

Engage360 | Intro: Welcome to Engage360

Introduction: Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: I'm Don Payne, I will serve as your host for this brand new podcast. We want to welcome you to the podcast and welcome all of our students back for the opening of the fall semester at whatever campus they're studying, whether they global online campus, Washington DC, West Texas, in Amarillo or right here in Littleton. So this is Engage360, this is our opportunity in podcast format to kind of push the needle ahead on the mission statement of Denver Seminary, which is to prepare men and women to engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of scripture. And our intent week by week is to interact with a wide variety of people, doing a wide variety of things, each of which will in some way help us explore what that redemptive power of the gospel looks like in the world we inhabit. And we want to have some fun along the way. We want to enjoy each other and we want to push each other. We want to explore and we want to see how this particular mission that God has given us is going to, what it's going to look like in the world around us. So I'm honored on this inaugural podcast to, on this inaugural episode, to have as guests, the President of Denver Seminary, Dr. Mark Young. Welcome Mark.

Dr. Mark Young: Thank you.

Dr. Don Payne: And our dean of students, Rob Foley. Rob, welcome.

Rob Foley: Thank you.

New Speaker: So these gentlemen are going to join me for a conversation basically, to introduce the podcast and tell a little bit about the backstory of why we've done this, what we hope to accomplish, and where we're headed from here. So I'm going to start with Dr. Young and ask him to maybe speak to some of the overall patterns that have been taking shape in theological education. That's part of the backstory for all of this.

Dr. Mark Young: Oh, definitely it is. What we're observing is that in the last, let's say at least twenty years or more, students have begun to think differently about how they access the theological education. So Don, you and I went to seminary at a period of time where the institution would say, here we are and they have this location. And then they'd say, you come into our location and you can access the theological education. Now what we're seeing is a lot of students who are saying, here's my life, Denver Seminary, you showed me how you can fit the theological education into my life. Notice the shift in movement, right? We

expected students to move toward us years ago, and now the student is saying, you need to move toward us. So as a result, the way we educate students, the way we bring them into our community, the way we relate to them, the way we have influence in their lives, has to change. Because we're simply not going to be able to fulfill our mission if we continue to insist that students attend and take in access to theological education in the ways that we accessed it twenty, thirty years ago.

Dr. Don Payne: Now part of theological education as most people would be familiar with, it is a certain type of community life that is shared, by those in residence and with some of those changes you've just described, Mark. That means that some of those aspects of community life get reformed and refashioned as well because the things that have been done for so long and were very important and very meaningful. It seems like those are more and more difficult to do, at least in the same way. One of those aspects, I think is what is traditionally been called a chapel program where a seminary community gathers for worship on a weekly basis or with some regularity. And those are really, really important times because they give a sort of framing to the theological education process, a framing of worship, a framing of prayer, a framing where the word of God in some fashion can be proclaimed as the kind of magnetic centering device for the otherwise kind of dispersing effect that analytical academic study can have. And so that what's often been called the chapel program has been a really central part of a healthy seminary community. Rob, this is intersected the work that you do as dean of students because you in your office have overseen our chapel program for some years. And maybe you can speak a little bit to some of the trends you've seen in that arena.

Rob Foley: Sure. You know, one of the phrases you just used, was the magnetic focus point or something to that effect. I think there's been a shift along with what Dr. Young was just talking about, in terms of where students know that they experience community. So in the feedback we've consistently gotten over almost the last decade from students is, kind of an outcry for the school to acknowledge and support the efforts that they're making already to experience God, and experience others, and pursue Holy living in their own communities, wherever that might be. And so that is also a bit of a, in terms of what Dr. Young was saying, you know, back in the day, so to speak. The education.

Dr. Don Payne: By the day, you mean, our day?

Rob Foley: That's right, no age is disclosed, no age is disclosed here, but it's the, it's the switch of a school saying, come to us and access us where we are versus now the student is, it's exactly right. The student is saying, I need you to access me where I am. So there, there is a change in atmosphere of what community looks like at an institution. There still is a need and a desire to create opportunities for students to connect with other students, with faculty, and with staff to create meaningful relationships. But there also is a need for institutions to recognize and acknowledge, what's going on in the life of the student where they live. And so, one of the goals with the podcast is access, access, access, for students to be

able to access the theologically rich information, and the spiritually formative information, and material and content that we as a seminary, as a theological institution of higher education want to disseminate. Want to offer to those who wish to engage it, but in a way that allows students to access it where they are. And so, there's going to be some reciprocity. We'll have to learn with this of re-understanding our role as a school in creating opportunities for community to happen, while also acknowledging and supporting the efforts students are making within their own communities. So that's the feedback we've received over years now of students saying in a variety of ways. Chapel feels like a duplicated effort of what we're already doing through the weekend with my family or with my community, with my peers at the church where I worship, the church where I invest my time and energy, or in my pursuit to find a church. And a school is not a church. It's not that place where they will find that church community. But there is, there's merit and coming together as we would say, doxologically right to frame our experience here as a seminary family, within praise and worship of God. And there will be opportunities to continue doing that sands a chapel program. So I responded to your question. Sorry. I probably responded to some others you didn't ask.

Dr. Don Payne: But I was going to ask you. But on that note, before you pursue that a little bit further, it might help to name something that I can almost anticipate, at least from people in my generation, when you talk about some of the trends of students wanting and needing for seminary education and seminary services to come their way. I think there are some, and maybe in my generation and even up above who would say that that's a rather consumeristic, but I wonder whether it's more or really a case of just the increasing complexity of students' lives. Do you see that to be the case?

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah, I think there are a couple of mistakes we make when we generalize about the seminary student body. A lot of us or like folks who aren't a part of the seminary community imagine a group of 18 year old's leaving home to go to a place to have an educational experience. And actually sometimes we catch ourselves, like we were talking about the others talking about the kids. But the reality is the average age of a student at Denver seminary is 34, so as a result, we're educating adults, adults with families, adults with jobs, adults with children. We're really not creating, or I should say it this way, our primary student body isn't that 18 to 20 year old. In fact, that be, that'd be unusual. Even that 22 to 25 year old who isn't married, doesn't have a job and is just coming to diverse seminary to study. Right? So when we talk about whether or not these students are as committed or whether or not they're willing to make the sacrifices necessary, we're talking about levels of sacrifice that many of us could not or would not make.

Dr. Don Payne: Right. Because for you and I, who launched into seminary immediately after our undergrad, that was a very different game. A somewhat different world and life was far less encumbered for us in doing seminary.

Dr. Mark Young: That's exactly right and I think another mistake we make is, you know, we talk about different campuses, right? We have the Littleton campus and still the majority of our students are enrolled in the Littleton campus, as well as our fully online campus. We call it Global Campus, DC, as well as West Texas. But the average student, even the ones who are coming in person to the Littleton campus, are still taking only 15 credit hours per year. Now think about that. We probably took over 15 per semester. Clearly because we were more brilliant.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, clearly.

Dr. Mark Young: No, because our lives were less encumbered. So, even though we have more students on the Littleton campus at any given time, we only have a small percentage of the total number of students on campus. They come from work, they take a class, go back to work, they come in the evening, they come on the weekend, they come at various times to fit their schedule. And so as a result, having the whole student body in a place at a time for chapel is fundamentally, mathematically, impossible.

Dr. Don Payne: And I think it's worth stating that while, to some that may look like, people trying to just kind of fit seminary into a sidebar of their lives, it takes an enormous amount of commitment and a sacrifice to fit seminary classes in to an already really jammed life because you still have a sense that God wants to do something with you, for which you need theological education.

Dr. Mark Young: That's right.

Dr. Don Payne: And I, would on a personal level, want to really underscore and affirm the significance of the sacrifice that students do make to do it in, sometimes the creative ways they have to do this in these already really full jammed lives. So all of that then brings us to this point where as Mark you've said quite a number of times, we can't simply just recycle seminary education in the same kind of packaging and delivery systems that has always been done, that did work well generations ago. But simply will not get the job done these days. Rob, you alluded to some change, one of the ways that this will impact us is in the chapel program. So why don't you speak a little bit more about that, what you've seen and what we want to do moving forward.

Rob Foley: Sure. Well, I might be helpful to provide a little context about the chapel program. The chapel services were 45 minutes to an hour every Monday and Tuesday from 11 to noon. And there was an attendance requirement, but the school allowed students, I think it's a pretty gracious attendance requirement to opt in and to opt out as long as a 10 services were attended, any given semester. And a student could count that semester toward their attendance requirement. The assumption was that this was a huge, a rested audience for any message that the seminary might have to disperse upon this audience. What we found over, at least the nine years I've been here, is that we really, it was just a confluence of a number of challenges that we had to address with that. Some of it being values driven and more philosophy, if you might say, of

the value of chapel and also the logistics. And they really blended together to create this kind of a perfect storm where we had to take a look and put everything on the table. Something that I've appreciated about Dr. Young's leadership is the allowance for everything to be on the table to evaluate. And are we effectively meeting the intended outcomes? Do we place the right kind of value on this based on what students are getting from it? And one of the things we learned is that unless some significant structural changes were to be made, we were just not going to have a whole lot of influence on increasing chapel attendance. We found that we were averaging between 80, maybe a hundred in one of those given days on a Monday and Tuesday. And over the last eight years, that was in a steady decline despite a number of efforts to try to bolster it. And so we had to listen to that. We had to pay attention to that. What did that mean? What is that saying in terms of what students, how students might be perceiving the value of chapel and perceiving their engagement with that? We had to ask, is the chapel format in its traditional, hallmark type of delivery model, the only way to produce the outcomes as we've talked about the irreducible of framing, theological higher education within praise and worship of who God is. And the answer was no, that wasn't the only way. And so, that would, that resulted in a group coming together and evaluating what would some other opportunities be? Fast forward, we started to evaluate what the idea of doing a podcast would look like. So that then leaves a question of, well, if you take something away, what might you replace it with? Do you leave that void? And answer that question is no, absolutely not. Because again, there's value and merit to creating, gathering points for onsite physical, I can see you and you can see me in a worship full posture, of reflection, of worship, of hands up, eyes closed, hands folded on our knees. Whatever posture that might look like of pursuing a relationship with Christ. So in a somewhat counterintuitive move, by stepping away from the weekly rhythm, which this would then get into some of the logistical challenge of chapel, it required a tremendous amount of resources and effort to pull off. If you think of what that is, what's required in, you know, to coordinate Sunday services on a weekend. That's what we were doing on every Monday and Tuesday, from finding speakers to hosting them, to coordinating all of the audio and visual. It goes on and on and on. So by stepping away from that, it will actually free those of us who are involved in coordinating those efforts, free us up to invest in more strategic points of gathering students, gathering those who are part of the community throughout a semester, and spiritually formative worshipful types of contexts. So, what does that look like? We will still retain two to three, to four, maybe upwards of five on some semesters of an onsite gathering of some kind. And then the student life office, which is the team that I can speak to, is my team, will be involved in a variety of other efforts to engage students to grow spiritual vitality. And spiritual vitality is so connected to what we sometimes overlook as, you know, it's not just a worship service. Although in all of that, all of the beauty of a worship service, there are aspects of spiritual vitality that get into the social, relational aspect of our lives. The mental and physical health and wellbeing of who we are as creations of God. How we recreate with other aspects of creation. And so these are elements of the whole being of a student that we will now be focusing on, along with those strategic gathering points.

Dr. Don Payne: In those strategic gathering points, I know it's really important to Dr. Young to have an opportunity to address the seminary community at the outset of each semester. Mark, do you want to say a little bit more about that?

Dr. Mark Young: Sure. I'd love to. It's been my privilege throughout the 10 years I've been here to think through what God would have me say to our community theologically, to encourage them in their studies, to encourage their walk with Christ. So we will have an opportunity at convocation this Fall for us to gather as a community, for me to speak from scripture, from my heart, for what God is saying to us about why we're doing what we're doing and what it leads to. So I'm looking forward to those opportunities. I think the fact that they will occur less frequently will actually raise the level of anticipation and the level of participation. I do believe like Rob, that it's important for us to gather. I think it's important for us to see one another in worship. I also think it's important to say at Denver Seminary, we're kind of constantly reassessing what we're doing. So, you know, sometimes at higher ed you make a change and people assume, well, it's going to be that way forever. No, all of us are asking the question if what we were doing isn't meeting the needs of the students, is what we're currently doing, meeting the needs of our students? And if we can honestly say it isn't, then we'll figure out another way to meet those same needs. So I want to say thank you, to the community, for Rob, to you Don, to Dr. Cohick, and others who helped pioneer this idea because I do think it creates an opportunity for us to create those centering messages that everybody has an opportunity to hear. It creates an opportunity for us to reconsider what it means to gather together periodically throughout the school year, and truly worship together. And at the end of a couple of years, we'll take another hard look at it and say, is it working or is it not? And then move forward from there.

Dr. Don Payne: Right. Well, one of the things that excites me and I think a number of us about the podcast, Engage360, is the opportunity now to have an equal platform for all students at Denver Seminary, regardless of the location, where they live, the campus, that it's their primary point of contact. Now we have one unified voice for Denver Seminary through this podcast, and one unified opportunity for every student, as well as alums and other constituents, friends of the Seminary. And in fact just the broader ministry community to connect with the Seminary, to hear from us, here what's going on here. And then to kind of enter with us in this process of wrestling through the thorniest, thickest, problems that are going on in our culture, which need the redemptive power of the gospel, the redemptive touch of the gospel. And we want to be able to do that in a wide variety of ways, with really interesting conversations that are going to have something to say to people even potentially around the globe.

Dr. Mark Young: That's correct. It was very difficult for a committed donor for example, who is fully engaged in a career to come to chapel on a Monday or Tuesday from 11 to noon, or for alumni who engaged in ministry or other activities. So this gives us an opportunity to address not just current students, but prospective students who may be interested to hear what are the messages that mattered to Denver Seminary. Graduates who are working in all parts of the world as well as friends

and donors of the Seminary. So I'm thrilled with the possibility that this type of medium has for us to be able to reach those broader audiences.

Dr. Don Payne:

Dr. Young, tell us a little bit about how Denver Seminary's mission and core commitments will inform what we do on this podcast.

Dr. Mark Young:

Well, like everything we do at Denver Seminary, we believe that this podcast will help us accomplish our mission, which is to prepare men and women to engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel, and the life changing truth of scripture. There is some significant words there that matter in that mission statement. Engage. It means we don't stand back from the world that God has created and from the mess that we've created, in the world that God created, that we step into it. We engage with the needs of people in the world. Gospel and scripture. We believe that it's the gospel that redeems, that rescues and restores humanity. And that it's scripture that guides us in our engagement with the world, as we live out who we are in Christ. Alongside of that mission statement, we have five core commitments that we believe define the educational experience at Denver Seminary. The first is what we call Biblical Authority. And we say that we are people of the book. The Seminary was founded by a group of people who believe that the scripture, the Bible, is the final word for faith and practice. It creates for us a foundation of what we believe, and how we are to live. Secondly, we say that we believe in Vigorous Scholarship. We're committed to vigorous scholarship. You may have heard the phrase rigorous scholarship, and in some disciplines rigorous scholarship means knowing more and more about less and less. When we say vigorous scholarship, we apply two things. Number one, we want to answer questions that matter, and number two, we want to do it in an intellectually challenging and satisfying arena. And that's why we like to say we are people of truth. We want to seek truth from all disciplines and interpret it within the framework that scripture provides for us theologically. Our third core commitment is what we call Charitable Orthodoxy. By that we mean we are committed to the great truths of our faith, and we recognize that within the framework of those great truths, there are disagreements that we've had historically. Some of them have lasted five centuries or more. And we recognize that people of good faith come to different conclusions, theologically and hermeneutically. So the question is rather than going to war with one another and trying to convince one another that we have the only way to think about it or to condemn one another where we don't agree, how do we learn from one another within the framework of these great truths that have defined Christianity? And so that's why we say we are people of the faith, the core commitments of faith that have been a part of the Christian tradition since the early church. Our fourth core commitment is what we call Redemptive Relationships. And let's face it, the gospel message is a message of redemption. God's great act on our behalf to step into our lives, to rescue us from the mess we've gotten ourselves into and the penalty of sin, which is death, and to restore us to life in its fullness. That's why we say we are people of the gospel, but we believe this gospel is best understood and best lived out in relationship with one another. And so we value being able to know students, relate to

students, listen to students, engage with one another, whether that's face to face in a classroom or around the table, whether that's through a virtual classroom, through zoom or whether that's through a threaded discussion, all the different ways we relate to one another. And we believe that in those relationships we live redemptively with one another, wanting to help one another, bring our lives more in line with what Christ is asking of us. And our fifth core commitment is Global Concern. By this we simply mean we are people of the kingdom of God. We believe that God is at work establishing his people as a foretaste, as a glimpse, as perhaps a little aroma of what ultimately he's going to do when he establishes his reign over all the earth. All the earth. All the earth. And if that's God's concern, then that needs to be our concern as well.

Dr. Don Payne:

Dr. Young, thanks. Thanks for that vigorating closing challenge to us that really set the pace, kind of chart the trajectory for this podcast, for Engage360. And I think listeners will know what we mean, even by the name, in light of what you've just outlined for us. So thank you, Rob. Thank you for all that you've done, you and your team, the dean of students office, to bring us this far, and your tireless labors there. To our, for our entire production team, I want to thank them and want to welcome you to Engage360. I'm Don Payne. I'll be your host and look forward to interacting with you. I encourage you both to subscribe to the podcast, tell your friends about us, and then communicate with us at podcast@denverseminary.edu and we will see you next week. Take care.