

Ben Best, co-host

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

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One doesn't have to look too hard or too far to recognize the church's shortcomings. But according to Brad Edwards, author of *The Reason for Church*, these obvious flaws aren't the main reason people dismiss the idea that church helps humans flourish. Edwards argues that both Christians and non-Christians have absorbed two powerful assumptions: anti-institutionalism and radical individualism. These beliefs make many view the church with cynicism and suspicion, preventing people from recognizing how its work and its witness can help address our deepest needs. In this episode, he joins Dr. Keith Plummer to discuss these cultural assumptions and how even committed Christians can mistake these ideas for genuine biblical faith. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Pastor Brad Edwards is the church planter of The Table Church in Lafayette, Colorado, where he resides with his wife, Hannah, and their two sons. He's a regular contributor to *Mere Orthodoxy* and *The Gospel Coalition*. He's one of the hosts of the *Post Everything* podcast. An item that didn't make it into his bio is that he was a seminary classmate of Cairn University's own Dr. Adam Porcella. Yes. This is his second time as a guest of *defragmenting*. So, Brad, welcome back, and thank you for daring to return.

Brad Edwards

Thank you. Is there any prize for being a repeat guest? I feel like you should create some tiers here that would be really fun.

Dr. Keith Plummer

There should be, and you should get something for both being a classmate at Covenant Seminary with Adam Porcella and being a returned guest.

Brad Edwards

I'm okay with that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

All right, we'll see what we can work out for you.

Brad Edwards

Perfect.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Last time we talked, it was almost a year ago, and toward the end I asked you what you were working on, and you said you had this book coming out. And that's what I wanted to talk with you about because it is out, and it's called *The Reason for Church: Why the Body of Christ Still Matters in an Age of Anxiety, Division and Radical Individualism*, published by Zondervan Reflective. This is something of an apologetic work, a unique apologetic work. Tell us a little bit about the name, the title of the book, which has some allusions to something that many people may be familiar with. But why this book?

Brad Edwards

Yeah. Well, let me answer your last question first. As we talked about last time, being in the place that we are for planting a church, it's called The Table in Boulder County, Colorado. One of the things that we realized very early on in planting here and have only had this confirmed and even strengthened and seen this grow stronger and more prevalent as time goes on, is that rather than many of our neighbors being opposed to the idea of talking about God or Jesus or the Bible or anything along those lines, they're actually pretty open to the idea that God exists and even maybe that they might need Jesus. What they're closed to is the idea that the church is beautiful or good for anyone. And so that dynamic meant that some books, and I talk about this in my book in the introduction, that *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller was a huge and vitally important book for the entire church, the

American church, but for myself as well, and was extremely helpful for me when I was a baby Christian. But I was shocked that when I gave that out and read that with some of my neighbors who are spiritually seeking or curious, they would just shrug and say, Hey, this is good, I guess, but I'm not asking any of these questions.

Brad Edwards

When I started asking more questions early on of like, Okay, so what are you wondering about? It had more to do with Christians than Christ. If you fast forward to the pandemic that just lit everything on fire, it didn't introduce new fuel. It just injected nitrous into an existing cultural trajectory that we've been on, a post-Christian trajectory, as Keller has written about, that has just made us more anti-institutional. What I know you've talked to Mike Graham and Jim Davis about with their book, *The Great Dechurching*. A lot of that dechurching is not so much an opposition to the church. It's actually just an opposition toward all institutions of which the church is one of them. Understanding that at the core, and that's the foundational assumption that everything in the book is built off of, is that this is a cultural moment where the post-Christian hardware has caught up to the post-Christian software of culture. And so, yes, the title is an allusion to Tim Keller's *The Reason for God*. I was beside myself when his son, Michael Keller, agreed to write the forward. I'm still on cloud nine from that. But the reason for that is, it is, like you said, it is a different apologetic.

Brad Edwards

It's a cultural apologetic for the institutional church because institutions are good, actually. Where it is similar to *The Reason for God* is where, I think what was so helpful about that book is that Tim Keller introduced the idea of what he called Defeater Beliefs. These cultural assumptions that we don't even realize because we're fish that have been swimming in water, and this water is the only water we've ever known, we don't realize how much of the things that prevent us from believing in God are these cultural assumptions that are incompatible with Christian belief, but we take them on the basis of faith, and we don't really have a reason to believe them. And so I take that idea and come up with five church defeaters that actually preclude participation in church instead of belief in God. Each of these on their own are powerful assumptions that make it very hard, even if you are connected to a church, to feel fully like you fully belong in a church. If you believe one or more of these, it's going to feel really weird and awkward and difficult and uncomfortable in a lot of ways, even more than it already will.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. In the introduction, you say that originally you thought that it was going to be most difficult to persuade people that God existed. "But you say by several orders of magnitude, it has been much harder to persuade anyone that church is good or beautiful." You include even professing Christians in that. You said that you didn't have a category for the church as an institution, let alone an awareness of my own anti-institutional bias. And as a result, you weren't equipped as you would have liked to have been for shepherding your church through what you only now understand as the beginning of an age defined by countless and often conflicting flavors of radical individualism. A lot of what you deal with is anti-institutionalism and the assumptions that many of us operate with where we are suspicious of institutions, maybe cynical about them, maybe outwardly rejecting of them. What are we talking about when we speak of institutions in general and why it is that there is this adverse reaction to them?

Brad Edwards

Part of the difficulty that we have here is when we talk about institutions, we don't talk about the context of institutions. The society itself is the collection or the sum of its institutions, each of which are the sum of its people. And so everywhere human beings go, they actually create and start institutions. One of the ways I try to illustrate this with our people is during our membership class, the first thing I do is a stream of consciousness word association exercise. I ask them, Hey, I want you to just blurt out the words that you use that come to mind when I say the word institution. Go. They say things like corruption or bureaucracy or establishment or exhausting or unhealthy, toxic, all these negative words. I'm like, Okay, great. I'm not going to argue with you on any of that. I want you do the same thing with the word family. They say things like nurture, care, connection, belonging, growth, maturity, all these positive words. I'm like, okay, you realize that a family is an institution, right? It is the combination, and I think Tara Isabella Burton does this really well. In her book, *Strange Rites*, she

describes how in religious identity is formed through institutions made up of four things: community, ritual, meaning, and purpose.

Brad Edwards

This is why the family sitting down for dinner most nights is actually really important because it's a ritual, it's a liturgy even, that's shaping and forming us to value one another and to prioritize that. Community is a little bit more clear, but the meaning and purpose of family, it can vary by culture in a lot of ways. You put all this together and you realize, wow, actually, we're using institution to describe only those institutions that we don't like or that we maybe have conflicted relationship with. But if you drill down to the core of that, that's why I focus on radical individualism, because what individualism does instead of receiving my identity from an institution, i. E. Family or a church, I want to achieve my dignity, value, and worth on my own, either by mustering it up inside me or accomplishing something in the world. The beauty, quote, unquote, of individualism is it's infinitely to any, every individual person. But thinking that's even possible assumes that what we choose for our path of individualism to achieve our dignity, value, and worth, we completely forget and ignore the reality that we are still being shaped and formed by the world around us.

Brad Edwards

It's a willful blindness that requires individualism to be operative in our lives. All of the symptoms that we see, talk about and make news headlines, the loneliness this epidemic, the mental health crisis, all of these things, polarized politics, all of these things are just symptoms, not of a variety of different crises, but of one meta crisis that is, are abandoning the very things that have shaped and formed us and been refuges in times of instability. If we don't participate in them, if we're not shaped and formed by them, well, you actually get exactly what we are seeing unfold in our world around us right now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So What Keller was doing in *The Reason for God* and what he was doing in *Making Sense of God* is, he looks at how the things that we are resorting to in the name of freedom, for example, are actually destructive to us. And that is something that you do throughout the book. You make a strong case, and I think you make a persuasive one, that the things that we are looking to for a sense of fulfillment are in actuality dehumanizing, fatiguing. You say that really it is in the context of the church that we are to be, I like this phrase, rehumanized. And you ask a question that is quite jarring. "What if we are all suffering from Stockholm syndrome with individualism, and that's why it's so hard to see or trust any true good or beautiful reasons for church?" That was a profound thought. For those, I'm sure many are familiar with Stockholm syndrome, but for those who might not be, why do you think that that is a good illustration for what you're getting at?

Brad Edwards

Yeah. So Stockholm syndrome is just this idea that if somebody is kidnapped or there's a bank robbery and you're one of the hostages or something, there is a psychological dynamic that captives start to identify with and sympathize with their captors. And so it's disorienting. And it's a genuine phenomenon that we have data to back up. And it's a thing, right? And so if we have Stockholm syndrome with individualism, it's because we don't realize or understand and haven't connected the dots to the effect and the cause of our alienation from ourselves, from each other and from God. Let's put it this way. I think one of the most... It's actually really validating that one of the earliest scenes and examples of the Fall in Scripture is in the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. I think you can make a pretty good argument that what Genesis 3 through 11 is looking at is the effects of the fall on our relationship with God, i. E. Adam and Eve with God. Then Cain and Abel, our relationships with one another individually. Then you extrapolate that through with creation, with the flood and Noah. Then in Genesis 11, this is our relationship to institutions.

Brad Edwards

Babel and this tower, it is hubris. That's what we normally diagnose the spiritual root of Babel's folly is hubris. But it's not because we thought we could build a high tower. Surely we have built taller towers than Babel in the 20th century. It's the idea that we could do anything to make a name for ourselves apart from God. That's the motivation Genesis 11 gives. It's that they want to make a name themselves, which is why in Genesis 12, God tells Abraham, go to the land that I will show you, and I

will make of you a great nation, a better Babel, a true and better Babel, and I will give you a great name. And the rest of Genesis is how Abraham and his descendants try to still make a name for themselves, even with that promise. I'd say individualism is basically a distillation of that original sin that that plays out across society.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. And so in the first part of the book, you look at these five defeater beliefs, these assumptions that are easily absorbed and that make us think about the idea of church as being something that is undesirable, oppressive, restrictive. And then in the second part, you look at some ways that the body of Christ is the refuge that we actually need and that we're searching for. So I wanted to spend a little bit of time looking at some of the defeater beliefs that you identify, because, again, as people are listening to this, it's important to understand you're not just saying that these are things that non-Christians are operating by. Yes, you have that in mind, but you're also saying, to a large extent, even we who are professing followers of Christ, particularly in America, have so taken this in that even though we might profess, yes, you should go to church, there might not be a real deep conviction that this is good, that this is life-giving. And so I just wanted to spend some time looking at some of them. And the first one that you start off with is what you call spiritual pragmatism, how seeker sensitivity and self-actualization reduce the church to a spiritual nonprofit.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And in that chapter, you define the Defeater as follows. "Because churches exist to facilitate our personal spiritual growth and help us fulfill our unique potential, following Jesus faithfully may require leaving or switching churches for one that better meets our spiritual needs." Now, what's wrong with a Christian evaluating a church on the basis of how well that church helps him or her grow spiritually?

Brad Edwards

Nothing except that that's not why God gave us the church. At the core of that, and we can double click on the root causes of this and where this comes from, but the way that it manifests, especially I'd say for millennial and some Gen X, but millennial Christians, especially, is they've grown up in a church knowing that, hey, you know what? Consumerism? It turns out that's really bad, and we shouldn't do consumerism with a church. It should be really about spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is good. Discipleship is good. Also, the fruit that we are expecting the church to produce in us is the byproduct of worship and mission. It is not the point of the church. The point of the church is to glorify God and be for the good of our neighbor, to love our neighbors ourselves. That's the greatest commandment in the second is like it Jesus said. If we are doing that, then we can entrust that God is going to be the one that produces that fruit. But if we're expecting pastors or programs or whatever else it is about this church that draws us there in the first place to produce that fruit directly and primarily really, then we're setting ourselves up for failure, because that's actually self-actualization with a Christian theme slapped on top of it.

Brad Edwards

But that's not what Jesus says when he says, Pick up your cross and follow me. Where's the empowerment and the fulfilled potential in that? It comes on the other side of dying to yourself, not investing in yourself. And so instead of edifying individual Christians, individual Christians would be edified if we edified the church. We worship God throughout. That's the fundamental switch. And that's really hard to get, again, fish and water. It's really hard to get fish and water to see because a lot of churches have contributed to this. I don't think I say this in the first chapter, but really what the first chapter is about is how the church... We spent a generation basically eroding the built-in spiritual immune system to individualism. We've created, we've discipled two or three generations of Christians who know and love Jesus but could take or leave his bride. And that's not good for us. That is actually counterproductive to the very thing that we are hoping and expecting a church to do for us.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You say we can't flourish without church, but it is the American church's complicity with individualism that discipled us into thinking we can live without her.

Brad Edwards

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And related to that, you say that there is an implicit marketplace logic that people are operating by as they are thinking about their involvement in church. Say something about that. What is this marketplace logic?

Brad Edwards

Yeah. I talk about this in the chapter where Bill Hybels, who was the primary architect of the Seeker Sensitive Movement, and what's the church in Chicago?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Willow Creek.

Brad Edwards

Willow Creek. Thank you. Yeah. He had famously a quote hanging above the door to his office in Willow Creek, and it was a Peter Drucker quote that was like, it said, What is our business and who is our customer? And what is our goal? This idea that the authority and the purpose of the church is determined by the customers' felt wants and needs as opposed to what God has, is an inversion of where the authority for the church's existence comes from. When that is the case, it may not be immediate because this is happening in the context of a generation of Christians who have been shaped and formed by non-marketplace logic, but by kingdom logic. It takes a little bit for that to go downstream. But again, even though millennials have maybe shed the consumerism as boomer cringe, we are still operating off of the assumption that the individual Christian is the primary purpose and accountability for a church's meaning and purpose.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. What can be so insidious about this is that at first, even that quotation that hung over Bill Hybels' door, it sounds somewhat close to the idea of service and servanthood. And so our guard is let down. Well, what's wrong with that? We're serving people. But you're saying, Well, no, but what you're doing is you are complying with an attitude of the individual as primary. And when you put it in the language of, which I think it becomes more apparent, the customer is always right. Well, then you see the problem with that view taken to Christian discipleship.

Brad Edwards

Well, and I want to affirm, too. Asking what your neighbors value and long for? What are their dreams and their nightmares? Those are good things. We should do that. The problem is, it's not the ends. The ends for which the seeker sensitive movement we're motivated by are good. We should want to reach out. We didn't want to tell them about Jesus. We want to involve them in the church. We want them to bump up against God in our midst. Absolutely. The problem is when you introduce marketplace logic as the means, it will eventually end up inevitably shape the ends. It won't even be about that. It will actually become about what the most number of people will put up with or not put up with and what they're looking for and expecting from a church. Again, that language of expecting is significant because I think it was probably in about 2014, somewhere between 2012 and 2015, that we hit a tipping point where that expectation became the norm. Where the typical visitor walking through the front doors of a church prior to that, they'd be expecting be shaped and formed by that church. Starting around then, the typical visitor comes in expecting the church to be shaped and formed by them. And that is across all generations. That's what we all have in common there.

Dr. Keith Plummer

When I was in pastoral ministry in the Chicagoland area, we were at a relatively small church in the shadow of Willow Creek and some other larger churches. And I remember people dipping into these other churches, coming back and saying, Well, why can't we do this? Why can't we do that? And at times, I was wondering, Where are you really rooted? Because there was, in listening to some people, it was like they were shopping. And it's like, Well, this is what the competitor is doing. Why can't we do this? It got rather frustrating at times.

Brad Edwards

If you're a church planter or been in a church plant, you know that one of the hardest chicken and egg tensions to manage and navigate in the first decade of a church's existence is youth ministry. On the one hand, you don't have the resources to create a youth ministry ex nihilo with everything that people want for their kids. In a lot of ways, it's good to expect those things. But you actually need a critical mass of families who are willing to strategically neglect their kids in order to have that critical mass and the resources to get that youth ministry off the ground. And fewer and fewer people are willing to do that. They're going to go to a different church because their kids are learning about Jesus. And again, I'm super sympathetic, but what are you teaching your kids by leaving for one church for another with a better experience? Because every time we detach from one church to reattach to another, it becomes easier to detach and harder to experience belonging. It takes longer to experience belonging every time we do that because that is something that we know and accept and would not object to being a reality in all of our other relationships. So why is the church different in that?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Related to that is the second chapter in which you refer to what you call the sacred self and intuitional spirituality. And you say that intuitional spirituality and therapy speak make us more fearful, fragile, and alone. And the Defeater belief that you have here reads as follows, "Because our fragile intuitions are only reliable source for spiritual truth, we become hyper vigilant of any potential harm and use therapeutic culture to keep ourselves safe at all costs." And as I read that, I was thinking about how it is over the years. I've been really, really alarmed, and this has been going on for some time. This isn't anything recent, but I think it just amps up. With Christians adopting the narrative of a pop, psychological, therapeutic view to life, which distances them further from the biblical story as being relevant for making sense of life, and distances them, as you bring out here, from one another, when self-protection becomes paramount and in the name of such things. And I know you are not discounting the legitimacy of these in certain cases. But when we're overusing words like toxicity, trauma, and so forth, how that just distances us from each other, and we see it as a prime directive, I've got to protect myself at all costs.

Dr. Keith Plummer

When you talk about intuitional spirituality, what is it that you have in mind?

Brad Edwards

I think this is why if I were I don't know what color the pill would be, but if I were church pill or institution pill at any point, it would be the combination of two really amazing books, both of which I recommend. One, *Strange Rites* by Tara Isabella Burton, and the second is *A Time to Build* by Yuval Levin. Tara Isabella Burton contrasted two fundamentally different ways of having one's religious or spiritual identity shaped and formed. The first is institutionalism. That is, to go back to the Robert Bellah definition of individualism, that it's an achieved dignity, value, and worth, not received. Institutionalism is receiving that dignity, value, and worth, that identity from something external. Intuition is the reliance on the intuition, one's intuition for spiritual guidance and authority. And so that makes anything that disturbs that authority an existential threat. Because if you give an inch on that, it'll take a mile because, well, if I can't trust my own intuition on these things, then what can I trust? And that fear is just amplified by that by individualism. Now, in terms of how does that play out and how does that just actually make us more fragile and lonely, Philip Reef wrote this in the '70s.

Brad Edwards

This quote sums it up really well. He said, "Religious man was born to be saved. Psychological man is born to be pleased. The difference was established long ago when I believe lost precedence to I feel. The caveat of the therapeutic. If the therapeutic is to win out, then surely the psychotherapist will be his secular spiritual guide." I think it is a good thing that we have recovered a place for therapy. But I think my generation, in particular, millennials, have very much swung the pendulum hard in the other direction, and we're experiencing some of those consequences. To make this really practical, one of the scenarios I explore in that chapter is, let's say you grew up with an abusive father. If that father, whether it was verbal and emotional or also physical, it is actually understandable, and you should expect that it will be difficult for you to understand God as a father in a way that doesn't feel scary.

But what Therapy Speak does and how it protects that intuitionism is it says that we can't expose ourselves to this threat. We have to self-protect ourselves because nobody else will, and only we know how to do that.

Brad Edwards

You know what? The way that trickles down into our spiritualities. You know what? If God is loving and he's a father, then he would probably be okay if we didn't relate to him as a Father. Maybe we just relate to him however feels good to us. But in doing so, We are, by definition, limiting our experience of God to however we feel. And that's a very shaky foundation. That is not an authority we want to. And what we don't realize, what we're doing in the midst of that, and this is the sad and tragic part, is what we're saying in that moment is that our brokenness and our hurt actually is more powerful than the God who created and wants to redeem that hurt. And we're letting those wounds determine who we're vulnerable with and how vulnerable we are. And we're cutting ourselves off from the very healing that we genuinely and should want and long for.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. So in the attempt to protect ourselves, we're actually cutting ourselves off from any real hope.

Brad Edwards

Yes. I mean, it's like that C.S. Lewis quote. He says that if we want to protect our heart, I'm paraphrasing here, but if we want to protect our heart from harm, we're going to lock it in a safe in a box and never let anything touch it. But in so doing, it becomes hard and brutal and completely isolated alone.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. Unredeemable, he says. Yeah. You have a quotation. You say, "When Christians are more deeply catechized by therapy speak, then, for example, the Westminster Confession or the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, it will reshape our perceptions and expectations of church and eventually God." And you just illustrated how that is so. I was curious. When I read this, did you read Mia Staub in *Christianity Today*? Last year sometime, she had an article called, "Be Quick to Hear, Slow to Therapy Speak."

Brad Edwards

I cited that article in that chapter. Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay.

Brad Edwards

It is outstanding.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It is.

Brad Edwards

Don't think I've come across a single article that so concisely and articulately summarizes everything that I'm trying to write about in that chapter. It's really well done.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes, I would commend it to listeners. Let's take a break here for a few messages, and then when we come back, I want to look at at least one of the other defeat or beliefs before we move into some of the content of the second part of the book.

Ben Best, co-host

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Dr. Keith Plummer

I am back speaking with Brad Edwards, author of *The Reason for Church: Why the Body of Christ Still Matters in an Age of Anxiety, Division and Radical Individualism*. And we are doing a brief survey, at least of some of the five defeater beliefs that he identifies that are actually problematic, though people resort to them thinking that we are somehow doing ourselves good. Man, I don't know where to go next because I want to talk about all of it. But let's look at one of the defeater beliefs that you identify is counterfeit institutions. And here you deal with social media. And this is something that we talked about the last time we got together. But you develop it further here, the defeater belief you state as this, digital platforms that... Well, actually, you say that this isn't so much a belief as this is somewhat distinct from the other defeaters, but you say, "Digital platforms that bypass gatekeepers, hijack incentives, and manipulate user behavior to extract and monetize our attention at the cost of deforming individuals and unraveling society." And you write, "Unlike the other four church Defeaters, a counterfeit institution isn't itself a belief, but a digital medium that shapes belief through social interaction and incentives."

Dr. Keith Plummer

We have certainly seen a whole lot of this. What does it work here in terms of why is social media a counterfeit institution?

Brad Edwards

Let's just take a look at the word counterfeit for a second. We're probably most familiar with the word in terms of a counterfeit piece of artwork or maybe a counterfeit currency. What a counterfeit is, it imitates a genuine article of something in order to extract value from the larger ecosystem. So a counterfeit is not a thing in and of itself so much as it has a parasitic relationship with the people and the ecosystem that it's interacting with. And so what social media does is it basically sucks the nourishment out of institutions by hijacking the incentives of an institution and subverting it for its own purpose. Example I use in there, it probably the most well known is when Barry Weiss resigned from the *New York Times* because it wasn't that the *New York Times* was using social media as an institution in the wrong way. It was primarily that the journalists using social media had their incentives reshaped and reformed and then bringing it into that institution. And so now the journalist isn't thinking about, how do I represent the *New York Times* well? Because they're giving me a platform with their brand and their name so that I can sit in the White House press briefing room because I work for the *New York Times*.

Brad Edwards

How do I be responsible to that trust? Instead, the *New York Times* become a platform for accumulating enough online followers such that you can be your own institution in a sense. And the *New York Times*, you're not thinking about how you'd be responsible to the *New York Times*, but to your brand instead. So And that makes the... First of all, you can just see and imagine how that would spray the fabric that makes the *New York Times* function well. But the same thing is happening within churches. And this is why, I mean, think about this way. How many times have you seen on Facebook or Twitter the following post, if your pastor or your church doesn't mention blank this Sunday, go find another church.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Brad Edwards

That is insane. It's unsustainable. I think I would say it is wicked and evil because it's actively subverting the flourishing that happens within churches, but it's using your church as a way to

promote someone else's individual platform and agenda. It scrambles the community, the ritual, meaning, and purpose within an institution. If leaders aren't aware of that and aren't actively inoculating whatever institution they lead, whether that's the church or anything else, if there aren't guardrails and safeguards, it will tear an institution apart.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. You say in that chapter, Pastors Moonlighting as Influencers and Ministry Leaders, Leaving Loud, Even if for Valid Reasons, or just a couple of examples of how attention-seeking incentives can rewire us to see even our church as a performative platform rather than a formative institution.

Brad Edwards

Yeah, absolutely.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I know that this is something that at The Table, you have given a lot of thought to. Since the last time we spoke and you were talking about what used to be used of various media in the life of the church and so forth, what are some of the things that you do at The Table to try to work against this?

Brad Edwards

I think it's got to start at the top. The other pastor at The Table, his name is Michael Phillips. He's pastor of spiritual formation. Just by temperament and preference and also character, he is not really at all on social. I think he uses Facebook marketplace. I think that's it. We have a standing awareness an invitation with each other. Hey, if we need to actually address something because it's exploding on social media, we talk about it. Or if, as has happened already in the course of promoting this book and everything else, there was one point this spring where he was like, Hey, Brad, I think what we're planning for this sermon series coming up, I think we're missing some really basic and essential stuff because I think your vision for this is good, but I don't know that this is what our people are dealing with. I was like, Wow, okay, I think you're right. I don't think I'd realize just how much where our people were have been in some ways, at least slightly distorted, especially in the starting point, by the more online presence I've had in the course of, since the book was released in the couple of months leading up to it.

Brad Edwards

So that's a really timely and since the book was written, example of how, okay, yeah, I actually need him to be an anchor for me and vice versa, so Because what I don't want the takeaway to be is you can't and shouldn't be online ever. I think that is possible, but I don't think it is responsible if you are an institutional leader, because you can't go into this blind. You have to be aware of what's going on. But that can't be your primary lens or filter either. It's hard. And by the way, it takes an institution in order to help you with that. It cannot be just you yourself doing it on your own. You do not have the filter for that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And there's something about the media, particularly in terms of social media, that is going to push us to think beyond the local, which is what you were describing. And so it can very easily lead us to have severe blind spots as Tee brought out in terms of, I don't know if this is what our people need, though this is what is trending in terms of social media.

Brad Edwards

I would argue that the digital sphere is not even beyond just social media. I think the digital sphere in general does this, and it's something we have got to be aware of. I mean, think about, there's It was an Axios article in 2003, I think, spring of 2003, that named Boulder, Colorado, as having the highest per capita percentage of remote workers of any city in the country. And it was something like 38% of halftime or more workers are 100% remote. What that means is the culture of Boulder is going to be shaped in a lot of ways by that digital layer of life now. And so it's not that those two are irrelevant, but if you're a pastor of a local church, is your sermon application about what the church needs or what your church needs? Because the digital sphere is going to draw our attention to what we think that the church needs, and that might still... It's going to overlap with your church because your

people are coming from other churches. It's not that it's irrelevant, but what about the particulars? What about the specifics of your people and the shepherding that you're engaged with and involved with?

Brad Edwards

And those relationships? When you start seeing like, wow, I'm noticing a trend of the marriages within our church who are struggling because of that therapy speak. Like, men and women both are starting to go down that road. So how do I address that? It's going to look differently than just addressing it as I did in that Sacred Self chapter. It's going to need to be different to do well.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I can't recall who it is, but I remember reading a pastor who said, I know how to best speak to my people on Sunday by conversing with them during the week.

Brad Edwards

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And what you're alerting us to is how it is that the digital sphere can really work against that.

Brad Edwards

Yes. No, 100%. And also in ways that are not terribly intuitive to us, it is actually that embodied connection to your local church and parishioners and congregants that makes you able to speak to the church as a whole. That's actually the right way. I mean, it's been talked about in multiple places how Tim Keller, even though he had achieved this celebrity status that, of course, he was not looking for, he was still prioritizing making sure he was meeting with non Christians in New York, and he was engaged in discipleship and shepherding in his church. It was never going to be the scale that no one person can do that with everybody. But I think that that is part of the reason why he didn't just write one or two books and then nothing else that was helpful. It's because he was, in an ongoing sense, continuing to pastor and making his local church his primary area of responsibility. If anything else came out of that, beautiful. But that's not the point. It's easy to get lured into that. It really is.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. The other two defeaters that you have, I would just tell people about them. You have a chapter called Uncivil Religions: How Making Enemies to Make Meaning Leaves Us Angry and Empty. And I'm sure you didn't have to search far and wide for illustrations for that because we see that all around us, this attempt to find meaning and even identity by who we are mutually against. And then related to that, the other defeater is you call Virtuous Victimhood: How Justifying Coercion and Weaponizing Compassion Incite Vicious Competition. I don't want to leave the second part the book untouched before we lose too much time, because there you're dealing with, and you've touched on this somewhat in the front already, but here you're looking at elements of the body of Christ and how it is that this really is what we are searching for, though looking in the wrong places. One of the chapters there, because it relates to this idea of embodiment that you were just talking about. In one of the chapters is called A Greenhouse for Exiles: How Church Integrates Life and Cultivates Faith. And the chapter opens with a quotation from John Stott from 1982 that I was floored by.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And he wrote this, "It is difficult to imagine the world in the year AD 2000. In such a dehumanized society, the fellowship of the local church will become increasingly important, whose members meet one another and talk and listen to one another in person rather than on screen. In the human context of mutual love, the speaking and hearing of the word of God is also likely to become more necessary for the preservation of our humanness, not less." 1982.

Brad Edwards

Yeah, 43 years ago.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Brad Edwards

I mean, did they even have TV back then?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes, I can vouch for that. But that's amazing.

Brad Edwards

Yeah. Part of the difficulty to imagine that, that must have been, even in hindsight, we don't have to imagine it, we're living in it. But it's actually difficult to follow the breadcrumbs back, because each of these technological advances that we've had, whether it's the information revolution and the internet in general to social media and everything that's come along in between. All of those things have been like another step along this road. And in a weird way, it's not as jarring as the atomic revolution. It wasn't a huge leap forward. It was these incremental steps that was like the analogy of the frogs being put in a pot of water and brought slowly to a boil, which apparently I don't think is actually true, but it's still a helpful illustration. But we don't even realize just how much we have been like cable TV, where everything's been unbundled, and now we have different subscriptions to different Netflix and Disney Plus and whatever else. Each of these dimensions of life that used to be bundled in together into one holistic life now require separate exertions of attention and effort to do. And it promises us, I know you've talked a lot about frictionless communication.

Brad Edwards

Slack, apps, messaging apps, those kinds of things. Okay, Yes, it's more convenient and more efficient and frictionless. But over the course of it, you're losing out on other things. You're losing out on the extended conversation you might have because you did this over coffee with a friend. You don't think when you're texting somebody about a work thing, Hey, how's your family doing? That requires you to actually go out of your way to ask. I think most pastors experience this the most acutely during lockdowns and during the pandemic. I remember the moment when I realized, Oh, my God. I didn't realize how much I'd relied on just seeing someone on Sunday morning to know how they're doing in ways you can't do over Zoom. And so when you're preaching and you notice that somebody is scowling during an application point, you're going to go follow up and be like, hey, how's it going, man? I was talking about workaholicism. I remember you saying that your wife was criticizing how many hours you're spending. How's that going for you? None of that happens naturally. You have to have a mile long task list just to keep up with it, and you can't keep it all in your brain.

Brad Edwards

So it doesn't deliver on the promise. Yes, it makes one thing much more efficient and easier at the expense of several other things.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You describe contemporary life as exile without the change in scenery. What do you mean by that?

Brad Edwards

That really goes to the digital layer over life that we were talking about earlier, and the way Matt, actually, I'm curious what you think about this thesis that I'm currently thinking about since writing the book is Tim Keller talked about how cities are the bleeding edge of culture and cultural catalysts and incubators. And that's a huge reason why he encouraged church planners to look to the cities and plant churches there because that's how we influence the culture as a whole. I don't think that's true anymore. I think that the bleeding edge of culture is Silicon Valley. And that one city, the cultural assumptions that the people who live there are forming and shaping are then informing the design of all of the apps that we're using. And now those become digital liturgies, to quote Samuel James, that then shape and form us because that's what we're using Monday through Saturday, right? Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In answer to your question, I do think that that thesis is worth teasing out because I think that there is much to that.

Brad Edwards

Well, I mean, when you think about traveling to a foreign country, especially one where you don't speak the language. First of all, if you don't speak the language, you've got to rely on rudimentary gesturing toward your mouth for food. How do you navigate that? And you know what? If I go to a different grocery store than the one that's next to my house, King Super, which is a Kroger brand, I'm going to go to where... If I go to a different grocery store, I'm going to go to where I think the dairy section is. And it turns out that's actually the meat and vegetables. And it's going to be confusing and disorienting. That's part of what the experience of an exile in place is, is that it's moving and shifting the ground underneath us in ways that we're not expecting. And because we're not expecting it, it's harder to actually adapt to it in ways that when you go on vacation, you know you're going to need to adapt. So it's okay. It doesn't cause you distress. But when that happens and you're not expecting it, it's really disorienting. And part of what a greenhouse institution or a spiritual greenhouse does for spirit for exiles, which I love as a theme in Scripture, is it provides a place of stability where you're rooted and anchored to something that transcends all of those cultural shifts.

Brad Edwards

And so that actually enables you to become more resilient and wise and mature in the ways that you engage in the world around you. It's like if you rappel off of a cliff without a rope, wouldn't recommend it. It's going to be painful. But the church provides an anchor for navigating those things, because when you come to church, you get your meaning, your purpose, your ritual, and your community. All it does is require you to show up on Sundays as the starting point, and you can build from there.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You say in that chapter, "We can't claim to be taking up our cross or following Christ if we aren't fully devoting ourselves to the bride he died to save, not with a straight face, anyway." I think someone could read that and think about the bride he came to save generically in terms of the universal body of Christ. But you're saying that this requires also a sense of loyalty and commitment to instantiations of the body of Christ, which means a local congregation.

Brad Edwards

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And you elsewhere speak about the necessity to redeem obligation and sacrifice. Could you say a word about that? Why? Why are those concepts in need of being redeemed by people in the church?

Brad Edwards

Man, well, first of all, it's biblical, right? In Ephesians, when Paul is talking about the relationship between grace and faith. By grace, you have been saved through faith, right? And when he describes the church as God's household, we don't realize that part of what Paul is doing when he's writing into a Greco-Roman context is he's actually relying on categories and language familiar to them because they live in a patronage system. What I mean by that is there are interrelated relationships that are codependent in healthy and good ways. Interdependent, that's a better word, on one another, not just socially, but also economically. And there was no way to survive outside of that patronage relationship and arrangement. And guess what they call the gifts that a patron gives to the people who are welcomed into his patronage system, his household is what they call it. It's *kairos*. It's a gift. It's grace. And guess what is expected of that relationship from the person, from the client, is the technical term, in exchange for that gift? It's *pistis*, faith, loyalty. And so part of what is... If we think that we can do that with the universal church without a particular church, it's only for two reasons.

Brad Edwards

Number one, economically speaking, we actually can do that and not starve. That's actually a testament to how different the world is that we live in. But it's also part of one of the symptoms of that digital layer is we're all becoming digital gnostics that's undervaluing people in place and the material at the expense of the digital and therefore also spiritual. It's functioning as a counterfeit spirituality in that sense. And so that reciprocal obligation that happens between *kairos* and *pistis*,

that is an engine for spiritual formation. That's what Paul is appealing to the church in emphasis to, because those are primarily Gentile Christians who don't have an understanding of the Old Testament covenants. But that's the next closest paradigm that Paul is using there to explain why connection to a local church is possible. And by the way, that also, man, when we read in Acts, especially about how, it was in Ephesus, when Paul was kicked out of the city because he was not worshiping the gods was actually threatening the local economy, that's partially because the church was drawing enough people out of the existing patronage systems into the church, and it was destabilizing the economics, the system, and the foundation for that that economy, that local economy.

Brad Edwards

And so it wasn't just their individual personal beliefs that was threatening. It was also the way in which it was reordering their entire economic system just by virtue of being part of a church. Looking to that, Christ as our head, when Paul is using head, it's the same word used for patron. He's our patron. But instead of an extraction model, it's a grace model, and it's a generosity based.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, you say "We don't just belong to God as one of his people, we also belong to God's people because that's where God has obligated himself to be." You continue and say "It is individualism, not Scripture, that says we can belong to God without being obligated as members of his household."

Brad Edwards

Yeah. I mean, the idea that we could read, when Paul uses the language of in Christ, the idea that that could be spiritual and not also materially social and geographic, I can't even imagine Paul having a category for that. That is something that is part of our lens for reading Scripture. To be in Christ, spiritually and not in Christ in his church, in his body, local body, not the church, there is no way in scripture where that is compatible, that idea. Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But it does seem so much more plausible for us because we are so much more accustomed to existing in scare quotes apart from place and interacting apart from place. In the Epilogue, you say something, you call the Epilogue "a love letter to the local church," and you say something about your own preaching. You say, "My preaching has changed, too. I still appeal to areas of agreement with secular culture, but I now spend even more time highlighting the differences that make secularism so inhumane and unsatisfying." I think as we talk about engaging non Christians, there is this tension that we feel at times, and I think sometimes we feel a pressure to so focus on the areas of overlap because we want to show we're really saying the same thing in some ways. But what is it about what you have experienced in terms of interacting with people where you think that this need to highlight the differences that make secularism so, as you say, inhumane and unsatisfying? Why is this so important for Christians to do?

Brad Edwards

Many, many reasons. As you're describing that, it brought to mind a conversation I had with a neighbor, I think sometime in the last year. The guy is... He's awesome. I love him to death. He struggled to land work after he was let go at the tail end of the pandemic and his industry getting hammered. One night, I was having him over for cigars and sipping on some whiskey. He was just opening up and sharing how when the economic bottom of his world fell out, it really exposed all these other areas in his marriage and his family, and as well as even just personally for him, who am I? What is my value and worth if I can't even get a job? It was very much causing an existential crisis. I brought up and talked about Jesus in the gospel and how there's an invitation here to be loved in ways that are actually not shirking and glossing over all of those failures and deficiencies and ways you may have contributed to that yourself. But you can be defined by something more than what you do Monday through Friday. That actually carries you and frees you to see where you can own things in your marriage.

Brad Edwards

At that point in the conversation, he was like, That's cool. Yeah, I'm glad that works for you. I was like, Well, wait, no, this is something that's objectively true. It doesn't just work for me. It's worked for a

whole lot of people throughout history and in far more dire straits than either you or I have ever been in. It was very much this I believe, and I was able to help him say this, that he said, Whatever I believe will work for me, not just, If it works for me, I'll believe it. And that is an inversion. That's the intuitionism right there. But I don't think I could have even helped him see that or had the rest of the conversation where I was like, Okay, if what you believe will work for you, why are you so unhappy? That's the point where it's like, Okay, well, here's a crazy idea, man. And you've got this invitation doesn't expire. But if you get to the point where you're like, I We just need to be around other people who are actually, it's something's working for them with no expectation that you have to sip the Kool-Aid or do anything else, that's why we're here.

Brad Edwards

You are welcome anytime. I know he's like, I believe you when you say that. I'm like, great. I'm going to plant, maybe somebody else will water, but God's going to give the growth. The rest of that conviction and that work is on God. But he knows, at least now, that there is a community that isn't perfect. It's broken, but it's also beloved. And that can make a huge difference. Now, in terms of why does that matter going forward? Man, if we've learned anything over the last few years, it's that a lot of the things that we thought we could trust to continue and be stable in society, economically, politically, socially, technologically, otherwise, we don't even have to go down the AI rabbit hole. But I don't think I'm alone in saying that we're on the front edge of some significant societal disruption and reordering, even if it's a conservative prediction of how AI is going to affect us. If the church isn't anchored in Christ, and I mean that in every way we've been talking about, it's going to be really hard to hold out a hand and pull somebody up from drowning if we're not already there.

Brad Edwards

I think that this has potential to be powerful. Okay, maybe not if we are still in the economic order that we enjoyed in the '90s. But man, our neighbors are going to be... We're all going to be hurting, but we're not going to be wondering whether we have dignity, value, and worth, at least. That is a gift that only God can give that peace.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In your sixth chapter, called *The People Named Glory*, you talk about this idea of receiving as opposed to achieving. And you say, "Christianity is utterly unique among all the world's religions and belief systems in that we believe God multiplies his glory by bestowing it. God is the original uncreated gift giver. Whether we give him credit or not, we are awestruck by natural beauty because it testifies to the existence of one who both created a beautiful cosmos and designed our hearts to apprehend its beauty. Giving gifts is who he is, and receiving them is who he made us to be."

Dr. Keith Plummer

And relating that to your recurring theme that part of what is so bankrupt about individualism is it is going against the grain of what it is that we were created to be by saying, identity and meaning are things that I can create, that I can achieve, as opposed to humbly receiving them. Recently, I spoke with a mutual friend, Ian Harber. Yes. And we were talking about *Walking Through Deconstruction*. And I said to him, One of the things that just astounded me about what you wrote was that you are someone who has known some really serious church hurt in addition to other pain.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But I was just so overtaken by how convinced he is that it's only in the context of the church that real healing is going to be realized. Say something as we draw to a close. What about the person who has really, in the context of the church, experienced real hurt? They hear what you're saying in this book, and there may be an inkling of hope that there's something to what you're saying, but there is real dread about the institution of the church. What is it that you would hope he or she would derive from what it is that you have put together in *The Reason for Church*?

Brad Edwards

So part of the way I frame part one is in saying that if institutionalism, or sorry, if individualism is the desire to make a name for ourselves, a la Genesis 11, then each of these defeaters are like the brick and mortar to building that tower, to building to building up and achieving that name for ourselves.

Part of the whole reason why I think Keller's defeater beliefs are so helpful here in his framework is because what he did with *Reason for God*, what I tried to do was to show how on their own merits without even bringing in the church, these don't satisfy. We're not more happy. You can see this quantitatively with the data that's coming out, with the many non Christians who are saying that actually, Derek Thompson, Staff writer at *The Atlantic* had an amazing article called "The True Cost of the Church Going Bust." And he talks about how as an agnostic, left of center, Jewish agnostic, he said, Maybe everything that was going on right now is actually because we've abandoned church. When non Christians are saying that, you know that the trajectory we're on is not sustainable. And so that's the first thing.

Brad Edwards

It's not that the church is better than those things. It's that none of those things actually can do it at all. And so if that's the case, then we've just leveled the playing field in terms of being honest about and seeing clearly our current state and where we are in the world we're living in. But secondly, I'm putting a whole lot of trust in Jesus on this one, right? Because if he has said in the great commission, "Behold, all authority has been given to me. Go, therefore, and baptize the nations in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and behold, I'm with you until the end of the age." That combination of authority and then presence, that's the name of God. And you're baptized in the name of the Trinity. A name, especially divine name in the Old Testament, is where your source of authority and presence comes from. So when Jesus is saying that, he's saying that if you want to experience the glory of God, if you want to refract that glory across the face of the Earth, then there is no other place than in the church. Our hope is not in the church, figuring out how to structure itself and embrace an institutional, pro-institutional vision.

Brad Edwards

It's in Christ. I think I hope that he's going to do it. Now, that doesn't mean we just go in blindly. If you have trust issues with the church, I mean, I get it. For some reason, we didn't set out for The Table to be a refuge for people who've experienced that, but that's what God's done, and I'm grateful for it because it's given all of us a deep appreciation for the church. So you don't have to jump in with both feet and just be blind about it. But my experience is those who've had church hurt, actually understand just how badly they need the church because they have sought what the church offers elsewhere and found it lacking. And so, yeah, I would say that's so valid. And that's why I'm not saying, We just need to read church. No, the church has got to stop with our complicity with individualism because that's the root of the church hurt. Whether that's celebrity culture and pastors who use their church as a platform in ways that aren't serving and responsible to that institution. Yeah, that's actually individualism. That's not a biblical understanding of the church. Not from my reading of Scripture.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, Brad, it has been a real joy to talk with you about this. I am very appreciative of the work. I would encourage people to pick it up. Each chapter has reflection questions that could be used either in a group or for one's own reading. But given the subject matter, probably a group would be better.

Brad Edwards

That'd be great, yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But thank you so much for putting this to paper and for talking with us today. The book, again, is called *The Reason for Church: Why the Body of Christ Still Matters in an Age of Anxiety, Division and Radical Individualism* by Pastor Brad Edwards. And thanks again, brother. It was everything I was looking forward to and more. Thank you again for your time.

Brad Edwards

You're very welcome, and thank you anytime. I love our conversations.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Me too.

Ben Best, co-host

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