

Engage360 Episode 166 | Closing the Expectation Gap: Finding Relief in God's Presence

Guest: Steve Cuss

[00:00:16] **Angie Ward:** hi friends. Welcome to Engage 360 Denver Seminaries podcast. I'm your host, Angie Ward, and I serve here as director of our doctor of ministry program and on faculty here at Denver Seminary. Thank you for joining us for today's conversation. My guest today is a repeat visitor, Steve Cuss. He is a former trauma and hospice chaplain.

Pastor and leadership coach. So a wealth of ministry experience and stories. I know Steve is based here in the Greater Denver area. I first got to know him through his first book, which I highly recommend managing leadership, anxiety, yours and Theirs before I came back to this area and got to know him personally when he was pastoring a church in the area.

Now he has gone on to found capable life, which aims to help people be calm, aware, and present in all of their relationships. And he's also the host of the Being Human Podcast, which is published by Christianity Today. After writing, managing leadership Anxiety last year, he came out with his next book, the Expectation Gap, the Tiny, vast Space Between Our Beliefs and Experience of God, which is what we're gonna talk about today.

Steve, thanks for being here. Great to catch up with you.

[00:01:25] **Steve Cuss:** Great to catch up with you too, Angie.

[00:01:26] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Fun to see you again in this environment. So I wanna ask a question first in your, just before we dive into more of the content of the book you say in your description of this book that you apply the science of reactivity to our very personal faith journey.

What is rea? What do you mean by reactivity?

[00:01:44] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah. Talk about a nerdy way to start.

[00:01:46] **Angie Ward:** exactly.

[00:01:47] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah. Reactivity feels like an anxious response, and that's kind of what it feels like in your body. Reactivity is a tiny version of when you see a deadly snake and you need to run for cover, but it's instead of that response in your body, you get just a couple of little drips. So reactivity is first of all, the only kind of anxiety that's contagious and

My first book, helping Leaders notice

[00:02:10] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:02:11] **Steve Cuss:** Anxiety and Lower It. everybody, and if you are watching or listening to this in the United States of America. You don't need to be told what reactivity is, just watch a presidential press conference,

[00:02:23] **Angie Ward:** Right.

[00:02:24] **Steve Cuss:** the news, get on your Facebook feed, and you'll see it.

It's the inability to deeply connect and instead just kind of bounce off each other and escalate or shut down. It's kind of an amping opera or a lowering down feeling. And reactivity is based on a false need that feels real in the moment.

So like the need to be respected, the need to have the last word, they need to be right.

They need to be misunderstood. They need to be liked. for some people the need to do it perfectly. These are all false needs. when you don't get them, your body reacts. And then you do weird things to try to get them.

[00:03:02] **Angie Ward:** To, yeah, to go away. Yeah. Well, so, and I, my understanding from you, knowing your story, like you first. Discovered this phenomenon, the reality of this when you were working as a hospice chaplain and and so, but then you've since applied that to like being a pastor in Leadership Koch and saying way, and this applies to everything.

Is that right?

[00:03:21] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah, that's right. Yeah. We were taught, I had the great fortune that the head chaplain was trained by Murray Bowen, who was the founder of Family Systems

[00:03:30] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Good stuff.

[00:03:31] **Steve Cuss:** theory for those who've never heard of it, it simply helps you locate the anxiety in any room you walk into. And you might think, well, how hard can that be?

Yeah. You'd be surprised. and I was. was surprised at a young age that I was often the most anxious person in the room as the chaplain. You think if someone's dying or someone's getting awful news that they're the most anxious, but my need to say the right thing and do the right thing, for example, would take over. So learning how to locate my own anxiety and manage it was a game changer.

[00:04:04] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:04:05] **Steve Cuss:** and I've been studying and learning and teaching it ever since. I'm kind of addicted to it. This new book, it was a wake up call for me in 2016, when I realized, oh my goodness. The same dynamics that infect our human relationships, also infect our relationship with God.

[00:04:22] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:04:23] **Steve Cuss:** got this new book going.

[00:04:24] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. So tell a little bit more about what happened in 2016 to make you realize that 'cause for so long you've been applying this to human relationships and

leadership and and all those environments, but now you're turning your focus to relationship with God,

[00:04:37] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah. Well, and to get to the end of that story I, Jesus, I think a good rule of thumb is just to say Jesus knows what he is talking

[00:04:44] **Angie Ward:** right?

[00:04:45] **Steve Cuss:** but when he says, look, the love of God, the love of neighbor and the love of self are all linked.

[00:04:51] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:04:52] **Steve Cuss:** Jesus summarizing the law, love of God, neighbor, and self, way you love one, infects the way you love another. And I think we're generally good at that with God and neighbor. You

[00:05:02] **Angie Ward:** Hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:05:04] **Steve Cuss:** Mistreat your neighbor and say you love God, we are very comfortable mistreating ourself saying we love God. So, 2016, yeah. Frankly, what was going on?

I was a lead pastor. I was the primary preacher in my church I couldn't shake, a momentum toward deism. My, my faith and it, my faith was affected profoundly by my chaplain experience.

[00:05:28] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:05:29] **Steve Cuss:** Just an onslaught of death and suffering that was more than I could cope with. then from there I went to seminary and I went to a theologically moderate seminary, a great school.

I loved seminary, but then academically did a number on my faith.

Know a lot of seminary students have had that experience.

[00:05:45] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:05:46] **Steve Cuss:** That was a one two punch for me and I spent the next 20, 30 years kind of to grapple back to a faith or a, a new deeper faith. And I found if I wasn't careful, that the belief in an all powerful God that isn't involved was the safest way to not be hurt as a Christian.

And it took me a while to get that specific. And Angie, I was just thinking, I don't think our church should have a dearest as a pastor, I wasn't keeping this from the congregation. I wasn't

[00:06:18] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:06:19] **Steve Cuss:** some secret faith life. I was very open with my elders, with my, I freely shared my doubt. I thought that was helpful to my people, that the pastor would open room for their doubt, but I couldn't get past the fact that is not the faith that's taught in scripture.

I don't have the luxury of creating my own faith. I have pledged my life to the Bible and the clear teaching. So, so that was the turning point. In 2016, I went on a sabbatical and I'm like, enough, I have to figure out why am I not experiencing the God I'm proclaiming to others? Why am I better at telling other people about God's love than experiencing it for myself?

And, I, what I put in the book is the faithy things weren't helpful.

[00:07:02] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Yep.

[00:07:04] **Steve Cuss:** and it was kind of humbling to realize, oh, I've been teaching people how to improve their human relationships. What if these same dynamics are infecting our faith? And that began a amazing journey for me that really transformed my life.

[00:07:20] **Angie Ward:** Well, yeah. And so you you mentioned talking about not being hurt. So what would that look like? Like what hurts are we trying to avoid by making kind of a safe. Proclamation God and not experiential in experiencing.

[00:07:34] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah. I think the, I've worked a lot on this, Angie. I mean, I think thousands of hours of angst and thinking for me.

[00:07:42] **Angie Ward:** Oh, for sure. Yeah.

[00:07:43] **Steve Cuss:** The issue is God can but doesn't.

I think that's the shortest way I notice. Talk about doubt. God can,

Well, let me add a word. God can, but doesn't always,

God can, but doesn't enough. So what's safer is to believe God doesn't that way I can't be let down when I pray. Steve Taylor. I love Steve Taylor. He had a song since I gave up Hope I feel much

[00:08:09] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, that's right.

[00:08:09] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah.

[00:08:10] **Angie Ward:** That's right.

[00:08:11] **Steve Cuss:** Just thinking, well, what's when I was in seminary I read holy The Firm by Annie Dillard,

[00:08:17] **Angie Ward:** Okay. Yep.

[00:08:18] **Steve Cuss:** kind of a weird book.

Not condone illicit drugs, but I would imagine taking LSD and then reading that book might help. What Annie's trying to figure out is, what is God good for? What

[00:08:30] **Angie Ward:** Mm-hmm.

[00:08:30] **Steve Cuss:** On? What do I know for sure. And I think as a people pleaser, I had linked people's approval of me with God providing over too much time.

And I think that was probably the crux of it for me. And then, in the book I get into this, like I. of my skills is looking at recurring predictable patterns that keep us stuck.

[00:08:53] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:08:54] **Steve Cuss:** And I started to notice the way we talk about faith in our churches is perpetuating a problem. Like, the story of Peter walking on water. If you look at that actual story, 92% of the disciples stayed in the boat.

[00:09:10] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:09:10] **Steve Cuss:** Why does a hundred percent of the congregation have to walk by faith? That's not even biblical. A biblical message is um, of you should stay in the boat this week. Watch

[00:09:20] **Angie Ward:** Wow.

[00:09:21] **Steve Cuss:** friend almost drown you worship God.

Anyway, the end of it all 12 worship Jesus. So I started to notice the way we talk about faith, the way we stack. One point in time story in the Bible and we expect to do it all of the time in our life. That's some of the stuff I cover in the book. So I started to really kinda unravel our faith is actually in and what God is actually good for.

[00:09:47] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, well, you talk about three three main gaps and that's kind of the focus of the book. So, let's talk about, let's go one at a time and kind of go through, you talk about, first one is I believe God loves me. So it's these things between what we have have assumptions and then what we experienced reality.

So I believe God loves me, but I don't feel it. So. Talk about that gap

[00:10:09] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah.

[00:10:09] **Angie Ward:** a little bit.

[00:10:10] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah. So that was my number one personal struggle is I believe God loves me generically, but not particularly.

And that goes completely against the teachings of the Bible. God knows the number of hairs on my head, and which, let's face it as I get older is.

[00:10:24] **Angie Ward:** Right?

[00:10:24] **Steve Cuss:** easier for God. But,

[00:10:25] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:10:26] **Steve Cuss:** And that what is going on there is the story I tell myself about myself is the primary competitor to the gospel of Jesus. And so I do two chapters on the gospel of your inner critic how your childhood trauma soldiers are blocking goodness in a well-meaning effort to protect you.

[00:10:50] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:10:51] **Steve Cuss:** Talk about the meaning we make. So, I was raised in a pretty angry home. there's many ways that I'm very grateful for my parents.

They're very good people, but I was raised by 1970s parents. Others have it worse. Whatever you're going through, get

[00:11:08] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:11:08] **Steve Cuss:** I'm not even saying that's a bad way to raise kids but I brought that into my faith

[00:11:13] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:11:14] **Steve Cuss:** to where. God, others have it worse. So I'm not ever gonna ask you for anything some of that kind of stuff.

So, your childhood propaganda, I call it your family propaganda, your inner critic, trauma triggers. For me, when I was a chaplain, too many prayers begging God for a miracle that I just stopped asking

[00:11:34] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Yeah, you talk, you in another phrase you use, and I love the way you put this, 'cause it just tells me, envision the people ar like the voices around me, the stories we tell ourselves. Committee,

[00:11:46] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah.

[00:11:47] **Angie Ward:** How many of those do each of us have? Like one of mine is, it all depends on me, which as a child in a trauma environment in a household, it that, it was life or death or it felt like that, as a kid but.

But that causes me to put up a leadership shield to relink, not engage in relationship. So I know that's one big one for me. How many, and you identified a list in your book, so, how many do most of us have on this committee? That's always given voices.

[00:12:12] **Steve Cuss:** I love that question. I dunno the answer actually. I know that people who have a traumatic

[00:12:17] **Angie Ward:** Um.

[00:12:18] **Steve Cuss:** Particularly when their own wellbeing was in danger, they have a number of soldiers. That are armored up to keep the outside world from even getting close to their lockbox of trauma. So, and I know I'm talking to someone who has experience here, but it's not like there's one line of soldiers.

I more picture it like there's eight to 10 rows

[00:12:39] **Angie Ward:** Of, yeah. Lines of defense.

[00:12:41] **Steve Cuss:** your lines of defense and as

[00:12:42] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:12:43] **Steve Cuss:** get busts through them, then the alert goes off more. has a family propaganda. little person in their head. Everyone has an inner critic, so there's at

[00:12:54] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:12:55] **Steve Cuss:** or four. But I think what's helpful for people to understand is, I operate in the world of assumptions.

I'm always testing assumptions. Here's an assumption we all perpetuate in church. Jesus is our deepest belief.

I think it'll be really fun this Sunday to ask if you can do a testimony and get up on stage and just say, I just want everyone to know. There is no way that Jesus is my deepest belief. And then just sit down.

[00:13:19] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:13:19] **Steve Cuss:** The

[00:13:19] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:13:20] **Steve Cuss:** call you. It's not cool to do that. but I, and I put this in the book, I found it really freeing to say, okay, Jesus is my most precious belief. That is true. He's transformed my life. He is my king. But what is also true is I have these conscious and subconscious, deeper beliefs.

Like, for example, it's all on me.

[00:13:42] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:13:43] **Steve Cuss:** Boy, do they show up when I'm not paying attention. They just kind of take over the reigns of my life, whether I invite them to or not, whether I, and more often than not, I don't even know they're driving my life. Well, no wonder I struggled to experience God's love. 'cause Angie, my deepest belief is I'm not worth loving. And it took me quite a while to dig down and find that belief. And it was really startling. I mean, it's only like 10 years ago when I found it. like, whoa. But boy did it explain so much of my behavior. No wonder I'm always there for you,

[00:14:19] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Yeah,

[00:14:21] **Steve Cuss:** I can be essential to you.

[00:14:22] **Angie Ward:** yeah.

[00:14:23] **Steve Cuss:** earlier this year I had shingles and I've

[00:14:26] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:14:27] **Steve Cuss:** fortune of never really being very sick in my life in anything serious. And I was in five weeks of excruciating pain. It was in one side of my face, it was in my mouth. It was in my ear. I've got, my tinnitus has gotten worse and I'm an old man.

[00:14:42] **Angie Ward:** That's right.

[00:14:43] **Steve Cuss:** okay, so five weeks of shingles. A number of people praying for me, I didn't even think to pray for myself until week three

Because I just think I'm worth God's time.

Like,

[00:14:52] **Angie Ward:** hmm.

[00:14:53] **Steve Cuss:** Belief. And

[00:14:54] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:14:55] **Steve Cuss:** so, experiencing God's love became, becomes a real wrestling match of, in any given moment, who am I putting my faith in?

[00:15:04] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:15:04] **Steve Cuss:** Most of the time I'm putting it in myself

[00:15:06] **Angie Ward:** Yeah,

[00:15:07] **Steve Cuss:** I got myself through childhood

I keep relying on myself. So it then becomes an intentional practice to actually believe God over myself.

[00:15:15] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. And if I understand correctly, I mean the people who have some sort of trauma background, there may be more rows, but we all have a committee and at least have these shared voices.

[00:15:25] **Steve Cuss:** That's right.

[00:15:26] **Angie Ward:** In us. Yeah I remember an aha moment. We were back living in Indiana and I had a teen son that I was praying about and why, God, why aren't you doing this and this?

And I felt like the Lord said, do you trust me? And I caught myself saying no,

[00:15:40] **Steve Cuss:** No. Why? Why are

[00:15:42] **Angie Ward:** though I teach that at a church we were at, trust God. Of course God's gonna come through whatever can do everything. And when it came right down to it. My honest, deepest so that would be our deepest belief, right?

My most precious belief is, yeah, of course

[00:15:56] **Steve Cuss:** yeah,

[00:15:57] **Angie Ward:** my espouse belief, but my actual Yeah,

Under the surface, isn't it?

[00:16:01] **Steve Cuss:** in church. Like we use all this exaggerated ative language. I'm sold out for Christ all in a hundred percent. devoted. No, we're not.

[00:16:09] **Angie Ward:** So was Peter

[00:16:11] **Steve Cuss:** Right.

[00:16:12] **Angie Ward:** at one point?

[00:16:13] **Steve Cuss:** yeah,

[00:16:14] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:16:14] **Steve Cuss:** in time

[00:16:15] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:16:15] **Steve Cuss:** do a point in time following of Jesus,

[00:16:18] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:16:19] **Steve Cuss:** my score is somewhere between 15 and 18%.

[00:16:21] **Angie Ward:** Right,

[00:16:22] **Steve Cuss:** Angie, think that's a good score.

[00:16:24] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Wow. Wow. Well, so I believe God loves me, but I don't feel it. So, and I know you, I don't wanna give away the whole book. You give some, like your book is structured, so you have these gaps and then you have these very practical tools, which is what I love.

So it's not just, I'm gonna wrestle with this conceptually, but what do I do with it? Are there, would you be able to give a little glimpse of like, of something you could do if that's the one that listeners or me, is kind of one of the bigger ones? I believe God loves him but I don't feel it.

What do I do with that?

[00:16:55] **Steve Cuss:** What do we do? Yeah. And the beauty of this kind of committee in your head, let's call 'em your protective parts

[00:17:01] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:17:01] **Steve Cuss:** that are protecting you from threat, and therefore keeping you from love. One of the easiest ones to notice is sarcasm. Is an attempt to protect your heart from pain by blocking intimacy.

And of course there's some sarcasm that's good natured and ribbing, but it all pushes away.

[00:17:21] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:17:21] **Steve Cuss:** distance, you know? okay. So once you've kind of figured out the beauty of this is you only have to unravel the thread for one, most of those protective parts to relax. So I recommend starting with your inner critic,

[00:17:34] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:17:35] **Steve Cuss:** he or she is the easiest one to locate. Yeah, what you can do, ideally you do this in community because even your nervous system needs the accepting look of another person. It's a, like, the body of Christ is incredible. So if you could get a group of friends and they

just have to be a group where you know you can be exactly yourself around them, and they're not gonna tell you how to live your life, be freaked out by your baggage, they can handle it. Then you play the game that's sweeping the nation, which is, let's talk about our inner critic and,

[00:18:09] **Angie Ward:** Exactly. The party hit. The party. Hit. Yeah.

[00:18:13] **Steve Cuss:** the nation. when I do workshops in organizations, I actually have people play this on the job they're like, we did not think we would be doing this. And what you do is one person goes first and they just say the message of their inner critic.

[00:18:28] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:18:28] **Steve Cuss:** So if you don't have a community, you can write it down. My, my inner critic has three messages I've. Put these in the book for people.

[00:18:35] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:18:36] **Steve Cuss:** At first my inner critic says you should know better by now.

Then if I let it keep talking, it says, you're really stupid and everyone knows you're stupid. And if I don't wrangle at it, it says, you're not worth loving. You're not worth anyone's time.

[00:18:48] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Boom.

[00:18:49] **Steve Cuss:** the messages. You hear 'em,

[00:18:50] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:18:50] **Steve Cuss:** man that's awful.

[00:18:52] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:18:52] **Steve Cuss:** then as you hear it, Angie, if you're in my group, you are now gonna write down descriptions. Steve, that sounds really harsh or unrelenting or

[00:19:01] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:19:02] **Steve Cuss:** sounds like you're drowning or, and then you would take a turn, you'd share yours, and then we would feed back the descriptions.

And after, let's say there's five of us playing this fabulous game, at the end of it, I've got a pile of descriptions. Well, now I just draw a column now just start describing the gospel of Jesus.

And you see this.

[00:19:23] **Angie Ward:** Speaking truth. Yeah.

[00:19:25] **Steve Cuss:** stark contrast between the gospel of your inner critic and the gospel of Jesus.

You start to realize, why am I giving so much

[00:19:32] **Angie Ward:** Mm-hmm.

[00:19:33] **Steve Cuss:** Inner critic? and then I have tools in the book on, okay, how do you contain? tried firing my inner critic and he kept showing up for work. He's not Milton from office space. He

[00:19:42] **Angie Ward:** That's right.

[00:19:43] **Steve Cuss:** clocking in. so I, I learned, okay, a protective part.

My inner critic is meaning well, so I can teach him how to stand down.

[00:19:52] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:19:53] **Steve Cuss:** And I let him run his little mouth and then I stand him down and then I invite God's word.

[00:19:59] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:19:59] **Steve Cuss:** And that's really helped me. I give God the first and last word I, in my life, I notice, oh, the inner critics in the corner office in my brain, I'm gonna put him in the basement.

[00:20:08] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:20:09] **Steve Cuss:** okay. God's word gets the corner office. So for a couple years when I started doing this, I believed God loved me, particularly only by faith. Because the Bible tells me, so I had quietened my inner critic. Now there's room for scripture. And now I know it

[00:20:26] **Angie Ward:** Hmm.

[00:20:26] **Steve Cuss:** Faith for me to believe that God loves me particularly.

It took a while, but it doesn't take faith anymore. It's just something I know.

[00:20:33] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. You've internalized that. That's what I was gonna ask. How often is there a point where it does become more of a part of you?

[00:20:40] **Steve Cuss:** it doesn't take long actually, 'cause you've been living this other way. I just kinda see this committee, it's had free reign.

[00:20:47] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:20:48] **Steve Cuss:** So the first time you pull on those reigns, it'll put up a bit of a fight but then they'll stand down. It doesn't take long and I'm just looking to feel freedom in my body.

So I'm, what I'm looking for is my nervous system is believing what my head is believing

[00:21:03] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:21:04] **Steve Cuss:** and, now I can do that in a couple of minutes

[00:21:06] **Angie Ward:** Hmm.

[00:21:07] **Steve Cuss:** I'm really spun up and then it takes an hour and sometimes a couple of days if things are really uh, really spun up for me.

[00:21:13] **Angie Ward:** Wow. Yeah. We'll get to the other, two main gaps that you identified in the book, but you mentioned something about being in a community and you listed a lot of caveats where I can be myself and be safe and all that kind of stuff. I know a lot of people who don't have that kind of community.

That, I mean that alone is the first big hurdle.

[00:21:31] **Steve Cuss:** I know. We it breaks my heart. We host intensives. I'm doing an intensive at my house this week. did an intensive at Los Valley Ranch here in Colorado.

[00:21:40] **Angie Ward:** Mm-hmm.

[00:21:41] **Steve Cuss:** People spent a lot of money. I mean, that's not a inexpensive place.

[00:21:45] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:21:45] **Steve Cuss:** And we had 27 of us in a big circle, all of us in a big circle. And it was a number of my co, Lisa and I were there, a number of my coaches that we've all been doing this work together for years at my church and these strangers from all around the world who didn't know each other.

And they were flying. And it was like the third day. And one of the guys named Ryan, who has since become a coach for me, Ryan said. I don't think you guys know what you have. I don't think you know how rare it is

[00:22:13] **Angie Ward:** Mm-hmm.

[00:22:14] **Steve Cuss:** Like it's so normal.

[00:22:15] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:22:16] **Steve Cuss:** And we're like, what do we have? And he said, I don't know any of these people.

I came in, now as close as anyone I've ever been close. I can talk about anything. Like, I can be exactly myself, also he said, you're not making me share. Like, it's not one of those vulnerability hangovers where like, oh. He said, it's what? What is that? And so actually the intensive I'm doing this week is the first intensive where we're trying to teach people that

[00:22:45] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:22:46] **Steve Cuss:** rather than my tools, like you and I were just talking about, we're

[00:22:48] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:22:49] **Steve Cuss:** coaches. How do you, we've all been to those retreats where you are forced to share.

[00:22:55] **Angie Ward:** Yep.

[00:22:56] **Steve Cuss:** No, and then we've all been in places where there's a lot of pretense. So we're trying to be human sized and it breaks my heart that is the rare experience. I will say this though, Angie. When you are a kid, if your house wasn't safe, you knew your friends, which friends of yours had a safe house.

[00:23:14] **Angie Ward:** Yes. Yeah.

[00:23:15] **Steve Cuss:** in the same way, I believe every church has those people even those churches where there's a lot of propaganda from the stage, a lot of performance. There's almost always still congregants that are like, you

[00:23:28] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:23:28] **Steve Cuss:** house, you be yourself

[00:23:30] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:23:30] **Steve Cuss:** I. So I do think you can find those people and invite them in to

[00:23:34] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:23:34] **Steve Cuss:** with you. Yep.

[00:23:35] **Angie Ward:** a good word. Yeah. How to find them outside of formal context where it's kind of Yeah. Assumed. Yeah. Well, so let's go to the second one. The second gap, I I believe God is with me, but I don't see him. How does that get lived out?

[00:23:48] **Steve Cuss:** Okay, so the number one obstacle to awareness of God is reactivity. And I also, Angie, I just wanna say, I know we're covering a lot in a short chat but reactivity, it looks like is you're no longer human size. You are now bigger than human, or smaller than human. Bigger than human is easier to notice. Just solves almost every problem in his life by getting bigger than

[00:24:10] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Powering up. Yeah.

[00:24:12] **Steve Cuss:** And we've all seen leaders that do that.

[00:24:14] **Angie Ward:** Okay.

[00:24:15] **Steve Cuss:** of those leaders, they're rewarded for it. But generally they dominate, they mansplain, they have to have the last word. sometimes it's more subtle, where somebody's telling me about their day. tell 'em some advice when they weren't asking for

[00:24:31] **Angie Ward:** Mm-hmm.

[00:24:31] **Steve Cuss:** To get bigger,

Getting smaller. That's harder to see, but suddenly someone gets quiet. They only speak up when they're called on. have their own secret meeting after the meeting. Okay? When we are bigger than human, God is no longer the judge.

We are now the judge. So some of these aggressive leaders, they are in God's seat.

[00:24:51] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:24:52] **Steve Cuss:** can't notice God when you're trying to take God's job. What we call self-righteousness, that you are no longer folded into the righteousness of Christ. You are now self-righteous. When you're smaller than human god's no longer your refuge and strength. am now my own refuge and strength. And so I walk into that meeting and my nervous system says to me, don't say what you think. Hold back. Now, I should say, Angie, that may be a wise thing to do, but more often than not, you actually not are under threat.

[00:25:24] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:25:25] **Steve Cuss:** you're moved into self-protection. And it's hard to notice the Lord when you are protecting yourself.

And so that middle ground is saying, sized. God is God, I'm human. I can be myself. Nothing to prove, nothing to lose, I can be. So what? My goal is to help leaders and actually all humans the number of situations where they can be human sized,

Which means increasing your tolerance for conflict. When somebody is bringing their heat at you. Like as a preacher, I've had critics that don't know how to behave well,

And it's wild when I work on being human sized rather than trying to change them.

It they should not treat me this way. I, but I'm fine. Like,

[00:26:10] **Angie Ward:** yeah.

[00:26:10] **Steve Cuss:** time it happened was a couple weeks ago, this guy came up and unloaded on me.

I'm like, eh,

[00:26:14] **Angie Ward:** Again, it could be, right? Yeah, exactly.

[00:26:16] **Steve Cuss:** for

[00:26:16] **Angie Ward:** I'm fine. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:26:18] **Steve Cuss:** So it's the passage, Genesis 28 where Jacobs says, surely the Lord was in this place. I was not aware of it. Cleos in Luke 24, walking along, and not aware of the

[00:26:30] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:26:31] **Steve Cuss:** And so it's learning to notice when your reactivity has flooded you, and then it's stopping and relaxing into God's presence in on purpose in their course.

I've got a number of tools on how to do it.

[00:26:41] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, so, so that one's, I believe God is with me. So, I don't see him and there's reasons we've become too big or small, and don't allow ourselves to be human sized and God to then be God sized.

[00:26:51] **Steve Cuss:** And we forget that the Lord is here. So, like if I feel pressure coming into an elders meeting, that I have to know everything that I don't know what they're gonna ask, but I have to know 'cause one of my false needs is looking smart.

[00:27:03] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:27:04] **Steve Cuss:** And so if they. If they ask a question like, Steve, what was the children's budget in 2018?

I don't know. I can get that number, but in the moment, my nervous

[00:27:13] **Angie Ward:** Like, like, yeah,

[00:27:16] **Steve Cuss:** And what I might do if I'm not careful is say, come on. I might get combative. Like,

Instead of just saying, oh, I can, I don't know, but I can totally get you that info. I,

[00:27:27] **Angie Ward:** yeah,

[00:27:27] **Steve Cuss:** You tomorrow.

[00:27:28] **Angie Ward:** yeah.

[00:27:29] **Steve Cuss:** then the elder is gonna be like, great.

[00:27:31] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:27:32] **Steve Cuss:** and so. If I'm combative, okay, I've forgotten the Lord. So just walking into that room, I take one minute and I say, okay, Lord. When I walk into this elders meeting and I'm all nervous about knowing the answer, I'm walking into a space. You are already sovereign and at work. So I'm actually relaxing into your presence really helps me, Angie, it really helps me stop my false needs kind of get managed.

[00:27:57] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:27:58] **Steve Cuss:** Then even if an elder comes at me with a little bit of heat, which just for my eldership was very unusual, they were, I had great elders, but if they did, it's like, oh, that's fine. Like maybe you had a bad

[00:28:09] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:28:09] **Steve Cuss:** You have a strong opinion. if I'm not aware of the Lord, then I respond with heat or feeling hurt or something like that.

So.

[00:28:18] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. There's a theme so far through our conversation and some of the tools of this, just naming things and having an awareness takes away some of, a lot of it's power.

[00:28:26] **Steve Cuss:** Huge. We teach a three step process, notice and then name and then diffuse.

[00:28:31] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:28:32] **Steve Cuss:** Real simple.

[00:28:33] **Angie Ward:** Wow.

[00:28:33] **Steve Cuss:** just learning to notice is huge.

[00:28:35] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. So for listeners, I mean, I, my, one of my takeaways is that, like you said, the noticing, I think we wanna skip forward to what do I do? But one of the hugest things is just to, admit you have a problem, to notice it and be aware of it. So, yeah. Yeah. Okay. The third gap, this one.

Sounds like it's kind of more me centered. So I'd love to hear your thoughts on how this is about relationship with God. I thought I'd be further along by now.

[00:29:00] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah, so one of my skills is assumptions and one of them is stuck, predictable patterns. We're kind of talked about

Reactivity we talked about. The one we haven't talked about is I'm really good at noticing attempted solutions. They're one of my favorite things to talk about. In the 1960s a therapist named Jay Haley coined the term attempted solution. would come into him for counseling and they'd say, here's the problem. And he'd say, oh, I don't treat problems at all. I only treat your attempted solutions to problems. It's so great. It's, and even for leaders to learn to notice when you're stuck and an attempted solution, of course, doesn't. Solve the problem? Well, I think our faith communities, the way we talk about following Christ in Church perpetuates an attempted solution that doesn't help us grow. The, the easiest ones to look at would be the early two thousands. About 20, 25 years ago, there was a spate of books the author would have you open Acts chapter two and read amazing devotion they had. Then his attempted solution is now go be more like them.

[00:30:09] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:30:09] **Steve Cuss:** There'd be a gap between them and us. And then other authors wouldn't focus on acts. They'd focus on like the persecuted church in China and they'd say, look how fat and lazy you are. What American Christian,

[00:30:21] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:30:22] **Steve Cuss:** those always drove me crazy. And I won't name names.

You may have a name in your head. If those books helped you as an audience, who am I to spit on it? But, it's not helpful because for example, here's an assumption and a stuck pattern in our churches. We always talk about that. The people in the Bible had it harder than we have it, and I'd like to say not so fast. I do not mean to say that being a Christian in the Roman Empire was a picnic. It was brutal, but they got God with vocal chords.

[00:30:57] **Angie Ward:** Mm-hmm.

[00:30:58] **Steve Cuss:** At least a competitive advantage over us. We follow an invisible God that is very hard to do. And I don't hear many pastors getting up in front of a congregation and saying what is really true?

Which is, it is difficult to follow an invisible intangible God.

The disciples like, what does it look like to follow Jesus? Well, where is he? Oh, he is over there.

[00:31:20] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:31:20] **Steve Cuss:** All right, off I go.

[00:31:21] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:31:22] **Steve Cuss:** And so then there's all this implication for this like. the way we put our anxious need to grow onto scripture. So what we're doing what do they call that in Herman Iso? Iso Jesus. When

[00:31:36] **Angie Ward:** Reading it into the text.

[00:31:38] **Steve Cuss:** it in the text, we should be wildly mistrustful of American culture.

This as an Australian, I, if I was an Australian, say Australian culture, any culture that values efficiency, progress and growth, we should be wildly. Suspicious because then we take that into our faith and say, if I'm not growing, I'm a failure as a Christian

[00:31:56] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:31:57] **Steve Cuss:** man. I don't know. Story about Peter walking on water has nothing to do with Peter.

And the way we know that is Mark and John recorded that story and they never mentioned him. only mentioned Jesus walking on water.

They never mentioned Peter. Now you might say, well, John had this weird competition with Peter. He's always bragging about how he's a faster runner,

[00:32:18] **Angie Ward:** Right,

[00:32:19] **Steve Cuss:** Like,

[00:32:19] **Angie Ward:** right. Got there first. I

[00:32:21] **Steve Cuss:** him out.

[00:32:21] **Angie Ward:** win. Right.

[00:32:22] **Steve Cuss:** And you might say, well, mark was Peter's apprentice. Mark's the one right writing down Peter's stories.

Mark never met Jesus. He's only taken Peter's account of Jesus. So maybe what happened is Mark and Peter are up late one night and Peter's talking about the story of Jesus walking the water. And

[00:32:37] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:32:38] **Steve Cuss:** mark, we don't need to tell everything that

[00:32:40] **Angie Ward:** Right,

[00:32:41] **Steve Cuss:** that's what

[00:32:41] **Angie Ward:** right.

[00:32:42] **Steve Cuss:** But what's really going on is that story in Matthew, and John, Matthew being the one that mentions Peter in all three stories. It's all about Jesus' sovereignty over creation. That's the point of the story. That's the whole point of the story. There's no other point. that would explain why at the end of the story, 12 disciples were astonished and worshiped because they have just

[00:33:04] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:33:04] **Steve Cuss:** Jesus as the creator.

God.

[00:33:07] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. It wasn't to put down Peter.

[00:33:09] **Steve Cuss:** In fact, Jesus does not call Peter's walk or walk of faith. We call it that.

Now, what happened is Jesus walking on water? The disciples like it's a ghost. Jesus. Like, come on guys, get a grip. not a ghost, it's me. Peter then says, Lord, if it's you, me to come.

[00:33:28] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:33:29] **Steve Cuss:** always impetuous. It's his gift and his curse, right?

He's

[00:33:32] **Angie Ward:** Yep.

[00:33:33] **Steve Cuss:** leader and his foot gets himself into trouble. The only thing Matthew records in that story is Jesus says, come, that's all we have to go

Did Jesus say, so that for 2000 years, preachers can use this story to tell us we should step out in faith or. Did Jesus say? Every time Peter puts his foot out, something funny happens.

Let's see what's gonna happen. We don't know. But we like, like one week we're reading about Peter and the application is, you gotta take a bold step of faith. We come back to church the next week and it's, the story is not Peter walking on water. It's Mary and Martha and Jesus. Martha's scurrying around and Mary is sit and soaking like a freaking pot smoking hippie, youngest child

[00:34:23] **Angie Ward:** Right.

[00:34:24] **Steve Cuss:** doing nothing. And that week in the sermon it's like, look, you're too hurried. You need to sit and soak in Jesus. So one week was supposed to be bold like Peter. The next week was supposed

[00:34:35] **Angie Ward:** Right.

[00:34:36] **Steve Cuss:** like Mary, and Peter and Mary are nothing like each other. And we only have them doing this one time in their life, but we feel a constant low grade pressure to always be bold like Peter, always be contemplative like Mary,

[00:34:51] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:34:52] **Steve Cuss:** like Esther, faithful like Ruth.

Off and off we go, and we've created a fictional super disciple

[00:34:58] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:34:58] **Steve Cuss:** and in our best effort to become like Jesus, we're missing him altogether. It's nothing but a self-improvement project. That's my rant.

[00:35:05] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. That's great. Yeah. Preach. Yeah. Yeah. We've read read all that pressure into the text and feel like that's what God was saying when he wasn't at all.

[00:35:13] **Steve Cuss:** Peter. Peter kind of died a lot like Peter. Like Peter at the end of his life was a lot like Peter at the beginning of his life. He grew in some areas for sure, mostly 'cause the Holy Spirit did miraculous work. He really wasn't working on it a whole lot.

[00:35:25] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Yeah. So, I have a guess how to answer this, but what, what would you say is your deepest hope for people reading this book? I'm seeing a theme to these different three things and the other stuff I've read in the book. What's your deepest hope for someone and longing for someone who's reads this

[00:35:42] **Steve Cuss:** my deepest hope

is relief

[00:35:44] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:35:45] **Steve Cuss:** so that they can step off the treadmill of more of the same and try harder, which doesn't work.

[00:35:50] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:35:51] **Steve Cuss:** Actually encounter the Risen Christ.

So my deepest hope is worship. I think this is in the book. I don't remember if I put this in the book or came up with it later when I'm teaching this, like if I'll do a sermon or I'll do a workshop, I'll ask the crowd, the game, would you rather,

[00:36:07] **Angie Ward:** yeah. Yeah.

[00:36:08] **Steve Cuss:** I'll say, if God was playing, would you rather, and God could only get one of these, would he rather your growth or your worship? People hate it. Like, no, it has to be booked. And I think he would rather our worship if we simply encountered Christ, he does the rest.

[00:36:26] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:36:27] **Steve Cuss:** So relief. That's my, number one relief. Long enough to realize that a lot of our well-meaning effort is futile.

[00:36:35] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Yeah, that's a, that's what I thought relief rest, letting ourselves off the hook for having to be God.

[00:36:42] **Steve Cuss:** To get too preachy, Angie, but God literally died on a hook.

[00:36:47] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:36:49] **Steve Cuss:** He would never put us on a hook,

The

[00:36:51] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:36:51] **Steve Cuss:** is actually the gospel.

[00:36:52] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:36:53] **Steve Cuss:** had someone say to me, it feels like you're letting us off the hook,

[00:36:56] **Angie Ward:** Like.

[00:36:57] **Steve Cuss:** gently said, what kind of God puts you on a hook?

Not the God of the universe.

[00:37:03] **Angie Ward:** yeah,

[00:37:04] **Steve Cuss:** put himself on the hook, so that's right

[00:37:06] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. So why are we putting ourselves there also? Yeah. Wow. Such good stuff. Steve, I know we're we're out of time for the podcast here, but where can people find more about the stuff you're doing?

[00:37:16] **Steve Cuss:** Yeah, they can just go to my website, stevecusswords.com and that'll kind of link to all of our, the podcast and we've got some free stuff there, and also books and intensives and

[00:37:26] **Angie Ward:** I love Steve cuss words.com. Are there any cuss, actual cuss words harmed in the making of this website? I don't think there are any. Just

[00:37:34] **Steve Cuss:** it

[00:37:34] **Angie Ward:** I.

[00:37:34] **Steve Cuss:** Mark Twain said that sometimes cussing provides relief, not even afforded to prayer.

[00:37:41] **Angie Ward:** That's great. That's great.

[00:37:43] **Steve Cuss:** Very Mark

[00:37:43] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. That's great. Well, yeah, folks encourage you to check out this book and Steve's other work. I've found it very helpful for my own life, my own relationship with God, with others and my leadership and ministry. So Steve's so glad that I could be the one to interview here today.

Thanks for being here.

[00:37:59] **Steve Cuss:** thanks so much, Angie. This was a lot of fun.

[00:38:01] **Angie Ward:** Great, thanks. Friends, thanks for choosing to spend some time with us. We are grateful for your interest, support and prayers. Till next time, may the Lord bless you. Peace.