



Season 9: Episode 8 | Connie denBok | Does Faith Give Us Purpose?

Andrew Stirling: Well, Connie, it's a delight to have you with us today on this podcast. And first of all, I want to ask you, because I know you've got a very rich background in the faith. Can you tell us something about your heritage and who have been sort of the great influences in your spiritual formation and your spiritual life?

Connie DenBok: I've had so many influencers and I think some of them were praying for my family before I was born. There's a family legend that the first meeting of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands was actually held in one of my ancestors' houses. And among my cousins and second cousins and third cousins, we have an inordinate number of people who are active in Christian faith and who are also pastors. So, I think there's somebody back there who was praying for the generations.

My first memory of the faith was actually in church when I was three years old, leaning up against my father's jacket, which I remember was tweed and rough and smells like pipe tobacco. For me, that was a very comforting experience that for me, church has always seemed, almost always seemed like a safe place.

My mother was German, Roman Catholic, and my father was Christian Reformed. When they came to Canada and they met and they married, their church backgrounds were largely incompatible. So, they compromised by sending us to the Sunday school, which was the church denomination that had the word Canada in it, which was United Church of Canada.

And that's how I ended up where I am. And I remember distinctly in Sunday school, I don't remember what was said, but I remember some very passionate Sunday school

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superintendents. And I remember they would say, go home and pray, kneel by your bed and pray. And I would go and, I mean, I didn't know any better.

I would go and kneel by my bed and pray and have a genuine sense that there was a presence there who wasn't just my imagination. And then I have another clear memory that didn't come back to me until later. My grandparents who were Dutch were very pious in the best sense of the word, very loving people who loved Jesus and spoke very little English. And I spoke virtually no Dutch.

But my memory of my grandfather was, my grandmother would put these big, sumptuous meals on the table, and with my mom watching to make sure we weren't picking at the chicken, while my Opa said grace, he would say these long-convoluted graces in Dutch, which bored the living daylights out of us kids and frustrated us. Except I remembered years later that when he began to say grace, the tone of his voice would change as if he was having an intimate conversation. I realized in that memory that at least he believed he was talking to someone who he loved tenderly the way he loved us grandchildren.

When I was 12, like all good United Church Sunday school kids, I dropped out of Sunday school, adopted a really shabby version of Buddhism, which was basically making it up as I went along and listening to Gregorian chants by candlelight. I mean, it wasn't Buddhism, it was the seventies man. And anything goes, if I believe it's true, it's true.

Andrew Stirling: Anything goes, yeah!

Connie DenBok: By a series of coincidences, I ended up helping at a drop-in center here in downtown Brampton. And the speaker that night, *Rosemary's Baby* was big that summer, was speaking about the occult, and that was a cool topic at the time. And he managed to turn the conversation around to Jesus as a living person who could interact with people today.

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I was actually offended because I don't recall having heard anything remotely like in Sunday school or from anywhere else, it was kind of like, yes, I believe in Jesus. He lived, died, and then was resurrected. But where is he now and what is he doing? I kind of assumed that he went off on some kind of extended vacation.

I argued with him into the night, not to be obnoxious, but I really wanted to press this because the memory of my grandfather's grace came back to me at that moment. I thought, if this is really true, I really want it. And so, he challenged me to go home that night. He was a United Church minister, again, here in Brampton. He challenged me to go home that night and say a simple prayer, which he'd probably recognize, Jesus come into my life, be my Lord and Savior.

And I don't remember the rest, but I went home and feeling like stupid talking to the air above my head. I said, "Jesus come into my life," and something happened that I could not explain that it was not an emotional experience because I wasn't feeling anything emotional. And it wasn't an intellectual experience because I had believed in Jesus, third person, or second person of the Trinity, the same way I believe Paris is the capital of France, but if you'd prove to me it was Marseilles, wouldn't matter much.

And so, it was the only thing I could describe it to, and it's a profound moment, it was like making eye contact with somebody and knowing that they see you and you see them and that you are aware of each other in that moment.

And from that moment I've been aware that even when I'm mumbling prayers under my breath, that I'm connecting with a someone, not a something, not a principle, but a someone who is a person with a personality, who is infinitely patient with me, has occasionally corrected me. But I've got to say, I really love this guy. So, I didn't know. And this is where I think the Holy Spirit came in.

I began to confess all my lame 15-year-old sins all the way back to kindergarten when I remembered them. And I mean, I didn't, I did not know that that repentance was a sign of the Holy Spirit interacting with your life in a deep way. But I find it interesting looking back that spontaneously, it's not that I'm feeling guilty, it's just that I was face to face with this personage

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who I felt such love in that look, and such that he knew me so well that I felt that I had to just become honest with him and say, you know, I see the things that you see in me, and I named all of those things and it was wonderful.

So, the next day I went back to see this minister who I now agree that I kind of knew what he was talking about. I told him what I'd done, and he gave me a Bible and gave me instructions for how to read a Bible and he gave me a couple of other books and he told me to start going to church somewhere and, on the way out he said, by the way did you ask for the Holy Spirit? And I was a little embarrassed that I wasn't, I had no idea what that meant because when we were kids in church we would, you know, the adults were downstairs eating supper or whatever, us kids would be chasing each other around the sanctuary, jumping out from behind doors and boom, it's the Holy Ghost.

I thought, okay, I'm in this far, I might as well go for the rest. So, he asked if it was okay if he put a hand on my shoulder. I thought, that's a little bit weird. And he prayed for me to receive the Holy Spirit. And I felt absolutely nothing. Which is fine, because I didn't expect to feel anything. I thought, that's nice. But on the way home that day, I felt, it wasn't like an emotion, but it was like a joy. It was like a physical sensation rising from my tummy up through my chest.

I said, one day I'll have the vocabulary for it. Joy is the closest I would come, but it wasn't as in an emotional feeling. It had emotional repercussions, but that wasn't the source of it. yeah.

Andrew Stirling: But much more than that, deeper than that, right?

Connie DenBok: We don't have words in the English language for that thing. And then I actually, I was a little embarrassed about reconnecting with church. So, I would sneak out of church on Sunday mornings, and I would go to the congregation that I'd attended as a child. And in my 15-year-old mind, the minister was about 112 years old, and a slow talker.

And, you know, his voice, as I recall, would put you into a coma. But that Sunday, when I went back for the first time, everything was different. When he prayed, he was talking to someone I

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had connected with and really liked. And when he read the Scriptures, I thought, my goodness, what he's reading makes sense and it's talking about someone I really, really like.

And so, the hymns, the words to the hymns began to make sense and it's as if everything took on a new context. And so, I began to attend a youth group, and somebody asked me to give my testimony, and I have no idea what that was, how Jesus had changed my life. And I was a little embarrassed because you don't want say Jesus really hasn't changed my life that much.

But later that week, I have two sisters, we're all really close in age. We fought like cats and dogs all the time. And my sister, who I had not discussed this with, said to me, Connie, what's happened to you? You're different. And I was a little defensive. And I said, what do mean? And she said, you know, haven't been mean to me all week. Are you OK? And I thought, well, maybe.

So that's how the journey rebooted that time for me. But as you know, there have been several, several reboots in my faith as you go through different struggles and different life stages.

Andrew Stirling: But clearly you had a really strong foundation in a few things and there seems to be, Connie, almost a commonality amongst a lot of the people that I speak to. People who have been praying for them before they knew it. Church school teachers who had an influence. Pastors who perhaps weren't always understood at the time, but whose wisdom has come along and even a family environment where the scripture is taken seriously and the faith is taken seriously and then sort of with those foundations, so that the Holy Spirit uses those and moves in on those and so on.

In your varied ministerial experience, and you've had a varied ministerial experience, what role, has the Bible played in your personal life and how it's influenced your devotion specifically, notwithstanding the experience you had of the Holy Spirit in terms of forming you and shaping you as a minister. How has the Bible had an impact?

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Connie DenBok: From that day, I began reading from the Bible every day. I had a reading order, which as I recall, was the Gospel of John, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Mark, whatever. And the first time I read it through, was like having a drink of water when you didn't know you were thirsty. I didn't understand everything I was reading, but it scratched an itch I didn't know that I had.

And when I was about 16, I was going through a very anxious time in my life and I had read Matthew, I guess it would be Matthew 6, "*Do not be anxious about your life, saying what are we going to eat, what are we going to drink?*" And so, I thought I need to carry this thing with me. I can't just pull out my book every time I'm feeling anxious. And so, I began to memorize that section of the Sermon on the Mount. And eventually the entire Sermon on the Mount.

And then I began to memorize Psalms. And what that did for me on a personal level is that every time you memorize, you repeat. I would write out longhand, I would mutter the words to myself. If I was awake in the middle of the night, I would mutter the words of Scripture that I'd memorized. And they embed, the words embed themselves into you deeper and deeper each and every time. And I found particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, we see the character of Jesus. And I'm not saying that I have the character of Jesus by a long shot, but I'd be a lot farther away from it if I didn't have those words resounding in my mind and my heart from my own voice again and again.

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. It shapes Scripture and isn't just information, it's transformational. But it has to go somewhere that is beyond your eyes to your mind and even your heart. It has to, by continued repetition, soak its way very deep into your bones so that when you're facing a situation where the Holy Spirit needs to steer you, there's something already there for him to click and say, "Connie, not that, this, or this, not that."

Andrew Stirling: So, you're talking very much than Connie about sort of a Living Word. I mean, a Word that goes deep into us and that in our recollection of it, it sort of guides us in our lives. Is that the sense that you have?

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Connie DenBok: Yes, it guides us, but you know, we have the Spoken Word, the Written Word, the Living Word. They interact with one another. So that even this morning I was reading, and I wish I could tell you the chapter in one of the Psalms, and I tried to read a Psalm a day because they expressed what I didn't know that I wanted to say to God. And I find that in the Scripture, it is also an interaction with the living person of Jesus Christ. When we say it's God's Word, God's Word is speaking to us. And we speak back and forth in conversation in Scripture.

I don't see how a person can in any trustworthy manner expect to be guided by the Spirit of God and follow Jesus unless they are deepening their relationship with Scripture day by day. It's a lifetime enterprise. I still find things, I just didn't realize they were there before.

Andrew Stirling:

Absolutely. Yeah, that's wonderful, Connie. Connie, we live in a very diverse cultural context and where your ministry now, perhaps in particular within Canada, how has the cultural matrix of Canada changed the way that ministry has evolved? And how do we reach out into this highly diverse pluralistic culture with Christ and with his Word? How do we engage with that society, Connie?

Connie DenBok: You know, I can tell you it is very different than when I started in ministry in the 1980s. Very, very different. At that time, we were dealing with people who had said the Lord's Prayer every day of their life and at least had a mini foundation. Now we have people, they've never been to church, they've never interacted. Their parents spent a lot of time on Santa Claus, no time on the Jesus part of the Christmas story.

So, we're starting in a very, very different universe, and I think of when we worked on the Canadian prairies. There were people who ran combine operations. Does that language make any sense? They would start harvesting down in Texas and as it got later in the year, the harvest

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would move farther and farther north. And I have wondered if at any given time a demographic within a demographic is not ripe for the gospel.

So, at this point, I'm living in Brampton, Ontario. It's a very brown town, we call it. And we call that affectionately because we're allowed to do that here, because it is a brown town. And probably the most spiritually receptive people are first and second generation African and Caribbean, followed by people who are from the mainland of India.

Followed by people who are European, lapsed Roman Catholic, followed by ex-vangelicals. And at the very, very end of the line are people who grew up in the historic Protestant churches that I did. They seem to have somehow had an immunity booster that made them not want to hear the gospel.

So, I find most of my spiritual conversations don't happen as a pastor, but as someone who works out at the same gym. Someone who hikes along the same trail as someone. I often find that telling people I'm a pastor is a hindrance to having a spiritual conversation in this milieu.

Andrew Stirling: Hmm, interesting.

Connie DenBok: Because either they'll think that I'm there to judge them, or I'm there to convert them. And truthfully, I'm just there to interact with them with everything that's in my life, and Jesus is very much in my life. And I'm surprised, I pray, I ask God for opportunities, and I'm surprised how many times the other person starts the conversation.

Andrew Stirling: Fascinating. Connie, my experience goes very much hand in hand with what you're saying too, I'll be honest with you. Not long ago, the Bible Society held a seminar for diaspora clergy, and I think you know about that. And it was an eye-opener. There were 13 countries represented from all over the world, and these pastors are ministering in every conceivable part of the metro area and beyond.

And they're bringing the gospel and they're faithful in their love of the Lord. They love the Bible. They love the Scriptures. They love Jesus. And they are making the same point that, you know,

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they don't have big churches that people can go to. More often than not, they are simply bearing witness where they are in the ordinary conversations of life, and it sounds to me, you know, very much like Jesus' early instructions to the disciples.

You know, go to the byways and the highways and bring in the cripple and the lame and the great feast. Go out and get those and engage with those who are not always the ones who you think are going to be part of the great feast, the great banquet. Bring people in and I find honestly, Connie, I have deeply spiritual conversations with cab drivers, and you know, and they can be from anywhere in the world and we can get into deep conversations.

I just hope they concentrate on their driving as well. But, you know, I've had some really great conversations like that. We have another relationship in Canada and as United Church ministers, we've been always concerned, I think, about the relationship with our Indigenous partners and the broader church.

And as you know, we have been involved in the Mohawk Bible, which was helped and assisted by the United Church and we in the CBS helped produce it. How do you see churches and you've again; you've got varied experience in various parts of the country. How do you see us fulfilling our commitment to our Indigenous people in terms of truth and reconciliation? And most especially, Connie, how does the gospel of Jesus Christ fit into that relationship.

Connie DenBok: I think it would be easier. If we took seriously the Beatitudes and approached the topic and the people with the humility and faith of Jesus. I have hard questions about how this has been approached.

Because if you apologize for something that's happened to a people and nothing changes, have we really repented of anything? And the Christian standard is not reconciliation through apology, it's reconciliation through repentance.

I am concerned that the church has bought into a secular and anti-Christian narrative of the worst the church has done, and people representing the church have done some very bad things.

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That has affected the church as far as I can see that speaking as an institution, it's almost as if we are embarrassed about our faith and need to tuck that away and not have faith discussions anymore. I know a significant percentage of the Indigenous population are Christian. I think we need to acknowledge that.

You know, I had a daughter who worked up in Attawapiskat for a summer and she came back thinking, she said, I went up there thinking that we had answers for the problems. And she said, ultimately, the solutions are going to have to come from within the Indigenous community. And she said the capacity is there.

But as far, you know, I know this isn't what I'm supposed to be saying, Andrew, but I think we can regret the bad that happened and the stupidity of letting these evil people have access to children. But I think we cannot say that it represented the Church of Jesus Christ and the policy of the Church at the time.

So, I think we need to get into the business of relationship building again and seeing that land claims are settled, reparations are made where necessary, and we can get on with our business without self-flagellating.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah. And a lot of it, I think, comes down, as you said, to relationship. It comes down to love. It comes down to forgiveness, and it's very, very important within our society, I think, Connie.

We face as a society too though, some pretty tough moral and ethical challenges. And in a recent Canadian Bible Society and Cardiff Survey, it was found that most Christians rarely open their Bibles to look at and examine the things that are around us from a Biblical perspective.

How do you see the Church and what advice do you have for other Christians to re-engage the Scriptures in dealing with the complexity of our age. And I'm not thinking one specific ethical issue. I'm talking as a general approach, Connie, in terms of being ready for and prepared for, you know, the world that we really live in, in its concreteness.

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Connie DenBok: You know, it's funny you should say that, Andrew, because I did a Bible study here of people who are lifelong church people and people of faith. And I had no idea that they would find it as difficult as they did to read and understand the Bible together.

It was as if it was still written in Greek for them. Just, the words didn't make any sense. The concepts didn't make any sense. The word made flesh. They never, they'd never heard that before.

Where they get the Trinity from, I wouldn't know. And so, I'm still in experiment. I'm trying things one after the other. We know that Alpha worked very well here for connecting people to faith, but we've got to get them in Scripture or else they make it up as they go along based on their own feelings, which is, you know, in our culture, what I feel is true is true.

So, what I'm thinking of doing for Lent is starting a Wednesday night group to watch episodes of *The Chosen* together and let them see the story. I'm thinking in times of our history when most people were illiterate, they had much better Biblical literacy than our people do who all know how to read.

And we've got the best stories. We've got adventure stories, war stories, love stories, we've got raunchy stories, scandalous stories, we've got it all in the Scriptures. And I would really like to see us using the arts to communicate our stories again. Have you been following Justin Briarley's conversation on the new atheists?

Andrew Stirling: Yes I have, yes, Justin's good..

Connie DenBok: Really interesting conversation that what the new atheists realized many of them that they could not deliver, was that there is not a narrative that gives life meaning or the world meaning. We have a great story. We just need to know how to tell it. Our story is we were created, not formed by accident, and somebody knows who you are and knows your name and is eager for you to know them.

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And we have this story of redemption that, you've messed up bad, I've messed up badly. But there is redemption, there are fresh starts in Jesus Christ. And we have the story that says at the end, we know how it ends, that there's hope, that it is not endless gloom and destruction, and why don't we end it all now, but that there is hope in the future, even though the middle is very, very complicated. And that's a story I'm certainly going to tell Christmas Eve.

And it's a story that resonates even with my demographic who are white people whose ancestors would have been in the old historic churches; they get that part of the story gives them something that makes sense that the other narratives just aren't doing. So, you know, if you find the definitive answer to that, Andrew, please let me know. I'm eager to implement it, but I'm with you. I'm emphatic that we cannot do this without connecting people to the Written Word of Scripture again. They will end up going weird places without Scripture drawing them back.

Andrew Stirling: And Connie, in my conversations with Andrew Bennett of Cardus, who's a friend as well as someone with whom I've been on podcasts. Andrew and I keep, even after our conversation online is over, we just talk about, how can you possibly live a Christian life? How can you seek to be a disciple of Jesus, you know, if you're not grounded in that Word.

I mean, all these different disparate voices that are coming at us from all these different places, and how do we in the midst of the cacophony of sound, you know, hear the Word of God and sort of apply it.

Connie, there's one of the traditions that I grew up with was with Dutch friends in the UK. And I had adopted sort of an Oma, an Opa who were loving towards me, and they had two sons. And every Sunday afternoon, my parents would send me over to this Dutch family to spend the afternoon because my parents were tired of me at that point. And my father was a minister, and he wanted to nap at two o'clock on a Sunday afternoon.

So, I was shipped off to my Dutch friends and they were deeply devout, and we would have *hagelslag*, we would have it in a sandwich, we would read the Bible. But then they always

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concluded by saying these words, Andrew, what would you like us to pray for you today? And that was very, very profound for somebody who was 10 or 11 years old.

What would you like us to pray for you today? Connie, what would you like us to pray for you today?

Connie DenBok: Well, I kind of retired and then unretired. But what I would want to do with the rest of my life is to connect as many people as I can to this Jesus who has profoundly changed my life, who I know, if they could only see what I see, that they could, how could you not love the guy, really? He's amazing.

So, I would ask for the grace to discern who's right for that conversation, and that nothing of me will interfere with their connecting with Jesus.

Andrew Stirling: That's a beautiful thought, yeah?

Connie DenBok: Can I go back a second to the last conversation? And that is in terms of speaking with people who are skeptical about the faith and especially moral stances. I found a way to disrupt that, which is really kind of amusing me because it seems to be disruptive and the people who really hate it are some of my colleagues.

And that is when we have these discussions about gender, sexuality and orientation, I have wondered if the conversation that we are having should not be centered around the issue of faithfulness. How God's monogamous relationship with us or our monogamous relationship with God is the standard for sexual relationships.

And I can tell you people who are not faithful in their relationships hate that conversation. But I've just been meeting with a couple who were preparing for marriage. They want to get married in a church. They don't have a lot of Christian background. But that conversation about faithfulness, how about God is faithful, you don't get married and have other boyfriends, girlfriends on the side and say that.

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It means something because so much of that generation have had parents who have disrupted their lives because they have not been in faithful relationships. And I wondered sometimes, Andrew, if in, and I'm guilty of it, but in letting the culture wars set the tone of the conversation, if we haven't missed some of the more important issues. Because a church that is not faithful to God and to, can I say their partner, will have a difficult time communicating that faithfulness, that personage of Jesus Christ to the flock. So, this is my hypothesis. I'll let you sit with that and take it apart. But I've found that even hardliners will come around to that conversation.

Andrew Stirling: Because it's rooted and grounded in God's covenantal relationship with us, isn't it? I mean, that's what it all boils down to. It boils down into God's faithful covenant with us and therefore our faithful covenant with others. And you know, that is, again, as about as Biblical as you can possibly get from the very beginning of God calling Abraham right through to the book of Revelation. I mean it's rooted and grounded there.

Connie, I want to thank you for our conversation today. I want to thank you for your frankness, for your openness, for your willingness to share about yourself, and for the guidance that you're giving us, really, in our walk with God. And I know that those who have been listening to this will feel blessed and encouraged and challenged. And on behalf of the Canadian Bible Society, Connie, thank you so much for your time with us today. It's been a real joy and a privilege. God bless you.

Connie DenBok: My pleasure speaking with you, Andrew, and thank you for the good work you're doing. The Canadian Bible Society has helped me put New Testaments in the hands of many, many, many, many people over the years. And I'm grateful for that ministry.

Andrew Stirling: Amen, thanks, Connie.

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