OG Pastors: Faith Over a Lifetime

Episode 4 – Kyle Kroeger

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STEWART: Hey, welcome back to OG Pastors, Faith Over a Lifetime. I'm Stew, better known as that Texas podvangelist, and I'll be your host. And this is episode four on our way to a ten-episode season one. This show is pretty simple. We sit down with people who have spent a significant amount of their life walking with Jesus and we're asking them what they've learned along the way. Not just what they believe, but what faith has actually looked like through family, work, success, disappointments, certainty, uncertainty, doubt, and all the twists and turns that make up a life. And so, wisdom is not made in a moment, it's built over a lifetime and I hope you enjoy these conversations. We'd appreciate it if you like what we're doing, please tell a friend. And so, uh, I want to introduce our guest, which is in the immortal words of Monty Python, now for something completely different. Uh, today's guest is Kyle Kroger. And Kyle is the founding pastor of Taproot Church in San Antonio, planted just steps away from the University of Texas at San Antonio's front gate. Welcome, Kyle, I'm thrilled to have you, very, very, uh, excited about this one and, uh, and look forward to hearing what you have to say.

KYLE: Thanks, Stew. Yeah, we're just across the street, UTSA Boulevard, and we've been reaching college students for about nine years. Uh, we came over with a, a team of about eighteen people from Texas A&M, and two pastors, several staff, and we planted the church, and it's, it's been a journey.

STEWART: Well, it's funny, OG, like I, I've had to explain that original gangster is not really related to being in a gang, that it, it means that you're well-established. And for the most part, our other guests were a little more senior in their years than you. But when we met, I quickly learned that and we kind of changed our criteria a little bit to go from total years to percentage of life. And so, what stood out to me is that you chose and you're, like, you have a very youthful appearance, but you've been at this for a minute. And what stood out to me is that you chose one of the hardest missions in America, which is a university campus. And sometimes, sometimes it's hard to get God firmly rooted there. And so, I, I just wanted to kind of start with, where did you grow up and what was your family like? I know your dad, I, I know your mom less well. He inspires me, but talk to me

and, and we're in Fredericksburg, Texas, I am, and this is where you grew up. So, uh, tell us that story.

KYLE: Yeah, so, so yeah, I grew up in Fredericksburg, Texas, and, uh, honestly, I had a lot of things going for me in the sense that Fredericksburg's a nice small-knit mostly Christian community and it's a great, it was a great place to grow up. Ironically, I was kind of not the best kid. Um, not because I was –

STEWART: I find that hard to believe.

KYLE: Yeah, no, I, it is, though, but if you ask people that knew me in Fredericksburg, they'd be like, "Oh no, I can, I can tell you about it." It, I didn't follow rules well, and I kind of I was pretty selfish and and I just kind of like would bend anything to try to get what I – and I would think outside the box, which is great for me now, but back then it was not good. It, it doesn't work great for school, uh, to think outside the box too much and I would just do I would do a lot and I would just keep getting in trouble and it pinned me often as a troublemaker because I was. And I did other things that were actually even more morally like like I I lied a lot to my parents, oh I did my homework, it's a convenient way to get out of homework. And so about the time I was thirteen, my parents were like, "We don't know what to do with this kid. Like, out of these four kids, he's the worst and we can't handle him." And so they sent me on a mission trip with Teen Missions International and like on my own, back then, like they just brought me to the airport and they were like, "Bye," you know. And, uh, it was the best decision they'd ever made for me. Like, I I remember this one time, it was really early on, they were like, "Okay, we're going to have quiet times." I'd never had a quiet time. I grew up in the church, I'd prayed a million times, but I never spent time with God. And they're like, "Okay, you read the Bible or you spend time or you talk to God." And, uh, I started reading the Bible and then I was like, "What am I doing? I hate reading. I don't want to do this." And so I put the Bible down and I started talking to God and for the first time ever, even though I had grown up in the church, I realized no one was watching me, no one was I was doing this all on my own and I was like, "If I'm, if God's not real, I'm being a crazy person right now talking to myself." And so I asked him, I was like, "Lord, are you real?" And right at that moment, the sun kind of crested over the trees and it was just this moment where I felt like he he met me there. And it was really impactful. I came back, still struggled, you know, I still struggled, but I was doing better. I at least wanted to live for God at that point and not just for myself and things really did take a turn for the better. Ironically, my dad was actually not a strong believer growing up. He had connected me with the church to keep me in contact with really strong like doctors and and people that are of the higher echelon. Like, he viewed the church as a great social place to rub

shoulders with good people. And that was his motivation. My mom was more the Christian, but even her background was I mean she she loved the Lord. And it wasn't until around the time that I was coming to the Lord that my dad ended up having his big turning moment. So now he's this big missionary and everyone knows him as like just the amazing believer, but growing up, him and I's journeys were in some ways parallel.

STEWART: That's interesting. So when you're speaking to God and and the sun comes up and and this is really where you say, "Wow, okay, I'm, I'm in tune with you're real and you're here."

KYLE: Mhm.

STEWART: When you look back, were there other times that you think you could see God working before you recognized him? In, in retrospection.

KYLE: I don't think I was self-aware enough and looking back, I, I can try to come up with them, but I was so focused on myself. And actually, here's a good example. I used to lie, that was a big thing that I would do and it was a I developed habits, it just I could get out of things and I and I wanted I thought, "Oh, this is the way to get what I want." And I never felt guilt for it. But when I was on that mission trip and I was liked by people and people appreciated me, I told people I got bit by a rattlesnake. Because they were like, "Oh, you're from Texas," I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, I once got bit by a rattlesnake, but, you know, I survived," you know. And they all believed me. They were like, "Whoa, that's the craziest story, I can't believe you were bit by a rattlesnake." And I felt guilt for the first time because I was actually believed. And when I wasn't believed, there was nothing to get me to like I was just constantly defending myself: "No, I'm telling the truth," even though I wasn't, that was like my disposition. It wasn't until I was wholeheartedly believed that I thought, "That was wrong." It was the first time I had felt that way. And I think looking back before I'd had these connections, sure, but I just I know God was doing things, but it's hard to even I just was so focused on myself, so insecure that it was hard to move past it.

STEWART: It's, it's inspiring how transparent you, you are. And how authentic, because it takes a lot of courage to essentially call yourself out on things that a lot, a lot of folks are like, "Oh yeah, I was just a kid, whatever." And it's interesting to me how, you know, thoughtful you are and how you, you think about, how you kind of recall those, those times. One of the things I'd love to know is that is when did, did you first realize that God was calling you into ministry?

KYLE: It's a great question. So, I got back from that trip and I started following God –

STEWART: How old were you, remind me? You were thirteen –

KYLE: Thirteen.

STEWART: And oh you were thirteen when you went.

KYLE: When I went.

STEWART: Okay, okay.

KYLE: Okay, so I come back and I'm ready to serve God, but there's some bumps and you know, so I even go on another trip when I'm fifteen and this time I requested it. And my parents were like, "Well, last time was a good idea," but it was a bad for me. Basically, it was a small trip, no one liked me, I was very humbled by the trip, I God was actually my only friend. Luckily, I'd had a relationship with him and it got really deep on that trip. So, then I come back and I meet Paige Finley, who was the youth pastor at Hill Country Church or back then it was called E-Free. And Paige believed in youth in a way that very few I've seen, very few youth pastors I've seen believe. He thought, "You guys can step up." He had us reading CS Lewis and Thomas Aquinas and he had us doing ministry. We would go and do we would be the church in a way that just called us to step up as kids in ways that we just no one asked us to do that and it was incredible. So I grew some in that, but again, I still was like adjacent, like I I would never say that I was ever shining in these even though I was serving the Lord, like there was just an element of like I was with really good people and they were wanting to do great things. So, anyways, all that to say, all that setup is between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college, I was I had been accepted to Texas A&M as a chemical engineer and I had chosen that, uh, job because it was they said, "This is the highest-paying job, you're going to do great." And I was like, "Great, money's what the goal, right?" And so I was going to do that and we we went to Cuba as a youth group. And I felt very clearly at one point, I I can't quite remember, I remember where I was and I just remember being like, "I love this. I love doing ministry." And he he basically, I he didn't use words but I I confirmed I want you to be a pastor. Now at that time, I thought, "Great, I'm going to become a mega pastor. That's what that's my dream." And the Lord had a way of of really showing me some humor later on in what I ended up getting into, so.

STEWART: It's not too late. I want you to know, it's not too late. You never know. Um, at the end of the day, I mean Paige Finley like inspires me too. I would love to have him as a guest on this show, I just, uh, I think folks would benefit from hearing from him. But so, I don't know a lot about planting churches, I'll be total candid with you. But you planted, first of all, it's called Taproot and I think there's a story there, but what made you believe that planting a church near UTSA was where God wanted you to go?

KYLE: Yeah, so when I got to A&M, my life just dramatically – well, so at first, it went down a little bit, I started playing a lot of video games, that was the first semester. But after that semester, I got really involved in the church, the college ministry there. And there were people that would pour into my life and say, "Hey, you, you can step up." Kind of like what Paige did, but in a way that, well, honestly, we were actually adults at that point. We actually had the freedom to make our own choices in a way that it's one thing when it's like, "Hey, I'm making good choices, parents can you can you condone this?" and they say, "Yes." It's another thing when it's like, "Oh, the world is the limit. Am I going to choose Christ? The world – I could do anything," like I was. I was playing, I don't know, eighty-plus hours a week in video games, no one was stopping me. I had so much freedom. And he was calling me, you could serve Jesus. And when I chose that, it was a different choice than all the choices I had made before leaving my parents' home. It was more real in a way that you just can't have outside of college. And that's what I've loved about college ministry and so, anyways, it totally changed me. I got on fire for the Lord. We've seen dozens, dozens of people get saved, get baptized, their lives completely turn around. Bad people turn into great people. Jesus just changed their lives and and a radical type of change and growth that you really only read in Acts 2, that you just don't see a lot of places. But like in the college context, people have the availability to change and so if the fire, if the ball starts rolling, it can create a movement. And so that's what we did. Our church grew – well, I graduated, I wanted to go into ministry because my life had been changed, I wanted to help change other people's lives. Went into ministry and over the course of those eight years there at A&M on staff, the church grew from – or student and staff, so I guess it's like twelve years – uh, the church grew from a hundred to six hundred college students. And that's with a fifth to a fourth of graduating every year.

STEWART: You and I were talking about that. I was a college prof and like, you know, a quarter of the student body walks out the – I mean, everybody's thrilled for them, they've got their cap and gown and they're like, "Yay!" but at the end of the day, it's like you've lost a fourth of the campus and you've got a new fourth of the campus coming. So it's like having it's like filling up the bathtub with the the plug pulled, right? Like you got there's you got to put way more water in than if the plug was was in there.

KYLE: That's right.

STEWART: But so – so I don't know beans about about video games. And so what was your game of choice when you played, what was what did you play? I mean you had to be exceptionally good for eighty hours a week. You had to be – like people make a living at that.

KYLE: No, I wasn't, I wasn't that good, actually. I was having fun, but I was in some kind of multi like massive multiplayer game that you just you grind and you level up and it it was a dark time. I I – you know, it's funny you ask that question, most people don't ask me that question, but I immediately when you did, I started feeling a little flush and me like, "Oh, this is embarrassing. It wasn't high quality."

STEWART: Oh no, no, I –

KYLE: Nor was I.

STEWART: well no, I understand. I mean, I spent I I discovered like when I went to when I was a freshman, MTV was it was new and uh and I – and I can relate, I mean I was like, "You mean I can just sit here and watch this and nobody's going to yell at me?" It's like, yeah. So what surprised you, what has surprised you about planting a church? And you've you've planted a church and been really successful at it. And you've developed some tools to help folks. I mean you've been at this for as I mentioned, you're a very experienced church planter. Could you talk about that process?

KYLE: Yeah, Well, here's the thing. I I would not say that I'm very successful at planting the church. I think there's a couple things. So the rest of that A&M story and and how it went from a hundred to six hundred, that's where a lot of the success and and I was I told you some about this – a lot of that is because Christina and I were a big part of that, you know, we were were part of the team and we were a big part of the team. We were we were big catalysts for why it grew so much. And a lot of that, and I think I told you some about this, a lot of that is is by training up college students to reach their own campus. That's the heart of college ministry. And so training them up, you know, they come in as freshmen, they're clueless, they don't know what they're doing, they're fickle. By their sophomore year, they're ready to start getting serious and we can kind of start the way, but really we are pouring into each of these college students for two years before they ever are able to do anything with their campus. But in only one to two years, junior and senior year, a college student is like, you know, I think about the parable where he's like, "Some of these seeds produced thirtyfold, sixtyfold, hundredfold." The college student's the hundredfold if you pour in, pour in, pour in, and then they come in and within months, you can see a dozen new people. It's just an insane harvest, but it's so much work to get there. And so anyways, we were really successful at A&M and so we church planted to be really successful at A&M to that's and this is kind of answering your last question – that's why we wanted to church plant is for to reproduce what we had done. And so what surprised me is that it was a lot harder than I thought. UTSA is does not have as motivated of a student as A&M on average and the percentage of Christians is significantly lower at UTSA than

it is at A&M. And so it caused a lot of difficulty. We ran into a lot of things that we were like, "This should work. We've done this before," and it didn't work and it kept causing problems. We've had to deal with so much sin in ways that I mean, obviously we always deal with sin, but like things that are just have blown my mind. Things that I didn't even I knew existed on college campuses, but even though I had worked in there for eight years, I didn't see it until I church planted at UTSA.

STEWART: Yeah, it's beyond the pale. I mean, I heard some stories when I was a prof. And like when you're a professor, you don't ever see students outside cla – I mean, you do, you see them, you know, at lunch or whatever, but like not socially. Like, you know, you don't you're not hanging around when they're doing whatever they're doing. And you hear some stuff happen and you go, "Whoa, like I wasn't like whoa, okay." So that's – I can somewhat relate to that.

KYLE: Yeah. Within Here I'm I was trying to think of PG things I could share because there's some crazy stuff, but one that's just gives a little bit of – we had to kick someone out of the church. We had to excommunicate someone. I mean, how often do you do you even hear of someone excommunicated?

STEWART: You say, "I'm sorry, you have to go now."

KYLE: Yeah, and and so we you know this guy was giving drugs to minors and alcohol to the minors. And so we we gave him a warning and we it made him write a con – like we wrote out a contract and he signed it because he said, "No, I want to stay, please let me stay," and you know, what do you do? You say, "No, you want to change, no, Jesus can't change you?" No, you say, "Okay, we'll give you another shot." So we were like, "Okay, but like this is serious. This is so serious." And so we got him to sign something, he still did it, and so he left and and you know that kind of stuff is that's one of the common – the lighter versions of some of the stuff that that we had to go through. So honestly, it was the first four years was was rough. We were finally starting to make it and then COVID hit and completely reset us. Because if you think about it, it takes us two years of pouring into someone before they become a leader. Well, they and then they have one to two years to contribute. It was already hard enough, we were putting like three years, three and a half years into someone to get a half a semester of them producing. And then COVID said, "Hey, everyone go home." So that half a year or year that we were going to get of them producing more was gone. They were gone the rest of that time and so we had to start over with new students. And that was brutal.

STEWART: And so I would not say we've been very successful. Since COVID, though, we have started again. I'm we've been successful at persistence.

STEWART: There you go, that's important.

KYLE: And so we've been at it again and we're finally starting to see the and this is where I'm excited and I told you about like we're starting to see those student leaders step up. We're starting to see like we're going to have the most student leaders we've ever had at at next or two weeks from now at our leadership retreat where we get everyone and we plan out the semester. We're going to have the most amount of student leaders and that's the key to college ministry. So we're very excited about it. And then through all the suffering, the Lord did reveal a form of evangelism that is eight times more effective than anything we've done in the past. So that can feel really successful and and I guess I – and I hope it will become that way, but what the truth behind it is the reason I we were able to even come up with this method is because of failure on failure on failure on failure on failure on failure.

STEWART: So, yeah, I mean it's you know, being an entrepreneur I'm familiar and at the end of the day, I used to say to my students, I'm like, "I hope you fail early and often and because that's the only like you learn so much more failing. Like you hit the ball out of the park and everything goes perfect the whole way and you go, 'Wow, I'm really good at this.' And then and then you go someplace else and you go, 'Wow, none of this is – everything that used to work doesn't work anymore.' And you know, I mean I think you see it but the good news is that you adjusted, right? That's the that's the thing –

KYLE: Mhm.

STEWART: is like you I've always said to people like, "Hold on to the goal let go of the path," right? Like and even the guy that was excommunicated, I'm a firm believer that as as someone who was aware that Jesus was there and God was there and I always felt like I was a believer and whatever else, I just I didn't realize that I was not there. I was not doing what was important and I was not doing it right, right? So what what I would say is like you put a seed, I mean our goal here on this show is is to plant seeds, right? It's to sow seeds. Forget about planting them, we're just here to sow them. And you've sowed a seed in that person and you don't know like they may come back. It may and it may be five years, ten years, it may be, you know, whatever. But I I think that you're winning more than you think I think. But one of one of the questions I wanted to ask you was you have a lot of conversations and and I think that people who and I can say this from personal experience, had I not been on a college campus, I wouldn't understand the dynamic of a college campus. And there is a dynamic that's different than anyplace else and it is a place where young adults are very pliable. And sometimes that results in them going uh the wrong down a a

path that isn't the best for them. What do you think young adults are looking for or searching for today when you talk to them?

KYLE: Well, I'd say the biggest common denominator from all the generations, you know, that I've at least that I've worked with, is belonging. They want to have a place that they belong. And that can have slight shades of variation, but at the end of the day, they just want to belong. And and honestly I've seen people that were that did associate themselves as like a jock end up joining a nerd crowd or vice versa because they wanted that sense of belonging where they found it was with people that were very different personalities and they they said, "You know what, even though I've always identified myself this way, I want to belong here." But you know, since you mentioned earlier, authenticity is a big thing for Gen Z. Part of even why I am the way that I am, I love being authentic, but I I realize part of that is because I work with Gen Z people want me to be authentic. They want me to to be real with them. And so that is something that has also been developed, so.

STEWART: And and it's talk a little bit about that because I do think it's interesting you you'd mentioned, you know, folks who aren't honest, right? And I think a lot of times college campuses or a college kid shows up, they don't know where they fit in, they're around a whole bunch of other students, a lot of whom look cooler than they think they are, right? And this idea of belonging really, I mean really resonates with with me. It's interesting that you that they value authenticity and I could see how that could permeate Taproot. Have you experienced like where people are just they're more honest? And they're you know, more take I believe just myself in what I see is a lot of folks are quick to say, "Oh, it's that that person's fault," but reality is that that it's it's me. Like I'm not taking responsibility for what I'm doing. How does that work culturally at Taproot?

KYLE: I would say that how honesty and authenticity translates in our culture is it it amplifies good and bad. So when things are good and there's a lot of trust between people and there's a lot of, yeah, there's trust, then authenticity's amazing. It it only amplifies the trust. It's like, "Man, he's being real with me, I love it," you know. When there's not trust, it gives the other person a lot of ammo. And when there's really unhealthiness, man all of a sudden you've just shared your heart with them and now they're using that to dig and to be really ugly. And that can spiral real toxic real fast. And so I, I think it's definitely better in the sense that again the the focus for success and good and when there's trust and that's the point of the church, right? That is there is a higher standard that you can reach there. But it also it's been hard to know, you know, and I'm I'm also I've moved even further from the college students in the sense that a lot of what I do now is

managing staff, younger staff that are reaching the college students. And that's where I've found, man, it is hard.

STEWART: Holy cow, yeah.

KYLE: It is hard to function in a business, because we're a church but we're also like, I'm their boss and I'm their supervisor and they they got to get your job done. And to be authentic, it just creates as soon as when things get toxic, they go toxic real fast. And it can be hard, you know. A lot of business advice out there is rules of what you should and shouldn't share with your employees. What do you do in a situation where you value authenticity? I have shared things with employees that I shouldn't have shared and I didn't know it until until it was already getting toxic. So that that is hard and you don't expect that to be in the church, you expect, you know, these staff they're all they we spend our time and we literally have parts of our job description sometimes in becoming close to the Lord, but yet we're still very broken people.

STEWART: Yeah, we're all human for sure. I probably I may be the flag bearer of the good founder lousy operator parade. Uh so I can relate to what you're saying about like I don't like to manage. I don't like to run an existing organization. I'm a I'm a pure founder entrepreneur guy and I I can appreciate that you you probably have some of those same characteristics if you're going to go start a church from scratch as opposed to like being a pastor a well-established church. I mean, you have you're an entrepreneur too. So I would think that one of the things that's happened with this show is I've had become I've had an opportunity to get to know some folks who are in your business. And I had a very disillusioned idea that like we didn't go to church a lot when as I was a kid, but the the pastor had robes on and I was like this person, you know, was struck by lightning when they were four and they they this just, you know, this is what they were going to do. And what you find out is that that pastors and people of faith like everybody else have different seasons, right? So when this is hard and you go, "I want to I don't know what I'm doing here, I need to what am I doing with my life?" what keeps you faithful? Like what keeps you what keeps you close to Jesus in those difficult moments where and and you know you've talked about some of it, but I know that's just scratching the surface. There's a lot of complexity in doing what you're doing. Talk to us about that those moments.

KYLE: I would say the more I'm in this the more I I don't think it's that much different than anyone in the sense of the things that keep us solid are the same things. There are complications with being a pastor, like it is harder for me to connect with the Lord when I'm at my church. I'm just focused on, you know, making sure things go or I I see too much. And it's hard for me to focus on God. When I go to someone else's church, it's really

easy, but it is harder on that. So there's elements there that I'm like, "Okay, well then I have to connect with God outside of the church service if I'm going to have that." And so that those are some of the elements. But one of the biggest things is right now for me is just my daily quiet time. Having a waking up before the kids, spending time in the Bible in scripture, spending some time praying, not just being in scripture but also like talking to the Lord about it. Uh once a week I journal, uh I don't read the Bible I I just journal on every Saturday. And that routine has really helped me. Now I want to throw the disclaimer out there that there was a time when I was a young staff and my pastor was telling me, "Kyle, why aren't you getting your quiet time? You need to have a daily quiet time." And I was feeling trapped because I was felt like my relationship with God was crushing it at the time and he was like, "You need to –" and I was actually coming to him with a celebratory like, "I finally found a way to get back into it." And then in that situation, I had really young kids and I was helping my wife with these kids and the idea of waking up before your infant that arguably doesn't go to sleep is kind of a ridiculous idea. So either I put everything on my wife to do all the parenting, which would burn her out, or I just can't do the routine that this sixty-year-old man could do. And so I had developed a system to where I would just once a month go for twenty-four hours and spend time with God for twenty-four hours. And it functioned. What blew my mind is that twenty-four hours of dedicated time actually added up, at least in in feeling of how close I felt the Lord, how much it was helping my constant prayer, how much it was affecting my journey with God. It felt like it was affecting the same as if I had been doing, you know, seven thirty-minute, one-hour chunks each day. It was amazing and that's what I had come to tell him. "Hey, this celebratory thing," and he was like, "No, that's not good." And I realize now that I'm an older man and routine's easier for me that I I am that actually what is helping me right now is what was helping him. But back then, something different was helping me. And I just want to throw out that disclaimer so I don't make other people feel trapped the way that I was feeling trapped – that what is helping me now is the daily, the daily before the kids wake up but that wasn't always the case.

STEWART: Okay, so you brought up the kids and that's a great segue. Tell us about your family. And how do you – I was at Bible study the other day and someone shared that their kids are kind of rejected and this person was very devout Christian and had kind of rejected that. And so I can only imagine, I mean your your situation with your kids is different than your dad's situation was with you. Talk a little bit about your family and and how do you how do you manage it?

KYLE: Okay, well first I'll talk about Christina, my wife. She we met in college, we were both in Home Group together, uh we ended up starting to serve together and crushed it. It was even part of what has made our church

successful is we were a dynamic duo. It was fun and we got married and we've been a dynamic duo since in the ministry context and it's been great. We have three kids. We have a fourteen-year-old boy, a twelve-year-old daughter, and a ten-year-old daughter. And they've grown up in this college ministry church planting sphere. That's their life. And I have had some fear. I I know the stereotypes of of PK and I'm nervous about my I've always been nervous about my kids having that stereotype, that idea that they're going to walk away from God because, "Oh, my dad was a pastor, he was hurt by the church, I don't want to be anything to do with the church." That jaded feel. Um, so far, I have been pleasantly surprised that my kids have not taken that on. Some of that – well, I'd love to take credit for as much as I can, but I I honestly can't point to anything that I'm doing that I can take credit for. I know that my son's personality is very compliant and that he you know he may have his walkaway from God when he gets to college, which is so painful for me to know the trend because I see it over and over again. And I think he's going to I think he's just going to keep being himself. I'm working on him to not have pride but he's just like, you know, during his baptism he's like, "This is the moment, this is the moment the pastor's kid is getting baptized," and I was like, "No!" like you know, just trying to convey to him that he he knows he's a sinner, but he's he's a tier-one you know or he's a higher tier than the other sinners. I think sometimes in his in his mind. He wouldn't say that, but it it feels that way. He's prone to that pride and we've been trying to work with him on it but I think what I've seen in that trend is that you know everyone affirms him. He's such a loving kid, he's such a hard worker, he's a servant, he wants to take help people. Everyone affirms him: "Oh man, Zeke's amazing." And that that's going to get to his head. And the main advice that I give parents that are like, "Hey, how do I make sure my kids stay well in college?" is like, don't tell them they've arrived. Don't even hint that they've arrived in their Christianity. Because if you even hint at it, they're going to receive it as they have. They're going to go into college thinking, "Well, I've already done the college the Christian thing, I've done it well." And if they don't realize that they haven't started yet, this is a conversation I consistently have with freshmen when I can tell they've got that they like, "I was a good Christian." I will tell them, you can only cap at ten percent when you are a high school Christian. Like you don't even know the potential you have in Christ. You cannot and it's interesting, they're actually not they're not prideful in the sense that they can actually receive that. Most of them are teachable. When I tell them that, they'll go, "Oh, really? Okay, well then I want to step up into that hundred percent. I want to step up and and get even further." But if you never tell them that, they'll assume that they can handle college. And that is the assumption that gets them in trouble. Because they go into college and they're like, "Oh, I'll find a church, but like it's fine, I'll just keep having my quiet times." Oh you know I'll do the they're not serious, they don't have any fear because they've been

told you're crushing it. And that's what gets them in trouble. That's what happened to my brother and that's what happened to my um one of my sisters. They kind of went in and they had crushed it in high school and and they even went to Christian colleges and I believe I just see it over and over again. So I'm working with my son on on that because that's where I think he's at. My youngest daughter, though, man I'm working on her to she doesn't make mistakes. She is she is like me, she is ready to make a ton of mistakes. And the fine line between morality the thin line of what is good and what is bad is already real with her. And so it's just different kids are different and so working with them it changes how you have that dynamic.

STEWART: So, our culture keeps changing and I mean you mentioned COVID, but I mean even since COVID, I mean AI, the the creation of AI has changed dramatically. I mean it's – it's changed it's changed so many things. And and it is only getting started. But there are truths that have that don't change. What in your mind do you think younger Christians need to hear most right now?

KYLE: I feel like yeah, this this kind of beating a a dead horse for me in what I just shared – people I've been sharing with people for sixteen years – but it's community. It's hard to under – overestimate it's hard to overestimate how effective community can be. There's the quote I love to quote, just that you're the average of your five best friends. It's not completely accurate, but there is a truth behind it that is really powerful. And I think that it would save a lot of people if they lived by that and they said, "You know what? Who do I want to be like? Those are the people I'm going to make my friends." And if they lived by that, it would save them from ninety percent of their problems.

STEWART: There's a lot of wisdom in that. A lot, a lot of wisdom in that. You're the average of your friend of your five closest friends. Yeah. I mean I think it makes I think it makes a lot of sense. It's true and you see it. People who would ordinarily not be in trouble except for the people that they chose to hang around with and got kind of swept up in something, you know. That's really good advice, Kyle. I think I think I appreciate that. Kyle, it's exciting what you've done with Taproot. And I know I think you're you're your own harshest critic but but looking at from the outside, what you're doing's really important. What do you see as the future of Taproot? And in, you know, where do you think where do you think it's going and uh how do you vision the path?

KYLE: Well, the ideal is for us to see that same type of movement that we experienced at A&M at UTSA. And we know it's possible, we've seen college ministries do this in all types of campuses. It's not like certain campuses have the right students, certain don't. God can work with all of them. And so

what gets me excited and what gives me hope is seeing that happen and and it's all around those student leaders. We've got the most we've ever had. If they get mobilized and excited about continuing to see that happen what what has happened in their lives have, you know, help be a vessel for Jesus to do that in other college students' lives, then it's just going to grow and grow and then eventually you get to the point where like, "Okay, we'll send out a church plant. We'll do these different elements of we're able to, you know." Right now I'm thinking about sending a church plant to Austin because there's a connection that we have with the UTSA CAP program and UT Austin that would just create an incredible funnel of leaders where we could start getting the process going with freshmen who would be more committed to us because we're one of the we would be one of the few groups that are in both places. And then when they get to a sophomore year, they're already partially trained up and they come in, they plug in, and they start that process. It would it would make that that church in Austin explode, which would be great for the Kingdom. So that's something that gets me excited. I've also told you about this evangelism technique that I've been wanting to develop more, um maybe not even just for our movement, but other, you know, Campus Crusade and these different things, share those resources so that more people are experiencing this type of success and and able to grow and you know there's a lot to that I've I've told you about it, but there's a lot to that evangelism program that could help the process even more.

STEWART: Yeah, it's exciting. I mean, you know, it's exciting to see what you're up to and and what you're doing. I want to I want to wrap with this with this question, and it's a weird question, but it's it gets at the heart of it. So I want to take you back to the one of the days of your life. In my experience as a professor, when freshmen come on campus, there's like there's like this big like joyous time when every interest group on campus has a tent set up and balloons and whatever else and they're trying to they're trying to talk with people who are interested in what they're doing, right? And so you've seen this, I'm sure you guys have a booth and I'm sure you're involved in that. I mean everybody on campus is that first that first orientation time is really like all hands on deck to get people engaged and involved. If you today met Kyle Kroger the first week of college, what would you say to your eighteen-year-old self that that would have made a difference?

KYLE: That's a great question. I hadn't really thought about meeting someone that I could identify as similar to I mean, I guess I do see that with almost all college students is that there's a lot that are very similar. But honestly, it would be casting the vision, like I said earlier, that there is so much potential in Christ. Something that they and I have told this to many college students – there is potential in being an adult that serves Christ,

beyond your imagination, beyond what you could fathom. He can do things beyond what you could imagine and you will go the rest of your life being grateful that God used you in – I mean, feeling special and unique and like, "Oh man, I'm so excited that the Lord was able to use me in that way."

STEWART: It's inspiring, man, it is. You know, I really appreciate you being on and being so authentic and real. I just really appreciate your story. I mean, it reminds us that, you know, the most important ministry happens it's one conversation, one relationship at a time and you've been doing that for a long while. Um, and I just I mean not that it's like not that it means anything coming from me, but like I really appreciate your efforts in what you're doing. It takes a special person to do what you're doing. So really appreciate, too, the work that you've done with Taproot. Planting a church next to the university's not easy, I know it's not. And and we're all grateful for that. So thanks for being on, thanks for taking the time and uh hopefully we'll have a chance to have you back on.

KYLE: Okay, thank you.

STEWART: If you enjoyed our conversation, please tell one person. By telling one person, you too are that Texas podvangelist, and that's how the Kingdom grows, one conversation at a time. I'm Stew, I'm that Texas podvangelist, this is the OG Pastors podcast, Faith Over a Lifetime. Thanks for joining us. We'll see you on our next episode.

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