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**Announce Russell Moore:** The Art of Leadership Network.

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**Carey Nieuwhof:** Welcome the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, it's Carey here and I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. Today's episode is brought to you by On the Rise, in my On The Rise newsletter this Friday, I'm curing to Gen Z trends that I think are going to surprise you to receive it. Go to [ontherisenewsletter.com](https://ontherisenewsletter.com) or visit the link in the episode description, and by TENX10. Take the two-minute TENX10 quiz to begin receiving free curated resources designed for your youth ministry needs visit [tenx10.org](https://tenx10.org).

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Today I sit down with Russell Moore. He has had quite the journey over the last little while and we go into the back story about leaving the Southern Baptist Convention, why normal leaders have stepped away from ministry and allowed sometimes the fringe to step into church leadership, the real reason the culture is rejecting the church weaponized nostalgia and the outrage cycle. Yeah, we go into a lot of places. Hey and just a quick note right up front.

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We're not bashing any tradition or denomination here, as you know, a lot of Southern Baptists listen to this podcast and I have a lot of friends who are Southern Baptists. I have a lot of friends who are not Southern Baptists and things change and people change. So what I'm trying to have is just a conversation about all the dynamics at play so that you and I can have a better understanding make sense Russell D Moore is the editor-in-chief of Christianity Today and the former president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

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He lives in Brentwood, author of many, many books, and I really appreciate it. This is my first conversation ever with Russell, so really happy to share it with you.

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So a quick question for you before we get started, a couple of them. What can the church do to grow resilient faith in Gen Z and the next generation? Well, this Friday, I'm going to share two interesting trends that you will need to be aware of if you're trying to reach the next generation. One trend, not so new, but really important, easy

to forget. The other, well, it's really going to surprise you. You can get it by subscribing to my On The Rise newsletter. It's my once-a-week newsletter, delivered every Friday. I feature what I consider to be the most fascinating and curious content about leadership, faith, and culture. Man, I share like sandwich shops and people go crazy for it. Best sandwich shops in every state, stuff like that. And then obviously some trends as well in our field of work. So if you want to start receiving On The Rise, you can visit [ontherisenewsletter.com](http://ontherisenewsletter.com). You can sign up for free. You can get it along with 100,000 other leaders every single Friday. The content is exclusive. It is published nowhere else and it isn't available after it's being sent. So just go to [ontherisenewsletter.com](http://ontherisenewsletter.com). You can sign up when you sign up. I'll send you a sample newsletter. You can get an instant taste of what it's like then speaking of the Next Generation TENX10 is a collaborative initiative providing free and strategic resources. Did I say free? I think so to reorient how we disciple young people.

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And now I hate I just want to say welcome to all the new listeners man. We've had a ton of new listeners on the podcast lately. If you enjoy episodes like this, please tell your friends because that allows us to bring you the best conversations and we really appreciate it leave a rating and review but now without much further Ado. Let's dive into my conversation with Russell Moore.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Russell. Welcome to the podcast.

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Thanks for having me good to be with you.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So you were raised in a pretty classic strict conservative upbringing. Is that fair to say

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, of course, everything's relative. And I would say, yes, by most people's definition, but I knew people who were in much, much stricter sorts

of religious backgrounds at the time. And we were considered to be kind of loose and freewheeling to them.

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So I guess...

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Oh, you were the apostate liberals, were you?

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Yeah, because we watched television and things like that.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So let's... I don't think we've had, you know, 600 episodes in, I don't think we've had this conversation before. Well, you and I haven't. It's your first time on the podcast. I don't think we've had this conversation. What was like crazy strict in your childhood? You look back and some friends you knew or people you knew. What was like the strict end of the strict spectrum?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I had a lot of friends who could not watch television. The girls had to wear skirts all the time. There was a really harsh sort of pastoring and parenting that would call people out from the pulpit and really a strict kind of authoritarian sort of parenting which we didn't have. And I've had people who were shocked at some of the things that we would watch that weren't risqué, but things that had magic in them. You know that that sort of that sort of thing. So, yeah.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay, so that was hyper strict. But like it was Barack Obama's White House where you had your first alcohol. Is that right?

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Yeah. Yeah it that the bless her heart. The lady who is giving they had a naughty section and a nice section. So she called it add. She accidentally gave me the naughty and so that was a yeah.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay little bit more about your upbringing because I hear this story all the time. I'm actually rather surprised that we haven't had that conversation more often. I mean, I guess Philip Yancey a little bit, talked about his upbringing, but it was more about the abuse than than anything, but I'm reading Tara Westovers Educated, you know, that kind of thing. It's just it's just crazy what some kids go through. So what were some of the good parts of that super strict

upbringing because I think a lot of people can probably relate to that or at least a meaningful number and then what were some of the, what wasn't great about your upbringing, looking back on it?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** It was mostly good. And again, I didn't see it as super strict, largely because my parents were not super strict. My parents were authoritative, but not authoritarian in terms of parenting. So I never felt squashed by them at all the way that some people do. And our church, it was largely a very good experience.

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It was a close-knit community of people. Sometimes I think they didn't really know how to do children's ministry, so they did the only thing they knew how to do, which was just to teach us the Bible. And I'm really glad. I mean, I was immersed in the Bible from the very beginning.

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So I have mostly very positive memories and responses to that home church.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** But, you know, we'll fast forward to a few years ago and you're a relatively faithful leading church member and you find yourself with the tribe you grew up with on trial for heresy.

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What happened?

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Yeah. Well, I say heresy tongue-in-cheek. They didn't call it that but it was a series of you know, some people have heresy trials. Some people have inquisitions we had task forces. Committees, really bureaucratic sounding things. But yeah, I found myself in a situation where the context was there was an ever-narrowing within our tradition and there was almost a, who's the next liberal. So that kind of narrowing which some people had warned me about years before and I didn't believe it. I thought no no, it's just standing up for basic convictions, biblical convictions, but that was true. And so there was always a narrowing to the point that I would think, how am I here?

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I'm a very conservative, evangelical, homeschooling dad of five, how are we having these conversations? And so, yeah, it was kind of like, it's kind of like what's going

on in a lot of institutions in American life, and not just religious institutions. You have the institutions in crisis and declining, and that leads to a situation where, for lack of a better word, the normies, the grownups who normally would have run things, pull back, and you have some people who have very quarrelsome, destructive sorts of patterns who are left unchallenged because everybody else doesn't really understand that psychology. And so they assume well, if you just kind of ignore this and maybe give more and more, just do what they want you to do, that then that will bring about some kind of unity, and it doesn't work.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** That's interesting that you make the point about the normies or sort of the broad middle, which we have talked about quite a bit on this show, and it's an interesting observation, Russell, so you're saying in the particular cultural moment we're in, people who would be more moderate people who would be, you know representative of perhaps the majority of people tend to step back in a season like this. Can you explore that a little bit? Like why does that happen?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Yeah, and I can see that happening every day in church after church after church. I can see it happening in the United States Congress and in all kinds of other institutions. What happens is you can have a very small group of people who can absolutely control the temperature of of an organization because they're willing to do almost anything or at least they're willing to do things that normal people would not be willing to do and so you have the majority often the vast majority of people who because they're not given for all kinds of good reasons. They're not given to fighting and craziness and all these things.

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They start to just step back and to disengage, and their whole, I mean, one of the things in our denomination, it took a lot of work to convince the healthiest people to be involved. You had to tell them this is why you need to be here. And because they didn't need to have some sort of an honorific title of having served on some board or some committee, they had lives and ministries that they were carrying out, which left, often, the people who really wanted to be there and who really wanted to be at a microphone at a meeting.

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And that's just not a balanced way of going forward, and so a lot of times what happens in for instance take a local congregation. You've got a small group of people

who maybe they're coming up against the pastor and what they do is to start just one thing after the other, coming in and there's all kinds of the same tactics that are involved. Well, even if 90% of the people are perfectly happy with the pastor, what eventually starts to happen is those 90% start say wow, we're really exhausted by this. Why is the pastor always in controversy?

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And so what they're going to do is to eventually come to him usually and say why don't you just kind of apologize or make this go away because the pastor can't really respond because if he does but that small group of people will say, oh look at the pastor being divisive so you can't do that.

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And so it's a very very difficult place to be and you eventually end up then with those good people just getting worn down and they get exhausted, and that leads to, I mean, there's a there's a really important book Brian Klaas wrote called Corruptible.

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I think about it all the time where he talks about his mom who was a school board member.

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And she was a school board member because she cared about kids, she cared about education. It was mostly a really boring job for most people, going through curriculum, hiring policies and so forth. And he said, you know, if she had been in some of these school board situations that are kind of circuses of people screaming at each other, she just wouldn't have run because she's not the kind of person who likes that.

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The problem is, what do you end up with? You end up with the kind of people who like that. And often in institutions, what you end up with are either people who are willing to kind of play that game, or you have people who are able to so numb themselves and shut themselves down that they're able to survive what it takes to live in that context, and that is not healthy for anybody.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So I want to go back and unpack some of what you said to start this answer. And I want to go back to the heresy trial. But before we do that you you

said something with all the institutions in decline. And I think that's true right, like, Christianity is in decline in America. Your former denomination is in Decline almost every denomination is in Decline all the research shows that what is it about decline that attracts, like what is the connection between the radicalization and tribalization that we've seen in American life and decline? Is there a link there? What is that link or is there another explanation for it?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I think there are several things. I mean a friend of mine Yuval Levin, has written a book called A Time to Build on institutions and he talks about the cycle that's broken. So institutions are met, when an institution does its job it's shaping and forming people to lead the institution and to carry that forward. It's a character forming job. When the institution doesn't do that and loses credibility and loses trust, ends up not shaping and forming the character of people. And then those are the people who have the institution.

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I mean, it's a cycle that goes through. But I also think it's the case that when there is decline in an institution or there's crisis in an institution, often there becomes a panic. And you have, there was an elderly pastor who told me one time, and this has proven to be true in so many cases. He was talking about a group of churches in a city that he knew always seemed to be fighting with each other. And I said, what's the deal? And he said, you know, all of those churches are in decline and their people really don't kind of know it yet.

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And that whenever you have those institutions in decline people start becoming really really obsessed with policing their boundaries and who has what title and who has what position and I found that to be true.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** You know, it's interesting. I most of our listeners are American but I live in Canada. I spent a lot of time in the US, have a green card, the whole deal, etc. Etc. But you know, we in Canada probably became post-christian 40 years ago 50 years ago. It happened in the 60s 70s for sure and I was alive as a kid in the 60s have a memory going back to the 70s and definitely the 80s. We didn't go through a radicalization in the church as the church declined. It kind of became a cowering to the corner. Oh, this is going on. I guess we're a minority now kind of kind of thing.

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And there wasn't that now, you know in the last 5-10 years, we've had some echo of the radical politics in the US, witness the Canadian truckers, etc. Etc. But I would say as a Canadian, not that I'm entitled to speak for our country that that was an echo of what was happening in the U.S. It was a direct reflection of what was happening with Donald Trump and the Republican party and the Democrats on the left, etc, but we didn't really have it and you could argue in the 19th century. I mean I know a little bit about European politics. Europe definitely was fractionalized and factionalized and you had the rise of Nazism and Fascism in the 1930s in Europe, but I don't know that that was directly tied to the decline of the church the church had been declining for a century in Europe. So I'm just wondering, is there anything uniquely American that has activated the tribalism that you see? Or maybe my reading of history is wrong. I mean, feel free to correct.

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I think your reading of European history is a bit wrong because, I mean, if you think about the rise of Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, that did include a fear of, well, our Christian heritage as Germans or as Italians or Austrians, that that's under assault from some other.

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And so this is why you ended up with the captivity of the German Christians in the churches. And you see that in it for instance to be right now in Russia with the way that the Russian Orthodox church has become an extension in some ways of the state, so that has happened in a European sense, but I do think, I think you're right that there's a unique relationship in American life with religion and it's like anything else. There are strengths that have a shadow side and that's the case here.

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Why was religion, particularly Evangelical Christian religion, able to proliferate so quickly in the United States and then from their missionary movements all over the world? Well, it's because you had Baptists and Methodists and some others who were highly entrepreneurial. They didn't have to go through a committee checklist to go out onto the frontier and preach and start a church and church plant, and so you had that highly entrepreneurial kind of model and a highly populist model that has a lot of strengths but it ended up having some terrible drawbacks too, when the shadow side emerges from that.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Let's go back to your trial. So it's not, it's quote heresy, close quotes, right? You being interrogated by a committee. And can you replay the incident or incidents that led up to that questioning?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, there were really three broad issues that led to a lot of these problems. One of them was the Trump phenomenon. And I, of course, was not on board with Donald Trump. I am not on board with Donald Trump. And had, from really, as someone said the other day, from 2015 on, and that's, it really was from 2014 on. Because Donald Trump had blasted Christian missionaries in 2014 when there was the talk of treating Ebola-infected missionaries, and he said something along the lines of they knew what they were getting into. They need to pay the consequences of it.

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So it had been going back a long way. That was a key part of it. There were also questions of race and within our denomination, which of course was formed in advance of the Civil War in order to protect slaveholding. That it was a really really incendiary point.

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And then the issue of sexual abuse, which also includes with it the question of women, and the treatment of women, and the place of women, and all of these things kind of converged and in various ways, but those were the three central problems.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Well, you and Beth Moore and by the way, you know, we have a lot of Southern Baptist listeners. I work with Southern Baptist Churches. We work with a broad coalition of people, you know all the way from charismatics through to conservative evangelicals through to mainline through to even some people who consider themselves progressive. I want this to be a fairly large tent I would share I think a lot of your convictions from what I know about you. So I mean, I'm definitely on the conservative evangelical side, but you know, I think we need to have a wide tent, particularly when you're a minority culture. So I'm not out to bash any denomination. You left, Beth Moore, who's been on this podcast, friend of yours left, and others. What went into your decision to step out of the Southern Baptist denomination?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** You know, one of the things that I often have to make clear is that that's not a decision for anybody else. I mean, my closest friends are still SBC. And I think some of them initially thought, oh, are you going to think badly of me from? No, that's why I stayed for a long long time. And so if it was a situation for me where I said I couldn't in good conscience stay in the system that I was a part of and some of that was because I was seeing a lot of people who were coming in to Southern Baptist light, either they were SBC but they were kind of at the margins and they were coming in and getting involved, or people who are actually affiliating and coming in who didn't have the sort of I mean, I've been in this light in this culture nine months before I was born, on, and I've been in every committee room and every, know where all the bodies are buried.

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Well, maybe not all of them. But a lot of them. Yeah, it's so I know the situation really well and a lot of those people were coming in and getting really hurt by an institutional culture, not by not by most of the people who are in the pews, not by most of the pastor's, but an institutional culture that was hurting them. And so it was almost as though I was I was bringing people into something, in some ways under false pretenses, in order to say well that you know, here's what the SBC is, because I was, my wife says I still am, an SBC cheerleader. And you know, I really believed in our cooperative missions and so forth. So that was the case for me, but it's not the case for a lot of other people. And sometimes I'll say, and really this applies, I have this conversation all the time with people who are in all kinds of different denominations or church traditions or institutions, who will say, how do you know if you should leave or stay? And there's not an easy answer to that because there's a kind of leaving that just says, okay well, I'm going to go find a place of refuge somewhere else and just leave. And a lot of times what happens then is you have people who, if they had pressed on, would have come through, whatever that is. You also have a situation where there are a lot of people who stay and toxic systems and end up destroying themselves and others by doing that and so you have to kind of know which situation you're in and it's not always easy, and I, for me, what I found was I had to leave because I am too Southern Baptist.

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In the sense that this kind of response, I knew rationally what it was. I knew how to map all that out, but it felt like exile. My mind could differentiate between that sort of shenanigans and Jesus saying depart from me you worker of iniquity, but my limbic system really couldn't, or my heart really couldn't, and so I would find that

that was the situation I was in, and you know, it came to the point where I thought I'm really not able to fix this because in order to fix this system that we have, it can't just be fixed by saying, let's just kind of ignore this and wait till it passes. And so I didn't want to do what it would take to win, you know? And most people, I mean, every year at the Southern Baptist Convention meeting, which was always the happiest, one of the happiest times of the year, I would leave encouraged, affirmed, you know, all the way through. But it was what happened between those meetings. And so I just realized, I can't fix that.

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And so that's why in my situation, my particular ministry, I loved every minute of it. I had the most amazing team. I had the most amazing and supportive board. It was not anything to do with my particular ministry or institution. It was that larger system and I realized I don't have the power to really help with that. So it's time for me to do something else.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** I left a denomination about a decade and a half ago and completely resonate with hey, this size fits me. I'm not recommending anybody do anything. I think that's a really individual decision and I get asked about it all the time and I'm like, well, you know, those are my reasons. I don't know whether they're your reasons and it's a soul-searching time for sure. Russell, what did you learn about yourself in leaving the denomination of the time since then?

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I think I learned just how entwined and embedded I am with my denominational tradition, in a way that I think it was almost necessary to free me from that, for me, but, and I say am instead of was because I mean, I have a Baptist Hymnal right here next to me on the desk, and that's just who I am.

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That's who I was shaped to be and that's who I am. So I think I saw that and I also saw, though, my reliance on a group of people who were distant enough, in the sense that they were outside of my immediate context, so they didn't have a stake in me staying or leaving, but who knew me, and were able to give counsel and able to give wisdom, encouragement and so forth.

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And I learned just how reliant I am on that. And I think also the sense that I think I see in my own life that when I see other people who are going through awful

situations, a lot of times when it's clearly sort of ridiculous, I just assume well, they know that. And I just sort of laugh it off and shrug it off and don't think, well that person needs me to say hey, not only am I with you, but you haven't done anything wrong.

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And now I think I'm a lot more sensitive to that because for a while. Well, I say for a while, it's still the case, that one of the most stressful things in my life is getting a text message that says praying for you.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Those are never good. They're always loaded, right?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** My immediate response is what's happened. So my closest friends now know that they have a preface to say nothing's happening. Nothing's going on.

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I just happened to be thinking about you today. Praying for you, grateful for you. So I think I'm a lot more sensitive to that going on then then I was before.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Any advice? And again, this is not a recommendation that people stay or leave it denominations. But any advice for those who are leaving or in the process of leaving or thinking of leaving about how to do it well?

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I think the one thing is to make sure that you're protecting yourself from bitterness or rage or anger. And we were talking about Tim Keller before we went on the air, one of the things that that Tim said to me in the middle of some of this stuff was to say, now make sure that you watch your anger. And I said, I'm not angry at all. And I genuinely wasn't. And he said, yeah, that's what concerns me, because you can have a kind of anger that you don't think you should have that can then get redirected. And that's dangerous too, you've got to watch that. And I think he was right. And so I would say watch for anger and bitterness and what it does to you. And then also for people who have, and my problem wasn't bitterness. My problem was, and a lot of my closest friends said this, your temptation is to a kind of nostalgia that just sort of erases those things and looks back longingly, kind of Lot's wife sort of a situation and that is completely accurate and has proven to be completely accurate all the time, and my wife, well we saw there was somebody who had written about being an alcoholic and that one of the things she had to do was to put a little note on her mirror that says it really was that bad. Because she knew she

would just sort of forget about all of those things and think, you know those times weren't that bad, and you'd find yourself slipping back into it. And so I have to have people who are doing that. I mean and some of that is because, you know, there's a lot that I intentionally do not know and don't want to know. I didn't read any articles at all about any of this ever still have it and I don't I didn't want people to say hey, you know, what so-and-so said about you. I just didn't want to know that kind of stuff. It wasn't helpful to me at all. So that can lead you to a sort of well, maybe everything was fine. And I, just because of the way I was raised, that's the persistent problem. And I find myself kind of longingly looking backward and my wife will say, you're in wonderland. That is not the way that things happen. So that would be, I would say just know your own vulnerabilities there as to how to shore those things up beforehand. And then the other thing I would say is especially if it's an institution or a tradition that you feel like you have to leave and it's been really shaping on you, prepare for grief.

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I mean, this this is grief that is, genuinely, it's very similar to, my dad died in 2020. And one of the things that I found was that when he initially died, I was kind of able to go into grief and then I was able to get myself back together because I had to preach the funeral and write the obituary and do all of those things, and then later there would be the sort of waves that would come, and and still do, and it's surprising to me that grief isn't just like an intense thing that then kind of goes down like on a graph until it evaporates away. That's not how it works. And it's a very similar situation with a beloved institution or tradition.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So you've written a new book Losing Our Religion and I want to start with the title. And I'm glad you went there. I remember when the song first came out from our am I thought wait this isn't about losing your religion. It's about something else and I didn't realize it was a Southern expression. You talk about why you chose that title and the other meaning behind losing our religion It's a beautiful pun or double entendre.

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Yeah, you know, people whenever there's something, you know a new segment or something like that about people who are losing their faith and walking away from their faith, they played that song and it makes sense and it even makes sense in terms of the life of Michael Stipe the lead singer of REM who is the grandson of a Methodist. He comes from a line of Methodist ministers and he's now

some sort of a Zen Buddhist I think, or something like that. So it makes sense, but what they said is that it's not about losing your religion that way. It's about the kind of anger, that in the expression, I'm about to lose my religion, meaning I'm at that place where politeness is about to give its way over to anger.

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And what I have seen over the past several years is that those things often are not different things at all. That there are a lot of people who feel themselves to be losing their religion. And what they mean by that is not that they're kind of subtracting beliefs or those sorts of things, it's because they're looking at a kind of religion that they've been in and saying, what was this really all about? And that's happening a lot. It's as recently as this morning, conversations that I have with people. So that really was the impetus behind it.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Is that happening to use their sense in which you were about to lose your religion. Like what was this really all about?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** No, and I think the reason for that is because I had already sort of already worked through those kinds of things in a time of disillusionment as a teenager. So I'd kind of already gone through that crisis and really examined, what do I really believe, so that I was able to differentiate, in a lot of ways, Jesus from what happens in Jesus's name.

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And I had enough time with Christ and with my faith that I think maybe if I had been at an earlier time in my life, I probably would have. I mean there were, in terms of if you say losing your religion, there were all kinds of ways in which I said and would say, well the particular religious project that I was involved in had a lot of horrifying elements to them to it. And I was talking to somebody who had this experience in a completely different context, there were things that you would look at and you would just have a, this seems crazy to me, but I seem to be the only one who thinks that, so it must just be me. And you just sort of put them out of your mind and then you look backward and put them all together and think, ah, why didn't you see all of this? And so that was more of the question, but not a question of whether to walk away from the faith.

[00:42:37.100]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Oh, that's fair. Yeah, and that was sort of what I was driving at, because the book is a bit of a missive or a letter, an epistle to the modern church, not just your former denomination, but to all of us who bear the name of Christ, like guys, wake up, wake up. And we got a lot of work to do. And I thought you had some really good points. I wanna start with credibility.

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You tackle that in your work and you know, I think, I mean look at the Barna data look at the Pew data, pastors used to be some of the most credible people in our community and now we're not. We're not quite above used car sales people and lawyers, but we're close and what do you make about why we lost our credibility? Let's start there.

[00:43:26.500]

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I think what we would like to think is that well, the outside culture is secularizing and hostile to Christianity and that's the reason for this. So they're looking at our virtues and they despise them. We would like to say that.

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That's not what I think is happening, for the most part. I mean there is some of that but I think the far more dangerous thing is that you have people who are looking at us and saying, you don't really believe what you say you believe, and we have all kinds of evidence for that here. And so that brings to, I mean, sometimes I think there is a a fearfulness of the outside secularizing world that can tip over into an anxiety and a panic and an anger. And with that desperate times call for desperate measures that actually ends up secularizing.

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Because you end up with people whose own kids are then looking and saying, well, if that's what Christianity is, then that's not what I am. And when you have the outside world looking at this and saying, oh, so this is really just some sort of political or cultural sort of a thing. And the very thing that people think they're combating, they're actually fueling. And that leads to a really diminished sense of credibility. And you add to that, I mean, what we talked about earlier, this loss of institutional trust writ large, where people are asking, what institution can I trust?

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And not even necessarily can I trust in terms of morally, whether they can be evil, but what institution can I trust to actually be competent and mature? You add that to the mix and it's a very very difficult situation.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah, and at the heart of it and you tackle this as well, is hypocrisy, right? Like when I read the scriptures, particularly the gospels and I kind of look at the religious leaders of the time and then the people Jesus really hung out with, I always feel like I'm right on the edge of being on the wrong side of that story. If not, perhaps off and on the wrong side of the story, and then I look at the church as a whole with judgmentalism, hypocrisy, some of the things you mentioned earlier, right just the condoning of abuse or covering things up etcetera Etc. And I'm like gosh like it's just it's so hard to find Jesus in the midst of this. What are your thoughts on hypocrisy? And we'll talk about the life of the institutional church because I think we've seen that perhaps elevate and moved to new levels over the last I mean Kinnaman and and Gabe Lyons David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons wrote about that in 2007 in the book Unchristian. And if anything that's just amplified over the last 16 years. What are your thoughts on hypocrisy?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** I really don't think hypocrisy's the problem, and I kind of wish it were, because if you think about the classic cliché hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue which is to say, well this is the way that we ought to behave with character and integrity, so let's pretend like we are.

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That's not what's happening right now. I mean, it is to some degree, but it always has.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** It's worse than that.

**RUSSELL MOORE:** It's a lot worse than that, which is a sense of there's such a lowered expectation that there is, in many cases, a valorizing of cruelty and power for the sake of power and even sexual predation, and all of these other things, in a way that one of the things that was most surprising to me in dealing with some really awful abuses of power is the way that many people would respond with, I mean, grow up. This is the way people are. And so you have to play that game.

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Well, that is a really really really diminished sense of what humanity ought to be, generally, but even more so of what the church ought to be.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So that's not hypocrisy. What is it? calling evil good and good evil.

**RUSSELL MOORE:** I called it, It's kind of if you think about the Prosperity Gospel, which says if you believe you'll flourish financially and in terms of your health, this is kind of a depravity gospel that says well, yeah, you're awful, but so is everybody else, and that means that awfulness is the way to win.

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And that is what has sort of set in at every level and the problem with it, there's a sense in which no one wants to be naive and nobody wants to be seen that way. And so you find yourself in a mode where you think you're being realistic and what you're really becoming is Machiavellian and social darwinists, in ways that are really really destructive of the church's witness, institutional life, and maybe more importantly, of your own conscience and your own soul, because you start to adjust. And that's one of the things that happens is we're always able to talk ourselves into saying, okay, well, here's why I'm living with whatever it is. I mean, you can look at white pastors in the Jim Crow South in the United States, including a lot of them who knew better when it came to the kind of racial injustice that was happening around them. And what were they doing? Most of them were saying, well, in order to really help bad things from happening, I have to have a place at the table. And in order to have a place at the table, I have to conserve my influence. And so that means I can't speak to this right now.

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Which ultimately, there never comes a point in which someone says, oh now is the risk-free time for integrity, that doesn't happen. And so you just end up conserving it all the way through and it does tremendous damage to the way that Jesus talks about the inner and the outer to line up. When that starts to be torn apart it leads to all kinds of further destruction.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So what do you do because you're not alone and I mean, you're an Insider saying yeah, there's corruption and there is sin and it's not hypocrisy its intent right like I'm intending to wound. I'm intending to hurt. And you've seen that that's some of the highest levels.

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And that kind of plays into the critics worst fear, that's really what the church is about. What do you what do you do with that? Like, how do you call that out? If you see that what like, you know, I always want to believe it's not as bad as they say. I'm the optimist like you got to find some good people out there. But yeah there there's some really bad actors at work across different traditions within the church. What do you do when you see it, Russell?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I think the the the really dangerous thing that many people adopt is this idea, well, if you just don't talk about it and talk about all the good things that are going on, that will keep the church from being criticized by her enemies, right and you can just order ride things out.

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When in reality what you end up doing in that case is completely destroying credibility, including on the inside, with the generations that are to come who know what's going on, and so because you haven't talked about it or addressed it, there are many people who would assume, okay, Well, then maybe that's what it's all about. I talked about it in my book, a lady who came up to me one time and said my daughter's having a theological crisis, she went away to college, help me with her, and I said, okay. Well, what is her crisis? And I was expecting it to be you know, she's fallen in with the wrong crowd or she's taking existential philosophy and she's you know, but it was she's got a lot of non-believing, atheist, agnostic, other kinds of secularist friends, and they display peace, joy, love, gentleness, self-control, often in ways that she does not see in the church.

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Well, there's an ancient biblical and Christian answer to that. I mean that that shouldn't have been surprising. But if you say if we just don't talk about those realities then they will go away.

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That's just not the way Jesus responds to these things. And it's also the case that what what we want to do and what's easy to do is to say let's talk about what's happening out in the world, but not to talk about what's happening on the inside, which is the exact opposite of what the Apostle Paul says we are to do in First Corinthians chapter 5.

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And it's also, that has a very light and trivial view of the church. So the the golden calves that Jeroboam put up at Bethel were worse than the paganisms going on around the world. It was worse because it was using the name of God and using the place where God had met with Jacob and met with his people at Bethel, it was worse. It was actually a blasphemy. And often what we have going on on the inside is not just that we're doing the wrong thing, but we're doing the wrong thing and we're saying we're doing this because this is what Jesus is like.

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And that is, I mean, if you think about Jesus himself, he is saying ahead of time, I'm telling you all these things so you won't be alarmed. And then the first extended words that we have from Jesus after his ascension are really brutally honest words to the church. And why? Because the church is the body of Christ. The church is to be united to Christ. And so it's important. It's really important.

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If the church is just another interest group or group of people, then yeah, I guess PR is good enough for you. But if the church is actually the demonstration plot of the kingdom of God, then it's quite another thing altogether.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Just a quick excursus. What is the biblical answer you would have given to that mother who is concerned about her daughter whose friends, secular friends, were displaying more Christian virtues than her Christian friends were?

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, the tension that we have in the scripture of createdness and fallenness so that people are all people created in the image of God all people who have conscience, and all people who then are going to display this, and also that you have fallenness that is universal. And I think one of the problems is a lot of times the way that we think that we're preparing the next generations of Christians is by giving them a really scary caricatured view of people or ideologies that are on the outside, to the point that a lot of times when people actually then talk to those people, they start to realize, oh wait, these aren't supervillains in a land, these are fantastic people. And of course, because nobody, or very few people, sit down and say let me find a way to be evil. You know, that's that's not the way that people live and so having that more complex view of human nature is what's actually preparing people.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So tribalism and nostalgia, those are two things that you have lots of thoughts on. Can you talk about tribalization, you could call it the ideological bent or the political partisan bent, partisan I should say, bent that a lot of church leaders are on, sometimes to the left, but a lot on the right. What are we losing when we do that?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** Sometimes people will say, what about all of the politics? And I'll say, we have almost no politics, because what politics actually is, is people who are working together in the civic space to get things done. That is not what we're seeing. What we're seeing are people who are finding ways to have belonging and to have meaning in partisan or culturally defined groups that is largely not defined by what the group loves together as who the group hates together, or who the group's afraid of together. So I'm not that. And that's one of the reasons why you can even see the way that people can completely change ideologies if their partisan tribe and group changes those ideologies, and I mean, pollster after pollster's demonstrated you can do this. You can call the same person and say do you agree with Barack Obama that... and give a statement and then wait a few minutes and say do you agree with Donald Trump that...

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You will have yes and no even though it's the exact same issue because it's about who am I and where do I belong? and that ultimately leads to exhaustion and that's where we are right now, and it's just it's also not the way of Jesus, who if you look at what's happening in the gospels, a lot of it is about wait, which of our groups are you in?

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And he just walks right through that.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** It's like, none of the above.

**RUSSELL MOORE:** None of the above. Yeah, calling both the Zealot and a tax collector to be disciples, I mean, that it's an entirely different way of being and I think one of the things that's happened is, you know, we talk about sort of post-Christian world and secularized world. What we don't realize is how we have secularized. And I mean, sometimes even the loudest religious people, and sometimes I mean even especially the loudest religious people. Because as one person said, the thinner the identity, the louder. Because you have to somehow

prove that you're this. And so, you can have this sort of secularizing of spiritual warfare language that is the opposite of what the New Testament teaches.

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Not against flesh and blood, but when you demonize people, I mean you think about what that language, our language and our metaphors, they shape us. And one of the things is that demons are not redeemable. Demons are wholly evil and irredeemable. Once we start having that attitude toward people to whom we're to bear witness and demonstrate the reality of Christ, we're not doing what Jesus told us to do.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** The other big thing we're seeing intensify in our day is what you talk about us Nostalgia, right this idea that if we could only get back to the Reagan era or the Eisenhower era if we could only take over the Supreme Court and get it back to what it was before, the governorship, or whatever, make our schools the way we want them to, talk about the power of nostalgia. What's at stake and why it has such a grip on so many conservative evangelicals right now?

[01:02:27.300]

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, a lot of this sort of nostalgia is a really low view of human fallenness and a really low view of the power of the Holy Spirit because what we do is we imagine. And all of us do this. I mean we do this in our own lives, we look back where I found myself doing that. I wrote that chapter and then just maybe two weeks ago. I was in this very room with my wife and something came up about the 1990s and I said we're at the 90s great? But you know, the the reason that the 1990s are so great and idyllic in my mind, is that I know how they end. So you're not in the middle of it. When you're in the middle of it, you're wondering what's going on. Whereas in the future you can look back without all of those worries and stresses and only see the good things. And we can do that societally as well. And so a lot of times you will have people saying the problem is the way that this culture has fallen apart, we need to get back to the way that it was. And the culture fell apart somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers long before we had any understanding. And in every era then, you have human sin and fallenness. It manifests itself sometimes in kind of an outright paganism, and sometimes as kind of a self-righteous Christianity, it can manifest itself in any way, but it's fallenness, and in every era the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. And if we don't remember that then we're going to be looking backward and saying well, let's get back to their rather than saying. Okay. Jesus is raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of the father. I'm united to him by the Holy Spirit, which means his future is my future. His past is my past. His future is my future.

That ought to liberate us from the kind of, especially the kind of nostalgia that becomes weaponized.

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It's not just sort of oh, it was great. Then it becomes, who took this away from me? And that can then put us into this sort of perpetual outrage cycle. And we want to know who are the people who did this so that we can find some kind of retribution for them, and that's just not the way Christ.

[01:05:21.300]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So what's the way out, forward, ahead? I mean it can be a very despairing thing. Cynicism is not that difficult to find right now in this moment. So where's what's the way forward, Russell?

[01:05:36.100]

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I think the way forward is I think there are a lot of people who think I quoted in the book Wendell Berry who said to a group of environmental activists one time you think that the solutions have to be as big as the problems, when most problems are resolved by many small-scale solutions.

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And so there's not a lot that any one person or any one church can do about the big picture of what's happening in the world, what's happening in religion, those sorts of things. What you can do is to recognize that and be renewed in your mind, which is to say, okay, I see that, I'm going to ground myself in the Word, in prayer. I'm going to recognize and look for these signs of life that are around me. I'm not going to panic. I'm going to trust that Jesus actually is going to keep His promises. And I'm also going to make sure that I don't overreact to the last bad thing, which is often what we do is to say, okay. Well this was bad. So whatever is the complete opposite of that is the answer. No, I'm going to be grounded in cultivating a conscience that is informed by the Holy Spirit and by the Word, and what you will often find is sometimes you'll feel like you're by yourself in that, and then you start to see, oh wait, God actually is at work all over the place and now these people are finding each other. And that's what I see happening right now. And you look at that. It's happening all over the world. So, Christianity, whatever happens in the American Church, Christianity is doing fine.

[01:07:41.100]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah, yeah, that's true. It's much bigger. So I gotta ask you with everything you've seen, with everything you've experienced, with everything that's been thrown at you. How have you not become an ex-friend? Jellicle, how have you not just thrown up your hands? I mean you've taken on new leadership responsibilities, etc. Why did you not just go ask it's too hard. I'm going to read my Bible live out my days? or just given up and throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

[01:08:11.300]

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I think because I mean, I believe, I really believe Jesus is alive. I really believe, as one person put it, the Easter women weren't lying. I really believe that. And then you add to it, I mean, I noticed myself getting a little cynical at one point, and I snapped out of it because I was standing over my son Jonah, baptizing him at our congregation. And as I was doing that, the words just came to me, I will give you no sign except for the sign of Jonah. The Son of Man is alive, and the Ninevites repented when they heard that word. I mean, that's the sign of Jonah is all around us. And I just stopped and said, how in the world can I be cynical when I'm looking down at this miracle? And how can I not respond to that with awe and gratitude?

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A lot of times that's hard to to. What I would say to someone is, don't get cynical. Don't get bitter. I'll just say, just notice and say God, I think I'm getting cynical and I don't know what to do about it. That that breaks the power of it. It's not, oh, you know, make sure that you do all of these things to get out of it. Just the recognition, I'm powerless in front of this, but I'm crying out and expressing that to God. That's what's important.

[01:10:01.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** You also signed up to be editor-in-chief of Christianity Today would used to be a fairly neutral thing, but it's not anymore. It has too been weaponized and polarized and people would think that's a good thing or bad thing. Why did you decide in yet another form to put yourself back in the front line of leadership?

[01:10:19.500]

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Because I really do believe in this mission and because I think that there is a church that is in need of equipping and also a church whose gospel is

in need of proclaiming and so I just don't think we can, I don't think we have the privilege to get exhausted and give up.

[01:10:50.800]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** What question have I not asked you, or have other people not asked you that you think needs to be asked?

[01:11:00.700]

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Oh, I don't know. I can't. I was actually thinking about that the other day because I was rereading Walker Percy's questions that they never asked me. So he did an interview with himself. And one of them is, how can you stay, he was Catholic, how can you stay in the Catholic church given all of the disasters? And he said, well, it's a sign of its supernatural origin that it's been able to survive all of this fraud and deceit, incompetence. So, yeah, I get it. But I can't think of anything that no one's asked me.

[01:11:40.500]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Nothing that you're chomping at the bit to talk about that no one's given you the opportunity to?

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**RUSSELL MOORE:** I don't think so. I think I've kind of laid it out there, yeah.

[01:11:48.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** That's great. Well, the book is called Losing Our Religion. And where can people, I mean, obviously at Christianity Today, but where else can people find you online these days? Where are you active?

[01:12:00.000]

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, I'm a Twitter account is @DrMoore but I'm finding myself spending a lot more time on threads these days, I really, for whatever reason, I just really like it so far and I hope that keeps up.

[01:12:18.600]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So that's you over on threads and it's so funny because Twitter is now X of course, but everybody who writes about it has to say formerly known as Twitter. It's becoming the Prince of social media, the artist formerly known as Prince, right. Thank you Elon.



Russell, this has been a delight. Thank you. This is long overdue. I'm so glad to finally have you on my podcast, particularly in this moment where I think we need a voice somewhere from the middle from the normal and I really appreciate what you shared today.

[01:12:46.800]

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Well, thanks for having me, and I enjoyed the conversation.

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**Carey Nieuwhof:** I really appreciate his honesty and all of that and I hope that helps you understand the nuance and that's why I wanted to have this conversation. It's not to throw one tribe under the bus against another, etcetera. I mean, it's just a nuanced conversation. That's what you don't get online. That's why we have longer podcasts. This is why we do the show. And next episode man. I am so excited. Kyle Idleman is back, but first check out a couple of free resources, if you haven't yet checked out my On The Rise newsletter. I'm going to share two interesting trends this Friday. So you're going to miss it, all right, because it's the only place I publish it this Friday, ontherisenewsletter.com. You can subscribe with over 100,000 other leaders starting today, and we'll send you a sample newsletter. If you do that and TENX10 has a two-minute quiz, and after you take it you can begin receiving free curated resources designed for your youth ministry needs, not a lot of spam, stuff that actually helps you. Go to [tenx10.org](http://tenx10.org).

[01:13:44.700]

Well, Kyle Idleman is coming up next time. We talk about redefining moral failure. It was a short moment, but one of my favorite moments on the podcast this year. Productivity as identity. Man, we've gotten into some really honest conversations. This one as well, and it will not disappoint. Here's an excerpt.

[01:14:06.500]

**Kyle Idleman:** And so in my frustration, I said to my friend, I'm like, hey, I'm afraid people are gonna hear this and they're gonna think there's been some kind of moral failure. And he stopped me and he's like, hey, you are a moral failure, right? Like you know that, right? And I'm like, no, you know what I mean. Like, you know what I'm trying to say. And he's like, no, like you're, if you spend these next three months concerned about what degree of moral failure people think you are, then you don't really know the gospel very well.

[01:14:39.700]

**Carey Nieuwhof:** That's Kyle Idleman next time on the podcast. Also coming up Philip Yancy's coming back, William Van Der Bloomen, Jenni Catron, Karen Gordon, JP Pokluda, Gabriel McCullough, John Ortberg, John Mark Comer, and a whole lot more coming up on the podcast, and one more thing because you listened to all the way to the end. Thank you for doing that. I would love to get you the Preaching Cheat Sheet. So last month I preached a series for the first time in a long time and I used it basically to see if one of my sermons was gonna hit before I delivered it.

[01:15:10.400]

Yes, I created it, but I hadn't preached a whole series in a year. I would love to give it to you for free, go to [preachingcheatsheet.com](http://preachingcheatsheet.com). We've helped tens of thousands of leaders with this resource. Make sure you get it [preachingcheatsheet.com](http://preachingcheatsheet.com) or click the link in the podcast episode description. Thank you so much, everybody. I so appreciate everything you're doing. I know it's hard out there. Hopefully, this is making a difference and I hope in some way that this helped you identify and perhaps break a growth barrier you're facing.