

Navigating faith and political discussions with Gen Z

TRANSCRIPT

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NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.

Mark Turman (00:02.386)

This is the Denison Forum podcast. I'm Mark Turman, your host for today's conversation. I want to remind you that what we're trying to do is to have conversations that matter, what I sometimes call clarity conversations, that we talk about things going on in the world and try to see them and understand them from a biblical perspective and to equip each other to have the best opportunities we can, both with family and friends and wider circles as well.

And so we're just grateful for you tuning in, listening in, being a part of this conversation today. We're going to have what might be called a generational crosstalk that we want to try to have a meaningful conversation about talking to different generations about controversial topics and particularly in this season, talking about politics. And let me kind of set the stage for this conversation. We all kind of know that this election is coming on November the 5th. And then about three weeks after that, college will obviously break for Thanksgiving and college students will be coming home. and there'll be times when we're sitting around, having some Turkey together or apple pie, getting ready to watch a football game or go do something else. And the likelihood of conversation around politics is going to come up. And a lot of us have history with not great conversations over the last number of years around this topic. And so we're to have a conversation among a couple of different generations. So my conversation partners today are first of all, Connor Jones. Connor is one of the guys I get to work with at Denison Ministries. Connor is our director of what we call performance marketing and helps us to get our message out as effectively as we can and as broadly as we can. We also have Micah Tomasella. Micah is our Advancement Officer at Denison Ministries. He gets to spend a lot of time talking to our very generous donors and understanding their perspective and why they support a ministry like ours. So we're really grateful for Micah because he and those conversations helped to propel our ministry in a big way. And another one of our partners is Mark Jones.

Mark Turman (02:23.016)

Mark and I were in college about the same time and he'll talk about that, but he is the director of the Center for Collegiate Ministry with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. If you're unfamiliar, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, also called the Texas Baptist Convention, is about 5,000 Baptist churches spread out across the state of Texas and a part of their ministry is to have ministry on college campuses. And I'm going to get Mark to describe that in a little bit more detail. But before we do that, let me just say welcome to the conversation guys. Let's have a cup of coffee together. Mark, let's start with you. Where and when did you go to college?

Mark Jones (03:05.976)

Thanks, Mark. I went to Baylor in the early 80s. I graduated in 84, my wife in 85. So we would be the younger boomers. We're right on that kind of cusp of going from boomer to Xers. And so yeah, that's my background.

Mark Turman (03:28.486)

And let's, let's, let's emphasize that younger aspect. We're on the younger aspect of the boomers.

Mark Jones (03:31.286)

Yeah, well, I still have, as my boys remind me, my sons remind me, I still have lots of boomer characteristics. So yeah, they remind me of how old thinking sometimes I am.

Mark Turman (03:46.94)

that alright my could tell us a little bit about you and about when and where you went to college

Micah Tomasella (03:54.342)

Yeah, so I went to Dallas Baptist University, graduated in 2018. Connor and I actually were in college together, were involved in a lot of the same things on campus. And so, and I would be considered the last year of being a millennial before it switched over to Gen Z based off of my date of birth. But I definitely relate more with the millennials than I would say the Gen Z.

Mark Turman (04:21.042)

do you, so let me, let me ask you a clarifying question. Do you see any, do you see any qualities in your own thinking, that relate to Gen Z or kind of have a flavor of Gen Z in them?

Micah Tomasella (04:33.564)

Maybe a little bit just because I grew up in the social age, right? mean, a part of growing up was to a certain extent, especially junior high into high school, social media was a big part of it. So we're, it's really kind of a massive social experiment because kids are being raised and exposed and really have the world at their fingertips. So I think that that's the biggest way that I relate is in the way in which I grew up and the things that I had at my disposal.

Mark Turman (05:01.414)

No. Okay. So Connor, did you and Micah meet at DBU? that where y'all first encountered each other?

Conner Jones (05:07.893)

We did. Yep. At Dallas Baptist, we met there and I graduated a year after him. I graduated in the spring of 2019 and I'm right there with him. I was born in December of 1996 and Gen Z technically starts January of 1997. So I'm right on the cusp of kind of the intersection of both millennials and Gen Z. And it's an interesting place to be because you, I mean, I, I have a little bit of identification with both generations, growing up in the internet era. Like Michael was saying, it's been interesting and gives us a bit of a perspective on how Gen Z thinks, but also the Gen Z of high schoolers and kids currently in college definitely sees the world differently than I think we do. And that's understandable. They grew up just differently. So definitely an interesting time to be in college and high school and preparing for a first time vote if this is their first time. So eager to talk about this.

Micah Tomasella (05:48.488)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Turman (06:00.646)

Yeah. And so if, if you're already starting to tune out of this conversation, because we're talking about generational cohorts, let me ask you to stay in with us. Gen Z in case you're not aware are basically those that you might meet today who are roughly 10 years old all the way up to 25 years old. that's the general framework. These generational cohorts, by the way, are formed usually by sociologists who are studying trends and trying to understand particular traits and characteristics. This is not an exact science. Okay, that's one of the things I've learned over the last number of years. But it is the work of sociologists trying to understand that different groups, different generations, because of when they're born, where they're born, the context and circumstances that they experience, shape them in a particular way, and in a very broad way, can produce trends and characteristics that can help us to understand how they're thinking differently from their older siblings, from their parents, from their grandparents. Connor, what you were talking about, you and Micah as well. My son is a very, very young millennial, but he has a lot of characteristics of older Gen Z. And as Micah, you were saying, because of technology he loved every aspect of technology and still does very, very fluent and capable with technology. he's never known a world where he didn't have high speed internet access in his pocket. And, that's very different from, in some ways, even from his older sister who is four years older, certainly a lot different from me, and from his mom. And so those are realities. And so,

Mark Jones (07:37.314)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Turman (07:53.16)

And let me just add to this. So I went to not Dallas Baptist University, but to a sister school very similar to Dallas Baptist University. I went to a small Baptist college called Howard Payne University in the middle of Texas. Really one of the smaller universities in the state about a thousand, 1200 students when I was there. I actually went to junior college in East Texas for a year before I went away to college. And my junior college was probably I don't know, three, four times the size of the university I ended up going to and had some of my best academic experiences in a junior college setting. So I had kind of a foot in both of those worlds. And so we just want to have a conversation among the four of us representing at least two different generational cohorts and talk about what we're experiencing and how we might relate not only as Millennials to boomers, but also to generations beyond that both generations below us in age generation Z or those that are above us as well because everybody will be around that Thanksgiving table, hopefully and hopefully everybody will feel comfortable free and Eager even to have conversations that will produce understanding. Although we're seeing some signs guys. It's pretty troubling we're seeing what's called affective disharmony where even counselors are now telling us that husbands and wives are coming to their offices not to talk about financial conflict or other kinds of marital conflict. They're coming to talk about political conflict in their marriage and that that's becoming a real problem in our country. But before we jump too far into that detail, Mark, tell us a little bit about the ministry that you're leading on college campuses on behalf of Baptist churches in Texas.

Mark Jones (09:53.326)

Thanks, Mark. ministry I oversee is we are funded in two ways. We're funded through cooperative giving of Texas Baptist, and we have a robust CP is how it's referred to CP budget that comes through the cooperative giving of those 5000 plus churches that that Mark mentioned. And then we've also in order for us to be kind of vision and mission driven and not budget limited. Our CP giving has been very, very level as Texas Baptist, as BGCT. We're very fortunate. Other states have really struggled with cooperative giving. We really have not. We were seeing great things happen through that. But then we add another three and a half million to our bottom line through support raising, personal support raising. I tell folks we're not crew, we're not STUMO, we're not FCA that does all of their budget through personal support raising, that has allowed us to be a lot deeper and wider as a ministry to go to places that we would not be able to pioneer. We're on about 130, 135 campuses around the state. We have 220, 230 employees. We have a pipeline of ministry that goes from campus missionaries, which are right out of college. They give a year or two years in more of an internship that IRS won't call it let us call them interns but there is more of an intern you know they kind of test drive the college ministry they give back a year or two years to the ministry they they they were part of or another ministry they we're we have partnerships both in the northwest other partnerships for under-reached places in Texas and also international partnerships so we and then we have

kind of a stair step of coordinator level, associate director, and then director level. A lot of our priority, of course, is to be on the big campuses all around the state. And most of those big campuses, we have directors and associates and then campus missionary level. So it's a multifaceted staff with the heart and the strategy to engage different parts of the campus, to have that commitment to, you can talk about some of the core values. Our healthiest ministries prioritize evangelism.

Mark Jones (12:17.588)

and is engaging the campus robustly. In other words, it's daily on the campus. Even if we own 25 buildings, we oversee 25 facilities that we own around the state. It's great to have a building. We're building a new building at Baylor right now. We're seeing a movement of God at Baylor like we haven't seen in a generation. As far as just students coming to Christ, students called to mission, churches working together. All of that, could, you know, whole different conversation there, but we're seeing some great things happen. But besides having a building, you want to have that engagement mentality. And that is to begin to be, you know, just have dialogue on campus. We table on campus constantly, ask questions. You you want to be winsome, you want to be tactful, you want to be respectful of people with a lot of different ideologies and they're there on the campus. So we're very intentional evangelism, we pray for it, we train for it, we do it regularly, and we evaluate in big group settings, in small group settings, with discovery groups, where many that are involved in small groups are not believers yet. Many that come to our big gatherings are not believers, but they're asking questions. And then we're doing contact evangelism on many campuses where you get conversation started, and then you just kind of trust the journey that you're going to continue, maybe set up a a coffee conversation and you're sharing, you're listening well to their life and you're sharing the gospel and we're just seeing a movement of God right now. So, yeah, I know I'm kind of jumping ahead, but this generation is spiritually curious. They're interested. They see the brokenness in their own lives and the brokenness in our culture. So they're looking for answers. that, know, priorities within our ministry, and I'll try to be brief here, but evangelism, discipleship, Working in great partnership with local churches is a big part. We're not a ministry that's siloed on any campus. We're only as effective as we build those local church relationships and help them see involvement in a campus ministry as a limited time in life. They're involved in a BSM or a crew or whatever that campus ministry is. Hopefully you're building that good segue or bridge to the local church. That's a win for us is that they would become

Mark Jones (14:39.886)

local church. And then missional sending is another big priority for us that we, that's a vital part of discipleship to get outside of yourself, to see the context, whether that is starting first in your Jerusalem, which would be your campus. And then what is next? And we, we send 500 plus

students every summer and throughout the year to do missions all over the world. we also have, mentioned those strategic partnerships to reach underreached places.

Last thing I'll say is that we we're really trying to adapt to the changes in education. And that is you mentioned junior college as part of your experience, Mark. I mean, I taught on a junior college campus and then ran the ministry at Tyler Junior College for years. We're seeing a movement more to junior college and a lot of vocational training. You the idea of a four year college education, it's still there and still a lot of students that are involved in that. But many of the educational trends. They're wanting to do a two year degree and then right into the workforce or get some kind of vocational training. there's some shifts and changes and schools are adapting. You'll see big universities planting with their DNA in different places. In Fort Worth, just this next five to 10 years, you're gonna see an A extension and you're gonna see a UNT extension and a UTA extension all within that part of Texas.

Mark Turman (15:51.976)

Yeah.

Mark Jones (16:05.12)

Why? Because they want to take education to where students are.

Mark Turman (16:10.044)

Yeah. So yeah, lots of, lots of things changing. And, and, one of the great things about having, a ministry on college campuses, mentioned not only the one that you're leading, but others as well crew and those types of things is that, I heard, as I heard, Trevin wax, another, spiritual leader say recently, you know, we, go to people in these environments because people are often open to spiritual conversations and looking for spiritual answers in times of change and in times of pain. And hopefully college or vocational school is not a time of pain. It can be when it comes to writing papers and all those kinds of things, but more it's a time of change. It's a time of, you know, increasing responsibility as well as increasing freedom, an opportunity to explore a lot of new ideas as what college is intended to do.

Mark Jones (16:40.622)

Mm.

Mark Turman (17:02.074)

And as one of my favorite professors said, when I landed at college, the purpose of college is to, is to not tell you what to think, but to help you learn how to think and, how to think critically and how to claim your ideas and to know what you believe in, why you believe it. those kinds of things. Mark, mentioned curiosity. guys, Connor, Micah as well, other things that you're seeing among,

Mark Jones (17:10.434)

How to think. That's right.

Mark Turman (17:29.938)

college students and even older teens coming into high school, coming out of high school. What are some of the things you guys are seeing in terms of just kind of general trends that are kind of like that curiosity that Mark was mentioning that, this, this generation is really, asking big questions and asking really big questions about spirituality, and other things. What are some of the trends that you guys are hearing and seeing?

Conner Jones (17:58.069)

Yeah, this is a great question. I wrote an article last year about Gen Z and church attendance and really referencing the fact that Gen Z's church attendance is way down compared to millennials and Gen X and especially compared to boomers. This is, know, somewhat concerning, but there's a lot of reasons why. And if, you could read the article, you'll see all these different trends as to what led to this. But Mark had a great point. They are spiritually curious. It's not like they'd want to just not have some sort of deep spiritual connection. They, I think, recognize there's more to this life, there's more to this world. The problem is they're not always finding it in the church, they're going other places. And this is why I love the ministry that you guys are doing, Mark, because there's so many people that are wanting more and they want a faith, they just don't know where to place it. So doing evangelism on campus is so important. One of the big trends is, one of the big trends right now is just finding...

Mark Jones (18:31.036)

Bye.

Mark Jones (18:48.526)

All right, I guess, yeah.

Conner Jones (18:54.217)

spiritual in the new age spirituality. This is like astrology or anything that has to do with stars, all of that. So it's a weird thing for us as, as Bible believers, we don't understand why that would be important or make any sense, but it is something that is just happening. and they manifesting is another big thing. They

Mark Jones (19:13.036)

Manifest. Yeah, we hear that term a lot, don't we? Yes. But that makes it, that makes it self-actualized. In other words, in it back to that, that phrase that I'm going to embrace my truth, you know, this understanding that there's no absolute truth, but it's going to be what I interpret,

what meets my needs. I deserve to be happy. I deserve to be fulfilled. I deserve to be healed. You know, there's a, acknowledgement. I like, I don't want to take away from your contribution here, but I,

Conner Jones (19:16.224)

Right? Yeah.

Mark Jones (19:42.934)

I want to, I yearn for the authentic. You you talked about why is it that only statistics say only a third of Gen Zers are connected to church or really Christian community. They yearn for community in a peer group of their own making. In other words, they're gonna adapt that they still want to be communal, but they just, they want to do it their own way. And I think for us in the Christian sphere, for us to say, we've got to,

Conner Jones (19:47.542)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (20:12.918)

in some ways develop trust over time. You go from curiosity to, or a lack of trust. we talked about a lot of factors there. You think about what they're bombarded in social media and some of the picture that they have of what Christianity is, is bigoted and intolerant and even what are some of the irrelevant. In other words, I can do community and life and have value outside of my... even my spiritual upbringing. My grandfather's faith is no longer my faith and I'm gonna do my own thing. And that yearning, this is last thing I'll say before y'all, is they wanna experience it. This generation wants to experience it themselves. They wanna immerse themselves in whatever. And that's why the opportunity is there to come be a part of our group and learn more about us. They wanna know why it's important to us and if it has value.

Conner Jones (20:54.827)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (21:10.518)

They want to see it lived out because they've seen these great leaders of faith fall away from faith. And that just, that further can disillusion or, and some of them have been affected by it. You know, their youth minister had an affair, their pastor embezzled money, know, whatever it was. And they're dealing with a lot of that, that cynicism or skepticism that they carry over, or sometimes trauma that they're carrying over. So anyway, I'm over talking to most of you guys.

Mark Turman (21:36.36)

Hmm. Yeah. Yeah.

Micah Tomasella (21:37.526)

Mark, absolutely, man. mean, I mean, you're hitting every subject there. And it's so pertinent. I mean, in your your comments, your perspective in this conversation is crucial because, you know, you're a big part of the boots on the ground and the direction that it's moving. think that we have a unique perspective here in Texas. And I think that maybe 20, 30 years ago, you could live off of your parents' faith. You could even live off of your grandparents' faith. Right. But there's been this just kind of line that's drawn in the sand.

Mark Turman (22:01.992)

Yeah.

Micah Tomasella (22:06.564)

when you talk about people in this generation and in the generations to come, they want to experience it. On one hand, you you might think that that's a discouraging trend, but I hear that and it's very encouraging because I think that there's a lot of people that have been living on the coattails of the faith of the generations that came before them or who raised them or where they came from. And I think that there's this shift that takes place in we have to make our faith our own.

Mark Jones (22:33.09)

That's it.

Micah Tomasella (22:33.18)

and with social media and all these different things, we want to be in this echo chamber naturally. It doesn't matter what generation that you're in, you want to be affirmed in how you think. so social media algorithms are almost determining the way that we choose friends, the way that we have conversations because, right, because the algorithm tells you what you want to hear. But I think the solution to all of this, and it's, mean, there's a lot of solutions, right? But I think a core solution is

Mark Jones (22:46.934)

Yes. they're steering it to what we, yeah, you're right.

Micah Tomasella (23:03.89)

chips are stacked against believers in this generation trying to make an impact on college campuses in one way because it's what they're used to and it's what they hear here in Texas a lot. It's built into the culture. So faith is views in an institutional sense. I relate Jesus to this church, this pastor, this person that hurt me, right? And so the chips are stacked against us in that way.

Mark Jones (23:17.218)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (23:21.474)

Yeah.

Conner Jones (23:24.257)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (23:27.246)

Mm, that's right.

Micah Tomasella (23:31.246)

at the same time, the curiosity is there. Well, how do you solve that? Through relationships, one at a time, one-on-one, just the way that Jesus did ministry, and then through a personal relationship with someone who's seeking to live out their faith, not perfectly, but faithfully. That's how I think we can see kind of the tide turn and capitalize on this curiosity that we're seeing. So we shouldn't grow so discouraged that there's so many things in the way, but instead look at the opportunity and remember

Mark Jones (23:48.629)

I think that's exactly right.

Micah Tomasella (23:59.108)

We're here for such a time as this on purpose. It's not on accident.

Mark Turman (24:02.94)

Yeah, and that's a great way to transition into some of the research we've done. We'll attach this to the show notes. Connor's article is one of those things, but we also have a larger research tool that we created for pastors and for church leaders about Gen Z. And one of things that you'll learn in that is that they're not only going to church less, but they're more open to spiritual conversations, that curiosity thing.

And they're more open to those conversations happening with people who are older than them. they're eager, to, to investigate, as Mark said, to investigate these conversations and to find out particularly from people who are 10, 20, even 40 or 50 years older than them. Okay. Tell me why this works. Why, why have you dedicated yourself to this? Why have you lived this out for multiple decades?

Mark Jones (24:34.05)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Turman (24:55.632)

Show me and tell me and explain to me why do you think that this this way of living as a follower of Christ really actually does work? And so, know there that's kind of I remember my pastor's preaching a sermon gosh 50 years ago almost where the the the question he said was you know, What people want to know is does Christianity work? Is it not just a great theory or a great story? But does it actually work? And that question is still being asked today, Mark, wanted to get you to comment a little bit about, it almost seems, counterintuitive to say, okay, I'm going to, I'm going to hope, hope for even encourage my college student to go to a Christian college or a faith based college. Why would there need to be an evangelistic ministry on a Christian college campus? Like there was at Howard pain at Baylor at a lot of the other schools.

Again, I heard another commentator talking about this, that kids show up at college, whether it's a secular state school or a Christian college, and they may have exactly the same questions. And some of them may be asking these big questions, well, just because my parents handed it to me doesn't mean I'm going to take it. Can you kind of talk about what you're seeing in some of the context of particularly small Christian Baptist schools?

Mark Jones (26:15.662)

That's right. Well, yeah.

Mark Turman (26:25.272)

That you work with that there's just as much a need for evangelism there as there would be at you know Mike, you know, my daughter went to A had a great college experience but had a very significant spiritual experience alongside of that in a in a college campus that had 50,000 students right and you can find that at schools of all different sizes but why is it important that even if your kid is at a spiritually faith-based college that it's still important to focus on the development of their faith.

Mark Jones (27:01.294)

Well, and I think coming back to something that Micah said so well about within our culture, especially in, I did ministry in East Texas. If you look at Texas in general, there's still a lot of, I had students that could flip a switch and talk the language of the saved pretty easily because of the environment that they grew up in. So, you the need for us at our, coming, Wyatt a Baptist school from a Howard Payne or a Wayland. We've got multiple small schools that are Hardin Simmons. Students come, as you just mentioned, they come with some of the same questions and struggles. What does it mean to own your own faith? They may have been involved in youth group. A lot of times the end of their college or high school experience, they're less involved than they were. So sometimes their college experience is owning it for themselves, Whatever that

is. And asking all those questions, we're seeing some of those same questions about sexuality, identity, all those things playing out on these Baptist school campuses. And we better be ready to, I say as a ministry and as older adults, a little farther along, engaging there, how do we be patient and journey with people? And I always say no wide eyes, that we're not.

We're not surprised and shocked by some of the things that we hear. And that could be on a secular campus or on a Baptist campus. Some of the things that our students are wrestling with. Both you guys went to DBU and you know that as many great things, spiritual opportunities and places for growth that there were at DBU, there were many men and women, young men and women that were struggling with areas of, I mean, whether that was substance or sexuality or whatever that was, how do you express all those? So there's a need at our Baptist schools for that active engagement in whether it's a student coming to Christ or what's it mean to really interpret, to go deeper in the Word, to have an understanding of clarity on biblical ethics, history and background, all of those things. Because within our overall culture,

Mark Jones (29:18.594)

Those are being turned upside down and it's how do you define? We've got to always define our terms. We're seeing a movement of progressive Christianity that is just questioning the very foundation of family and sexuality and relationship. We better prepare, it's like coming back to what value do we have with our Baptist schools and our Christian schools, we better be training leaders there. And you mentioned A I'm convinced A has got as big a Christian community as any school in the nation. I would tell my students that would transfer from TJC to A and I said, listen, get involved. There's lots of places, I said, but you can go weeks without breathing unsaved air. You can go from Bible study to worship to whatever else one day after another and never engage the regular ags that don't know Jesus.

Mark Turman (30:04.186)

Yeah.

Mark Jones (30:17.1)

So there's gotta be something, but coming back to Baptist schools, what a great opportunity. And what some of our Baptist schools have done also is they've embraced different student kind of revenue streams. They brought athletics onto campuses. And what that does is bring students that may be there to play a sport, but they don't know, I mean, like at DBU, you had men and women there playing a sport, or international students that they're there because it's a great school. There are opportunities.

Micah Tomasella (30:17.597)

Hmm.

Mark Jones (30:47.31)

And I think coming back to what I hope our practitioners of ministry on every school, and especially our Baptist schools, that they would constantly be mapping. And I love Caleb Kreider's book, Tradecraft, where he has this mindset of a spy, the Matt Damon image of going into the bar or the restaurant. And he knows the exit. He knows every license plate in the parking lot. He knows who's packing a gun. In other words, he reads his environment real well.

He knows that and our campus ministers should be expert practitioners on their campus. There needs to be for a campus minister at a DBU or Hardin Simmons, he needs to know the places of light and darkness. or she, know, Megan Hendrickson is our campus minister at DBU right now. And I think at a place where we have to find a unique lane to run in, how can we strengthen what's already going on? for the sake of the gospel and what unique thing can we do by way of leadership and evangelism and discipleship.

Mark Turman (31:54.482)

Yeah. So good. So good, Connor. just want to get your thoughts on, do you think we really need to have a conversation about being prepared for your college kid to come home for Thanksgiving? Yeah. And you know, I don't know that my parents ever gave much thought to that. of course I grew up in a big family. There were people coming and going all the time. And so they're like, well, somebody else just showed up. Just one more, one more mouth to feed one more hamburger to get. Is this something new? Do you think that we're seeing a higher level of conflict and controversy when high schoolers, when college kids come home and we're in an environment like we are relative to politics right now? Is there a real sense of angst when we start to gather around the table for Thanksgiving or anything else? Is that real?

And what are some of the potential topics that might be inside that if it is real?

Conner Jones (32:58.421)

Yeah, for sure. Well, I mean, and your own personal journey, you, are you, if you think about Thanksgiving, are there people you're kind of nervous about sitting across the table from and talking about politics with? Maybe so. I would imagine a lot of families are going to have this type of thought in their head. How do we talk to our grandson, our son or granddaughter, daughter about these different things? I think some of the topics that we're going to hear from people, you know, who are on college campuses or in high school they're going to think about, you know, Israel, Palestine, they're going to think about gender fluidity, they're going to think about, you know, quote unquote, woke issues that, yeah, if you're if you are from an older generation, you may see it totally different than they do. This is something that you have to be patient with, as Mark was saying, you know, be open to hearing what they're talking about. Don't be wide eyed. Don't be so shocked. But say, hey, explain this to me. Slow down and hear thou

hear out what they're thinking, why they're thinking this. What are the root reasons why they're thinking this? You know, I would say one of the big things we have to do as Christians who may be around family members that are not Christians or around other people, this isn't just at Thanksgiving, this is just in general, we cannot pass judgment. That's not our place. We need to be open and then share,

Mark Jones (34:00.969)

Good.

Conner Jones (34:22.401)

Hey, here's where I stand on this. And here's why, because of this biblical principle. And this is what scripture says about these different issues and have those issues that, know, are hard lined in the Bible. And you're like, okay, I know that we cannot move on this if it's abortion or if it's LGBTQ issues or whatever it is and say, this is where we as Christians stand. This is what the Bible says about it. This is what God told us to say about it, but there's going to be issues that the Bible doesn't necessarily address. And so have those conversations and be gentle and loving in them.

And don't pass judgment. And, you know, if you're a parent and you're, worried how your kid is thinking or how your kid is going to vote, I would say, don't, don't pressure them. Let them, let them feel like they are in a safe space to talk about what they want to discuss, to talk about these issues and make sure that they feel loved and like they can without any sort of pressure or judgment that they can talk about it with you. And then I, like you were saying, they, they want to hear from older people.

They have an interest and this is myself. I want the wisdom of my parents and grandparents and older people in my life to hear why, why has your faith been so strong, even through really hard times or why are you always so joyful? You know, they want to know the answers to that. They're very curious. And so if you're able to just share and be loving through this and in, in faith and in politics, if that's what it is, or if it's something totally different, just be open to what they have to say, but then offer that wisdom, offer that love and gentleness and it'll be way more productive and fruitful than ever just an argument or tenseness or passive aggressiveness at a Thanksgiving table.

Mark Turman (36:04.326)

You know, and yeah, to your point, you know, I definitely have my reservations about going into multi-generational and, know, extended family environments in this season, right? There's lots of, and so, but if I, I'll get, let me get you guys to react to this idea. One of the observations I've made, as I've gotten older is there is a tendency when we are younger.

that we think outside of our head or we think out loud. And as seemingly as we get older, we start to develop this tendency of, well, I'm going to think about that in my own brain for a minute. And maybe with one person or two that I'm very, very secure with, but I'm not going to have that in a wider circle until I test it out with some people that I know are not going to be too hard on me.

But it seems like it is the, I learned this way too late as a dad. And maybe I get to have a redo with grandkids when they get older, but it just seems like that when we're younger, we say things out loud because not necessarily because we have completely embraced them as our view, but we are, we're trying it on. It's kind of like we're in a department store and we're trying on a.

Mark Jones (37:23.192)

Yeah.

Conner Jones (37:26.433)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Turman (37:29.408)

a coat or a shirt to see if it really fits us well and that we're doing that politically, we're doing that emotionally, we're doing it spiritually, we're throwing out an idea sometimes very randomly, sometimes very colorfully or very aggressively at a Thanksgiving meal and there's a real opportunity here for anybody of any age, but particularly maybe a really concerned parent or grandparent to overreact, to that. Mike, have you seen any of that? If y'all does that, does that make sense? Do we think out loud too much when we're young, maybe.

Mark Jones (38:01.432)

Mm-hmm.

And I think.

Micah Tomasella (38:11.804)

Maybe. I think that there's something to that. I think that people are more internal processors or external processors, and maybe those in the younger generation find themselves more in external processing because there's just a ton at our disposal. I think context to this question, Mark, is important. As we've moved into an age where politics are so intertwined with identity, every political discussion happening at the Thanksgiving table, going back to your previous question, isn't just this ethereal topic that's outside of yourself. It typically has something to do. It's wrapped up with who you are. It's wrapped up with if you don't agree with me, if you don't believe the same thing, you must feel this way about me. If you don't affirm this, then you don't

love this about me or you don't ultimately love me. So there's this identity politics that shifted. mean, even with this election, it feels like the stakes are so high, but we still have a strong union.

Mark Jones (38:50.797)

Yeah.

Conner Jones (38:57.942)

Mm-hmm.

Micah Tomasella (39:09.34)

We still have checks and balances. These candidates are speaking as if the other one gets elected. Democracy is over and they're both guilty of speaking that way. so, so political discussions aren't new, but the stakes have changed. And so I think there's, there's young people feeling an additional pressure of how does this affect me? Everybody's talking like the world's ending.

Mark Jones (39:17.792)

Right. Well, and yeah, right.

Mark Turman (39:17.992)

Hmm, yeah.

Micah Tomasella (39:33.744)

and the country's about to end and everything's gonna change, right? So I just think the stakes are different and it's wrapped up in who we are a little bit more than it used to be.

Mark Jones (39:39.288)

Michael, you have really hit on a real good insight there. You look at just the polarity within our culture. mean, just so, and like you said, weaving identity into the conversation. Do you really, and I think many times I'm kind of playing out a conversation at the Thanksgiving table. Is there the struggle because think about, we said that Xears are not just, they don't just use the tool.

Conner Jones (39:49.416)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (40:09.102)

They are on phones all the time. I read a statistic that said like 60 to 70 % of Ziers, I mean like all over are checking YouTube every day. They're on YouTube, they're on Instagram, they're on Twitter, you know, pick your different platform. And with that, just think about how they're not diving into deep, long understandings of political candidates or ideas. They're getting little snippets that are extreme in their views. And so they see this battle and conflict. And a lot of

times I think when in a conversation, they throw some things out there. And I think what Mark said is definitely part of it, this external processing, this kind of putting things out there. I think the challenge for us, for others at the table, is to be more the barometer and not the thermometer. Let's try to, in the way we respond, not to be shocked not to listen to the emotion that may be coming through and really maybe the cry of, you, if I side this way with this particular issue, are you gonna still accept me? Are you still, and sometimes they're playing out issues within their family. They're throwing out things just to get a rise out of mom or dad or grandfather because, and then others are just sitting watching like they've got popcorn just watching the show.

Micah Tomasella (41:21.702)

Hmm. Yeah.

Mark Jones (41:37.422)

You know, I think for us to not let the emotion and this external, thinking outside your head first, don't let that dictate the narrative. Don't constantly be on the reaction. I think you both said this well. You don't want to overreact in situations to something that seems so demonstrative that was said.

Micah Tomasella (42:03.432)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Turman (42:03.944)

Mark, Mark, you you relate obviously to leaders on a lot of campuses, you know, as you mentioned, almost a couple of hundred, do parents really need to be concerned that their college student is coming home with some dangerous ideas about things like antisemitism and, you know, what some would call the rewriting of history. Are you seeing that?

Mark Jones (42:28.558)

I think it's not on every campus. would definitely be on, if you look at some of our students that go to some of our campuses that have more progressive voices, larger campuses, your student that goes to UT Austin and is active on that campus and just listens to people within the overall culture there in Austin. Yeah, you're going to hear strong anti-Israel, anti- you know, very pro Palestinian, you know, just the and I think the challenge listen well there. I think that call to go deeper and to look at understandings and ideas from multiple different sources. If all I'm doing is watching MSNBC or all I'm doing is listening to Fox News, that's not being, you know, here are some of the brightest students in the state. They're going to UT or they're going to my campus, our campus minister at Rice. You can imagine you're dealing with highly intellectual students and just the progressive understanding there on that campus. You've got to just be very, I use the term mindful, that's a very Eastern term, you're very watchful. You want to be very thoughtful in how you respond there because of what the currents within the culture are.

Yes, I think that there needs to be a concern there, but I don't think it needs to be taken to the level of, my gosh, my son or daughter is going to be an anti-Semite or whatever. I don't think that's it. I think they're just really, they're connecting. This generation feels deeply. They're very sensitive. They yearn for that which is authentic and they see this activism and they kind of wonder what's this all about. They must be upset about something.

And helping walk alongside them to unpack that is just, that's the burden of leadership to have these. I mean, we have groups where we have Jewish students involved and we have Palestinian students involved in these groups. They're all coming to the same, some of them are not believers, but they're all coming on this college campus to these gatherings. How do you help them navigate that? I think that's what pushes us that role of leadership to...

Mark Turman (44:48.658)

Yeah. Yeah.

Mark Jones (44:54.316)

to try to listen well and then to bring biblical truth and biblical understanding about how Christ came to break down those barriers that exist between people.

Mark Turman (45:05.288)

Yeah, I think that's a really great call out. And like I said, it does have a lot to do with what part of the world you're in, what campus you're on, whether that's in the state of Texas, really big state. And going to college in West Texas at Angelo State University is a different experience than going to college in Dallas or going to college in Austin or Houston.

Mark Turman (45:30.13)

there's similarities but there are a lot of differences and then you get outside of that into other parts of the country. There's a lot of different things but the good thing is from what my experience is talking to different people is you can find the activity of God on just about every campus in the world. Somebody sent me a photograph about a month ago of several thousand students at the University of Texas gathered under the UT tower having a worship service and just people coming to that, right? And so, and you mentioned Rice, one of the most wonderful, winsome Christian scientists, guy named Jim Thor, teaches at Rice University and just is one of the most sought after teachers and lecturers on

Conner Jones (46:00.683)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (46:14.968)

They're right. Yes.

Mark Turman (46:20.072)

Christians and Christian apologetics and the intersection of faith and science, know, you won't find a more effective communicator and thought leader. Yeah. Then Jim Tor and God, you know, God's place people like that everywhere. let me, let me get you to, we got a few more minutes before we wrap up, but wanted to get y'all to react to this idea. We all know that we're, struggling as a culture.

Mark Jones (46:28.944)

Thank the Lord that he's there, you know.

Mark Jones (46:35.756)

Amen.

Mark Turman (46:47.31)

probably all of us at every generation, doesn't matter how old you are that, we're very skeptical fighting at times a lot, not to become cynical about all of the systems and institutions of our culture. And that can include our university. You'd be going to a university and be highly critical of that university, depending upon your perspective.

We know that that's true about the government. We know that it's true about the church. We know that in some ways it's often true about the medical community, that there is just a pervasive skepticism, sometimes cynicism, that we all seem to be carrying around in one way or another, but particularly young, you know, when you're young, you're supposed to be an optimist, right? I would hope that you are an optimist.

Conner Jones (47:39.595)

You

Mark Turman (47:42.002)

But we're seeing all kinds of levels of anxiety, depression that really is coupled with this, this, skepticism, cynicism. how do you, how do you guys recommend we navigate that together as families sitting around the Thanksgiving dinner table? Who wants to go first?

Mark Jones (47:52.504)

Yes.

Micah Tomasella (48:05.074)

I think Connor should go first.

Conner Jones (48:07.346)

Hahaha

Mark Turman (48:08.209)

Have at it, Connor!

Conner Jones (48:10.421)

You know, I just think when I think about the skepticism within government, there's a lot of reasons why. There's a lot of reasons why across all generations. It's not even just a younger generation thing. I think there's a lot of people, it especially got heightened during the COVID pandemic, of just like questioning the government, which leads to questioning other institutions, which honestly, Mark, can lead to questioning our church institutions and our church leadership. And when you have scandals in news stories, it... causes people who are members to question that. And can I trust my leaders? Can I trust the people who are supposed to protect us? Can I trust the people who are supposed to be there to defend us and, you know, make sure our rights are protected and all of that? There's, there are great reasons to be skeptical, but what I would encourage people to think about is, Hey, we live in an amazing country. We live in the best country in the world. We won the lottery essentially. And God intended for us to be in this country, which is amazing. That also affords us the opportunity.

Mark Jones (49:06.392)

That's right.

Conner Jones (49:11.783)

many of us to be able to travel the world and share the gospel and share it on campuses around the country. I would encourage people as if you're skeptical to one, continue to press transparency within government or within your church or your university. I think our government has gotten better at that. We've had senators and congressmen pressing bills for information, essentially accountability. We've seen this recently with even the Secret Service.

Having to step up in accountability, we've seen this with the freedom of information act really coming into play with a lot of journalism. And I would encourage if you want to make a difference within your institution, I would encourage you to step up in a leadership role. That could be stepping up in the church or on your university campus, stepping up into a leadership role within the university or in a club of sorts. And it could even be local politics or bigger politics, if you want to make a difference and you want to see accountability and transparency, go be a part of it. That's one thing I think we could definitely encourage.

Mark Jones (50:13.174)

Yeah, that's a good word. Yeah. Good word about not hiding, not putting your head in the sand, but let's, maybe a weapon against that cynicism is becoming more informed and more active. And I think this generation is willing to step in and learn more. And I think for us to kind of say it, it doesn't need to be us turning over cars and that activism doesn't need to be destructive.

Mark Turman (50:16.092)

Yeah, yeah, good point.

Conner Jones (50:42.432)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (50:43.326)

Being active or being involved in the dialogue and the discussion is a healthy thing. we, I guess as leaders, we encourage that engagement and involvement. I sure want our Christian leaders to be involved in student government, our Christian leaders to be involved in places where they're speaking truth amidst different parts of the culture, right? I mean, we always say that

Mark Turman (51:09.8)

Hmm. Yeah.

Mark Jones (51:12.108)

We sure would love our godly men and women to be involved in fraternities and sororities so that they're affecting those future leaders that are in the Greek system. Well, we want that same thing within dialogue and government learning more, you know, that press to go beyond. And I just think that unfortunately, we're very, this generation is spiritually and probably politically interested and conscious, but pretty illiterate when it comes to deeper issues. And so how do we encourage a deeper dive into, know, when I thought about preparing for this, when it comes to not just listening to sound bites, but really understanding policy, really understanding it say, do you really know what, you know, what, Donald Trump or JD Vance or Kamala Harris or Waltz, what do they really stand for? What is their history? What is their

What are they really saying beyond what little snippet you've heard? That call to move beyond the, and I think that skepticism can lead to a paralysis if we're not careful. I don't know what, I'm hearing so many voices that I don't know what to believe. And that maybe that call to go deeper, that may sound simplistic, but there's that call to go deeper is a pretty strong.

Conner Jones (52:33.877)

Yeah, that's a great point, Mark. One of the... go ahead, Micah.

Micah Tomasella (52:34.172)

I'll be brief here, Mark. Yeah. go ahead.

Mark Turman (52:37.64)

Go ahead, ahead, Michael.

Micah Tomasella (52:39.484)

Yeah, I was just going to say if we're going back to the Thanksgiving table, and I would challenge you, I would challenge anybody kind of in the generations above us that have been here a little bit longer as you're leading your families in discussions, as you're the matriarch and patriarch of your family, as you have influence that you've earned through the way that you've lived your life, understand that your words matter. Understand that when you're speaking in front of

Mark Jones (53:05.966)

Good.

Micah Tomasella (53:09.25)

Millennials, Gen Z, Gen Alpha, which is the younger generation, why speak as if everything is over? Why speak so doom and gloom? Why speak so negatively? That makes an impact. It makes a difference. then the second thing that I would say is that just like in sin with shame cycles and stuff, we think that beating ourselves up is going to improve our performance, help us from

Mark Jones (53:21.89)

Yeah, well said.

Micah Tomasella (53:36.382)

not doing that sin anymore or stopping that habit, but instead it's operating out of a place of grace and understand the sacrifice that's been made for you and how it hasn't been about what you've done or not done. It's all been about what Jesus has done for you, right? And so when we as believers are working through politics and thinking about politics, the enemy's tactic is to get you so discouraged that you

Mark Jones (53:44.643)

Mmm.

Micah Tomasella (54:00.766)

Either just dig your heels in and don't listen to anybody else and it can almost become your identity of how you associate yourself with your politics and your religion. But then also the

tactic is that we would just bury our head in sand like Mark said. That we would just give up. That's the tactic that we do not need to give into. There is hope. There are reasons for hope and ultimately our hope is Jesus. But on top of that, there's a lot of encouraging trends out there too. So don't grow so discouraged. If you do,

You'll do the wrong thing.

Mark Turman (54:31.688)

Yeah, because either, either one of those options, Micah that you laid out are really, fear, fear-based responses rather than faith-based responses. And that's what the devil's trying to get us to buy into. And, as y'all were talking about activism that, you know, one of the things you'll learn, if you do decide to go get involved is, is you'll learn out, you'll learn that some of these problems are really complex. And, if you've ever tried to get four people to agree on where you were going to go to dinner on a Friday night.

Conner Jones (54:55.51)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Turman (55:00.176)

You know some about what complexity is like add that by a very large factor, you know, whether you're in a church or you're in a business or you're in a country thing, it doesn't mean that you can't work on and make things better, but a lot of these issues are complex. All right. Last question. I'm going to let's turn this thing all the way around and let's say that any one of us was going to get to talk to, I don't care 50 or 500 college students that are going to be going home for Thanksgiving.

Micah Tomasella (55:01.433)

goodness gracious.

Mark Turman (55:29.372)

And these college students have things on their minds. They have things that they're afraid of things that they really believe in things that they want to talk about. What is your advice to college kids about how they start or participate in conversations when they get their apple pie or their pecan pie and they sit down at the table? What do those emerging adults need to remember?

Conner Jones (55:58.423)

Well, I I said it a little bit earlier, but I think you really have to remember if you're, if you're an emerging adult and you're a believer already. Remember there are biblical truths to stick to, but I would say stay open-minded on other things. Everybody has a different perspective. Everybody grew up differently. We all come from different backgrounds, different ethnicities. So that is

going to be a, you know, a table setter here. People out. Why do you think this way? What cause what, what in your, you know, young adulthood, or if it's an older person, what over the decades has brought you to this point where you think of it in this way, and they may see something totally different than you. And that's okay. But stick to the biblical truths, remain open-minded and go get educated on whatever the topics are that you don't know much about. I would say the best way to do it is honestly, if you're speaking of candidates specifically, go check out their websites, read about their policies. But I would say one of the best things you can do to get educated, to actually listen in to podcasts. and that's because they're long form conversations similar to this. If that's about candidates, go listen to candidates on podcasts. that's about just some specific topic or issue, type it into Google, type it into Spotify or Apple podcasts, and just listen to podcasts on it. Listen to experts and get educated. And you know, you'll, you'll, you'll find yourself maybe leaning into different directions just because you're learning a new perspective.

Mark Jones (57:14.712)

Good thought.

Conner Jones (57:23.681)

And I think that'll make, you know, conversations with your parents, grandparents, or anybody else much smoother. And, know, it'll be, you may come to a general conclusion or an agree to disagree and that's okay.

Mark Turman (57:34.588)

Yeah. Good word. Good word. Micah Mark suggestions for these college kids.

Mark Jones (57:36.716)

That's not that. That was so good. I mean, that's that's that's about what I would say. And don't go in with the idea that you're going to change anybody's mind in a in a Thanksgiving Day conversation. I think you go in with with I want to learn and grow. I'm not there to dogmatically, you know, because there's so much emotion that can be involved on either side.

Conner Jones (58:02.699)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (58:04.28)

you know, for a young adult to come in and come hard at their grandparent or their parent, it does it. It seems to question their, it's questioning that older adults identity and how they raise their kids and the priorities and those things. And we can become, at our age, we can become defensive also. We can allow emotion to dictate. So I think that call to be

I want to learn, I want to share kind what I'm wrestling with or what I'm thinking, some of my beliefs, but I also want to do it in a way that I'm not attacking that other person and where they're coming

Micah Tomasella (58:46.846)

So I would just say, Mark, Connor, those are great. I'll take a little bit of a different perspective and just kind of your mindset going into it. I would say first and foremost, if you're in Christ, be prayerful about it. Be prayerful about the discussions. We all have our own family situations. If I'm speaking on my own, personally, it's just not worth it. I want to be in relationship with this person. I want to show respect to parents.

Conner Jones (59:00.139)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (59:08.3)

Yeah.

Mark Turman (59:09.35)

Yeah.

Mark Jones (59:14.882)

What's the end game? What's the end game? I don't want to destroy a race.

Micah Tomasella (59:16.37)

grandparents, aunts, uncles, right. I'm not gonna change the world by convincing them to change their minds. I'm not saying that you give up and I'm not saying that there shouldn't be accountability for things that are said that are just outright sinful or wrong. But at the same time, I would say pick your battles and choose peace. Choose peace. Talk about the football game. Talk about the food. Talk about things in your life that you're grateful for, that you're thankful for. Talk about, I love being with my family. Choose that.

Mark Jones (59:29.24)

Right.

Conner Jones (59:34.741)

Mm-hmm.

Mark Jones (59:38.24)

It's just not worth it. That means to

Micah Tomasella (59:45.316)

As opposed to trying to convince somebody else who they should vote for or if they should change their mind on whatever stance they fall on. Choose peace and just be prayerful about the process and remember younger generation, me too, reminding myself, sometimes it's just not worth it.

Mark Turman (01:00:01.864)

No. Yeah. No, it's yeah. Yeah. R relationship over, over politics, but you know, at the same time, I, it comes to mind what, what you read about in Paul's letters to young pastors, Timothy and to Titus, you know, he's, he's very clear to, to say to them, look, you're younger, recognize that you're younger. And he says, relate to older people as if they were your parents.

Mark Jones (01:00:02.552)

That's so good.

Conner Jones (01:00:02.7)

It's not. Don't damage relationships over politics. It's not worth it.

Mark Jones (01:00:05.516)

Right, right.

Mark Turman (01:00:30.724)

as if they were your father, your mother relate to those that are your age as, brothers and sisters in Christ. And he's very clear about understanding some of the generational dynamics and differences. It's, know, it's not a level playing field between generations, you know, usually, because, younger people look up to, to their parents and grandparents in different ways. Oftentimes they're like, well, you made it through. wonder if I can make it through.

Mark Jones (01:00:59.372)

Mmm. Mmm.

Mark Turman (01:01:00.45)

Or you did it all wrong. I'm going to do it the opposite of the way that you did it. something like that. So, recognizing that if we all walk in with the humility, and with a desire for relationship, not to be right all the time, or to exercise our rights, if we can walk in saying, we're going to prioritize relationship over some of these other conversations and over the idea of me being right when the day is over.

I think we'll come out with a better outcome. Guys, thank you for the conversation and for the coffee that I got to enjoy while we were talking. And we'll add in our show notes, some of the

articles that we've mentioned, as well as some other resources that we hope will help you to understand different generations, particularly Gen Z and that your conversations about politics and other things will be transformative, will be God honoring, and will be helpful to you.

and to those that you're talking with. We'll see you next time on the Denison Forum Podcast. Thanks for listening.

Mark Jones (01:02:05.592)

Thank you, man.

Conner Jones (01:02:06.7)

Thanks, Mark.