Joanna Meyer:

You're listening to the Faith and Work Podcast where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work.

Hi, and welcome to the Faith and Work podcast. I'm your host, Joanna Meyer and Brian Gray, my colleague at Denver Institute is joining us as our co-host today. Hi, Brian.

Brian Gray:

Hey Joe. How are you doing?

Joanna Meyer:

Good. We have a rainy spring day here in Colorado as we're recording. And Brian, one thing I'm wondering about is how closely you're watching the news these days. Are you following the run up to the election cycle?

Brian Gray:

Let's see. How closely am I attempting to be aware and not cynical or fearful is maybe the way I'd phrase that question. I mean, it feels like I'm as much watching how people are responding to a political moment and seeing a lot of discomfort for people with what is going to happen, in the markets, when my candidate loses everything else. There's a lot of interesting future fear happening out there. So I'm paying a little less attention now that it seems as if we're going to have the same two candidates politically that we've had in the past. I'm paying a little more attention maybe locally to what's happening at our state level here in Colorado and some of the things. A little bit more dark cloud stormy feel on the national front. So I don't necessarily feel that, but I'm watching and hearing it from people.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, it's so interesting. I just sense a real weariness in my circle of friends this year. Often with elections you'll have strong opinions either way. We've seen that in the last eight years or so, but it just seems like people are tired of the contentiousness of the last election cycle. And like you alluded to, maybe people are less than

enthused about this year's candidates, but we remain concerned about the health of our communities and our civic lives speak into that.

And as listeners to this podcast may remember, we've had previous conversations with politicians and pundits to better understand how faith speaks into our roles as neighbors and citizens. And this election cycle, we're taking a little more meta approach. We're looking more deeply to understand how our spiritual and intellectual lives shape our perspective about faith and public life and political engagement. If you haven't heard our interview with Michael Ware from the Center for Christianity and Public Life, don't miss it. That episode aired on April 5th, and we talked about the spiritual formation that helps us engage the political process.

And today we're also taking that meta approach. We're talking to scholar and thought leader Karen Swallow Prior, whose recent book on evangelical imagination invites us to consider the cultural influences that shape our understanding of the role that faith plays in public life. It's a fascinating conversation. Brian, before you introduce us to Karen, I would love to know what are you excited to ask Karen about in this interview?

Brian Gray:

Yeah, one of the things that I'd say in the last decade of my life and really overlapping with time for me and work at Denver Institute, I've started to realize how much I'm shaped by invisible forces that I may not be aware of all the time, and she'll use the word and we'll ask her a little bit to define some of our imaginations. But if I'm not paying attention to advertising on TV, it's forming and shaping my vision of what a good life is all the time. And so I'm really excited for people just to pause and think together with Karen, what are the ways our imaginations are being shaped for us in our world, at our workplace, in our understanding of what a quote-unquote ideal family is or the American dream? So those things excite me quite a bit.

Let me start with a quick introduction of Karen. Karen Swallow Prior is a reader, writer, and professor. She's the author of the Evangelical Imagination, How Stories, Images and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis. We'll focus a lot on that work today. One of my favorite book titles slash needs to be all of our life philosophies on reading well, Finding The Good Life Through Great Books is actually on my book reading list. Karen hasn't made it out of the pile. It's a really respectable pile you're in though over there. And then Joanna, Fierce Convictions, the Extraordinary Life of Hannah Moore. Karen has a monthly column with Religion News Service and is a contributing editor for Comment. We are big fans of Comment around here, and her writing has appeared in

Christianity Today, the New York Times, The Atlantic, and The Washington Post. Karen, thanks so much for joining us and welcome today.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Thank you for having me.

Brian Gray:

Karen. As we've paid attention to your professional journey through writing, it's clear that God has shaped you for, I think, a faithful and prophetic voice towards a public moment and for your work. Just curious how your reading, writing, and teaching have come to be a part of your sense of vocation? What was that journey for you? Tell us just a bit about your professional life.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yeah. I mean, on my bio, I placed reader first intentionally because I was a reader first. I was the proverbial child with her nose always in a book, and I'm still that. And so I grew up reading and loving books and came to major in English and had no intention to teach, but wanted to continue studying English, so went into a PhD program as one does. And there I sort of discovered my love of teaching, but teaching literature in particular. And so I spent 25 years teaching literature in universities and colleges and a seminary and writing eventually in a public space. And now that's what I'm doing entirely is writing and speaking and hopefully through that still teaching.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, I'd say you are. I learn a lot from all of the opportunities I have to listen and read what you're producing. So we wanted to talk to you specifically, Karen, because in your recent work, you're inviting readers to understand the cultural influences that shape the way that they perceive their faith in the world. But before we can even dig into that conversation, it would be helpful to define a few of the terms that we'll be using in this conversation. And I'd like to know more about imagination. Often when I think of imagination, I think of a self-generated idea, the kind of fanciful imaginings that I had as a child. And you give a very broader, deeper definition of imagination. I'm wondering if you could tell us what are you talking about and can you give us a modern example of how we would see a cultural imagination?

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yeah. So yeah, the book title is The Evangelical Imagination. And most people who maybe know a little bit about either one of those things might think it's a book about C.S Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. And it's really not that, although they get brief mentions. It is really about, because I am an evangelical, and so I care about evangelicalism past and present and future. But it's a book that's really about the social imaginary of evangelicals in particular, but we all exist in social imaginaries. So I do in the book talk about the imagination that you just mentioned, the imagination we all have that we conjure up pictures or create things in our minds and picture things, and that is an important component of the imagination. And there's a long history of the way philosophers think about the imagination, whether it's imitative or generative, whether it's dangerous or transgressive or all of these things.

That's a rich history. But through that, we tend to just think of imagination as just being a sort of individual isolated thing, something we all possess and we have a healthy one or an unhealthy one or a big one or a small one. But we actually also have this cultural kind of imagination that Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, calls a social imaginary. And so a social imaginary is basically, as Taylor defines it, a pool of stories, myths, legends, expectations, visions for the good life that we inherit from our communities. And we exist in multiple communities at any one time, so it's not like we have just one social imaginary. But we inherit these images, stories, and expectations. And what Taylor says about them that I think is really important is he says that precognitive. So that means we're not really necessarily thinking that we have them, they're just there. We inherit them and they're forming our expectations and directing our attention and shaping our individual imaginations as well. And so that's really what I'm talking about in the book is our social imaginaries.

Brian Gray:

There was a really helpful metaphor. Well, the book is loaded with metaphors both analyzing and using, but there's a helpful metaphor to capture that idea right in the introduction, just the notion of a house, a home, a building, anyone is listening from a place where there's going to be structure, there's going to be rafters. If you're in a home, there's going to be floor support, going to be foundation. They're invisible to you because they're covered by other aesthetic sensibilities like paint and wallpaper, drywall, and you never notice unless all of a sudden they go wrong. There's a creaking floorboard, there's a wall that's tilting. So it feels like that some of these things are the scaffolding of ... the idea is the scaffolding of much of our life, but we don't pay attention to

it or are particularly aware of it oftentimes. So I just thought that was a really helpful metaphor to be thinking in those terms.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yeah. I don't know that I originated it, but it is very helpful. It is a scaffolding, and there are lots of different fields and disciplines that talk about this in different ways, even in terms of language, our conceptual structures. But again, the point is that they're there under the surface and we don't really notice them until something goes wrong.

Joanna Meyer:

One of the reasons why I wanted to talk with you in the series about faith and public life is that this political season, so much of our social imaginary as Christians here in the U.S has been shaped by this understanding of America having a deep Christian history. That's part of our imagination, and it's for each individual to tease out and figure out to what degree is that true, to what degree is that reflective of their own life. But to be thoughtful about how we engage our public lives means acknowledging some of those forces that are at work under the surface. So your perfect voice to explore this with.

Brian Gray:

You've mentioned two phrases and right out of the title of your book, which is an evangelical imagination. And so as a lot of people listen to that, that can be a familiar word, it could be a charged word, an Inigo Montoya. I do not think that means what you think it means. And so I'm curious, are we thinking evangelical theologically? Are we thinking that about subculturally? Do you understand that as a social movement? Why don't you help us just frame that a bit so readers know what we're referring to?

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yeah, no, that's really important because the word evangelical right around, I don't know, 2016 I'd say got to be a word that's loaded with all kinds of connotations and implications and contestation. So people don't necessarily agree on what it is or what it means, and it's used in different ways. So I do this in the book. I set out the terms that I'm using, and really I'm talking about a movement that is 300 years old that began in England

with the evangelical revival, with the Wesley's and Whitfield and in America with the first of several great awakenings. And so that's a long movement that is called evangelical.

And there's a definition that's given by a church historian called David Bebbington where he identifies the four main characteristics of it. Now, most evangelicals maybe don't know about the Bebbington Quadrilateral nor do the pollsters who are asking the questions. And so it is a contested term, but that's the movement I'm defining and talking about. And it is the one, whether we realize it or not, that has formed the social imaginary of evangelicals today. And so I'm trying to unpack some of how we got where we are, why we are the way we are today, and this cultural political moment as evangelicals, which of course does I think matter to the rest of the country and the world because evangelicals are dominating so many of the headlines and elections, for better or worse.

Joanna Meyer:

Well, what's so funny about the Bebbington Quadrilateral, oh man, that's such a hard word this early in the morning, but I think after the last election as our understanding of what it meant to be an evangelical started to splinter, a lot of people started saying, "Well, how do I define what it means to be an evangelical? Give me something." And so those four kind of concepts became a bit of a litmus test. Remind us, what are the four parts of the Quadrilateral that'll help us?

Karen Swallow Prior:

Sure, sure. And the quadrilateral, which is-

Joanna Meyer:

Thank you.

Karen Swallow Prior:

... a crazy word. So Bebbington looked ... Again, looking back at the history of the movement from the 18th and through the 19th and 20th centuries, it really peaked in the 19th century in England anyway, and in America. Again, Brian asked is this is a theological definition. It really isn't. And it hasn't been a political one until recently because evangelicalism sort of transcended denominations and countries and so forth. But it's really four emphases, a renewed emphasis on the role of conversion in the believer's life, a renewed emphasis on the

understanding of the Bible as an authority in the believer's life, and an emphasis on Christ's crucifixion for salvation and an emphasis on activism, which in the early years of the evangelical movement really founded the modern missions movement. And so-

Joanna Meyer:

My grandparents [inaudible 00:14:28]-

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yes, yeah. Evangelicals are still, I would say, activists today, even whether it's left or right, progressive, conservative, that's still sort of in our DNA, and that may not be something that we realize that is part of what we inherited.

Brian Gray:

What's really helpful about that, even as you lay those out, is because activism has, I think in some ways, been narrowed to or assumed to be just a proclamation evangelism in some circles. But this is what gave rise to the abolition movement. These are the clapping circles. There's a rich history of the intersection of a robust belief in the gospel and its social implications, both, not either or. We proclaim the gospel assumed stereotypical right. We enact the gospel through justice assumed stereotypical left. And this splitting of these is just not in the roots of the movement. It's a strange phenomenon.

Joanna Meyer:

I think it's modern day faith and work, too, Brian. This vision that our work can be a place of renewing influence in the world is reflective of activism. It's just a little broader vision of it. Don't get us pounding the table on faith and work, Karen.

Karen Swallow Prior:

No, pound away. I mean, we mentioned earlier my book on Hannah Moore, the 19th century abolitionist, reformer, and poet. And this is actually, it was my research into her as a PhD student, I wrote my dissertation on her and then later wrote the trade book. But that's how I discovered my own heritage and roots as an evangelical is by studying the 19th century abolitionists who cared about the gospel, but they also cared about

social justice and reform and their work across a broad range of issues and spheres. They are inspiring, and I recommend anyone go back and study those members of the [inaudible 00:16:24] circle.

Joanna Meyer:

And so helpful to see it as a global movement too, that it's not a particular moment in American history, but that it stretches beyond the boundaries of the country and its history is much deeper and richer than we may often associate it with.

Brian Gray:

Karen, I know your discipline is English and literature, and yet a bit in your book you bring, and even from what you're describing in your dissertation, bring a bit of a historical angle to help us understand this moment. So can you play professor mode with us for a moment? There's an overlap between a few movements, evangelicalism and here really it's roots in Britain or kind of the Victorian England, American independence in our founding, and the enlightenment. Talk about the relationship between the three of these, and I'm wondering if this could help people understand a little bit what it feels like then today to be an evangelical. Give us those roots and some of the history of those together.

Karen Swallow Prior:

So sort of a short way for me to characterize and define evangelicalism within broader church history and human history is to understand evangelicalism as a product of the enlightenment. And when I say that, I really could say a lot, so I'm trying to be succinct here. But the enlightenment gave rise to an emphasis on the individual, like the importance of the individual scientifically, phenomenologically, socially, and politically. And evangelicalism does the same thing. It takes that emphasis on the individual, but also adds the theological and spiritual component, thus the emphasis on individual conversion. In other words, the evangelicals were saying, especially within the context of England where there was a state church that just because you were born into a state church and baptized into a state church that does not make you a Christian, you must be born again. And so that's what the evangelicals were emphasizing in that context.

But emphasizing the importance of the individual and the individual soul led to an emphasis also on the possibility of advancement, the possibility of improvement, the Protestant work ethic, which goes back farther. But again, evangelicals emphasize that because if you become converted, if you become born again, then you

are a new person and possibilities become increasingly open to you. And of course, those possibilities were also open because the enlightenment led also to the industrial revolution, which led to the possibility of improving life materially and economically. And so you really can't separate out the emphases and beliefs of evangelicals beginning in the 18th century from the things that were happening as a result of the enlightenment and the emphasis on reason and science and work. So yeah, I hope I hit on everything you wanted me to there.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. 1776 is a decisive date, not only in American history, but also in these social movements as well. How do you see American identity flowing out of some of those movements?

Karen Swallow Prior:

Right. So I mean, of course we all know the story in our imaginations of how some of the first settlers in America from Europe came here out of a sense of religious persecution and came here with religious motivation. And that's before we declared ourselves as independent from Great Britain. And so in 1776, as we made that Declaration of Independence, it was rooted in religious conviction, yes, but it was also rooted in enlightenment views, the idea of freedom and liberty. And I think one of the points I make in the book is ironically on the Ngram viewer, which tracks all of the occurrences of words and phrases in printed material and Google's database, imagination-

Joanna Meyer:

[inaudible 00:20:34].

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yeah, I love that. Play with that if you want. But imagination also began to peak at that time because the works of imagination are the works of human freedom and liberty and potential. And so reason and imagination really laid the groundwork for the birth of America, I think.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, that was fascinating that you described that both reason, which I think of direct focus thinking and imagination, which is broad and more colorful and free actually go hand in hand in this journey, which is

beautiful. So one of the things I wanted to know a little bit more about is that, as you describe the evangelical imagination, it has overlap with conversations about faith and work. It flows through a renewed imagination for work, shall we say. And I'm wondering if you would elaborate on that a little bit. How has the evangelical imagination, how does it speak into the way that we spend our days?

Karen Swallow Prior:

Again, this is something that ... I mean, many thinkers and writers talk about this, and I cite a number in my book, but I do draw heavily from Charles Taylor because he lays out this amazing and thick history in his famous book, A Secular Age, where he talks about the connection between the Protestant Reformation, which, of course, precedes the evangelicalism, but it sort of begins there, and the spirit of reform in general, that idea of reform and civilization that comes from, again, an emphasis on the individual that evangelicals also picked up. And so that phrase that we often use, the Protestant work ethic or the Puritan work ethic is one that is deeply embedded in evangelicalism through the Puritan strain, through the Protestant strain. And again, because evangelicalism arose in the context of the industrial revolution, there is this idea deeply embedded within evangelicalism of the work ethic and the sort of picking yourself up by your own bootstraps and improving yourself.

And again, I say I grew up with a very strong work ethic. I still have that. It's very important to me and I think it's very valuable, but it can without our realizing it cause us to ignore or dismiss or be blind to the way our communities and our families provide the material of the bootstraps that we pull ourselves up with. And so we emphasize work, we emphasize the fruit of our labor, we emphasize that in our culture and in our lives and in our social imaginaries, but it can cause us to be hyper-focused on the individual and individual responsibility and not on the role that community plays broadly, but especially in faith communities, in our formation, and in our support, and in helping others to work well and to reap the fruits not only for themselves, but for our communities.

Brian Gray:

You are hearkening to this beautiful idea from Dr. King, obviously, to not tell a person to pull themselves up by their bootstraps when they've got no boots. So there's a sense in which there's part of the myth of the self-made man self-made person in this case, self-made person is not a true concept. It has to have that, Jamie Smith says no when instead of nowhere, no when Christianity. It has to have no history behind it and no real

sense of anything but the present moment and who I am to tease on. And so it's just really helpful to pull that forward because you mentioned the types of invisible things that are forming us. Many people, they might be commuting into work right now, are going into a workplace which has it's ... it's religious. It has its beliefs, it has things that are worshiped. It's efficiency, it's productivity, it's hitting and exceeding a number so that a person has a certain expression of their view of the good life. All of those things are happening. And so to stop and just ask the questions, where does some of these things come from? Are they true? How are they forming and shaping me? I think you're a really helpful voice with others, Charles [inaudible 00:25:25], for exposing that for us.

Joanna Meyer:

And for our listeners, just to think about that of what are some of the underlying assumptions that have shaped the way that we go about our daily life? Even the idea of, like Brian, you said, what is our vision of the good life or the idea of being a self-made person can be really pernicious. One of the beautiful things I think about coming to America is that there are greater opportunities at times for people, and yet we assume that opportunities available for everyone and that everyone can have their dreams come true when they come to the U.S. And we don't have a willingness to look at some of the underlying structures or systems that make that difficult. And so some of those imaginations, those underlying cultural messages and assumptions can be powerful and distorting if we're not aware of where they come from. So I'm so grateful for the way that you introduce us and open our eyes to the ways that we're shaped by that, Karen. It's very powerful.

Luke:

Hey, I'm Luke.

Samantha:

And I'm Samantha.

Luke:

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Samantha:

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Karen Swallow Prior:

If we can pause for a minute and think about the American dream as a metaphor. I think it's really helpful to understand everything that we're talking about. The American dream is a perfect example of kind of a story or a vision or an expectation that we might not articulate. We might not realize that it's there lurking beneath the surface, and we may not even know what the definition is. But because it is there, it pulls us toward hopes and desires and optimism, whether we're born in this country or we come to this country, but also can lead to unnecessary senses of disappointment and failure and angst.

I think of that with the Millennials and Gen Z, who have been held up to the ideals of the American dream, whether that is symbolized by home ownership or 2.1 kids and a white picket fence or whatever it might be. They have this vision. Their parents have this vision, this expectation and the social and economic and political realities that have made those tangible parts of the dream almost inaccessible for them have led to lots of tension and angst and sense of failure that isn't necessary, and it's not necessarily true. But unless we know that there's a metaphor or a vision behind it kind of driving it and question how complete that vision of the American dream is and how truthful it is, then we can't really figure out what's gone wrong and how it can go right.

Joanna Meyer:

And that plays out in the choices that we make in the election booth. Certain generations may fight to preserve a way of life that worked for them when a younger generation may say, "This isn't even available to us anymore." So I'm so glad you mentioned that.

Brian Gray:

I suggest we should deeply offend our friends on the far left and far right with the discussion about empire. Who's ready to [inaudible 00:29:12]? I'm going to read a quote if I can from Karen's book, and then I'm going to ask you to talk a bit about this. You say The idea of empire is so embedded in the modern Western imagination that it has shaped our understanding of nearly every facet of life from how we conceive of and measure success to how we develop national policy, to how we teach history, to how we orient and order our personal lives, to how we think the gospel is to be advanced. Because evangelicalism was so connected to the British Empire, imperialistic practices and attitudes are seldom far from the evangelical imagination. That is a wonderful mouthful. And so I'd love to unpack that a bit. So when people just hear the word empire, they might harken back in Western tradition to the Roman Empire or they'd think, as you've mentioned ,to the British Empire, let's talk about just the idea of empire and how it's actually an American force that's shaping our understanding of faith and power and politics right now today.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yeah, no. Thanks. This is the heaviest chapter.

Joanna Meyer:

It was a gut punch.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Hopefully we will offend everyone, equal opportunity and challenge everyone. So of course, empires are part of human history and human civilization. Empires come and go. They have always existed. The particular connection to evangelicalism that I'm trying to draw out, which again I think is important today whether one is evangelical or not because of how much of our political and social debates right now are being shaped by the debates within evangelicalism. Evangelicalism, as I said, arose in the 18th century and had its most prominent

influence in the following century during the Victorian age. And so as evangelicalism grew in prominence and influence, so too was the British Empire growing.And so as the British Empire was expanding to the point that one quarter of the citizens in the world called the queen their sovereign, and that saying the sun never set on the British Empire was literally true because the British Empire had colonized so many places around the world that it was always daylight somewhere.

And so this idea of evangelicalism being tied to this worldly political success that the British Empire represented is still in our DNA. We've transferred it across the ocean. And so it still, I think, is part of our understanding of what it means to be a Christian, a faithful Christian, is to demonstrate our success. I mean, this isn't far from the Prosperity Gospel, but evangelicals would say we don't accept this. But yet the rise of influence of evangelicalism is tied to the British Empire and now tied to the greatness of America that some want to have again. Again, that's another myth or another image that carries weight. And of course that phrase, make America great again, did not originate with the last president. It originated a few elections ago with, I think, Ronald Reagan. So it's a phrase that's been around, and it has its roots, I think, in the British Empire and perhaps in Constantine before that.

And so we may not be thinking about empire, but it is so formed the way we think and act and vote and order our lives for so long that we don't even have to think about it to be motivated and driven by it. And even the way that evangelical institutions and churches and parachurches and ministries place so much emphasis on growth and on and expansion. That's a thinking that is an empire mindset. And I want to say this because I just saw it last week, and I'm not going to say it as eloquently as the person who shared it on a social media post said it, but he said something, he said, we tend to think that growth is always good, and we don't ever question the importance or the goodness of growth. And yet if we look at the way that chickens are injected with hormones in order to grow so big that they become deformed and can't even function and operate, then we can see that growth is not necessarily healthy. We can't assume that growth is always healthy.

Joanna Meyer:

It was so humbling, Karen, if I can trace a little bit of the fingerprints of empire in my own life. You had talked about the ministry and business savvy of Dwight L. Moody, who was an evangelist and Bible teacher in Chicago in the early part of the 1900s, and he was the first leader that had began to weave business thinking into ministry. And I have three generations of family history with Moody. My great grandparents were discipled in rural Indiana by Moody Radio because they didn't have a good church in their area, and so his business savvy

reached them. So I have three generations of family that attended Moody. My grandparents met and married at Moody Bible Institute and went on to serve in South Africa for 40 years as missionaries when it was part of the British Empire. And so I just saw that weave together.

And you even highlighted in some of the organizations, the parachurches in particular in the mid 19 hundreds in the U.S organizations like the Salvation Army or Campus Crusade had names that had a militaristic feel as part of this campaign to reach or change the country. And I worked with Peru for 12 years. And so I look at this multigenerational flavor of empire, of advancing the kingdom of this fight. And I go, that has shaped my life in ways that I didn't realize until I read your book. And I want to be fair. Beautiful things came of that as well, but we want to acknowledge some of the cultural norms that also went under the surface of it. So when I say that it was a gut punch, it really was. I realized in my own life, oh, there's more nuance or more layers to this experience of being an evangelical in America than I even realized.

Karen Swallow Prior:

But my whole project in the book is not to say that all of this is bad. I mean, some of it is, but also this is just the human condition. Whenever we use a metaphor or an image or tell a story, there's some truth. If it's good, then there's truth in there. But there are always things left out. And so if we don't say, well, what's being said, what's being emphasized by using this metaphor or this image or this label or this name, that might be a good thing, but what are we leaving out? So for example, when I talk about conversion, I think conversion is essential to one's faith. And yet if we emphasize conversion at the expense of discipleship and formation and sanctification, and we emphasize it so much that we care too much about how many hands were raised or how many people filled out the card or how many people came forward, then we are actually distorting a good thing and we should all be concerned about that.

Joanna Meyer:

Or when you blend military and spiritual terms, what risks do you take on of distorting the truth of the gospel? Just understanding the influences that there are powerful to understanding the reality of where you are now. So it was so helpful. And yeah, wow, it was a deep journey for me.

Brian Gray:

I'm thinking about an implication for ... maybe we could talk about implications for the American church and then maybe even what citizenship means right now. But one thing that struck me as we've been talking is over the last decade, you'll hear people all the time locating themselves in a deconstruction movement. I'm deconstructing my faith. And what I'm hearing, particularly, Karen, in your last comments, is really there's so much wisdom in taking a look at and examining more deeply and closely some of the good and unhelpful elements. But I'm wondering, when I hear so many people who are, they would call themselves, hey, I've deconstructed my faith or eventually walked away from their faith, they're walking away from some of the things that perhaps Jesus might agree with them upon in terms of a prophetic look at some of the unhelpful aspects of their evangelical experience. And I'm just curious if any of the way that you've thought about this book, have you seen it have implications for the faith moment for those who are kind of deconstructing their faith? Is there a pastoral thing that we could say to them?

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think that we should all be trying to understand the scriptures alone better and Jesus better. And I'm a person who co-edited a book called Cultural Engagement. I engage with the culture all the time. I love culture. And God designed it so that we would be human beings birthed and raised in human cultures that are different across time and across the globe. And that is how he designed it. And so culture is good. Culture itself is good. It has good things in it and bad things in it. And so we can't escape enculturation. We simply can't. So I'm not picking on evangelicals, I'm not picking on anyone. It is our job no matter what our tradition, what our faith tradition, what are our social communities or our politics to separate out the truths that are eternal and absolute and lasting from the cultural components. We don't have to throw out the cultural components.

We can just acknowledge using the example of Moody. We can say, Moody advanced the gospel and did good things for the faith, but wearing a business suit to class is a cultural preference, not scriptural. But somehow there are many that got tangled up into like, oh, you have to dress a certain way in order to be a good Christian. That's just one example. We see that in many, many places. And so there's something essential and profound and crucial to this sort of disentangling and disenculturation. It is hard and scary, and we should support one another in doing it in a healthy way.

But I think the reason why it's so at a crisis point now in this particular time and place in community is because the people we're talking about, my people, have been the ones in the position of power and privilege for a long time, and that's actually what makes it harder to do. I think it's harder for people whose underlying assumption has safely been one of position and privilege to see that there is an underlying assumption there. And so it feels like a loss. It feels like the ground is shifting beneath us, and it is. If the ground is shifting beneath us, it is our job to set ourselves right. And so that actually means for some of us, it means shifting a little bit this way and shifting a little bit that way so that we can actually be upright as the ground shifts beneath us and we can support one another so we don't all fall over.

Joanna Meyer:

Oh, man, such a powerful thought. I want to ask a question, but I want to preface it by saying I want to be careful. I don't want to put you in a position where you're having to make a political statement that we don't intend to make you to do. But I think at this political moment, one of the challenges we're coming up with is this idea in evangelical imagination that America is a Christian nation because it definitely has Judeo-Christian roots. It's been part of our history, and yet the scope to which it's a Christian nation can be challenging to untangle. I'm wondering if you could offer any insight of how do we begin that journey of understanding? I guess the question would be to what degree or how is America a Christian nation and how does that inform our choices as we engage political life?

Karen Swallow Prior:

Well, that could be a whole other episode, but I'm happy to answer. Obviously I have thought about this a lot. I mean, so 1776 was informed by many Christian ideals and principles and many just sort of deistic ones as well, generally a god, a creator. But more importantly, I think that our nation has been populated primarily by Christians for most of its history, whether Christians in name or genuine Christians. So in that sense, it has been what some people might call a Christian nation. And as a Christian, I do believe that Christianity is good for all human flourishing. If I didn't believe that I wouldn't be a Christian. And so of course I want to see that kind of what I understand can facilitate human flourishing for all people. That includes actually religious liberty, which is a very Christian idea.

And so even with that, however, it's important for me as a Christian to remember that God is God and that he is sovereign, to also to remember that there have been Christians who have lived in all kinds of nations and

countries and communities around the world and their faith and the church has flourished regardless of whether or not their nations and leaders were Christians. And then we can learn from them and take an example from them. So even while we or I might want to preserve as much as I can and advocate for my Christian values and beliefs, I don't despair at the thought of those not winning the day because I know God is God, and I also know that because God is God, I cannot be unfaithful by taking shortcuts or being pragmatic or supporting unbiblical or un-Christ-like things in order to help God achieve the goals I think should be the goal. So that's how I navigate those tensions. I need to be faithful, but I trust in God.

Joanna Meyer:

It's a very diplomatic way to answer that question. And faithful.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Thanks.

Joanna Meyer:

To wrap up our conversation, we could talk all day, but I'm wondering if you would have a simple suggestion for our listeners to become students of the imagination that has shaped their own lives. How do we begin to dig into this a little bit more so we notice the factors that have shaped our own life and perspective?

Brian Gray:

A practice they could carry from this conversation?

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Well, of course, I wanted to say read good literature. And so that's what I'm going to say. Read good literature. And you don't have to be ... again, it's not just literature. If you pay attention to imaginative works, like literal imaginative works, it can actually help you to see in a more metaphorical way the way in which imagination works in everything. So I'll just quote from one of my favorite novels just as an example, the opening line of

Pride and Prejudice, is it a truth universally acknowledged that a single man with a fortune must be in want of a wife? That line is completely ironic and funny because it's not a universal truth that a single man with a fortune must be in want of a wife, but it is the perspective of this poor mother of girls who need to marry well. And so just that opening line helps us to see how one character's vision and expectations of the world are imposed by her unknowingly on everyone else.

And don't we all do that? Aren't we all Mrs. Bennett imposing our own wishes and expectations on the world through our social imaginary? And so if once we become aware of that, we can say, oh, how am I doing that? How am I living my life according to a certain vision of the American dream? So literature helps us do that. Good film helps us do that. Just talking to other people who have different social imaginaries or different underlying assumptions can help us to see that theirs is different from mine and, wow, which one has this truth and which one is lacking that truth. It's something that I think once we are intentional about it, once we are curious about it, then the opportunities are endless to see the imagination at work in our lives.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, ad campaigns too, they're speaking to an unmet need. You see, what's the dream they're asking people to aspire to and what they're trying to sell.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yes. I cannot watch television without coming away craving chicken wings and pizza.

Brian Gray:

Which is really tough when you're also working on ... we're all working on our eight pack abs so that we can live our best life.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Yeah, because they have a commercial for that right after the pizza-

Brian Gray:

Right afterwards.

Karen Swallow Prior:

... the chicken wings.

Joanna Meyer:

And Ozempic altogether.

Brian Gray:

Karen, it is so important to pause and to reflect on this life that we're living, and I feel like your words written and then today with us in conversation just have given this opportunity. So thank you so much. We really appreciate it. And Joanna, why don't you take us home with any final thoughts for listeners?

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. I hope you've been intrigued. I want to encourage you to take a look at Karen's book, The Evangelical Imagination, and be examining your own thoughts. We will continue to link in the show notes to some resources from Denver Institute related to election season. That wasn't the focus of our conversation, but we want you to be thinking well about your role in public life as a person of faith, and I hope that you'll have some conversations around the dinner table about what forms of imagination, cultural imagination are shaping your own life.

Thanks, Karen. What a gift to be with you today.

Karen Swallow Prior:

Thank you.

Joanna Meyer:

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