration and praise. And then there's a reading of the law, and we respond with a confession of sin. And then there's a declaration of pardon and we respond with another song of praise.

There's a reading of the word and then an explication of it in the sermon, and then we're invited to the table. So I think that sense of the law laying us low, the gospel, raising us up again in new life, and then a third use of the law that gives us a calling to go out and love our neighbor for this week, and we're going to fail at it, but we should be growing in godliness even if it's only 2% over the course of our lifetime.

We want to respond to that call by getting a benediction, being told we're blessed. We have an identity that's permanent and eternal, not based on our own works. Now, let's go and work our asses off.

Josh Good:

It's a slight tweak, but a direction exit question for me, Ben, and Sam, actually. It occurs to me that our tribe that is the broader evangelical tribe in the United States is somewhat cognitive. We tend to emphasize knowledge more than heart and hands. And you guys have PhDs from Yale and from Cambridge University and have gone to Harvard college and have had gone to Gordon-Conwell... Well, the best schools in the world really. But it occurs to me that part of our work is also fostering an engine, fostering an institution. A couple books I've read recently have been, *We Need to Build* and *evolves a time to build*. And there's a lot in there about formation and starting a team and having an engine.

What's your best piece of advice about building a team so that it isn't merely the best ideas on display and that work, but an engine that fuels the broader contribution?

Ben Sasse:

Yeah. So we have a phrase on a lot of the teams that I've led over the years. I was a college president for five years before this job and I used to do crisis and turnaround stuff before that. And we've talked on my teams for a really long time about wanting a big cause, low ego people. Humans are meant to work together and row on oars together. We should be doing big stuff to love and benefit our neighbor. But if that becomes big ego for an individual trying to get credit, it becomes so toxic.

I mean, there's nothing profound really in this advice, but in private equity where I used to work, there is the old phrase that you'd much rather have an A team and a B idea than an A idea and a B team, because B team members tend to be threatened by other people.

So B team members hire C employees. And what you want is somebody who believes I'd rather be the dumbest person on my team than the smartest person on my team. If I can hire people that are better than I am at X, Y, or Z, what an incredible blessing that I get to learn from them. And I get to be a part of this team. So I'm just a big believer in trying to build a culture that is low ego and trying to do big disruptive stuff.

I'll only say one small man crush comment on Yuval. I've been a student of Yuval and it's kind of weird because I'm young and I'm often perceived to be younger than I am. And Yuval is a good bit younger than I am and yet I feel like he's like my grandpa, Grandpa Yuval in terms of his wisdom. And every two years for the eight years I've had this job, I've become more impressed with his insights and his translational ability.

So the fracturing and the time to build, I think are both very, very insightful. And this is a bastardization of what he's saying. So to be clear, everybody should read his books because they're better than this. But I believe the analog for our moment in America is 1870 to 1920, the mass urbanization immigration and industrialization moment. Cities were mostly uninhabitable from 1870 to 1890. And by 1900, they were getting kind of interesting. And by 1920 they were glorious places.

And what really was happening was social capital had eroded as people left new England town villages and moved to big cities where there was all this anonymity and humans were pretty good at rebuilding social capital, but it took a generation and a half before they could see that it was going to work.

I think that's very analogous to our moment, which is we're in the post-industrial era that will never be lifelong work again inside any one organization for the vast majority of people. The digital revolution has made consumers the richest people and all of human history, but the disruption of work, the end of lifelong work is really, really scary. We've never had 30 and 35 and 40 and 45 year olds that didn't think they were going to be able to do the same kind of work they did to put bread on the table yesterday, again, in 10 and 20 years.

That's not going to happen anymore. We're going to need to create a civilization of lifelong learners and that's never been done by any community ever. And I think Yuval is really insightful about that. I believe that human dignity is not just an ontological truth, but human dignity has potentiality that humans are going to be able to navigate this disrupted moment, but they're going to need a whole lot of cheerleaders. And the disruption is going to be gigantic.

I think synthetic biology in the next 20 years may be as disruptive to the shape of our economy as the IT revolution was of 1990 to 2010. I think humans can navigate this moment, but we need to tell the truth about how disruptive it is and we need to be optimistic about all the imago dei in our neighbors' souls can accomplish. And I think that's going to require accountability. It's going to require encouragement. It's going to require thick community. It's going to require teams. And so you need a lot more people that are big cause, low ego truth tellers.

Sam Ferguson:

Josh, you asked about team building in this particular moment and I have a lot to learn about team building, but one thing I'm noticing is and I think this comes up a lot, Ben in you're thinking in your writing is one of the problems we're dealing with are vacuums, right? You've got to give somebody something healthy and good to sink their teeth into. And it takes time to train them towards that because that often isn't the flashy thing.

In my own context, it's remembering the basics about what makes a church work, discipling people, doing a membership class, thinking about confirmation, working hard at worship. And what I find is you need to reimagine those things that seem basic, what are actually what it's all about. And so to reteach a church and a team of people in your church that actually first communion is a big deal.

It is something that grandma and grandpa should come to. It is a public declaration of your faith. It's a vivid image that you are invited to the supper of the lamb. And for me, team building right now, what can happen in an organization and a church can function like an organization when it should really transcend that in a lot of ways. But what can happen is people want to do the flashy thing. Do we have an Instagram page? How many people are watching our live feed? How good is our service in terms of a production point of view?

You can get very siloed in this kind of climate when people aren't together as much. I've found bringing people together to make the basic thing, the core things you have to do vivid again with deep meaning has been interesting for my team. I mean, it seemed like a simple answer, but those have been the things that have really... And then what happens in the life of a church is you see people become members. You see the Bishop come there and confirm people. It's a beautiful thing.

But what you have to do is re-narrate reality for people. Like Charles Dickens has this line. I don't remember what one of his novels, but he says, "Trifles are the sum of life." And there's a sense we're helping people see that the small mundane, everyday things that you do together are actually the things that binds you together that make you laugh, that make you smile, that make you human. And these flashy things that pop up on social media and get sales if you're a journalist or whatever, they actually are ethereal and fading.

So I think one of the things, Ben in talking with you this past hour, it's just been so interesting and really actually encouraging. I keep thinking, man, you could get up and pastor my church. We need to ask the question, how are we reinforcing people's identities? And that's going to require thick community. One

of the things I say to my church all the time is you're not yourself by yourself. The great religion of our time, the great frost religion of our time is expressive individualism.

We have to show people how it is in the thickness of healthy communities that you who you are, that who you are is solidified. So it's not just that, Ben, you read in Romans 8, that you're adopted and by the spirit you cry, Abba father, but it's that you've been in a community your whole life that's been reinforced. The way a pastor looks at you, the way you serve communion, the way your kids are treated when you walk into the house of God, we need places that reinforce that community. And I think we're going to have to work really hard at cultivating an eschatological imagination for delayed gratification, not striking it rich, life being harder than we thought it was going to be. I think we have the young generation I were...

We have almost no capacity for that long obedience in the same direction for redeeming suffering. And that's one area we're going to have to develop in a hard world with fracturing, where as you said, it may get with synthetic biology. I don't know what all that means, artificial intelligence that we may be in for bumpy ride the next few decades. We need thick, sturdy people and that will require thick sturdy communities. From where I'm sitting, the local church needs to be one of those.

Ben Sasse:

Preach it, brother. We have a brain injury at our house. My wife has some pretty significant issues that produce seizures. And I'm grateful for friends that want to ask about it and ask how we're doing, but we have a lot of thick skin and callous about it like we're 14, 15 years into this. So we mostly know how to navigate it. And the other day somebody was asking me how we were doing, and I tried to give an answer to brush it off in a hurry and the woman who understood that, I didn't really feel like talking about it right then said, "You know what? If you get the blessings of family, you get the blessings of all the crap that goes wrong in family."

I'd never heard that before and evidently it's a relatively common phrase. It just reminds me of how a thousand years are like a day and a day is going to be like a thousand years. I look back, kids 21, 18 11. I look back to the times when our kids would puke in the middle of the night and it felt so overwhelming when you have an 18-month-old up throwing up in the middle of the night. Now, I miss those times. My wife and I bonded by helping each other clean up puke in the middle of the night. Who would ever choose to do that? You would never choose to have that kind of suffering. And yet our friendship is deeper because we were a team navigating a lot of that crap.

If you take the law seriously, as we do in our tradition, in Christianity, there's basically no identification with the jailer. There's a ton of identification with the jailed. And people who think that they've been forgiven and they get to sing together, that's community.

Josh Good:

Well, that's a perfect word on which to end. We will link, Ben, to your Time for Choosing speech, the recent one to your two books, to Sam's podcast series, Falls Church Anglican. Thank you both, gentlemen, very much.



Faith Angle exists to connect journalists and also thinking leaders with leading clerics and religion scholars. Thanks for listening.