

KINGDOM  **conversations**

KINGDOM AND COUNTRY

**FOLLOWING JESUS IN
THE LAND THAT YOU LOVE**

ANGIE WARD, GENERAL EDITOR

Kingdom and Country is an unflinching, courageous work. In confronting the beast that is Christian nationalism, the authors do so with great wisdom, honesty, and humility. Drawing on crucial concepts like the nature of allegiance, the myths of our country's origin, and the importance of the pulpit in national and Kingdom life, this book will be a great source of wisdom and a companion on the journey to faithful witness and Kingdom living.

LISA RODRIGUEZ-WATSON, national director of Missio Alliance

While many seek to collapse Kingdom and country into one or remove concern for country from those dedicated to Kingdom, this new work edited by Angie Ward seeks to clarify what is at stake in the discourse today about Christian nationalism. In this integrative work, authors take theological frameworks as the foundation for practical engagement in our world. Is polarization our fundamental problem, or is it injustice? We are divided, yes, but is all division unfaithful? And how do we discern what makes for peace? What is needed to reclaim our Christian identity and vocation from nationalistic narratives in order to bear witness to God's Kingdom in a country coming apart at the seams? *Kingdom and Country* calls and equips the church to discern well how to embody a redemptive presence in the places where rectification and reconciliation are needed most.

REV. MATT TEBBE, cofounder of Gravity Leadership, copastor at The Table, and coauthor of *Having the Mind of Christ: Eight Axioms to Cultivate a Robust Faith*

Angie Ward has assembled a group of diverse, experienced, and influential contributors who articulate the central issues in our nation's divides. Many Christians today have forgotten that this world is not our home. We have placed our hope not in Jesus but in politics, powers, and principalities. As you read this book, you will be reminded and challenged that we live not just for this temporal reality; we live purposefully now to advance the Kingdom of God.

MATTHEW D. KIM, George F. Bennett professor of preaching and practical theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, author of *Preaching to People in Pain*, and coauthor of *Preaching to a Divided Nation*

This may be the most critical conversation for the American church right now. Unflinching and full of love, Dr. Ward and her team address the elephants in our room with wisdom, nuance, and much-needed biblical truth. Every pastor should read this book!

ROB BRENDLE, pastor, author of *In the Meantime: The Practice of Proactive Waiting*

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INTRODUCTION

“THE NEXT BOOK in the Kingdom Conversations series will be *Kingdom and Country*,” I’d explain. The responses became predictable—and, I’ll admit, mildly amusing.

An arched brow. A bemused smirk. A slight tilt of the head, not unlike the look my dog gives me when he thinks I’m crazy.

“Kingdom and country. Really?!”

“Ooh. Wow.”

“That will be . . . *interesting*.”

Perhaps you had the same response when you picked up this book. You are wondering what it will say, where you will agree or disagree, whether it might make you angry. (*Caveat lector*: It might.)

So why would we dare to publish a book about Christian nationalism? Why poke the bear? Why enter where angels seemingly fear to tread?

Either because we are completely foolish, or because a book like this is absolutely necessary for those of us who

claim to be followers of Christ at this moment in history. I'd suggest it's the latter, but maybe it's a little of both. Read it and decide for yourself.

The last US presidential election cycle was perhaps the most polarized—and divisive—in history. Of course, we said that about the election before that. And the one before that. Which means that the next one will be even worse than the last one. And this is not just happening in the United States. Our world is fracturing along multiple fault lines. The rifts are growing deeper. We've gone beyond name-calling to questioning character and Christian integrity.

What can we do to stop the madness?

Let's start by calling out the elephant—wait, bad political metaphor—let's name the things that are dividing us. Let's look together at Scripture, theology, history, and Jesus' example, and at what they have to say to us today. And let's get personal—as in, looking at ourselves, examining our temptations to participate in partisanship and to pursue power, and how these affect the trajectory of our hearts and the power of our witness.

In keeping with the spirit and tone of the Kingdom Conversations series, when curating the group of contributors for this book, we looked for women and men who were first and foremost disciples of Christ, servants of the King of kings.

We sought authors, teachers, and pastors who balanced boldness with humility. And we wanted voices who could speak from deep wells of expertise and personal experience.

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They went above and beyond our wildest hopes. The result is a thought-provoking—and eyebrow-raising, head-tilting, perhaps even gut-punching, yet ever-gracious—collective challenge to consider how we as Christians can and must follow Jesus in the land that we love.

Rod Wilson begins by asking if we can even talk about charged topics, using the lens of a true-to-life small group to help us see why these conversations are so challenging. Next, Karen Wilk outlines a compelling theology of the Kingdom of God, painting a powerful picture of the Kingdom near, here, and now.

Ryan Tafilowski follows with an overview of the church's mixed relationship to worldly powers and principalities over the course of history. What can we learn from those who have gone before? In a similar vein, Derek Vreeland reminds us, as the modern people of God, of the rhythms of the ancient people of God—the people of Israel—as they navigated the tensions of living under human governance yet under God's ultimate authority.

Sean Palmer makes it more personal, challenging our understanding and declarations of allegiance. Michelle Reyes then explores the concept of national narratives, and how we are shaped by the mythology and ethos of where we grew up. Tina Boesch—no stranger to life as a foreigner—delves into what it means to live as dual citizens of heaven and earth. And Alejandro Mandes calls us to love those we classify as “other” as our brothers and sisters, fellow image-bearers of God.

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Juliet Liu then takes the discussion into the local church. What should a gospel politic look like for pastors and parishioners? Finally, Mandy Smith leads us in a liturgy of humility and a pledge of Kingdom citizenship.

I invite you to join your fellow Kingdom sojourners on this road toward hope and healing.

Angie Ward

GENERAL EDITOR

1

CAN WE HAVE A CONVERSATION?

Rod Wilson

IT HAS BEEN A SAD SEASON in the life of the Brownlee Home Group at Thornbury Community Church.

Before the US presidential primaries of 2016, members enjoyed each other's company, discussed biblical issues thoughtfully, and appreciated the shared support. But in recent years, they have stopped meeting regularly. Many of them do not speak to each other, and respectful dialogue between them has ceased.

Some see Fred's anger as a significant contributor to the fracture. As their conversations have drifted into the political realm, he has become increasingly enraged. For him, Christians should have nothing to do with politics. God's

Kingdom is separate and distinct and has nothing to do with what is happening in Washington.

Sharlene's angst has resulted in some group members feeling like they cannot share anymore. Immigration preoccupies Sharlene, and she fears that the liberal left will create a country of lawlessness. Every discussion ends up at immigration for Sharlene, and her anxiety has stifled conversation.

The mere mention of Donald Trump's name triggers Graham. Throughout the 2016 and 2020 elections, his rants caused group members to be concerned for his health. They had hoped that the election of Joe Biden would bring an end to Graham's preoccupation, but it became easier to avoid attending the group than listen to his endless diatribes.

Letisha has strong feelings about pastors speaking directly and at length about political matters. Her opinion is that the pulpit is the place to be clear about the issues and the candidates during election time. While some participants agreed with her perspective, her obsession with the topic wearied them.

Fred's anger, Sharlene's angst, Graham's triggers, and Letisha's opinions all converged to create an environment in which conversation became nearly impossible. Being Christians with a shared love for the Lord did not seem to provide an adequate foundation for the Brownlee Home Group to engage in fruitful dialogue despite their political differences.

Sound familiar?

We live in a politicized time. And make no mistake:

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Political issues matter. They are tied to our deepest beliefs and values. Political decisions have the potential to affect so much of our lives. We wonder: *Can we still be ourselves? Will we be able to engage in our usual activities, or will those be taken away from us? Might political decisions influence what we have or do not have?* When there is a chance that our ways of being, doing, and having might be changed, it is no wonder that we experience a strong emotional response.

Yet as Christians we are called—even commanded—to live in community with others and to love others, even when we do not share the same values or perspectives. How can we do this when we can't even talk to one another?

As we embark on a conversation about Kingdom and country, let's start with the example of Jesus and then revisit the Brownlee Home Group with principles that can help us learn how to engage in honest and loving dialogue.

Jesus Chose Conversation

John 4 tells the story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. It's a familiar passage: On a journey from Judea to Galilee, Jesus chose to travel through the region of Samaria, where he stopped at a well in the town of Sychar. While resting there in the heat of midday, he interacted with a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water.

There were multiple reasons why Jesus and the woman shouldn't even have talked. It was unthinkable for Jesus, a Jewish male, to talk publicly to a Samaritan woman in the middle of the day. Even though going through Samaria was

the shortest route to get from Jerusalem to Galilee, any self-respecting Jew knew that doing so would lead to defilement through contact with an ethnic group that didn't share their values, participated in syncretistic worship, and taught that Mount Gerizim (not Jerusalem) was the proper place to worship. It might have made for a longer walk, but Jews were supposed to go around Samaria. The guideline was clear: Don't associate with people who don't share your socio-political-religious convictions.

And all this was only the context. The woman herself had significant challenges from her marriages and sexual history. A righteous rabbi in dialogue with a woman of questionable character? It was unthinkable to those in Jesus' day.

How did Jesus navigate this situation? Through a conversation.

He could have (and by cultural and religious dictates *should* have) avoided associating with her. Maybe he could have preached, lectured, or taught her, from a distance. Possibly a group could have gathered, and he could have presented a seminar. But Jesus chose to give her the dignity of interaction, the gift of a listening ear, the context of conversation to speak truth. Not only did the woman turn toward life but she became an evangelist, leading many to Christ and causing the Samaritans to invite Jesus to stay longer.

This is only one example of many in Scripture where Jesus chose conversation, not disengagement or diatribe. Think of his interactions with the crippled beggar, the rich young ruler, tax collectors and sinners, even the Pharisees and those

who wanted to kill him. What principles can guide us to engage similarly in Christlike conversation about difficult topics?

Balance the Truth with the Way

When people speak of a “Christian” viewpoint on politics, they are usually referencing what they view as the truth, not the nature of the conversation itself. They purport to have a theological conviction or biblical passage that forms the basis of their belief yet often miss the significance of the method of communication. But as Eugene Peterson writes:

The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life. We can't proclaim the Jesus truth but do it any old way we like. Nor can we follow the Jesus way without speaking the Jesus truth.

But Jesus as the truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. . . . We cannot skip the way of Jesus in our hurry to get the truth of Jesus.¹

Quality conversations should balance *conviction* with *curiosity*. They can be a venue for the expression of conviction, where we can state our views, provide a rationale, use understandable language, and do so respectfully. But they should also be characterized by curiosity in our willingness to be fully present, listen with vigilance, postpone evaluation, and seek understanding. Life will only be evident if truth is

believed and practiced in a way that is congruous with that truth.

In the Brownlee Home Group, it was clear to everyone that Letisha had strong opinions on what pastors should do during the lead-up to an election. The problem was that despite her claims, there is no biblical directive that would lead everyone else to such a conclusion. Furthermore, her conclusiveness on her conclusions made any form of conversation a door closer.

Three Latin words will help us lay a foundation for reflecting on quality interaction.

Controversia, from which we get our word *controversial*, means “turned in an opposite direction” or “turned against” something.²

Contentionem, the source of our word *contentious*, is “a vigorous struggling, a contest, a fight.”³

Conversari, like *conversation*, describes associating with others.

People have diverse beliefs, hold discrepant ethical convictions, and vote for different parties. Democracy, by its very nature, allows for these realities. The question is how we should deal with these dissimilar approaches. Do we adopt a contentious spirit, where we fight and scuffle as if we are in a battle with our fellow citizens? Or do we associate with people, engage in conversation, and participate in respectful dialogue?

Practicing the latter reflects an understanding that all people are fallen image-bearers, made of strength and struggle,

gifts and grime. Not just those who are like me and share my political leanings, but *all* people. Disrespecting someone by not engaging in conversation with them is a loud statement on what we think of their Maker (Proverbs 14:31; 17:5; James 3:9-10).

With a commitment to conversation and associating with others, our mode of engagement becomes clearer. While diatribe and debate may have their place in human interaction, discourse and dialogue allow for more cooperative interchange.⁴ If Letisha could deliver substantive information from history through a discourse that allowed others to understand the source of her opinions, that would ease the tension in the group. Better yet, if she allowed for two-way, cooperative dialogue where information was exchanged both ways, group conversations on what pastors should do during elections would be much less contentious.

Manage Our Emotions

Because God created us in his image, it is not a surprise that we experience and express emotions. Our capacity to feel is one of the ways we mirror our Creator. But poorly managed emotions can shut down the conversational ideal presented by Jesus. When subjects are controversial and contentious, interaction can become unproductive and dialogue muted.

The apostle Paul exhorts Christians, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). We cannot control what others think or believe, or how they respond to our words. We can only manage our

own emotions and behaviors, helping to create an environment that is safe for everyone to participate.

Managing Anger

It wouldn't be appropriate for the other members of the Brownlee Home Group to criticize Fred because he feels anger. Some social scientists argue that there are six primary emotions—love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear.⁵ Fred's rage reflects his humanity. But is his anger Christian, loving, and a conversation facilitator? One of the best ways to answer this question is to explore the Greek text of the New Testament. Its clarity and specificity shine a light on the various facets of anger.

The biblical text is direct in describing what happened when the disciples rebuked the people bringing children to have Jesus touch them: "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant" (Mark 10:14). The Greek word translated "was indignant" (*aganakteō*) communicates a sense of irritation, grief, and annoyance at what someone else has done, particularly if it is unjust. The lack of compassion demonstrated by the disciples irritated Jesus, for a good reason. It wasn't a petty issue that bothered him, but something that violated the clear teaching of the gospel that children and other marginalized groups should be treated with respect and offered hospitality.⁶

Earlier in Mark's Gospel, Jesus was going to heal a man with a shriveled hand, but the religious people reminded him that this should not happen on the Sabbath. Again, the

biblical text is clear on Jesus' anger: "He looked around at them in anger . . . deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts" (Mark 3:5). Disturbed by the stubbornness of people who should know better, Jesus expressed anger—this time the word used is *orgē* (pronounced *or-gay*), an emotion that indicates a settled judgment.

Jesus' anger did not contain personal animosity or vengeance as he confronted the offense. Paul's reminder in Ephesians 4:31—"Get rid of all . . . anger [*orgē*]"—as well as his caution in Ephesians 4:26—"In your anger [*orgizō*] do not sin"—show us that to experience frustration and distress with someone is not inherently sinful. But it will move this way if we are not mindful of the need for righteous expression.

While acknowledging irritation and settled judgment, the Bible also speaks of exasperation, or *parorgismos*: a slow, smoldering irritation that is not a full-blown rage but is part of the anger repertoire. Paul says, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry [*parorgismos*], and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26-27). It is not that we should never go to bed angry. But if we cultivate exasperation over time, we can expect this to be an invitation to the devil to do his work. Being occasionally irritated is both appropriate and human, but excessively nurturing this feeling is dangerous.

While *parorgismos* is a sort of exasperation, *thymos* is an all-encompassing body rage and temper. It is an emotion that exhibits no control or self-discipline but lashes out at the other person in a completely inappropriate way. Like the

striking of a match, this anger flares up with a boiling, turbulent commotion before it simmers down. Many of us have experienced this emotion, the cruel, demeaning attitude that lacks love and respect. Paul indicates that we are to “get rid of all . . . rage [*thymos*]” (Ephesians 4:31). The Bible never condones unbridled temper or uncontrolled rage.

Fred feels strongly about the relationship of Christianity and politics, but he has not learned the grace of thoughtful indignation or settled judgment. Instead, he has opted for long-held exasperation with large doses of rage. Whatever the merits of his position may be, his mode of expression is neither Christian nor facilitative of conversation.⁷

Managing Angst

Meanwhile, when group members talked about Sharlene’s preoccupation with immigration policies and her constant references to crimes committed by noncitizens, they used words like *anxiety*, *fear*, and *angst*. No one was trying to give a precise technical definition. They knew that she was obsessed with the topic. Every discussion moved in that direction, with high-strung emotion and normal conversation ground to a halt.

Fear is a response to a specific threat that is real or imagined. That is why phrases like “fear of flying,” “fear of public speaking,” or “fear of snakes” indicate a sense of danger. Anxiety, in contrast, is more of a free-floating emotion of unease and nervousness. Being anxious about the stock market or our child’s vocational choice is usually more general

and lacks a particular focus. Angst may be best described as an inner emotional turmoil that includes apprehension and concern with threads of fear and anxiety.⁸

These various windows into emotion are all characterized by three things:

- questions of *What if . . . ?*;
- a feeling of loss of control; and
- lack of clarity on the consequences of decisions.

When Sharlene thinks about immigration, she immediately completes the *What if . . . ?* phrase with *all the criminals arrive*, or *we lose our founding principles as a country*, or *our Christian faith gets marginalized*. In previous years she felt comfortable with her place in the culture, but now Sharlene feels out of control. She lacks confidence, control, and clarity—and she cannot do anything about it.

In the group, Sharlene gets amped up as if she has an excessive electrical charge. Little does she realize the impact of this behavior on the group. When an individual does not steward their angst well in a group context, several things ensue. There is less likelihood of dissent and a propensity to keep quiet, along with a decrease in questioning and challenging because topics seem threatening. Indecisiveness overcomes the group, and frustration permeates the ethos. Conversation is muted, and the angst becomes contagious.⁹

In the North American context, electrical voltage comes into our homes and offices at 120 volts. Most of our cell

phones require 5 volts to function effectively. Within the charger, there is a small transformer that converts the 120 volts to 5 volts. Otherwise, the phone would burn up. In electrical terms, this is a step-down process, whereby extreme power is taken down to aid the proper functioning of the cell phone.

Like the rest of us, Sharlene is exposed to a massive amount of socio-cultural and political information through various media. This powerful communication is loud, excessive, and fear-facilitating. If this power is not stepped down, it quickly amps us up and becomes a barrier to good conversation. Sharlene comes to the group wired, bringing 120 volts into the room, and now everyone is fried. How can she bring down the voltage?

Sharlene may need to put parameters around how much news she consumes every day. Building in some quiet, reflective prayer after hearing reports on immigration will put the picture in the right frame. Even a time of silence before small group, with an internal commitment to stay with the night's topic, will provide essential management.

Because angst can reflect fear, fear can mask threats, and threats can be deeply personal, Sharlene may also need to do some inner work. What is the source of her fear? Why is immigration so threatening? Finally, she may need to immerse herself in the biblical narrative. The trajectory from fear to faith is not a simple flip of the switch, where we move from the former to the latter. It is an ongoing journey where we bring our what-ifs to the only one who knows the rest of

the sentence. It is a daily commitment where we admit that only the Creator, not the created, is in control. It is a life of faith where we do not always see the consequences of human decisions.

Recognize the Effects of Our Own Story

God has designed each of us with a sophisticated system to help us process information, including what are commonly known as “triggers.” As you are reading this book, various parts of your brain are engaged. The thalamus is collecting and organizing all the information so two central areas of the brain can comprehend it. The amygdala or limbic system is the feeling brain, where various emotions are rooted and experienced. The thinking brain is the neocortex or prefrontal lobe system, where information is taken in and understood. Even as you read this paragraph, your brain organizes these various definitions, you experience emotion, and your comprehension is enhanced.

The hippocampus is closely linked to the amygdala and is the part of the brain that relates to memory. In other words, the emotions that flare up in the amygdala can be traced to historical memories. If you failed a neuroscience course as an undergraduate, you might be in fight-or-flight mode at this very moment! On the other hand, if you know little about the brain that God put inside you, you may be experiencing feelings of interest and curiosity. The amygdala and hippocampus are doing their job. Triggers are part of who we are.

As the amygdala and neocortex receive and process what

has been taken in by the thalamus, information is sent to the autonomic nervous system. Depending on the reaction, the body responds through changes in blood pressure, body temperature, pulse rate, and the like. A red face, quick breathing, and strong body movements may reflect a fight response. A flight reaction may show up in someone looking away or physically leaving the room. In addition, our memories of past events inform our thinking and feeling in the present moment, and that response shows up in bodily reactions when specific incidents occur or particular things are said. Typically, that leads to one of four responses: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. This is not just psychological mumbo jumbo. It is God's created design.¹⁰

Graham's reaction to Donald Trump was a real puzzle to the rest of the Brownlee Home Group. They landed on the trigger explanation because that was the best way to describe what happened. Even if somebody just mentioned Trump's name in passing, you could see Graham breathe more quickly, tense his body, and then unleash a seething outburst. Discussion quickly ceased.

Graham grew up in poverty, and economic and interpersonal deprivation characterized his formative years. He defined himself as "less than" and "not enough." Gripped by shame, Graham always felt something was wrong with him, particularly in contrast to those who had money. His parents often talked about the "filthy rich" as the antithesis to their family. People with money, especially a lot of it, were

the enemy and a threat. Around the dinner table, Graham's parents often held the wealthy responsible for their poverty.

For Graham, Donald Trump was the exemplar of all that his family was not. While he did not know all the details of Trump's life, he knew one thing: It was rich people like him who made poor people feel worth less than them. Whether that narrative was true didn't matter. Graham's hippocampus was full of stories, his amygdala was firing at lightning speed, and his body was impacted significantly. His previous experience led him to feel belittled or neglected, which created a feeling of insecurity. He responded emotionally by putting up his fists and throwing the first punch.

Given Graham's backstory and the nature of triggers, it would be futile for the Home Group to simply tell him to stop getting upset at the mention of Trump's name. The path forward will require everyone's participation. Graham would benefit from examining his reaction and where it comes from. For many people, triggers based on memories are unconscious and require patient exploration. Meanwhile, the other members of the Home Group can continue to reassure Graham of their love for him and their commitment to walking together. The best response to triggers is not argument but safety.

An Invitation

You are about to enter a conversation with my fellow authors as they deal with politically charged subjects that have the potential to fracture and divide. In subsequent weeks and

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months, you will no doubt have continued opportunities to engage others on these matters in your own relationships. Fred, Sharlene, Graham, and Letisha are like all of us. How we recognize and manage our opinions, emotions, and triggers will significantly influence our ability to facilitate and participate in Christlike conversation. Let us choose the Jesus way, so our conversations with others are respectful and compassionate, infused with conviction and curiosity.