*Theology &*
Episode 1: Theology & Public Discourse

**Emily Hill:** Hi, Jeff. How's it going?

**Jeff Liou:** Pretty good, Emily. How about you?

**Emily Hill:** I am pretty good. It's sunny out. So that always makes me happy.

**Jeff Liou:** It's always sunny out here in California, so,

**Emily Hill:** Oh, well, okay. We don't all have that luxury.

**Jeff Liou:** Well, what are we talking about today?

**Emily Hill:** Today we are talking about public discourse, pretty important topic.

**Jeff Liou:** I'm imagining that you have some experience with public discourse. As many of us do now.

**Emily Hill:** Yes. Well, I think it is an important topic for everyone. And I know my work and the church, and also, I think chapter work for those of you who are listening who work with InterVarsity and the chapters. We have people coming from all different political and theological backgrounds, and it's a challenge to lead and help everyone engage. It's important that we help everyone understand our system and our points and time and history, but also be rooted in Christ and theologically formed around these issues that are important and that matter a lot, but can cause a lot of disagreement.

**Jeff Liou:** A lot of disagreement. So who did we talk to?

**Emily Hill:** Today we talked to Dr. Kristen Deede Johnson. She is a professor of theology and Christian formation at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. And she is the author of a couple books. The first is *Theology, Political Theory and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance And Difference*. It's from Cambridge University Press and she is the co-author of the *Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance*.

We also talked with Dr. John Inazu, who is Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law science at Washington University in St. Louis at the School of law. He focuses there on first amendment freedoms of speech, assembly, and religion, and related questions of legal and political theory. He's also the author of *Confident Pluralism*, which deals directly with the topic for today. The subtitle is surviving and thriving through deep difference from the University of Chicago Press in 2016. And then Kristen and John worked together on a volume that John edited with Tim Keller called *Uncommon Ground Living Faithfully In A World of Difference* out from Thomas Nelson in 2020.

And we will include links to these books in our show notes.

**Jeff Liou:** We're excited to present to you today's conversation with Dr. John and Inazu and Dr. Kristen Deede Johnson.

Can I get you to introduce yourselves, your role and what institution you're a part of. So, Kristen, can we start with you?

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** Right now I'm serving at Western Theological Seminary, which is in Holland, Michigan.

I'm a professor of Theology and Christian formation, and I'm also serving as the Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs. And really I'd say questions related to formation, what it looks like to live faithfully, to be formed as disciples, including in complex cultural and political times are what drive me my own research and my vision, both in the classroom and as dean.

**Jeff Liou:** Great. Thank you. How about you, John?

**John Inazu:** Sure. So I hold a joint appointment at Washington University in St. Louis. I'm half-time in the law school, teaching law students and the other half, and the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, teaching undergraduates. And so I teach and write on the first amendment, law and religion, and related issues.

I'm also the Founder and Executive Director of the Carver Project, whose mission is to empower and equip Christian faculty and students to serve and connect university, church, and society.

**Jeff Liou:** Great welcome. Both of you to the podcast, excited to have you. And the first question we ask, all of our guests is if you were at a dinner party and somebody wanted to know what you do, or what you research, how would you explain it to them?

And the follow-up to that is why do you love what you research? So, John, can we start with you? How do you explain to someone what you research.

**John Inazu:** Okay. When you're at the hypothetical dinner party, you get invited to. That answer for me is actually pretty complex because I have a lot of different research areas, some tied more to legal scholarship and other work, more public facing, I suppose, today I would say that I spent a lot of time translating questions, controversies and issues surrounding the First Amendment, including religion, but not only religion to broader audiences. And I love doing that work because I think the longer I've been an academic, the more I've discovered that my core passions and probably better abilities are in the work of translation. I can do sort of the deep theoretical work, but I just don't like it as much. And there are plenty of people who are really gifted at that.

And so for this outward facing work, which seems really important right now to help people understand complex ideas without distorting them, but making them more accessible to generalist audiences. So that's a lot of my work these days.

**Emily Hill:** So for our listeners, could you perhaps remind them for this conversation, what the First Amendment is and maybe why you think it's important?

**John Inazu:** Oh, sure. Yeah. So the First Amendment, I'm not going to quote it for you because I'll forget about it, in the Bill of Rights it includes five individual rights that are at the core of our civil liberties: speech, press, petition, religion, and assembly. And there's also the antiestablishment provision, and the First Amendment.

And to me, this goes to the core of how we exist in a diverse and pluralistic society. How do we honor each other's differences, religious practices, speech practices, the private groups of civil society. And we've got a lot of disagreement over the boundaries of those rights and when they clash with other rights and other interests.

And so a lot of the work I do is helping to explain sometimes very complex, constitutional cases or legal theories that try to work out the operation of the First Amendment.

**Jeff Liou:** Kristen, how about you? How do you explain what you research and why you love it?

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** It definitely depends on the audience for some people. Especially when my core teachings to be in the area of discipleship, that was either a very confusing thing to say one taught or opened a lot of very interesting conversations depending on one's background. So in my mind, some of the deep questions that I try to engage are what does it mean to faithfully follow Jesus?

How do we think about biblically and theologically, and how do we think about that within specific times and places? So what is going on right where we live that might make us need to ask some hard questions about what faithful following of Jesus looks like? And what are the ways that we're being formed, both in our faith communities and in the wider culture? How does that formation either help us to live into the callings God has placed upon us or at times hinder us? And so we need to be maybe more aware, more discerning than we sometimes are about the things that are shaping us both inside and outside our faith community.

Almost my whole Christian life has probably been shaped by asking those questions. I came to faith through a high school youth group in the Washington DC area. So that intersection of kind of faith, calling, and public and political life, was always right there. And asking questions about how does this faith connect both to what I'm called to do in my life, but also to how we live out our faith in the world has been a recurring theme. My earliest academic work on political theory I don't think anyone would put that up and think, oh, this is a book on discipleship. But I can see that the questions I was asking were, what does faithfulness look like in a complex pluralistic political society when we're trying to figure out how to live together with a bunch of people who have different beliefs and different ways of life? And what is our posture as Christians in that? What are the ways that political theory is trying to help us live together? And what are some resources from our own tradition drawing on people like Augustine and other more contemporary thinkers that can help us wrestle with that.

And that sort of follows through my work on justice is similarly, what does scripture have to say about justice? What does the tradition have to say? And what does that mean for how we try to seek God's kingdom, justice, and righteousness here and now? So that thread underneath is always there, even though it may look like different topics at different times.

**John Inazu:** It's interesting too, because as Kristen was talking, I was reminded that we not only have shared formal, academic training and both political theory and for me to a lesser extent in theology, but also our lived practical experience is rooted in actually the exact same church, The Falls Church Episcopal, now the Falls Church Anglican. Kristen was there in youth group days. I was there in my early twenties during legal practice, but they're the actual embodied community of people affecting both of us in close proximity.

**Emily Hill:** Yeah, that's really interesting connection as well. Kristen, I love that focus on the things that form us and understanding the need to understand that as Christians, that's a really strong interest area of mine as a theologian. And that emphasis on you notice that as you were growing up in the DC area. And John, you're talking about the First Amendment being these key sort of elements of our life together, that really shape sort of our ability to do that, one way as a legal document, or some aspects of legal theory, our legal structure that enable us to do that.

And I'm wondering, John, if you could maybe talk a little bit about some other aspects of liberalism or political theory that shape our ability to do that. What are some of the possibilities, the pitfalls, and the way you tend to think about those options.

**John Inazu:** When we're talking about negotiating our differences and living in relationship with one another, the law runs out pretty quickly in that most of what we do is outside of the boundaries of the law. Take speech, for example, and in this country, I can say almost anything I want to almost anyone. And so the question is not what the law allows me to do because the law allows me to do a lot. It's what should I do as a responsible person, citizen, neighbor, Christian. And there, these questions of formation, and practices, and norms become really important. So how do we learn how to speak kindly, but also truthfully to one another? And how do we not avoid hard questions, but engage in them with a sort of charity and natural inquisitiveness that is not fearful or anxious.

And so those are, I think there are theological questions there, there are civic questions within liberalism. How does a liberal norm encourage genuine and honest dialogue rather than shutting it down? And then we can also talk about how groups form and exist in society. What are the challenges and opportunities of groups, both the harms that they can create, but also the possibilities that they can create?

These kinds of questions within liberal political thought are just never ending, super interesting, very contested and great things to study and teach.

**Jeff Liou:** And before we continue, I think the term liberalism gets used in a bunch of different ways. And even for those who are acquainted with political philosophy, who talk about liberalism, they might think about it in particular way. Maybe based on both of your disciplines as we turn to Kristen, your answer to the previous question, what do we mean by liberalism today as we talk? Or what should we mean? Or what does legal studies contribute to a definition of liberalism? What does theology contribute to our understanding of liberalism? How are those things together in your worlds?

**John Inazu:** I don't think we want to parse it by disciplinary differences. I mean, the term is just so fraught and so ambiguous. Maybe what I should say is when I'm using the term liberalism in this discussion, what I mean by that term as a shorthand is a kind of classical political theoretical ideas emerging largely, but not exclusively out of the enlightenment, in terms of how we relate to one another, how we think about law, how we think about negotiating questions of rights, uh, and that can be contrasted with more contemporary political liberalism with theological versions and so forth.

But that's about, I think all I want to say on that, because otherwise we're getting into the very contested territory. And there are lots of critiques one can make of it, but just as a descriptive matter to set up the contours of this discussion, I think that's generally the ballpark we're in.

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** Thanks for that, John. You know, I think in our contemporary imaginations often when we hear liberalism, we're thinking as opposed to conservativism or, you know, that kind of thing. But there is a school of thought and a philosophical approach to our common life that flows out of the enlightenment and might be associated with people like John Locke and, you know, names like that. So I think there's a kind of a technical way in which that term is used to think about how we order our common political life. Uh, that does not map onto liberal conservative in the ways that are often used.

**John Inazu:** That's why politically today there are both political liberals and political conservatives that draw from, or refute principles of classical liberalism. So that's a that distinction gets clouded a lot in popular discourse.

**Jeff Liou:** Maybe to press the clarification home: are we all liberals in that sense? Or who's not a liberal that lives in the United States?

**John Inazu:** Well, I mean, a theocrat’s not a liberal, right. And there are certainly plenty of people on kind of right-leaning Christianity today that are theocrats in practice. So, I think we've got plenty of non- liberals in this country and we can name other groups as well, but that was the first that came to mind.

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** Yeah. I mean, I think there are some ways in which we're, because we're a little bit a- historical as a society, we don't tend to know these roots of our own tradition and our own political life. And so I think part of the work that actually John has done in a place like Confident Pluralism is trying to draw our attention back to our roots. So there's a sense in which most U.S. Citizens have grown up in a liberal environment and so are framed in ways that we might not even know, um, by classic liberalism. But there's another sense in which we've forgotten some of those roots and some of the important pieces of that tradition that perhaps if we recovered, um, could help us in this moment.

Although I certainly have critiques of, and concerns about certain versions of political liberalism I do think there are pieces that we could be a refreshed on that might help us.

**John Inazu:** And that reminds me, too, the "us" here in my mind has to be kind of a critical mass of people capable of sustaining this project of liberalism. But you're going to have people on both extremes that are hardcore fundamentalists in either direction and their political posture is really just kill the dissenters. Sometimes, literally, but at least metaphorically, and that's not compatible with any kind of classical liberalism. So the challenge of the current political moment is to make sure there are enough of us that reject those poles to sustain the project going forward.

And that's a contingent question whether we get there or not, I think is a matter of contingent human history.

**Emily Hill:** Oh, yeah, there's a lot of questions coming up now that I think we wanted to talk about. I wanted to just go back Kristen, to when we were asking John about the way that his discipline had sort of engaged with political legal theory, about ways in which we're formed. And he was talking about legal theory runs out pretty quick, you know, and we need to talk about our character and the ways we talk to each other, or don't talk to each other. And so I wanted to give you a chance to answer from a theological perspective, how does theology tend to engage over history, ideas of political options for how we live together? And how have you thought about that in your research?

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** I mean, one of the ways we could organize that question is around this specific issue of public discourse. You know, how is it that in a society made up of different people with different convictions and ways of life, we think about our ability to speak with one another? And what kinds of reasons are we invited to bring into our public deliberations? And that's an area where I think you get some real interesting differences, of people trying to wrestle with the same underlying question but thinking about it differently. And it's a genuine question, you know, what does it look like to come together in the public square, if we want to use that term?

And you have some people like John Rawls would be, a more contemporary political theorist saying we really should only bring into our public discourse reasons and arguments that we can all be expected to understand. And more specifically, all reasonable people should be expected to understand. So anything that might come from your specific faith tradition or background, you ought to translate into language or reasons that other people who don't share your faith background could understand and agree with. And other people have, have really had concerns about that. Ought we not to be able to bring kind of the depth of our convictions with us because that's part of who we are and that's part of where our convictions come from. And you have even like a Jeffrey Stout, who's not operating from Christian convictions, but trying to argue that on behalf of, of Christians and other people of other faith traditions, that there should be space for that. And then you have people like Richard Rorty, who famously said, religion is a conversation stopper. It absolutely cannot be allowed in the public realm because it's kind of inherently intolerant. Um, and then others saying, well, is it any, is religion any more intolerant than other philosophies, theories, ways of being, um, we all are, there's no view from nowhere. We all have ways of thinking that shape us and that have the potential to be intolerant. And then we get to John's point that there's a layer here beyond just what's allowed what's legally possible, but there are ways of thinking about how, how we're formed to engage in our interaction.

So that's where then I probably bring theology in. And for Christians wrestling with that question is sort of, how do we want to think about our engagement and our posture? So in addition to kind of the formal layer of kind of what's allowed in public discourse, there's the posture layer of how do we want to, how are we called to engage, um, in our common life together?

And that's where you have some Christians genuinely believing that, we've probably gone astray That we are not being very winsome witnesses right now in some of the postures we've adopted. And you have people like James Davison Hunter has pointed that out in To Change the World, that really our mode of engagement reflects the world's categories, Nietzschean categories of will to power more than kind of faithful Christian ways of engaging the world. Amy Black at Wheaton, who talks about, you know, 1 Corinthians 13, it's not optional. It's not only a wedding text. You know, this is supposed to mark ways of, of loving are supposed to mark all of our interaction.

I tend to think a lot about the fruit of the Spirit. But then I want to wrestle with that, and as there's space, maybe wrestle with that with you all. I do want to say the fruit of the Spirit is supposed to mark all of our interactions and that's part of what it means to be biblical in the public realm.

But I don't want to say there's no room for prophetic, "no" moments, right? That there are places and times, including in our very recent history where we've needed to stand up and say, "this is not right." And there is space for that. So that's where I, I kind of want to hold together you know, these virtues, we want to talk about that John's written about humility tolerance, charity.

How do we hold those even in those spaces where we see and feel the need for a pretty dramatic, no, this is not right? That's a really interesting and important place to wrestle with.

**John Inazu:** One distinction here that might be helpful is the distinction between sort of ontology or theology on the one hand and, and an epistemic awareness on the other. So what I mean by that is there are things that are true about the world and, and Christian theology says there are things about the world that are true for everybody, not just Christians. And those are fundamental truth claims and sometimes we're asked to prophetically state those claims to an unbelieving world, but there is also an epistemic awareness that what people can know and understand is limited in all kinds of ways. From the fall, from practices we live into, from prior beliefs about the world. And so we're not always going to be able to convince other people of the rightness of even a theologically true claim. And I think that's part of the ballgame, not just for neighbor law, but also for contemporary apologetics or evangelism, that if we get stuck in a 1990s model that says, I'm just going to be able to convince you of the truth of the world or why this theological claim is correct, we're going to miss an audience that might not be capable of hearing or understanding that.

And it doesn't mean we don't speak truth sometimes, but it does mean we have a better awareness of the differences we have with people around us. And I think that's quite different than the posture that a lot of Christians have had in recent decades.

**Emily Hill:** There's two kinds of questions I'm curious to get to. You mentioned the poles of the sort of fundamentalists and then this kind of hopeful middle, where we can sort of actually concretely engage with people. And I want to get to what it looks like to do that, how we might engage. But I'm also curious how you might place our point in history from a public discourse perspective, whether that's broadly or as Christians. Because we sort of have this feeling that things really are a mess. And certainly, you know, they're not great. What is it maybe from your research? So you mentioned sort of a 1990s perspective, but also just, you know, from your research, how would you give perspective on the state of our public discourse? Our level of disagreement, our polarity, whether broadly in the public or even within the church, what kind of perspective might that give us even on how we can move forward in this.

**John Inazu:** That's a great question. It's a super complicated one. I mean, and I've got a mixed answer to it. So the first thing is just a caution against the kind of presentism that forgets the past. And we've had some really hard moments in the past, for example, the Civil War among others, but even just on the realm of discourse, look back to the presidential election of 1800, which makes Clinton/ Trump look pretty civil, right?

I mean, there are all kinds of historical examples where social discourse has been really, really bad. Now there are some contemporary and new challenges. I think social media is a massive challenge that we haven't figured out that that might complicate and uniquely complexify the current moment. But I also think that the sense that there is a, "we" that is experiencing the current moment as particularly fraught is not only presentism, but it's located especially in a kind of white Protestantism that is feeling the fragility of discourse maybe for the first time in ways that other demographics have not. And so 2021 might feel fraught to someone who could assume a shared cultural baseline with the people in power 30 or 40 or 50 years ago. But if you're a Black Christian or an Asian Christian or a woman, like all, we could go through a whole list of people who might actually feel that 2021 is a better moment for discourse than it was possible a couple generations ago, even.

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** When I speak in churches, sometimes I say, okay, if you think this is the worst and most divided moment for public discourse, that our ability to connect, is at all-time low go to one side. And if you've personally lived through, or are aware of a worse moment, go to the other side. And it it's pretty overwhelmingly, this is the worst.

Um, and I, you know, I started doing that cause I thought, you know, surely when people who lived through the Civil Rights era and Vietnam war and bombings and protests and assassinations. I mean, it had to feel like our country was falling apart. And maybe we've just forgotten that because we don't always remember history so well.

And so it's hard to say, is it, is it simply that the people with whom I am speaking are representing largely a demographic for whom things have shifted in uncomfortable ways and they're trying to grapple with that? Or has there been a fracturing amplified by social media that is actually of a different nature than what we've experienced before in the U S context?

I do think, and many are writing, making documentaries and other things about this. I mean, the impact of these emerging technologies, it's really profound. And, um, the things that it, it enables and the discourse that people feel free to engage in through a screen or in a mediated way, it's different than what you might say in person, and the forms that were available. But on the other hand, it's enabled wider access, which is really important. So again, trying to hold those tensions together.

I also always am comforted by Augustine who lived through so much. I mean, the City of God is his response to the fall of Rome, which no one could have anticipated and which raised profound questions for Christian and non-Christian alike, and Christians being blamed in part for that downfall and Augustine and trying to say we've got a heavenly city and let's try to put this into perspective and let's acknowledge, you know, some of what's going on in real ways and also kind of think about it biblically and reframe it a little bit. That's always reassuring to me, to remember that we're not the first Christians to walk through really complex times with really hard things and civilizations do eb and flow and shift.

I think in some sense we're living through that, but Christ is still Lord, as Revelation points out. The lamb is still on the throne, even when things seem really awry in the world.

**Jeff Liou:** You both have mentioned social media and who knows which way the wind is blowing, but I'm wondering if I can get you to put your social commentator hat on to maybe do some analysis to tell us what you're seeing. One of the experiences that I have as I scroll through whatever social media I'm using is, um, the question John, that you raised about quote, unquote, we, whether there is a public or there are many publics and to whom one is speaking, when one enters into social media and then what that does to us, when we are oriented towards a single public or multiple publics. Can you talk about what you see going on there in terms of fracturing or unifying or representation or whatever dynamics that you're aware of in social media?

**John Inazu:** Yeah. You know, I want to begin with a thought that your question prompted. Kristen and I, and I have a mutual friend, Warren Kinghorn who teaches at Duke. And Warren very early in my career wisely advised me that despite the reality of many different publics and fractured audiences to be, to have integrity with what you're saying across different audiences. I might have a different register when I'm speaking to Christians, I might be able to quote scripture for example, but I'm not going to say something to a Christian audience that is radically at odds with something that I would say to a non-Christian audience. And I think for, because of this reality of many publics, it's even more important for people to speak with a kind of consistency and integrity. And, you know, quite frankly, that's not always the case with a lot of public facing people who're trying to make friends in too many different places. And part of speaking consistently is you might, you might just end up being less liked in some of those arenas and that's okay because viewpoints are complex and genuine viewpoints are complex to explain across multiple audiences.

 I do think the social media piece is so hard because whatever you put out there can be quickly interpreted or distorted by a particular public or audience. And so I think actually it's, especially for people who are trained as scholars and academics. I mean, I get the need for it. I'm on Twitter. I think it's useful to some extent, but. And I think all of us who are privileged with these reflective jobs in the university should spend some serious discernment asking how much time we should really be on social media at all, uh, given, uh, quick, fraught, agitated nature of the communication medium, and whether our time is better spent pointing people to more reflective kinds of thinking.

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** On Twitter, I had an interesting experience with a thoughtful college friend who was really struggling in her local evangelical church and feeling the complexities of the last few years that many of us have felt in very discouraged and despairing. And in that instance, I found myself saying, "have you been on Twitter? Cause it can be encouraging." And I was sort of surprised to hear those words coming out, but if you're not, I mean, in her case, she's not in any other Christian world, she's in a, you know, secular work environment and other things so her only kind of window into, into the church at that moment was through her local church, which was struggling to figure out how to navigate race relations and divisions and immigration and refugee realities. Then I think that's a, that's a positive of social media that it can provide a way for you to understand there is more to this moment and to connect with people who are perhaps navigating more wisely or fully, then you might be seeing locally.

On the other hand, you know, the quick pace of responses in that, you know, the instantaneous, um, need to weigh in can bring out not always the best in us and not, not the fruit of the Spirit, as I mentioned earlier, that we're called to embody. So yeah. How to think carefully about our own involvement. I do, like John, wonder about academics engaging, but on the other hand, I think more and more people have pointed out to me that we're in a real, do I want to say crisis situation? I think within North American Christianity and particularly in a White forms of Christianity, and there are people who have a lot of time to give, to building their platform and posting and writing at a popular level. And I think God can work through that. I really do.

On the other hand, there are people who've spent decades in school and thinking, and, you know, being invited into the tradition and into the scriptures. And if there's no form of engagement or translation to use, John's earlier term about his own calling then there is a vacuum and it's almost like a, um, I don't know, sometimes it feels gluttonous to me. If we, as academics, hold all of that over here, just in our institutions, when it does seem like there's a little bit of starvation going on and people, and people are getting food, but it's not real food, maybe it's not always nourishing food. So what's our role in calling in helping to bridge that gap and to do some translation and offer, offer some wisdom?

**John Inazu:** Yeah, just to double down on that point, I think with the changing nature of higher ed, it's even more incumbent on scholars and academics to figure out how to do that outward facing work. Well, I mean, if you're, if you're in the lab, curing cancer, go for it. But if you're in the humanities or in theology or in some other lane you can no longer just hang out in the stacks, doing a bunch of research that without talking to people, it's just that luxury has gone. I think, especially for the newer academics, even in grad school now figuring out how to chart a course that is going to responsibly include a public facing component to it in the work ahead.

**Emily Hill:** That's great. I appreciate that advice and calling for scholars and academics to think about how they're going to translate their work, to help the public and bring a little more depth and thinking to the way the public engages in their life. I want to transition us to a closing question to help bring some of the things that you've been talking about and the things that you write about into a concrete question about how you would try to equip the public to engage and come together around the common good. So we talked about the fundamentalists maybe on, on either ends of the curve. And if we sort of ignore those people for a second and ask, how would you try to mobilize these people in the middle who really do want to engage productively in our society in this pluralistic way?

How would you advise those people to mobilize around an issue of the common good whether that's, how they productively talk to each other, how they productively live together, how would you encourage ministry or civic leaders to focus their attention, or every day church members or citizens? How would you encourage them?

**Jeff Liou:** And maybe we could add some context or some color to that question. I'm sure each of you has encountered someone who is so resistant to entering public discourse because it's noisy, scary, dangerous, but they are people of truly goodwill and virtue, as both of you have talked about and written about. They have some of the raw materials, but they are afraid or resistant or reluctant to enter. How, how would you encourage them to engage or would you encourage them to engage?

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** There are a lot of different ways to think about this. Biblically, I think overall, I want to remind us that we see through a glass dimly. And I think that that goes to John's point earlier about some need for humility that we as Christians believe God has revealed just some important truths to us in the person of Jesus Christ and through the word of God in scripture. And we are trying to live our lives by that. And we still see through a glass dimly. So we're offering, we're offering what we can, but we probably don't have it all figured out.

So that is sort of an overall posture, maybe combined with, uh, you know, Romans 12:2 to not be conformed to the pattern of this world and to really wrestle with kind of what is that pattern? Whether that's social media and what it pushes you to, and is there a different way to occupy that space and other others with whom you can wrestle and find accountability as you sense, maybe a calling into that space or in your own vocational life? How are we called to live this out?

And then one other biblical theme that I wrote about in the book that John and I worked on together with others, it's really tree imagery. That we are called all throughout scripture to look at trees, to be like trees. You know, the garden begins with trees. Revelation: the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nation.

And that we ourselves are meanwhile, called to be like trees, Psalm 1, and to bear fruit, Jesus talks about again and again. So what does it look like to be so deeply rooted in Christ and nourished by the Spirit and part of this grove of trees in the family of Christ that we're really attentive to our local places? We're really attentive to what's going on around us, the ecosystems. and we see where the toxic air is, and we see where they're, you know, we're taking in the carbon dioxide and offering life, giving oxygen and beauty and food and fruit and all these things and play and joy, you know. That that could be part of our witness.

And I think then to your question, Jeff, like that is a calling for all of us. That we can all be a part of, as part of the body of Christ, not as the lone hero, the lone tree saving the world, but as part of this family that we're called into in Christ, by the grace of God, discerning together, wrestling together with what our local presence looks like and how we're called to serve beyond that.

And the only other thing I want to add, maybe at this point is conversation and public discourse we tend to think of as verbal, but historically, and actually scripturally, they had much more to do with ways of living, social interaction. So whether you are engaged in overt forms of public discourse that our minds might go to or not, you are living a life and by God's grace living a way of life rooted in Christ and scripture.

And so, how do we do that intentionally and generously? And with deep roots in Christ? Then we can have really broad branches. We can reach out and overlap with people who care about all sorts of things from their own deep roots and find those places of overlap, right where we are right through our everyday ways of life. But it will take some work together to try to do that differently than perhaps some of the cultural pressures right now are pushing us towards.

**John Inazu:** Yeah, I love all of that. And I'll just underscore a point that connects some of Kristen's work with my work and that's the importance of institutions in all of this. So when we think about the local and the collective and the social and the shared practices, those only happen through healthy, functional institutions. And so to your question, Emily, specifically about how Christians might engage in this discourse and to find, I, I sometimes say, can we find common ground, even with others who don't share the notion of the common good with us, but when we do that radically outward facing work, what are the institutions that sustain us? Primarily and specifically, what are the local churches? And what do they look like? And what are they shaping us to do?

And so one of my fundamental questions, I think, and challenges today is, Are we even asking and forming people with theological questions or have we hijacked the questions with non- theological categories? If our local churches are starting with questions about what are my rights, or what did the local government say in this COVID regulation, then they're missing the theological question that needs to be asked first that's key to formation. And unless we recapture that frame it's going to be very difficult to send people who are formed and habituated into Christian practices to those difficult questions of engagement across difference.

**Emily Hill:** I love ending a theology podcast with the importance of theological formation and the church.

**Jeff Liou:** That's a really compelling note for us to end on. So I just want to say Dr. Kristen Deede Johnson, Dr. John Inazu, thank you so much for speaking to us and imparting your wisdom to us and our listeners. We're really grateful.

**Emily Hill:** Thank you so much.

**John Inazu:** Great to be with you. Thank you.

**Kristen Deede Johnson:** Thank you for having us. Good, rich conversation.