

Todd: Hey, Kristin. Great to have you today.

Kristin: Hi. It's great to be here.

Vanessa: Kristin, we're going to go ahead and jump right in. I would love for you to share a little bit with our listeners about your primary focus of research. When we talk about The Center for Formation, Justice and Peace, it might not come intuitively the links between the work that you do and justice and peace. We would love for you to talk about the implications that you've come across in issues of power and gender and patriarchy. And then maybe a little bit of your own story, how it led you to this kind of work.

Kristin: Sure, Sure. So I'll start with my own story actually. And I grew up in a Christian home in the reformed tradition. I went to Christian schools, went to Christian college and I had always been deeply interested in history, and then I went off to graduate school to study the history that I thought mattered most. And in my tradition, it was quite clear that was religious and intellectual history. So I went off to the University of Notre Dame to study Religious and Intellectual History and my first semester there, I was introduced to the study of gender and history. A professor shared a book on the history of women, and gender, and race and power (laughs) and my mind was blown.

Kristin: And I immediately, that week, changed my focus and picked a field in the study of women and gender. And I really haven't looked back because I realized, wait, this is the history that really matters, right? This is the history that matters in so many ways. And certainly in my own upbringing in a conservative Christian community, gender had always really been reduced to the issue of should women be ordained as ministers or not (laughs)? And that was what it was limited to. And what I understood in history, it's about so much more and it's intertwined with racial identity. It's intertwined with class and with power and all these kind of buzzwords, but I saw it as a historian, right? In how really it was just about people's lives and how this world worked.

Kristin: And for me as a Christian and as a Calvinist (laughs) who had always been told about sin (laughs) and about how we as humans have fallen--total depravity-- it's not just human sinfulness, but our structures, our institutions, our societies that also reflect that human fallenness. And we are called to seek Shalom and we are called to redeem that. And to me, a study of gender and race and power absolutely are part of that, understanding the fallenness of human society and understanding what we can do to bring things more in alignment with God's will for human flourishing. So I've always understood my research as the history of gender.

Kristin: It very much aligned with my own upbringing in a conservative Calvinist space. I don't know if all agree but that's my backstory. And I've then continued that research. My first book was on the history of Christian feminism, where I came to see that throughout Christian history, and for me as an Americanist throughout American history, there have been, devout, otherwise conservative Christians who read the scriptures in a way that undermines patriarchy, that sees that God's will for women and for men is not a

patriarchal rule. It is liberation. And just knowing that that was an interpretive possibility, I think freed me up personally.

Kristin: And then my second book is on the history of white evangelical masculinity and militarism. I think what was really important was not assuming that patriarchal authority was God ordained. And if you (laughs) simply hold that as a question that, you know, historical, that faithful Orthodox Christians can read the scriptures, take the scriptures seriously and read them in such a way that patriarchy is actually undermining God's will for women and men and is not, in fact, God ordained. If you just hold that as a possibility, then anytime you see patriarchy in history, in Christian history, in American history, it's something that needs to be explained. It can't just be accepted as well, of course, they're Christian.

Kristin: So that really describes a bit of the background of my research. And as I began to write the book, it became *Jesus and John Wayne*. First I thought that what I'm doing here is a pretty narrow project, right? Just telling the story of masculinity and militarism as they're intertwined. What I came to see (laughs), the more I researched, the more I started to write, is it was a lot bigger than that. It really was a book about power. It was a book about militancy. It was a book about the corruption of Christianity as I understood it.

Todd: So Kristin, knowing we were coming today, I was joking with Vanessa a little bit that I wonder if we would be pulling into a space that you're not normally (laughs) pulled into because this is The Center for Formation, Justice, and Peace.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: And those words are sequential to us, meaning that our working hypothesis is that most human beings don't consistently and fruitfully pursue justice because their hearts, their desires are formed in different directions.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: And of course there is no lasting peace without justice. So what we want to get to today is what we see in the overtones and undertones of your work. You've already mentioned power and patriarchy and that sort of thing as part of your work. So what would you say, having done all that research, what were patterns of inner brokenness that you were seeing either on the political power side or on the more sexual brokenness side, kind of in general, what kind of brokenness in hindsight were you observing?

Vanessa: Hmm.

Kristin: One of the patterns that I saw over and over again was the willingness of Christians to justify abuse, to justify abuse of power, to justify sexual abuse, to justify just really bad behavior in the name of protecting the mission of the organization, protecting the reputation of the pastor (who really didn't (laughs) deserve that reputation), protecting

the witness of the church. And I came across that language so often, and I started to see how much these abuses really were not placed at the feet of the perpetrators, although (laughs) there's plenty of blame there as well, but it was really unsettling to me to see how many good Christian people--respectable, good-hearted Christians--ended up doing some really terrible things in the name of defending their faith, defending their pastor, and defending the witness of the church.

Kristin: And it was really disturbing. Just time and again. These are not outliers, these situations, but patterns over and over again. Honestly my favorite line in the book is a quote that I have near the end from Rachael Denhollander. So Rachael Denhollander was the first witness in the Larry Nassar sexual abuse case who then turned her attention to abuse in evangelical spaces. And she has this powerful passage in her victim statement. And then a subsequent interview with Christianity Today from a few years back where she said, "I'm speaking directly to Christians who have this tendency to circle the wagons, to protect the witness." She says, "The gospel of Jesus Christ does not need your protection." Jesus does not ask for protection.

Kristin: Jesus only asks for obedience. And what does obedience look like? It's telling the truth and doing justice. And I (laughs) love that in the context of what she spoke but also I think in the context of my book (laughs), which is not just the history of sexual abuse in evangelical spaces, but really the last more than half a century of evangelical cultural and political engagement. This idea that we need to defend Christianity, we need to protect Christian America, ends up creating this kind of militant environment that the ends will justify the means.

Kristin: And as a person of faith, it ultimately ends up undermining the gospel of Christ, which is so revolutionary. So counter-cultural precisely because it rejects these human constructs of power and of coercion, right (laughs)? That's what's so radical about the Jesus of the gospels, and that's what continues to just shock and disturb his own followers, because he's not who they thought he would be. The Messiah doesn't look like what they always thought he would. He's not there to fight their battles.

Todd: Yeah. What I'm hearing, and what Kristin is saying is an unfortunate, but perhaps understandable conflation of Jesus and the precise mission of God in Jesus, as Kristin is explaining it.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: But a conflation with the church or the institution, the para-church or whatever. So protecting the church or the para-church gets equated in someone's mind as protecting Jesus, right?

Vanessa: Yes, yes.

Kristin: Exactly. And of course (laughs), here's the Calvinist in me coming out again too, right? We can very easily fool ourselves that what we're doing is for Jesus, it's for the body of

Christ when really it's for us, because if we happen to have our own interests tied up in our own church, in our own ministry, and our identity is tied up with this sense of righteousness, this sense of innocence, it can be very easy for us to justify all sorts of things in the name of Jesus, in the name of the church.

Vanessa: And to that end, I'm thinking about your perspective, Kristin, as a historian. I'm not entering into cycles that perpetuate this kind of harm, right?

Kristin: Yeah.

Vanessa: When you think back through the research that you did for your book, how might you finish this statement--thinking about being formed well to then do good work?

Kristin: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Vanessa: I wish that Christian leaders would have understood...

Kristin: Oh, I only get half a sentence for that? Uh, (laughs) let's see. I wish Christian leaders would stop trying to lead. I honestly have come to find the whole idea of leadership in Christian circles quite triggering to be honest (laughs) So much is done in the name of leadership or servant leadership which ends up justifying the consolidation of power. Usually for men, more usually for white men, to be honest. This is what biblical manhood is like, " Oh, you know, I have all the authority, I'm the leader. But it's for the good of my wife and children, it's for the good of this ministry, it's for the good of the church."

Kristin: I've just grown to be very skeptical of those claims. And if we look at Jesus (laughs), he doesn't call us to be leaders, really. He calls us to be followers. And I think so much emphasis has been placed on leadership in Christian circles and it really hasn't gone well. I'm open to the fact that maybe leadership can be redeemed but (laughs) it's gonna first have to go through a kind of deconstruction. I think the whole leadership industry needs a pretty holistic deconstruction (laughs) and see what might emerge out of those ashes.

Kristin: The other thing that I would say is we need to be much more skeptical of calls for deference--deference to authority that many leaders ask of community members in Christian circles. One of the things I came across over and over again in my research is this real emphasis on authority--who gets to wield authority--and it's a small number, it's this kind of pyramid scheme and all the rest must defer to the God-ordained authorities. Again, this is patriarchal authority, this is social hierarchies, this is religious hierarchies. And so much is allowed to happen that I think many people feel in their gut isn't right. But they self-censor, they don't speak the truth.

Kristin: They don't speak truth against what's happening, whether it's in their local church, whether it's in their ministry organization, whether it's in their network of pastors because they don't want to step on the toes of the person one rung or two rungs up on that hierarchy. Right? And you don't want to offend this pastor because then he's not

gonna blurb your book, or maybe you're never gonna get invited to the main stage of any particular event, or maybe you're gonna be accused of gossip or slander, or maybe you're gonna be accused of disrupting the unity of the church or of this local congregation. Right?

Kristin: I've just seen that so often, and what that has cumulatively led to is across the American Christian community (laughs), and my focus is particularly conservative white evangelicalism. There has been so much muzzling and then self-censoring that we are in this really unstable place where many people are deeply troubled by what their communities are doing, what their leaders are doing. And so many people don't feel like they can say something (laughs), that the consequences by this point are so far along, are going to be so great that they have no choice. I think it'd be much healthier if we had a very different model of civility and mutual respect. But not deferring to self appointed authorities. Right? And that has really caused a lot of harm. So we need more truth and we need more courage in our communities.

Vanessa: Yeah. I was just thinking about what you were talking about, people knowing intrinsically that something is wrong, something is off, something is amiss. It brings me back to a conversation that Todd and I had, our first reactions to reading your book were very, very different.

Todd: (Laughing).

Vanessa: Todd describes coming to this place of like, "Ugh, what do I... How do I... I don't know what to do or where to go from here and how do I be a part of something that moves us forward." I was so glad that I was listening to it audibly in the car, because if I had had it in my hands, usually I take notes in the margin, but if I'd had it in my hands, I would have thrown it across the room.

Todd: (Laughing).

Vanessa: So many times I just had this visceral reaction, like in my gut knowing, and having come through and lived during this time period. I mean, I was born in the early 80s. So knowing in my gut viscerally-

Todd: Yeah.

Vanessa: ... something is off, something is wrong here. And not having the words to kind of shape around it, but also Kristin, I feel like what you're speaking to is this, and it goes back to protection, but also this idea of like group think. I'm coming from more of a trauma informed perspective. So thinking-

Todd: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Vanessa: ... about how group think actually happens, how we merge with the thoughts and beliefs of people in a community. And I think that's what I hear you saying.

Todd: Yeah.

Kristin: I get several letters a day--I have ever since the book came out more than a year ago--from readers and so many of them (laughs) share their stories. They share their experiences in this community. Just today, I was reading one that was incredibly traumatic of a woman who was taught all of these things. She married an abusive husband, tried to bring the abuse to her pastor, to elders, and they just kept telling her, "You are called to submit, even if it means your death." And it's just so much personal trauma on that side.

Kristin: And then I also get a lot of letters from people who were deeply implicated and who are acknowledging their own complicity (laughs) in propping up these systems. And then there are people for whom both are true. So I think there's a lot that we need to reckon with. I will also say that many of the letters that I get are from people who say, I can't go public with this. They feel like they are still not in a place where they can challenge the members in their church, or they know what the costs are going to be because they've seen them.

Kristin: When people do speak out, they are ostracized. When a pastor speaks out, he is out of a job. Sometimes in their school or with their employer, they might say, "This is not okay." And they try to change this system and it's impossible. And before long--it usually (laughs) doesn't take all that long--they are unemployed, right? Things have been made so difficult for them that they feel they have no choice but to leave. And then they usually just leave quietly because they still have relationships and they want to respect the institutions and the mission. Again, always the mission (laughs). Over and over again this is happening and continues to happen in our churches, in our organizations. This is a very unhealthy system where so many people feel like they still cannot speak their truth or if they do the costs are going to be so enormous.

Todd: This is the first book I'd ever read, where I thought I have to talk to the author, I need help (laughing). Somebody needs to help me here. I don't know what to do. And I now have learned that she's gotten lots of letters like that-

Vanessa: Hmm.

Todd: ... but that was my response: what's the redemptive move here?

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: If you haven't read *Jesus and John Wayne*, one thing I love about Kristin is the scholarship is very careful. Your tone is very great, but it's relentless (laughs).

Vanessa: Hmm.

Todd: It's like page after page of, oh my gosh, it's so relentless.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: And I just felt like I couldn't unsee what I had seen through your eyes, meaning I lived it through some of the eyes that you're describing. But having seen it through those eyes, I just want it to be a part of a redemptive end to the story (laughs) if there is such a thing. I'm probably a little bit optimistic there but that was my goal.

Kristin: Yeah, no, I mean, the book is relentless in part because that's the story I had to tell. But also I've got to blame my publisher a little bit because it was actually my fault, but I'll still want to blame them. My original draft of this manuscript was 60,000 words over the limit (laughs). So there are a lot of stories that didn't make the cut in the end. I really had to be efficient and pack a lot in so it does have a very relentless feel because every sentence needs to be there. So that was part of a writerly process, which I think worked for this particular book. It is unrelenting. That's a good word for it.

Kristin: I will also say that I'm a historian, right? And so I wrote this book with a critical framing, the intro and the conclusion. I will also say a lot of people want to praise the book and say that it is totally objective. Look at her footnotes. Right? Fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. Now as a professional historian, I have to say that that is not true. There are a ton of facts there but all historians choose which facts to include. We frame them, we present them in a particular way, and there is no objectivity in the discipline of history. We're all very comfortable with that as historians (laughs). And so I usually kind of undercut that argument saying that there is a critical framing here.

Kristin: There absolutely is and I think I'm very upfront about that in the subtitle, if not (laughs) throughout the book. At the same time, I'm not offering that next step, right (laughs)? To do so, I'd be making stuff up. When I came to the end of the book and we were under a really tight timeline to turn it around in advance of the 2020 election--that was kind of our mandatory deadline (laughs)-- and at the very end of the writing process, editing process actually, my editor came to me and said, "Uh, Kristin, this is a really depressing book." And I was like, "It is."

Kristin: And then he said, you can't leave your readers there. And this is not a Christian publisher. And so I took that to heart and I took a look at the manuscript and I didn't know what to do. And so I wrote him back and I said, "You're right. It is. That's all I've got." This is what I have for you. And he said, okay, I respect that. And then about two days later, he writes back and he's like, Kristin, just give us something (laughs) like anything. So that's when I added the last sentence of the book. I reworked the end. And I struggled because I didn't want to give false hope. And honestly (laughs), I felt discouraged, incredibly discouraged by the time I wrapped up this narrative.

Kristin: I didn't know where it was going to end when I started this project. The deeper I got, the more concerned I became, the more disturbed I became (laughs). And so I didn't wanna give false hope and that's all I could muster that last sentence, "What was once done might also be undone." When I gave that to him I felt ridiculous. It just felt so insufficient

to the task. And he was like, fine, I'll take it and we called it good. And it went into production. Right? It was that kind of a turnaround. And I've heard from so many readers that that sentence has meant so much to them--readers just like you, right? Who have lived this life. But there is a power in history, right?

Kristin: There's a power to seeing how it was done because when you see how these decisions were made-- that none of this was inevitable--that things that were packaged and sold as timeless as God's will were not. We can see who did it and why. And usually it was because it enhanced their own personal power. Right? And once you see that happening, yes, it's distressing. It's disturbing, but it also means that it doesn't have to stay this way. And I think just knowing how that has happened in a way that has for so long been obscured and intentionally obscured by evangelicals themselves who really worked hard to control their own narratives, to present their own histories of themselves. Once we have this in front of us I think we are empowered to say this isn't where we have to be. This isn't where we have to stay. So what do we do differently? So that's about as hopeful as I can get as a historian. (laughs) Historians tend not to be a super hopeful bunch. But I do believe in the power of understanding how we got here. That is the first thing that is absolutely necessary for change if you wanna change what comes next. And then what that change looks like, that's where I have to pass the baton. I'll be part of that conversation, but that's where I really very quickly am up against the limits of my expertise. I can interpret things that have happened. I'm much less confident in telling people what they should be doing going forward, and that's where we need to bring a lot of us together. Right?

Kristin: Pastors, psychologists, other historians, and theologians. Absolutely. We need to be very sure that this is expansive. That we include not just white evangelicals and not just evangelicals. That this is an open conversation because part of how we got to where we are now was by closing down those conversations, by erecting racial barriers, and a religious boundary keeping that ended up centering things that should never have been centered as part of the gospel. Right? And so we really need to work hard to open up those conversations, and some of us maybe need to start doing a whole bunch more listening and a whole lot less speaking.

Kristin: And that applies probably particularly to white evangelical leaders--to get back to the question from a few minutes back of what should leaders do? I think for many leaders, the impulse to change is very good and right. But then I think there needs to be a kind of self interrogation. Who is actually called to lead this next step forward, and maybe some of those who got us to this place need to become followers and support those who are better equipped to lead.

Vanessa: So good.

Todd: I'm hearing that the disordered morals of so much of the story that Kristin tells us is really deep and broad-

Vanessa: Hmm.

Todd: ... but I'm learning something here, Kristin. I studied business in college and studied some marketing. And so I only know enough to be dangerous about branding and positioning and that sort of thing. But as I'm listening, it's just starkly coming to me, how much branding and specifically protecting the brand--I mean, that is a technical term--and marketing and PR.

Vanessa: Yes.

Todd: So not only institutions, but again, I'm old enough to know that we were taught actually to create a personal brand and so then nothing can impinge on that personal brand. Think of, as Kristin said, typically a white person in power. Let's say grooming a woman. So you've got all the moral barriers you have to go under in that part. And then you've got whatever comes after that, and then maybe it starts leaking out. And so now it just gets worse in that whole protecting of my personal brand.

Vanessa: Hmm. Yeah.

Todd: And so you're right. It's not just the people who know about it, sometimes even the guy himself, or what I've seen in my career the guy's wife, she does not want to be the one who brings down this ministry. So often won't even, "Tell on her husband," and so of course there's economics there and all kinds of stuff, but that notion of creating a brand, both institutionally and personally, and then doing anything come hell or high water to protect that brand. I remember now it's one of the things that came through in reading your book.

Kristin: Yeah. So I'll get a little spiritual here, which I don't often do in a podcast, but if you think about this whole instinct to protect the brand, it's taught, it's strategy. It's how to advance the gospel, how to evangelize. To me, it really does seem to exemplify a lack of faith. If you really believe in the power of God (laughs) and the Holy Spirit, this is not really on us, right (laughs)? What are we called to do? We are called to obedience. That's really what we're called to do. And to spread the good news.

Kristin: But like legit, good news, right (laughs)? Not fake, covered up, branded good news. Legit good news because people sense the difference. I had one Christian radio host actually ask me off-air after our interview. He asked, "Why do you think anybody who reads this book would want to become a Christian?" He was really struggling. He knew it was true. He's like, "Why are you putting this out there, really? Aren't we called to evangelize?" It was this protect the brand idea. And what I said (laughs) to him was, "Everybody sees through this sooner or later. And so what should we be doing as Christians? Just trying to patch it up and sell this false gospel or are we called to tell the truth, right?"

Kristin: And we need to be on the front lines saying, yes, this is the truth. And we are messed up. But we're going to point to something that isn't and we're going to try to do better. And you're going to see that we are different. We're different from all those people trying to polish their brand. And we need to have this deep confidence that that's going

to work and that it's not up to us. And that really seems to be missing here. So much fear. So much of this scurrying about, getting up your defenses, trying to control the situation, control the country, control the narrative and that's not actual faith, right? That's really giving into temptation. Real faith here is going to be trusting that God's going to take care of these things. And again, what we are called to do is much simpler and much harder in some ways because it goes against so many of our instincts.

Todd: So Kristin, we know that you're not an author on spiritual formation, you're a historian, but issues of malformed humanity or people with disordered desires, it's all through your book. You don't name them that way, the way we would, if we were teaching on spiritual formation.

Kristin: Right.

Todd: But as you know, this Center is focused on formation so that we say we want to be people who are formed well to love well.

Kristin: Yeah.

Todd: So can you say a bit about just as a Christian who thinks about these things, how would you see your work intersecting with the work we're trying to do in formation?

Kristin: Yeah. I think you could really see *Jesus and John Wayne* as a book about spiritual formation or spiritual malformation, as you suggested. (laughs) One of the fights that I'm taking on in *Jesus and John Wayne* is kind of an academic fight. Right up front I'm contesting what it is to be an evangelical, how we define evangelicalism and scholars of evangelicalism, who tends to be evangelicals themselves, many of them and leaders of evangelicalism. So the NEA, for example, will insist on defining evangelicalism according to its theology, right? So this is where you get biblicism, the authority of the scriptures, conversionism, the born again experience and crucicentrism, the centrality of the cross and then evangelism and activism, right? And this is what it is to be an evangelical--these lovely things.

Kristin: And what I understood as a cultural historian is that it doesn't really capture the essence of recent American evangelicalism. One of the first clues to me was the fact that the majority of black Protestants in America can check all of those theological boxes and the vast majority of black Protestants do not identify as evangelical, right? Because they know there's so much more to evangelicalism than this rubric, right? Where you just check those boxes. So what is it? We're really talking about cultural identity that is intertwined with this religious formation. But it is so intertwined that it's invisible to white evangelicals themselves who tend to exist in white evangelical spaces.

Kristin: So that their very distinctive understanding of Christianity is shaped by the white racial identity, right? Shaped by a particular, not just theological, but cultural inclinations. It ends up that they are absolutely convinced this is just generic Christianity. This is just the gospel. This is just biblical. That's how it's packaged and sold to them, but that's the key

is being packaged and sold. We're talking about cultural production here. So a huge part of my book is really on that cultural production. What is actually shaping the religious formation of a whole lot of American Christians.

Kristin: And that's where I started looking to Christian publishing, Christian magazines, Christian radio. Oh my goodness. Think about how many hours a day, a week the average white Christian woman might spend listening to a Christian radio station, right? That is religious formation. Televangelism, talk radio, whether it's religious talk radio or secular talk radio (laughs) and there's a lot of overlap there in terms of values and identity. These are the things again, hours a week. Now how many hours a week does the average evangelical spend listening to a sermon? Less than one, if that, and then keep in mind their pastor may well be listening to talk radio.

Kristin: This is how this works. And so if we want to understand American evangelicalism, we have to look at these sites of cultural production. We have to look at what is really shaping the values even though evangelicals themselves will want to claim it's just the holy scriptures. It's just the Bible, but no, they are approaching those scriptures with (laughs) highly defined lenses that they share in common, but lenses that are different from the lenses that many black Christians will bring, that many non-evangelicals will bring, right? Different from global Christians, right? But to many, this is just biblical Christianity.

Kristin: It's just God's truth. And so I think that if we pay a lot more attention to how people are formed spiritually, where this happens, what are those values, than we can ultimately have the tools all of us because we're all culturally situated, right? We all have our lenses. But if we talk across these differences, I think we will be able to have more tools to embrace more faithful understandings of the scriptures that are not just those that are consistent with our cultural blinders and that make us very comfortable because that's what we've (laughs) always told ourselves is true. So that's the kind of project that I think we need to be engaged in. And that's where history can help with that, talking across difference can work with that, but really understanding how religious values are formed today in a modern consumer culture is essential.

Vanessa: Absolutely. Absolutely. I want to shift us into our last question. But it comes really, really well on the heels of what you're describing. Where do you find that is taking place? Where are people being-- or at least pursuing different ways of being formed as a means of finding hope as a historian, kind of not having, not being a hopeful lot? But these places where we find people being well formed--where do you find God inviting you toward hope in that respect?

Kristin: I have some answers I could quickly throw your way, but honestly, it's kind of bleak right now. It is kind of bleak. The good things happen in small places, I think. And so personal relationships, relationships across the difference are absolutely essential here. Absolutely essential. And our churches are not set up well for that, our communities, our neighborhoods are not set up well for that. There are historical reasons. There are structural reasons. There are personal reasons that make it really difficult to have close,

trusting, meaningful relationships across all kinds of differences. But for those who do have those relationships, that is the place to start. But many people have to work really hard to make those happen.

Kristin: But otherwise, this formation, it has been so bad for so long and so much. Bad formation has been called good for so long. Christian publishing has some really good books out there, really good spiritual resources, and there is an awful lot of really terrible stuff out there, but they are all being promoted as God's word for you and people are gathering in small group Bible studies across this country. This is really funny because people in secular publishing have no idea that this even exists (laughs) so I try to tell my publisher about this whole world that's out there.

Kristin: And early on my editor was questioning some of my figures, publication numbers and in the Christian publishing world, he said, "These are inflated. Where did you get that number?" And it's from the New York Times. Well then it's legit, right (laughs)? Just no clue. And it's not just the numbers of these books that are sold, but how they're read, right? Because they're read by people in a church group and sometimes the pastor's leading, sometimes not, but they're read as God's truth. Right? Speaking to me, and they're often, so uncritically received in that way, and there is so much really terrible content.

Kristin: And there is so much money being made because this is an industry and we should never forget that. But those who are making money off of these ministries, it is in their financial interest to not disclose that (laughs), to not be upfront about that, but to just call it a ministry and to say, this is just God's word, this is evangelism. This is all good stuff. All of which is to say, (laughs), it's really hard to separate the wheat from the chaff. I will bring myself into this critique as well because one of the very strange things about this past year is I've moved in some ways from being just a historian, a kind of outsider critic telling this story to now a part of this world, just in a small way, right?

Kristin: Where now my book is being read in church groups (laughs), in small groups and it's moving through some of these same channels in the grassroots. And my book is selling and I get some royalties, right? I'm now living in this world that I've described in some ways. This is the world that God made. And we all live in a capitalist society but we just have to be really honest not to confuse our own desires or own justifications with what really is true evangelism, what really is God's ministry here. It's just tempting to conflate the two for all of us. I see this is a little divergent here, but to come back to where good things are happening.

Kristin: I think there's a lot of good things happening in small, small places. I think honestly, there's some really good things happening in bad spaces, if you want to call social media a bad space, right? There's a lot of useless stuff that happens out on Facebook and on Twitter and Instagram and stuff. Not great spiritual formation. Honestly, there's some really good, honest conversations happening in those spaces. And when I talked about the historical forces that make it really difficult for some of us where we're situated to

have relationships with people who are very different from us, social media means it's very easy for us to at least listen to people who are very different from us.

Kristin: And so there are new possibilities there as well, and I know that virtual communities are forming for support, for accountability, for conversation, for mutual challenging, to produce better fruit. So there are some glimmers of hope, but honestly, the forces working against this are really strong.

Vanessa: I appreciate your honesty and your candor to that question. Thank you.

Todd: I do too, but on Strengths Finder my number one strength is optimism (laughing). So I'm gonna bring you kicking and screaming as this careful thinking historian into some little glimmer of hope by asking you this question. Think of a letter or phone message or something you've received in the last 14 or so months. Tell us about a letter that gave you a little glimmer of hope.

Kristin: Okay. Here's one. This was a story shared on Twitter actually. It was a woman who talked about giving my book to her dad to read. Her dad was deeply enmeshed in this kind of Jesus and John Wayne Christianity. And I hear from a lot of readers who are really terrified--do I post on Facebook? Do I say something publicly about this book? Because again, the risks seem really steep. She had her dad read it and she said, "He fought you all the way through it. Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Three--all the way." They were texting back and forth or calling and he was totally not buying this.

Kristin: He was fighting all the way. And then he got to that last chapter. And she said after he finished that it broke him and he said to her, we need to talk. And I mean that (laughs) kind of thing for people who have absolutely embraced this value system, who have found meaning and purpose and goodness within this (laughs) system that has in fact done so much harm to others and possibly to themselves as well, the fact that they could honestly fight, right? Fight against this and hold onto their truths, but just even over the course of one book, and of course there's relationships here, right?

Kristin: There's a conversation with his daughter. There's an ongoing story here, but that he could over just a few chapters shift from absolutely not to "We need to talk" there's truth here. That's the story I come back to so many of times because I hear (laughs) from so many people who say I cannot ever give this to my dad. Right? (laughs) And that's a story that I come back to.

Todd: Well, I'm sure you've heard similar things over and over again. Vanessa wanting to throw the book across the room if she had it to me being so disturbed, I had to call you for (laughs) for some therapy. So on behalf of Vanessa and The Center, we just want to say thank you. I know you've gotten so much baloney but I really believe this is true. We can make headway in life if we know what's real. And God is in reality. He's not in our pretending. He's not in our ignorance. God is in what's real. And you've held up a mirror

to us to help us see what's real. And in that reality, I'm counting on God, meeting us there. And at least The Center is doing its little bit to try to form different sorts of Christian leaders.

Kristin: Yeah.

Vanessa: Amen.

Kristin: And thinking about what you said about having the book end not necessarily on a hopeful note, but coming from a historians perspective of taking seriously your responsibility to tell the truth and to put a spotlight on reality is so invitational and in a way embodies this idea of God being able to take over and take the rest from there and show us how now shall we live.

Todd: Yeah.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Kristin: Thank you. And thank you for your work. The hope that I have (laughs) is conversations like this, the work that you all are doing, and knowing that there are so many people out there who are asking these questions, who are doing the work, who are looking to do this work. The more we can find each other, the more we can strengthen each other, the more we can learn from each other, the better. So this does feel like a moment of crisis, but also a cathartic moment. That is really a good thing to bring into the light (laughs), right? To make this visible, to examine it, to hold it up, hold up the mirror and say, okay, this is what we're dealing with. It's not pretty, but now let's get to work.

Vanessa: Thank you so much.

Todd: Thanks for helping us do just that.

Kristin: Thank you. This was great.