

Engage360 | Episode 14: Gospel-Guided Political Engagement

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: Hello again. This is Engage360. I'm Don Payne your host. We are really grateful for you joining us each week. If you join us each week or whenever you join us and want to continue to encourage you to do that and subscribe on your favorite podcast platform, and tell a friend about us. If you find something beneficial here, please do that and leave us a rating or a review on your whatever way you subscribe or download our podcast. We'd really appreciate that. That helps us continue to get the word out even further and further. So when I was a kid, my dad would take me to the barber shop and I learned over time that barbers seemed committed never to discuss religion or politics. Those were topics that were considered far too divisive, and probably bad for business as well. Now, apparently that sense of social reserve has seen its day, because it's now acceptable if not fashionable for people, including Christians, to weigh in on matters political just about anywhere and without much thought of the, of how the manner of discourse affects the possibility of productive discourse. Of course, social media has aided and abetted this tendency. So it's time for us to dive into this tangled thicket of political engagement. But when we talk about political engagement, we're not merely talking about political structures or policies or candidates or resolutions. Those specifics provide the context for our discussion today, but we need to have a more macro level discussion about how the gospel shapes and directs our engagement with any political structure because engaging the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel demands that we understand the issues of the world in light of the gospel. And it's one thing to throw the gospel at problems in need, but it's quite another thing to, to see those problems and needs in light of the gospel, and then let the gospel interpret what we see and dictate how we speak into it, how we engage in it. So to help us in this discussion this week, we want to welcome back Denver Seminary's President, Dr. Mark Young. Mark, welcome back to the podcast.

Dr. Mark Young: Thanks Don. It's a pleasure.

Dr. Don Payne: Mark, currently in the US we seem to be peering into a steadily deepening and widening chasm and in a curious way, many in the church are attempting, so it seems, to throw solutions at the problems that the chasm represents while at the same time digging the chasm even deeper and wider. Is that a fair way to understand the situation that needs reflection on political engagement or how else would you describe what we're dealing with?

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah, I think the chasm you are describing may be defined by the word polarization. And certainly in my lifetime, I can't remember a season when there was such deep polarization within the believing community, the church as well as in the broader society, around issues of candidates. I'd like to think that it was really around issues and around questions of policy. But what I see is much more of a polarization around persona, around people who are leading the partisan efforts, in our nation to try to create some solutions. I think that I'll be quick to say though, that in the United States we've endured significant periods of polarization as a nation. And the church has been a part of that polarization, think back even to the Revolutionary War where there were strong believers who felt that the Revolutionary War was a mandate from God and some felt it was rebellion against the king. And so it was against God's word. Civil War would be another example. Other flashpoints of course, would be the Civil Rights Movement. So we have endured polarization in our nation politically as well as within the church. But I think that at this point in my life anyway, the problem seems to be more pronounced and certainly more emotional than I've ever experienced.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, the church has always had something of a checkered or a varied history of relations to the state, going back at least as far as Constantine, if not further. And then moving forward into the Reformation, Luther's understanding of two kingdoms, as occupying two kingdoms, Calvin's attempt to more or less Christianize Geneva. You've got the Anabaptists who have existed on a spectrum of engagement or I guess a spectrum of, with degrees of withdrawal from political life. And then it seems like in the 20th Century there were certain Christian eschatologies at play that focused on just the utter corruption and hopelessness of any and all political systems and is focusing exclusively on the afterlife. But then in 1947, Carl Henry publishes this book called the *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. And something seemed to shift in the latter half of the 20th Century. Talk to us about that.

Dr. Mark Young: Oh, you know, it's interesting. Let me just even go back before that if I could. Every human that's ever lived, even in a tribal setting, engages in politics, right? If, if by politics we talk about the way people organize their -

Dr. Don Payne: Life together.

Dr. Mark Young: Exactly. And they're always emerging structures of power. So how the Church, the believing community relates to the power, that certain instinct institutions or people have to organize life, has been a part of what it means to be Christian, a part of what it means to be human. So certainly we've seen the Church approach that in different ways as you rightly laid out. I think what happens at the beginning of the 20th Century is a Church that sees itself as needing to withdraw from a world that is seemingly losing its character or the way that they think the world, particularly let's talk about America, the way America ought to think about itself. So two things are happening. One is a massive immigration of people who don't come from the Protestant world. So for the first time, we see our cities moving away from being predominantly Protestant

to having very, very large Roman Catholic immigrant communities and that's something that the Protestant community in the United States really didn't know how to deal with. Secondly, you have the Modernists' development, which was a movement away from a basic theistic view of the world to a view of the world that kind of cast theism aside or at least to a certain degree sidelined it. And in that modernist perspective was a real optimism that humanity is going to be able to solve the basic problems that emerge through various structures of power, whether those be economic or social. And then in reaction to that modernist controversy, and out of the insecurity of seeing Protestantism losing its predominance in many parts of the United States, you have the fundamentalist movement, which pulls away or attempts to pull away from those power structures around an eschatology that is based on the world is getting worse and worse and worse. And at the end of time, it's going to be burned up. So it doesn't.

Dr. Don Payne: So, why does it matter?

Dr. Mark Young: Why does it matter? Right? We're just going to withdraw into our own communities, create our own social structures and let the world be burned. And I do think that becomes really the posture of the evangelical fundamentalist community in the twenties and thirties what evangelicalism or what many would call neoevangelicalism attempts to reclaim, is a confession of the fundamentals of the faith that defined fundamentalism, but an active engagement in the societies in which we find ourselves, which would include political engagement. So when Carl F.H. Henry publishes that book in the late forties, he's articulating a desire of a segment of what has essentially was a fundamentalist community to say, wait a minute, we don't want to withdraw. And we don't want just to see the world moving toward ultimate doom. We want to be a part of creating in the world around us, structures and policies and communities that enhance the quality of life, and address these significant problems that seem to be plaguing us.

Dr. Don Payne: So take us from that point and forward. How, how has the conversation, or the manner of discourse and the manner of engagement kind of evolved or changed in that latter half of the 20th Century?

Dr. Mark Young: You know, in the latter half of the 20th Century. I think you have to go back to a couple of key issues, right? Key events, I would say it this way. One is the Civil Rights Movement, it seems to me that the Church, or certainly many in the church today have never really come to grips with the way that many in evangelicalism either actively opposed the Civil Rights Movement or in many regards didn't engage. And as a result, it really left a huge wound in our nation where the church wasn't speaking into what was a quest for something the Church ought to value, which is justice. The opportunity for people to live without a prejudicial system that disadvantages them in every way. I think that was a significant reminder that the Church of the 1960s anyway, the evangelical movement in 1960s, still hadn't found its footing in knowing how to speak prophetically in a way that addressed some type of systemic evil. The next

significant event, in my opinion, is going to be the formation of the moral majority when evangelical engagement in politics takes on a partisan spin. So it's not just that the moral majority wants to speak to issues. The moral majority now comes out and says, no, no, we're not just about issues. We're about a party. And they wed themselves to the Republican Party, which now continues, continues up to this day.

Dr. Don Payne: So, well, go ahead. I want you to keep going on that.

Dr. Mark Young: I think the issue, Don, that we face today is, is an outflow of that adoption of a partisan political engagement. I think political engagement on the part of evangelicals is necessary because we need to be a community that speaks truth to the society in a way that embodies our values and our desire that people come to know Christ. So we have to be speaking, we have to be engaged, we have to be involved in the lives of people in ways that cause them to want to know the one we call savior. Partisan political engagement, on the other hand, is primarily about winning elections, about swaying the court, about creating or taking power in a way that often times subsumes or overwhelms this prophetic voice of truth. So in a partisan world, even if people in the party that I am involved in are telling lies or are engaged in behaviors that are contrary to the very values that we say we uphold as a believing community, we don't speak to that because of fear of losing an election or losing power. And I would argue that that partisanship is why we find ourselves today in such a very difficult place.

Dr. Don Payne: One of our commitments here, which we've visited already, in the few months we've had the podcast is our commitment to charitable orthodoxy. So how does this kind of attention and the struggle between participation and partisanship, how does that situate within a commitment to charitable orthodoxy?

Dr. Mark Young: I think one of the, one of the true tragedies of the way many evangelicals engage in the political process today is dividing the church. That is, the church itself is now being thought of in terms of red church and blue church. I'll give you an example. In the 2016 Presidential Election, I wrote a letter to our community and in that letter I said, you know, it's really not okay when political candidates engage in behavior or use language that is contrary to what we value. On the one hand, you had a candidate who was bragging about sexually assaulting a woman, and on the other hand you had a candidate who was calling an entire group of people deplorable. So I pointed out in that, in that letter to our community that neither of those is what we as Christians uphold, that we want to create a safe environment where women feel safe, that sexual assault's not okay, and we uphold that as leaders, and it's not okay to take a group of people and call them deplorable and write them off. Interestingly enough, as a result of that letter, the word comes back to us that, well, Denver Seminary is now liberal because they've chosen to criticize the candidate that evangelicals had rallied behind. It wasn't about, it wasn't about being partisan, it was about saying this is wrong, it's wrong. Both of them are wrong. And that's where as a church where we say we have common values, like truth, like the humanity, the

dignity of all people like justice for all, like the creation of a society within which people can thrive because of peace, like the treatment of the poor. We value those things as a community and I think we ought to come to peace with the fact that neither party is ever going to be fully aligned with what we value. So if partisan politics is dividing the church, it's elevating partisanship above what evangelicals have held in common for generations. And that to me, Don, is a tragedy.

Dr. Don Payne: What do you think marks the difference between healthy and unhealthy, or we might also say, faithful or unfaithful modes of participation?

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. Let me just go back to something I said before. The believing community has certain values, certain convictions that ought to characterize everything we do in the public square. First, a commitment to truth. We have to be those who speak truth even when we speak truth against those whom we think we're going to vote for because truth is truth.

Dr. Don Payne: Or maybe who we did vote for.

Dr. Mark Young: Or maybe did vote for because truth is truth and if people are engaged in deception or misinformation, then we need to speak truth. Or when people are engaged in behaviors that are contrary to what we hold dear, we need to speak truth. That's the prophetic voice of the Church. So when we go silent because we are on the side of one candidate as opposed to the other and our candidate is doing something that's wrong and we don't speak the truth, then we've abandoned who we are as people. Another common value is the humanity, the dignity of all humans. So we simply cannot abide political partisanship that dehumanizes someone else, whether that's an unborn child or whether that's an immigrant at our border. Both have full human dignity and we need to speak to that dignity and call those in power to protect that human because they have dignity. Compassion for the poor clearly indicated throughout scripture, justice for everyone where systems of jurisprudence aren't weighted or law enforcement aren't weighted against another, the creation of a peaceful society where within which the Church can thrive. That's what Paul told Timothy that the folks in Ephesus should pray about. These are all things we all believe in, but when our partisanship silences us on these issues, then we've elevated our partisanship above our own convictions about what it means to be Christian and that I think is negative way to participate.

Dr. Don Payne: It seems to me that one of the, one of the tangles that lots of people including Christians face here is a kind of a confusion of three categories and I'm going to draw these three categories. It's kind of a typology from the military. Though I was not in the military this is a sort of categorization of all that they do. They think at three levels, the strategic, the tactical, and the logistical. If you take the strategic, you know, we want to win a war, we want to protect the country, we want to liberate something. The strategic, the logistic, I mean the tactical, you know, we're going to run this campaign, these particular maneuvers, and logistical supply lines. We need this much of this and this much of that in order

to get all of this done. But lots and lots of entanglement and controversy and in fighting seems to take place at the level of confusing strategies and tactics and logistics or particular policies and resolutions. And aligning those in a partisan manner with candidates or with values. And when all of that gets mushed together, that seems to simply muddy the waters in almost intractable ways. There are there ways we can kind of differentiate and break those out in order to help us have the kind of faithful participation that you're talking about?

Dr. Mark Young:

Yeah, I do think that what I said earlier about values and convictions is a common way, right, to kind of get beyond conversations about tactics and logistics. But when we think about strategies, Don, I think we have to come back to the question. Who are we and why are we who we are? So the Christian community, we as evangelicals, our first identity is we are the redeemed. We are those who have tasted and enjoy and live it. The redemption that is ours in Christ. Our identity as the redeemed is interestingly, brought into the language of statehood by the apostle Peter, who talks about the redeemed community as foreigners and exiles wherever they are living. And what's interesting to me about that is clearly they lived in a very political environment. As Peter was writing this letter in the first century world, he was writing to those whom he's already described as those who have tasted the new life that is in Christ. And he says to them, think of yourselves as foreigners and exiles. Meaning your first identity is not your state. It's not your statehood, it's not your citizenship if you have it. It's not your social status. It's not your economic status. It's not your location. Your first identity is that you are the redeemed and everywhere else you find identity, you're a foreigner and an exile. Now as the redeemed, we are the redeemed for one purpose. And that is to create a credible and compelling testimony of the Redeemer, the one who has called us out of darkness into light. So however we engage logistically or tactically in the political process, we really only have one goal. How do we engage in politics so that our identity as followers of Jesus Christ, redeemed by Him on the cross, is made clear to everyone among whom we live, and the testimony of the Redeemer is made clear? And I'll say it this way, to the degree that we are known for anything more than we are known for the gospel of Jesus Christ, our own idolatries are revealed. And if that's where we find ourselves, then we have to take a hard look at ourselves and ask, how are we known and is it first and foremost as the redeemed and is the first thing people want to know about us, our savior?

Dr. Don Payne:

I think you ought to make that statement again to the degree that that's worth underscoring, repeating.

Dr. Mark Young:

To the degree that we are known for anything other than the gospel, our idolatries are revealed because we are giving ourselves wholeheartedly to something other than the gospel and our privilege of being its representatives on the earth.

Dr. Don Payne:

Well, hence the significance to the first century Christians of the phrase *Christos Kyrios*, Christ is Lord, which cost many of our faith ancestors their lives simply to say that and not say Caesar is Lord, who is not desperately, but it was a radically

political statement of a higher allegiance that they had to Jesus Christ than they had to any prevailing ruler or power or structure, which is something that may not sit well with the modern church.

Dr. Mark Young: Exactly right. And you know, the interesting thing is when Paul says something similar, right? Our citizenship is in heaven in his letter to the Philippians. That's not a command for us to withdraw from society or to withdraw from politics. It's a command for us to put politics in its place. In other words to recognize that whatever we do in the political arena has to be subsumed under our identity as the redeemed for the purpose of making the gospel of Jesus Christ known. I mean, ask yourself this question. Would you hear the political rhetoric that comes from those who call themselves evangelicals? I'm not questioning that they are or aren't from evangelicals who were involved very publicly in politics, and you hear them talk about the other party and the other communities and the other people who've made other lifestyle choices. Is the language that's used in the heat of political partisan, political engagement? Does that create in your mind the idea that their first priority is that those people come to faith in Jesus Christ? I think not. Partisan politics is a zero sum game. Some people win, some people lose. We're called to lose everything for the sake of the gospel. That's where I think we ought to end up when we engage these tough issues and talk about those who want to take power in our society.

Dr. Don Payne: That really is what makes it, and I appreciate this, that makes this a gospel issue, but in a very different way than the gospel card was being played a hundred years ago, where many, many evangelical Christians would say, we're going to disengage or have nothing to do with this because we only want to focus on the gospel. And I think what I hear you saying is that the gospel is far larger than that and wraps around this, and the gospel rather than dissociating us from the process, it actually shapes the way we engage the process.

Dr. Mark Young: Absolutely right. We're not calling disengagement. We're calling for engagement where our identity and our mission reign supreme. So we speak truth, we seek justice, we engage in the process so that we can create peaceful environments where churches can thrive, where justice is for all and not just for some, that's what we're engaged in. And the full humanity of people is dignified in the policies that are being put forward. So engagement, yes, partisan engagement, that I think is the poison pill of evangelicalism because that's where we lose our way when we engage the process.

Dr. Don Payne: So as we record this, the road is being paved, the ramps are being put down for yet another general election. We're in the throws of the debates that are going on within the major parties. So I think many of us are kind of bracing ourselves for yet another political season. You got any tips on how do we navigate and survive another round of all this?

Dr. Mark Young: Well, I would jokingly say emigration. New Zealand sounds like a good location.

Dr. Don Payne: I was thinking Switzerland, but you know.

Dr. Mark Young: You know, here, I do have some practical tips built, built on observations that I've made, as I've engaged friends of this Seminary, my own personal friends, and others who are deeply involved in the process. So I love that. Proverbs, Proverbs chapter four, it says, guard your heart. And I ask myself the question, in each and every day, do I allow myself to become either irritated or agitated or upset or consumed by the next political squabble, or am I guarding my heart so that it remains focused on who I am as the redeemed and why I am who I am as the redeemed for the testimony of Christ. So practical, practical example, I'll just tell you my own personal life. I don't listen to the news in the morning. I don't. I listen to classical music in the car. I do everything I can so I don't start out my day thinking about the divisive polarized issues or my own disappointments with candidates on both sides of the perspective. So I limit what I take into my heart and into my mind. I go into homes, Don, where I've been in places where folks get up, flip on their favorite cable news channel first thing in the morning, and from their first sip of their first cup of coffee, which ought to be a heavenly experience.

Dr. Don Payne: It should be.

Dr. Mark Young: They're already irritated. And then it's on all day long, the same channel, the same biases, the same perspective, the same desire to first, agitate, and secondarily inform.

Dr. Don Payne: So limit our intake.

Dr. Mark Young: Absolutely. I if you, you know what, what, what's the rule? I don't know. 30 minutes of cable news max and nothing after 5:00 PM. Right? Because those folks who get on in the evening, they're entertainers and their goal is to create an emotional reaction normally of either anger or fear.

Dr. Don Payne: Cause that keeps us watching and that's what advertisers want.

Dr. Mark Young: Exactly. And then that opens our wallets as well to give to political campaigns. So guard your heart. That would be my first thing. The second thing that I would, that I would recommend is that if you want to be informed and we should be informed, read. What a novel thought, read and read from opposite perspectives. So if you think that one particular news outlet that you're reading, either online, digitally, or God forbid, even a paper, a newspaper.

Dr. Don Payne: What's that?

Dr. Mark Young: Then read some.

Dr. Mark Young: One from the other perspective and hold in tension those perspectives. And I guarantee you what you're going to find that those who write from a partisan perspective, something about those perspectives will always come short of what we value as evangelicals. So identify what's good and what's bad in those

alternate perspectives or those opposite perspectives that you, that you read. I realized that, you know, we're swimming upstream here, but I, I want to go back to a book that was written the mid 1980s called *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman. And in that book, Postman points out that the medium of television is primarily for the purpose of evoking emotion, not for creating understanding. I think what we have with people are consumed by television news, by talk shows, by other politically oriented television shows. We just have over amped population. Our lives are driven by this overarching sense of, not futility, anger. Another thing I would say, make it a point to build a personal friendship with someone whose political views are the opposite of yours. And not only discover what they believe, what positions they hold, but why they hold those positions. Alan Jacobs wrote a fine book a couple of years ago called, *How to Think*, and in that book he talks about how when we don't interact with or have relationships with people who have the opposite perspective, what they become to us is a "repugnant cultural other," someone that we automatically distance ourselves from because we don't haven't taken the time to engage them as human beings who have perspectives and views that are different than our own for reasons that are intensely human. I find that knowing people who have opposite views from mine in all kinds of areas, politics in particular, allows me to have a better understanding of my own views, causes me to question why I hold those views, and above everything else, raises my desire for them to come to know the savior, in whatever conversation I would have. So guard your heart. I think that's a very, very important point and make sure that you know and get to know, those who hold different views than your own, because that raises your heart toward them and they're not just someone you disagree with now, they're someone whom you want to know, you want to come to know Jesus Christ.

Dr. Don Payne: Might be an amazing discipline if many of us would force ourselves in those conversations, simply to ask, tell me more about that or why do you think that?

Dr. Mark Young: Absolutely right. "Why" is the great question. Because when you talk about "why" you're humanizing a particular political perspective. So you know, I disagree with people on both sides of the political equation. Some more liberal than I, some more conservative than I, but they're both human. They both have reasons they both have needs and wants that are bringing them to the positions that they take. Why wouldn't I want to know that? If I don't know that I'm not going to love them. If I, if I do know that I can develop real compassion and love for them and that's where I think we need to be. You know, one of the craziest statements in all the Bible, Jesus said it, love your enemies.

Dr. Don Payne: I thought that got cut out. Somebody cut that out.

Dr. Mark Young: And I don't hear that. Right. Yeah. I hear it in the political language of some evangelicals who are very public about their support for one particular party. I don't hear compassion. I don't hear love for those who are on the other side of the political spectrum and that my dear brothers and sisters is not what God called us to be.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I don't know how we can claim to be people of the gospel and ignore that rather clarion call.

Dr. Mark Young: That's right.

Dr. Don Payne: Hey, do you have some recommendations for those who want to read more about what we're talking about? How to out of thoughtfully engage in, yeah, in a genuinely Christian way.

Dr. Mark Young: I do. I have to confess, I didn't bring my notes so I don't have the exact titles, but I can pick.

Dr. Don Payne: Well that's okay, because I happen to have them.

Dr. Mark Young: Thank you very much. Oh, maybe. Well, of course. Thank you.

Dr. Don Payne: Here read my notes.

Dr. Mark Young: Now, I don't have my glasses. Oh here they are. Yeah. I think one of the best books is written by the former director of the National Association of Evangelicals, Leith Anderson, and his colleague Galen Carey. It's called *Faith in the Voting Booth: Practical Wisdom for Voting Well*. I read that. I think that came out in 2016, 2017 it's a very, very, I would argue it's a very evangelical, it's a very biblical way to think through issues and participation, nonpartisan. And that was very, very helpful. If you want to read a book that will challenge you, I think is, and kind of force you to think in ways that may be uncomfortable for many of us, the book, *Public Faith in Action* by Miroslav Wolf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz. Miroslav Wolf is an evangelical who actually lived in the Balkan region, lived through the horrible wars there. His book *Exclusion and Embrace* is a classic for evangelicals. But Miroslav comes from the perspective of seeing how bad politics destroy societies. And so I think his book comes from a place of deep, deep wisdom because he's seen how when the political process breaks down, true chaos, true destruction takes place, and he writes from that place. So I'd recommend both of those books.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay, Mark, thanks. We've been visiting with our President, Dr. Mark Young, about what the gospel means in terms of our mode of political engagement. Mark, thanks. Thanks for your wisdom and spending some time with us again. This has been Engage360 as I've said before, I hope you'll write to us, our email address is podcast@DenverSeminary.edu we'd love to hear from you. On behalf of our incredible production team, I want to say thanks to all of you for listening and want to say thanks to them Dusty Di Santo, Christa Ebert, Rob Foley, Aaron Johnson, Michael Roberts, Maritsa Smith, Sean Truman, and Andrea Weyand. On their behalf, I'm Don Payne your host. We hope to speak to you again next week. Take care.