

Ben Best, Co-host

Welcome to *defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

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The Edmiston Center focuses on Christian endurance in the midst of competing cultural narratives. Mrs. K.A. Ellis, its director, joined Dr. Keith Plummer to talk about how she came to Christ and the people and things God used to form her heart for Christians experiencing persecution around the world. They discuss the varying forms persecution takes and what similarities underlie them. They also talk about what Christians in the West can learn from persecuted believers around the world and throughout time who have persevered in this face of severe opposition, as well as how American Christians conquer cultural anxiety. She and Keith also discuss what led her to jump ship from Twitter. So if you're interested in getting a broader view of what God is doing in the lives of Christians around the world, or want resources to equip your church or your family to pray for persecuted and marginalized believers globally, stay tuned.

Dr. Keith Plummer

My guest today is someone I've been wanting to talk with for quite a while. And though this is the first time we've actually spoken in real-time, it feels like we know each other to some extent because of our online interactions. She is Mrs. Karen A. Ellis, AKA K.A. Ellis, Director of the Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity at Reformed Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. She holds a Master of Arts and Religion from Westminster Seminary and a Master of Fine Arts from the Yale School of Drama and is a PhD candidate in World Christianity and Ethics at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies in England. Karen, I am so happy that you accepted the invitation to talk with me. Welcome.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Oh, the pleasure is mine. It's nice to finally get a chance to sit down and just chat with you about... We talk about so many things online together and so many bizarre things, and yet, that's relevant.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Oh, yeah. I'm going to say something about that.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

And it's just such a treat to finally have a chance to sit down and talk with you voice to voice.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It is. And this is far better than tweets.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

It is.

Dr. Keith Plummer

We'll be able to go more in-depth than with tweets, too. Well, can you begin by telling us first, before we get into some of your work with the Edmiston Center—what were some of the events, who were some of the people that God brought into your life who were instrumental in bringing you to faith in Christ?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

I grew up in church, but I was not a believer. I was actually the church organist. I know, right? I was the organist. I directed the choir. I was in college. That's how I paid my way through college, one of the ways. And I had been around the Word and around the songs of God and the Word buried in hymns and whatnot. But I really didn't understand what it meant to truly follow Christ—you know, the exchanged life. I didn't understand any of that until I was about 25. But leading up to the time I was 25, there were a number of significant people in my life. I used to call them my guideposts without even knowing that *Guideposts* was the name of a magazine. I didn't know anything about Christianity. I didn't know the Book of John from the Book of 1 John. I didn't know anything. So there were several

people—one of them was Debra Barrett. She's actually gone home to be with the Lord now, but she was my social studies teacher in Baltimore City Public School. And I used to get sent to the principal's office for bad behavior all the time. And there was this—the way the office was set up, it was like a fishbowl.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

So if you got sent to the principal's office and classes were changing, you were sitting there, and all the students were walking by like, "Yeah, there she is again," right? It was all-girls school, which made it like 100 times worse. "There she is again in the principal's office, waiting to be seen." And while I was sitting there in my shame, Debra Barrett, my social studies teacher, would come and sit with me. And she would bring her Bible, and she would sit with me while I was in the fishbowl, and she would just talk to me about... She asked me, "Where do you go to church?" I told her where I go to church. "What do you do? What do your parents think about you going to the principal's office?" And then she would talk to me about Jesus. She would talk to me about a genuine life in the faith. And of course, it was about 10 years later before the penny dropped. But she was probably one of the most significant people. Now, you got to understand, a public school teacher, we're talking about the mid '80s—early to mid '80s—a public school teacher having the courage to come and talk to a student about their faith, she still could at that point.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Right.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
I don't think you can do that in public schools anymore.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
A lot has changed.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
I don't think you have that freedom anymore. Another person who was... I was working at a hotel. So these were my guideposts, right? I was working at a hotel in Baltimore, the Crosskeys Inn. I don't think it's the Crosskeys Inn anymore. And we used to host all the baseball teams. Back in the '80s, the Yankees were the bad boys of baseball. Then there were the Mariners, when the Mariners—Seattle Mariners—came through. They came through with little halos on because they were all good. They'd be sitting in the lobby reading their books. I'm like, "Ohh..." Well there was one man on the Mariners team who was a Christian, and his name was Harold Reynolds. And he walked in the door one day, and obviously he didn't know me from a can of paint. He walked in the door one day, and he turned around and he looked straight at me. He came over to me, and we started talking. And I thought he was looking at me because it's the '80s. I thought it was cute. And he said, "Well, here's some tickets to the game, and let's get together and talk afterwards." I was like, "Okay." So I go to the game—which I love baseball, big baseball fan.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
I go to the game, and we go out to eat afterwards, and he tells me about Jesus. And it's still like hitting a wall in terms of my heart, but he's watering seeds that Debra Barrett planted. There was another young lady in college, Kelly Fitzgerald, who I just reconnected with after all these years in the last week. She just texted me yesterday, and I was like, I'm so glad we found each other. "I made it!" I'd be able to tell her, "I know him, I know Jesus." That girl witnessed to me hard in college. So these were all these signposts, and most of them were sort of people who were planting, watering. And then one day, I was 25 years old at Yale, sitting in the African and African-American Studies building, and it was a Easter service. It was April 1993. There was this beautiful brother up at the front who gave the gospel, and I had been hearing it my whole life, but that was the first time I *heard it*, heard it, and the penny dropped. And I crawled across—because I was at the Yale School of Drama—I crawled across a bunch of famous people that you would know today that I had invited to church, ironically.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
And so I crawled across all of them and went down the aisle. But I think I believed before that. I think I

believed a little bit. That was just kind of like the Lord's thumbprint on—yeah. Now all these other people know you believe. And that's what really started kind of a life of adventure in the faith. And it's been hard times, it's been good times, it's been ups and downs, but I wouldn't trade it. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I wouldn't go back, that's for sure.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It's beautiful to hear stories of how God uses people as links in the chain that leads to Christ. That is great.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Yeah, I'm a great believer in—you know, just sort of drive-by evangelism because that's how I came to know the Lord. It's like—boom! There's another one. Boom! There's another one. Boom! They seem unrelated, you know? There's something that every single one of them said to me, was that God had been after me since I was a little girl. Since I was that little girl sitting in, playing that old clunky piano in the church basement for the Sunday school, becoming a church organist, that God had had his eyes on me since then. And every single one of them said that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

There's encouragement in your story for those of us who share the gospel with people, and we don't see the fruit in that encounter because the people on the front end of that chain didn't see it.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

That's right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

They were part of it.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

They were just faithful.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

They were just being faithful and giving out of the overflow of what God had given them. I mean it's—some people, it's like, when we look askance at other faiths or other worldviews and we're like, "Man, they're always talking about it. They're proselytizing." And I'm like, we're supposed to be doing that, too! If you really found something that set you free, wouldn't you want to tell other people about them?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. Well, as we're going to discuss, you have a particularly tender heart and a burden for brothers and sisters around the world who are experiencing various forms of persecution for the faith. Any particular events or people there that you can trace that particular sensitivity to? How did the Lord use various things in order to form that in you?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

So I had a career in theater before I went into theology, and I must have been about six months, maybe four or five months old in the Lord, when I went to Eastern Europe, just after the Iron Curtain fell, and I didn't know anything much about the history. I knew very surface things about the history of Christianity under the Soviet Union. I didn't know much at all. I went with very secular people. It was just a theater job. And it turned out to be so much more of a foundational experience for my work with the underground church and the persecuted, in that being in Eastern Europe after the Iron Curtain fell was like watching people come out of caves into the light, blinking, like—in terms of their religious freedom and rediscovering who they were. Evangelical theology, evangelical Christianity had started to flourish again in the public square. So watching that happen, I didn't know what I was looking at at the time. But while I was there, into my hands fell a book by a man named Richard Wurmbrand called

*Tortured for Christ*. And I read that, and I came away with sort of a romantic understanding of the awful and yet blessed life of living under persecution.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

But that was sort of what started my journey of being curious about what life was like under the Soviet Union. And then I found—or the former Soviet Union—and then I found other works, biographies by people who had also... People who had lived in Vietnam, people who had been incarcerated in numerous other countries. And I was like, oh, wait a minute, this is a whole thing. So I kind of worked backwards from their biographies into the Bible—my early understanding of the Bible—to understand that, oh, this is normal Christian life. This is New Testament living. And the place where I was living for God's purposes, for purposes he alone understands, we were not having that experience. And so I started to look for the value of both experiences. Really, it was that—*Tortured for Christ* and his wife's book, *The Preacher's Wife—The Pastor's Wife* by Sabina Wurmbrand—that sort of just launched me into curiosity about that world.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And you were a babe in Christ when this began.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

I was. Yeah, everybody around me was reading *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, and I was reading *Tortured for Christ*, you know? So this is my life.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, I've been reading a book edited by someone named Nick Needham. It's called *Daily Readings: The Early Church Fathers*. Every month is devoted to excerpts of the writings of a particular church father. So for this month, Cyprian of Carthage is the church father. And when I opened it to this morning's date, I read an excerpt from one of his works called "On the Vanity of Idols," and there was a paragraph that I wanted to share with you because as I read it, I thought this is so providential that I would come across this as I'm going to have this conversation with Karen. This is the paragraph.

Dr. Keith Plummer

"So that the truth of faith might be all the more solid, and acknowledging Christ might not simply be some pleasant thing, believers are put to the proof by tortures, crucifixions, and many kinds of mistreatment. Pain, the acid test of truth, comes upon them. The outcome is that Christ—the Son of God, the Object of trust given to human beings for their life—is affirmed not merely by the mouth's trumpeting, but by the witness of suffering."

Dr. Keith Plummer

And that is so much related to the work that you're doing with the Edmiston Center. And I wanted to ask you to share with us, as the Director of the Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity, please tell us something about the people from whom the center gets its name, and then a little about what the center strives to do.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Right. First off, that passage just rings for me.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I will send it to you.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

I would love to have it. I had a great conversation at the Edmiston Center. We host public lectures, and we had Hannah Nation from the Center for House Church Theology come and talk about the work of Pastor Wang Yi, who's incarcerated. And the first question I asked her in the Q&A was, "Is persecution a blessing or a curse?" To which she said, "Probably Pastor Wang Yi would say it's both." It's both. It's part of the curse of this world, but God redeems it and uses it for his purpose to sanctify the believer and also to purify the culture around us. Because as we bear witness to the culture around us, we bring both an indictment and an invitation. You know?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

So the Edmiston Center is named after Alonzo and Althea Edmiston. And they were—so this is kind of where my personal history comes in to intersect with the persecuted church. When I was in Eastern Europe, I started to realize, and I started reading Wurmbrand and others—Brother Andrew—others who had experienced anti-Christian hostility in the 20th century, I started to notice that there were a lot of commonalities between their experience and what my ancestors, as African-American, had experienced as well, especially in the proto-church era for the African-American Church, when we were meeting in hush harbors and it was illegal to gather.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

There are many, many testimonies of people who were able to sort of untangle their ethnic persecution from their religious persecution, where they knew that they were being punished because they wanted to worship on the Sabbath. And that was very different from being punished because you're African and enslaved, right? So working out of that, I found the Alonzo and Althea Edmiston family—the Edmiston family. They were one generation out of slavery, so their parents were enslaved people. They were emancipated and did quite well. The parents did quite well post-slavery in the Reconstruction period. And Althea was sent to Fisk University, and Alonzo came through Stillman, the preacher's college. And she went on—she became a Christian and decided to become a missionary, felt called to be a missionary, and fulfilled that call by going to Congo—the free state of Congo at that point—and met him in Congo. Now, I don't know why they didn't meet each other in Alabama, apart from providence—God said no. She was a part of a massive relocation—we would call them today "internally displaced people," but a massive relocation because of threats against Westerners in Congo and also village people as well, Indigenous folks, women and children.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

So she met him on the march to safety in Congo. And they met and they married. We're talking early turn of the century. And they joined a team that was the first African-led mission team from the US, part of the PCUS(A), Presbyterian Church United States (of America) at that point. And they did an amazing work in Congo. It was the Sheppard team, which included Maria Fearing, who was ransoming children—orphans—from the rubber trade and the Arab slave trade, and also from King Leopold II, who was horrifically violent against the Congolese. If you ever want to take a look at his history, his legacy is insane. He massacred people. The rubber trade was punishing people for not working well or properly to produce enough rubber for our tires. It's interesting how Congo, even today, is sort of at a flash point of technology and the development of technology in terms of the cobalt that we get for our phones and our laptops and our electric cars, and how people are treated poorly, unethically, and in some cases exploited for the mining of the cobalt for those to run those things. So anyways, back then, for them, it was rubber tires. And so the rubber trade just had had a lot of horrific anti-human abuses and human rights abuses.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

And so it was very common to see people with lopped off body parts as threats—you know, work harder without a hand. The Edmistons were a part of ransoming children, speaking out publicly against human rights abuses, which came at great cost for them as foreign missionaries. And they stayed there. They did an amazing faith work project where they helped people connect their understanding of Christ with the Bible and how to work well, how to start their own projects, their own economic projects. They're just a fascinating couple to study—and unsung and unheard. So they carry, really, the ethos of the Edmiston Center of whole holistic Christian life under anti-Christian hostility in places where Christianity is hard. So we named the center after them.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Great. And what does the center do? What are the opportunities that are available? What is your mission? What would you like to accomplish through the center?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Well, our mission is to think theologically about life under anti-Christian hostility. So there's kind of a hole in terms of the spade work that's been done theologically around Christian endurance under

hostility. There's a lot that's been written—a lot of ink has been spilled about Christian suffering that we need about suffering. A lot of ink has been spilled around the ideas of persecution, but not a whole lot of spade work around endurance. What are the things historically for different populations that are the same throughout history in the contemporary world that are similar in their experiences? And then what are the things that are uniquely defined by their context? You know, persecution in Vietnam looks very different from persecution in China because it's historically and politically and culturally determined. So when all of those change, you know, you go over to India, things even look different from province to province. So persecution looks different from region to region because it's historically, politically, and culturally determined. So what happens in one country will look very different from another because you've got a totally different set of dynamics. But there are still commonalities to be seen because they're still following the same Christ who does not change and who has promised to keep his people from Genesis to Revelation. "I will be your God, and you will be my people" is a promise, and he fulfills that, and he's fulfilling it even today.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

So we want to analyze those cases. We want to look at those situations. We already have students writing white papers around human rights, the theological approach to human dignity, theological approaches to assisting people in using the gospel to find, to rediscover their dignity and assert their dignity. Where are the lines between your rights and giving up your rights in terms of being the church? We're operating according to a different kingdom.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

So we have a lot of students writing white papers around human rights. We have students taking some of the principles and the frameworks that we're looking at. We're working with a Cain and Abel dynamic with understanding where anti-Christian hostility, or hostility against the people of God, actually originated. We take it all the way back to the Garden. So we have people already applying frameworks to the physical body. We have people applying frameworks to digital technology. Just how do we understand how these things going on around us impact the Christian life and make it challenging, and how do we use the tools that we've been given, the blessings that we've been given to overcome.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay. So you're looking at various expressions, historically, globally, of what you've called anti-Christian hostility, seeing the contextual shape of those forms of hostility, but also looking at the underlying commonalities with a view towards equipping the contemporary church wherever she exists to endure.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Correct. Yes. Which I think is something that's much needed. As far as I know, and if there is another institution—educational institution—doing this kind of spade work, let me know because I want to join forces. But I think that this is an area that's much needed. We host public lectures where we can hear from people, both domestic and international, where we can hear from people who are having these experiences. You know, there's people in rural areas, there's people in urban areas, [inaudible] urban areas, who are having the first-century church experience. They're living under the New Testament reality. The players may have changed. It may not be the government that's against them. It may be the gang dealers or the Big Pharma who's not interested in people transforming under Christ. But there is a form of hostility there, so we love talking to those folks. We host public lectures so that the community can come and hear from them. And we just kind of feel like we're sort of on the vanguard of a new research area.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In October of 2022, you were a speaker at the Litfin Symposium at Wheaton College's Billy Graham Center, the theme of which was "Contending for Gospel Mission in Christian Leadership." And you were asked to address the question: "Are American Christians Persecuted?" You were also asked to

talk about leadership development in a society that is increasingly dismissive and sometimes hostile toward Christianity. Sticking with that question about persecution, how are American Christians prone to answer that question of whether American Christians are persecuted, and why do you think it's an important question for us to grapple with?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Well, let me start with the end of that first. I think it's important to grapple with it because we're a body. We are one. One is not a number in terms of Christianity; one is a state of being. And so whether or not we would ever face legitimate, violent persecution in our lives, and the Bible speaks about a range of persecution, from rebuke to open hostility to physical violence to martyrdom. Whether or not we would experience that in our life, in our personal lifetime, we actually are experiencing it because others in the body are experiencing it. So we want to try and reconnect those sinews by raising awareness more than just around people's personal stories.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

To the first part of that question, I run into... In the West, we want to help people think more biblically about where we are culturally at the moment. I run into three sets of people, usually. There's persecution seekers, who somehow think that there's some salvific element to being under persecution or some sort of revelatory like, "Oh, if you're being persecuted, then you must really be a Christian." And that's actually not quite how it works, even though the Lord did tell us, "In this world, you will have trouble, but take heart, I will overcome the world. If the world hated me, it will hate you, too." But we're not adding anything to our salvation, right? Salvation by faith through grace. It's not salvation by works, right?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Right.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Okay. It's not salvation by works. So you got these persecution seekers, who somehow think that, you know, "Bring it on, come on, let's have it." I'm like, well, that's not really biblical either. The other group is the persecution deniers. And they're sort of the ones who are increasing anti-Christian hostility by saying, "Ah, ain't nobody hurting you! Anyway, this is all your fault. It's your fault you're getting hurt if you are getting hurt. You deserve this. Look at all the evil that Christianity has done." And that's sort of like being in an abusive relationship. It's always your fault. It's never something else. And that's not quite truthful. So what we want to do is encourage people to think about, is a persecution realist. Yes, we have enjoyed more—I call it the freer world—we have enjoyed more freedom than most Christians for hundreds of years, collectively. However, what's happening today is different from what we experienced even 50 years ago. The freedoms that we have—culturally speaking—do we still have a Constitution in America to which we can appeal for our rights? Absolutely. And that's a major distinction in my mind, is that you still have the ability to sue for your rights and to say, "God has given me the right to speak about him for his purposes." We don't know why, but that still exists, and that sort of distinguishes us from everybody else. But there is something culturally that has happened. There is something culturally, where being an evangelical Christian in the purest sense of the word, is becoming a byword.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

And when you become a byword in your culture, I do believe that you're beginning to experience what the rest of the world is experiencing, what the rest of the world knows.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In your lecture, you said, "I have worked alongside a number of organizations who've served the church under pressure for 20 years. I generally do not talk about Americans as being under persecution in the sense that they experience persecution." And you've already used a term of anti-Christian hostility. What keeps you from using the harder term and using the softer term of anti-

Christian hostility?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

It is because we do live in the freer world. So 360 to 370 million Christians globally live under some form of persecution. These are the folks, these are the countries that end up on the Open Doors' World Watch List, which is the top 50 countries where it's most difficult to be a Christian. We're nowhere near being in the top 50. These folks are experiencing violence. They're experiencing cultural marginalization in terms of, they don't have economic opportunities, they don't—they have a particular place in society, in their cultures. So the antagonism that's towards them is identifiable, quantifiable by population. We're not in there. That's not us. So all of these things matter in terms of claiming persecution. If you are being persecuted or targeted *because of your faith in Christ* is kind of the dividing line. Not because you were a jerk in the office and you were mean to everybody and you got fired. That's not persecution. You can't claim persecution on that. But if you were taking a stand for your principles and you were fired because of that, and your principles are based on Christianity, that is legitimate. You are being targeted for your faith, for your belief.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

So it's kind of being able to draw those lines and think more—be a bit more thoughtful about what we call "Christian persecution." Because if we don't show some care in how we use that word, then it really cheapens the experience of persecution of people who are literally fleeing their churches because they're being firebombed or concerned about their children being kidnapped by the hundreds and targeted for that reason. So that's why I always hesitate to use that word here. There may come a day when I or my children or my grandchildren will say, "We're on the watch list," but we're not there yet.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Right. Going back to the persecution seeker, something that came to my mind as I was listening to you. Do you think in some cases, it's not necessarily in all cases that people see some kind of salvific element to their persecution, if that's what they want to call it, but that it serves in their minds some confirming element that this bears witness that my faith is real and true, and they might go out looking for it because it, in some way, gives them a sense of security.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Or validation.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Validation, yeah.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Yeah, and that brings me back to my question with the Wang Yi lecture that we heard: Is it a blessing or a curse? It is both. I think God does use persecution. He does use it to purify the church. He does use it to sanctify the believer. He does use it to sift.

Dr. Keith Plummer

One of the fascinating things about your talk was you shared what you hear from believers around the world who are experiencing persecution, what they have to say about their perception of whether or not American Christians are persecuted. What kind of responses have you gotten to that question?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Well, keep in mind that, just want to be careful about the single story, the single narrative, right? But I have heard from people... More than anything, I've heard warnings along the lines of, "Don't think it can't happen to you." Because there are some places globally that have had a reputation of a Christian presence and maintaining and upholding Christian values, and they've seen their constitutions violated. They have seen public perception and wind shift quickly against them. There was one woman who mentioned she witnessed the exodus out of Mosul and then the destruction of Damascus. And she said, "It's Damascus. It's the place where Paul walked. We thought it couldn't happen to us," she said. "But 700 years of the church—700 or 800 years of the church messing around



with its ethics and making compromised decisions that compromise the nature of the church," she said, "If you think that it can't happen to you, it can." It can happen to us. The people who say it can't happen here always see it happen where they are. And that's unfortunate because it's almost as if there are warning signs to say, "Things are shifting, and you need to pay attention to these warning signs."

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

It's funny. The Lord gave all of those warnings in John when he was talking to the disciples before the night he was betrayed. And then there's all the warnings of watching the times, understanding the signs. It's funny that the disciples ask him, "When are all these things going to come to pass?" I've heard Vern Poythress, who's a wonderful linguist and a Greek scholar, say the Word is rendered *now*. Now. All of these things are coming to pass now. And you know, we will always hear of wars and rumors of wars, so we're always in these times where life is just phenomenally unstable, not just for the individual Christian, but for the people of God. It's our natural position, so it's interesting to watch in some places how quickly things fall apart.

Dr. Keith Plummer

At one point in your lecture, you said, "If we think that hostility toward faithful Christians cannot rise against the church in America, we do well to remember that it has already happened in America's past." You've alluded to this somewhat already, but could you expound on that further?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

So I'm drawing on my heritage as an African-American woman. I am a descendant of slavery, of the slave trade, of incredibly remarkable... I tell you, my ancestors, I read their stories. My husband's like, "Well, you got African-American royalty in your family." I'm like, I do. I really do. Just the ways and the ways they pop up in the history books, how they got over is stunning. But I think back on the same anti-Christian principles and methods that were applied to the average slave coming up in 1617, particularly 1800s, as we work towards the Civil War, you know, there were confiscations of Bibles. We see that in North Korea and China today. There were Bible redactions. We see that around the world today—you know, the slave Bible. In the slave Bible, you have complete redactions of anything regarding freedom. Well, China just wants to remove the first commandment so that there are only nine, which serves the Communist Party. We see the threats of physical assault and violence of people being burned at the stake just like in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, there's stories of itinerant preachers being burned so that other slave plantations could see his body being burned.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

This is what happens when you decide that you're not going to let the rocks cry out in your place and you're just going to keep preaching. So these are points of contact for understanding that, well, you think about the threat against personal property, against physical property, like the church bombings during the Civil Rights Movement. Why didn't they bomb clubs—nightclubs? They bombed churches because it was the seat of the Civil Rights Movement, the seat of planning an organization. Hundreds of churches, not just 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, but hundreds of churches were firebombed during that period. And we see all of these things happening today, so when I say that it's happened here before, that's really what I'm getting at, is there are populations within the American population, within the American Christian population that have endured hardship and hostility, anti-Christian hostility, and the violation of their religious freedom.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Near the end of your lecture, you drew out principles from the New Testament that you said can help American Christians conquer cultural anxiety. First, can you explain what you have in mind by cultural anxiety, and after that, can you give us perhaps one of those principles?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Right. So there are things that God has given us that are sustaining elements. Think about the ordinary means of grace—preaching of the Word, the sacraments (baptism, the Lord's Supper), church discipline, and prayer, at times throughout history, has been seen as a sacrament of its own. All of these things are not just rituals. I think that after all this sifting that we're experiencing and sort of this

shaking up, these tectonic shifts that we've seen in evangelicalism in the last 10, 15 years, maybe 20 years, I feel like people are rediscovering these things. There's a huge movement out of Canada with a group called Prayer Current. It's not just them, there are others, too. Talking about a return to the concept of Kingdom prayer—Kingdom-oriented prayer, like understanding what we're here for, answering that question that the church has been wrestling with forever. What are we supposed to be doing while we're here? And sort of returning to basics, pushing the reset button. Also, focusing on the sacraments. There is an identity-bearing element built into the sacraments. It reminds us as we participate in them and the strength that we draw from them, they remind us who we are.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

They remind us whose story we're following. There is one story under which Christ—then under which everybody's story is subsumed. And you know, you're either following the way of Cain and destruction, or you're following the way of Abel and worship according to how God wants to be worshiped. And so, of course, Christ is the fulfillment of that, and he gives us from his own hand. He feeds us the story on the night he was betrayed. He was, "This is my story," when I hear that, I should hear the Shepherd's voice and say, "I am called to be—" not a counterculture. I don't think counterculture is the right word, quite the right word. We're called to be an *other* culture in the midst of a bunch of cultures that exist around us. We are called to be an *other* culture, an *other* political entity. It's a politics that's based on something completely different than what we base politics on. It's politics based on the life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ, and the government is going to rest on his shoulders. So it reminds us, yes, that we have this dual identity, but all of these things remind us, they're set up to quell our cultural anxiety and remind us that we are following a particular story that has a particular end, that no matter what is going to be kept, and we are going to move towards that, and it's going to be fulfilled.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Really, those are the only things. Preaching of the word, remembering who we are through the sacraments, discipline, and saying, "Hey, you're not behaving like the other culture. You've stepped outside of those bounds. Come back, come back, come back." All of those things, again, hold forth that living as that other culture and that other set of politics, it still holds out an indictment against the cultures around us, but it also holds out an invitation, Don't you want to be a part of this? And it's all done in community. I don't know if you've ever... Have you ever watched this movie called *Mully*?

Dr. Keith Plummer

No, I haven't.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Oh, my gosh. That's your homework.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay, I will find it.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

Yeah, it's available on Amazon Prime. *Mully*, M-U-L-L-Y. It's the story of Charles Mully, who grew up in Kibera slums, and he was an orphan. Actually, he made it to the slums. He was orphaned in the rural areas. His family just left him. They abandoned him as a child. And he made his way, walked from the rural area to Nairobi. And his story is phenomenal. But what he does, you're going to get to the end of the movie, you're going to be like, Wow, how did we get here from where we started? But what he does is he becomes... God burdens him. God gives him this crazy life path, and he becomes a believer in the process, and he becomes burdened for this system of orphans stuck in this system that is so broken and dependent on other broken systems that the only thing that he can do is set up a parallel system beside it, an alternative witness. And it costs him everything. It costs his family everything. But they start to build this parallel system next to the... And so what it does is the system indicts... The system that's founded on life and Christ's principles and his identity in Christ starts to indict this system in the slums.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

But it also invites these children, these other children, into a life in Christ. You got to watch the movie. It's crazy.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Okay, I will watch it.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
But there are other folks doing this same kind of high-cost, "other" cultural living. Now, I'm not saying everybody has to go out and be Charles Mully and lay down everything, but the principle is there, that when you live as the other cultural, life-producing, other political reality, instead of the one that's based on death and destruction, God is represented beautifully to the surrounding cultures. So anyways, go check it out. It's a great movie. These are just some of the ways that quell our cultural anxiety, and we need that because when we get anxious, we tense up and we can't move, we can't hear. God doesn't want us to be anxious. He wants us to be concerned, but he doesn't want us to be anxious. To be anxious about the culture and what's happening around us is to presume that there is no solution. He is the solution.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
What strikes me about what you're saying is it's nothing novel, it's nothing gimmicky. It is returning to the truths of Scripture and constantly reminding one another of whose story we're in, whose kingdom we belong to, and living accordingly. And one of the things that you said in your lecture that just really struck me is related to this. You said, "False narratives that plague American evangelicalism cannot bear the weight of the rise of anti-Christian hostility. When we place our hope in temporal solutions, though they may be good tools, they become unstable and destructive when we make them into idols."

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
I stand by that.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Yes, I do, too.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
I stand by that. Yeah. And anything that you make into an idol is going to destroy you. Idols are like, they're the crack of the world. They work on diminishing returns.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Exactly.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
And they never deliver what they promise.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Yes.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
And good things can become idols.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Yes.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Well, I told you I was going to—I wanted to talk a little bit about Twitter because I remember you from Twitter. One of the things that I remember most is that you used that platform to do everything we've

been talking about. You were a constant source of news about what was going on in the world with respect to the suffering church. You were also one who was calling people to pray and to intercede for brothers and sisters around the world. And less substantive than that, you and I are two-thirds of a trio of friends who got into the custom of tagging each other when we came across interesting stories, and especially videos of remarkable advancements in robotics, usually accompanied by some kind of dystopian humor and an occasional reference to *Black Mirror*.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
But I remember the sad day you announced that you were departing that platform, and I wanted to ask you, what led to that decision, and what have the results been for you?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
That's so funny because those things are all connected, and I don't think that you realized that. So, during the pandemic, I watched *The Social Dilemma*. I don't know if you've seen that.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
I have.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
I watched *The Social Dilemma*. Then I started watching—I watched *Coded Bias*—these are all documentaries about, but done by the people who have created social media platforms and who've created things like facial recognition. They're beginning to point out some of the negative effects that they're having on global culture—global online culture. At the same time, I was attending some security briefings about—the security briefings where people were saying things that we now know that are now public, that it's not our data that they're after, it's our psychology and our behavior. I just decided I didn't want to be feeding into that system anymore, but I also didn't want that system feeding me. Bless my little granddaughter's heart. I can watch her watching a show. Shows are so rapid pace now in terms of the images, how many images they show you per second. That's not even getting into the content, but I can just watch her watching. I see her little eyes just going back and forth, and I'm like, what is happening in your brain right now? And so the more I just started reading people like Tristan Harris, he's a social media ethicist who is instrumental in the development of a lot of the platforms that we know very well today.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
I started reading Jaron Lanier, I believe is his name, who gave you 10 reasons—this is the guy who developed social media, he's a futurist—he says 10 reasons why you should quit social media. These are probably people—so I just really started thinking about how maybe as much as we talk about how siloed we are as a culture and how bipolar we are now as a culture, and I mean the polarity of worldviews, how much we've been manipulated into that by the system and by bad actors who are exploiting the system. So I jumped ship.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Yes, you did. If people want to follow your work at the Edmiston Center, learn about the opportunities that are available to them, read more about the events that you're holding there, how can they do that? And would you also tell us about your writing at *Underground Rising* on Substack?

Dr. Karen A. Ellis  
Yeah, you can visit my Substack. I'd love to have you subscribe. I'm on a small writing hiatus right now. I've got a publishing project I'm finishing on a commentary on the Book of Esther. But once I finish that up, come see about us in May. I'm going to start rolling out more articles on thoughts on living under anti-Christian hostility, so you can check us out there at the Substack. But also—*Underground Rising* is its name—but we'd love to have you come and visit us at the Edmiston Center at RTS Atlanta. We do host those public lectures, and anybody can come. You just have to RSVP in advance. We'll have our last one this April. And after that, we'll take a break for the summer, and then

we'll ramp them back up in the fall. We've had a great series this last year. I've really been pleased with the folks who've come through. So you can check out all of those recorded lectures at [edmistoncenter.org](http://edmistoncenter.org) and also at Reformed Theological Seminary, they have an archive of all of our lectures. And just come see about us. Come visit us. Come sit in on a class. You are welcome.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

We have a Christian View of Human Rights. We have Theology and Mission of Prayer, which is a week-long intensive in the summertime. We're all over the city, engaging people in prayer and praying for our city, learning how to pray Kingdom prayers. We have our class, Principles of Leadership: Daniel, Nehemiah. We're going to add Esther to that once I finish this commentary, so—what's it like to be a minority and a superpower? We've got World Christianity and Perseverance, where we cover a lot of things that we've been talking about today. And yeah, all of those courses count towards any degree at RTS in the RTS system, so you can come and join us. We would love to have you.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Excellent. Well, Karen, I am so grateful for you and the ministry that you have, the service that you are doing, the local and the Universal Church, the heart that God has given you for his people and above all for him. And it has been a delight to finally get to actually talk to you. So thank you for your time and for your ministry.

Dr. Karen A. Ellis

I appreciate you, too, brother.