

Engage360 | Episode 30: Christian Apologetics in Australia

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 from Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, your host, and want to welcome you to another week's episode. We have a really interesting guest whom I will introduce to you in just a moment. First, before we get underway, I want to give a shout out to our Washington DC campus and particularly to the students who flew out here recently to attend the blacks in theology gala. We had a great time interacting with them, want to thank them for making that trek and for all the good things that are going on at the DC campus. Want to especially give a shout out in a word of thanks to Pastor John Jenkins and the First Baptist Church of Glenarden, Maryland, who have for several years now, very graciously and very generously hosted our DC campus. And we're delighted about all that goes on there. I want you folks to feel like you're really a part of the Denver Seminary community. And if you know anyone who is interested in Seminary education and that part of our country, please refer them to Deborah Barr, our site director for the Washington DC campus. Okay.

Well, to the business at hand, if you are interested in the defense of the Christian faith, apologetics, as it's often called, you need to know the name John Dickson. If you don't already, now, depending upon your angle of view, you might see John as an historian. You might see him as a New Testament scholar, an apologist, or perhaps even a musician. If you don't know of John, it might be because he is Australian and does much of his work there. Though he has a somewhat regular presence in the US, he was founder and for 10 years, director of the Center for Public Christianity in Australia. For nine years, he served as director of St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Roseville, which I believe is in the Sydney area. Is that correct? Has a PhD in ancient history from Macquarie University and taught at Macquarie at the University of Sydney Region College and the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics. So, John, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. John Dickson: Great to be with you.

Dr. Don Payne: We're so glad to have you here. Let me tell you just a little bit more about John before we turn him loose on you. John has his own podcast, very regular podcast called, Undeceptions. And I'll let him, I'll ask him to tell you more about that. You can learn more about the many facets of John's ministry at his website, which is JohnDickson.org and that's spelled D I C K S O N. Johndickson.org. He is the author of I believe 18 books?

Dr. John Dickson: I think so? I don't sit around and count them.

Dr. Don Payne: But that's what I've heard.

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah, it sounds about right.

Dr. Don Payne: Let me give you a few of the titles. Is Jesus History? A Doubter's Guide to Jesus, A Doubter's Guide to the 10 Commandments, A Doubter's Guide to the Bible, A Spectator's Guide to World Religions. If I Were God, I'd End All the Pain. I love that title. And then I think you have another one in the works right now. Do you not?

Dr. John Dickson: I have a few actually, but yeah, one of them is called Losing Well, and All the Strategies for Winning the World.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. John, why don't you give us a little bit of a, your own backstory and tell us a bit about your ministry and then we'll get into some specifics.

Dr. John Dickson: Sure. I was raised in a non-Christian household, typical Australian household by the beach Mossman in Sydney, if anyone's been to Sydney's Tauranga Zoo, our famous zoo. I grew up just around the corner from there. So, very nice upbringing at many levels, you know, comfortable beautiful surroundings, but Godless, in that I'd never been inside a church before I was 16. I lost my dad when I was nine and I think that made me a more ponderous kid. So I did think about God even though I didn't have any religious input. And I even remember I sang the Lord's Prayer. And it was always a mystery to me how I even knew the Lord's Prayer back then in its traditional form, you know, who art in heaven and all that. And I used to say it, and it was only years later after I'd become a Christian and was in ministry that I met this elderly lady who said that she'd taught me the Lord's Prayer when she was my babysitter shortly after my dad had died. And I obviously had just forgotten her and remembered the Lord Prayer. But it's kind of a long story short. When I was about 16, a teacher at school who was a dynamic Christian woman middle-aged mom basically sort of pointed me to the Christian faith.

I was skeptical at first, but I investigated, I read the Gospels and over about a year of reading the Gospels came to think this is true and beautiful and found myself sort of swept up in the Christian faith. But so did four or five of my mates who were all completely Godless Aussie kids as well. So what did we do? We started a band. We just thought, you know, Hey, that's what you do. And we thought, you know, at one looking back, it was partly teenage ambition, probably combined with a genuine desire to make Christ public. We'd never heard of Christian music. We didn't know anything about Amy Grant or MUFG or whatever, you know, it was kind of a blessing in some ways. All our influences were secular influences. So we just started a band and played in pubs and clubs and unis and it took off. So the year after we finished our final year of school, we were full time singing and playing around the country and overseas for the next six years, 10 months on the road. It was wonderful, but we were trying to command Christ and we would do it between songs and it led to more invitations to speak and invitations to write books. And so it was really out of

that band that everything fell. And I got to the point where I was worried I'd end up shallow, impressive, but shallow. You know, like you set up a band, you blast people away. I was the lead singer. And so I would do the song introductions and, you know, bring Christ in that way. But I was saying the same thing in the next town that I was saying in the previous town. And we were worried that we'd be shallow. So we decided weirdly, that we should go to theological college.

Dr. Don Payne: All of you together?

Dr. John Dickson: All of us together and just learn this stuff, you know, because we were talking to thousands of people every week, so we might as well know what we're talking about. And so we asked everyone, you know, what's the nerdiest college in Australia that we should go to? You know, and they all said this one particular college Moore College in Sydney. And we went, and it was a culture shock. You know, I went from touring the world with my best friends, playing music to sitting in the back of class, learning ancient Greek. And I struggled emotionally I struggled. Academically I surprised everyone myself especially. And that's what kicked off a more academic things. I went from there, enrolled in a Master's program, switched over to the ancient history department of a state university and completed my PhD. But again, not because I feel like I'm a passionate academic, but because I want to make Christ public and it seems sinking those roots really deeply is crucial to reaching the world today. This is a long winded way of just saying, yeah, I've done lots of different things. I became an Anglican clergyman and I started the center for public Christianity, but it is all just one thing that I've been trying to do since I was 16 and that is make Christ public.

Dr. Don Payne: I love the way you put that. Make Christ public. So what are some of the things that the Center for Public Christianity was involved in?

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah, well it was a dream that a friend and I had had for many years and it just through up miraculous series of events, we were offered a giant grant to just start, you know, the seed funding for a center. And so in 2007, my friend Greg Clark and I got ourselves some officers employed some support staff and we just started to write for the mainstream media that that's how it began.

Dr. Don Payne: Writing?

Dr. John Dickson: Writing ministry. So writing articles in the mainstream media. We didn't even know if they'd take the pieces, but they did. They took our first, our second or third, and we ended up being published very regularly offering opinion pieces in the mainstream newspapers that led to radio, TV interviews. It ballooned into making documentaries as well. The whole goal of which is to make Christ public to the secular space. So people should go to publicchristianity.org. I no longer work there, but the guys are still doing a fantastic job making Christ public.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Give us a bit of an overview of the Australian context. Most, not all of our listeners are in the State, but the majority are, I think. But how would you describe the Australian context, and how that gives a particular form or shape to your apologetic work?

Dr. John Dickson: Well, Australia is a little more advanced in the secularization March than America. Often say it's the only thing Australia is more advanced on. And so, you know, the number of people claiming to be some kind of Christian is around 50%. In America it's, you know, 70 plus percent. But in both countries there's a decline in the number of people in the major surveys and an increase in those who say they have no religion. And for us it's up to 30% now and you know, the next census, we'll find that that's grown. So it's quite a secular country. But you'll often hear Australians talk about it being really secular. I actually am of the view that Australia operates in two gears at once, which sounds odd, but it is, I mean, Christianity is highly contested in Australia. No Christian is given an easy time in the public square, but they are invited in the public square. Yeah. There's this plausibility nonetheless in the culture, you better have a Christian on this panel or whatever. They're not given an easy time, but they're invited. And that's really interesting.

So I actually think Christianity is neither, sorry. Australia is neither a Christian country nor a post-Christian country. It's just a weird mix. And what it means is that Christians in this environment need to, I think, adopt a posture of not being surprised at the opportunities that come along, but not being shocked when they're given a really bad time. Just rejoice that you're invited to the dinner party in the first place as it were. And in fact, that's one thing I try and drill into myself and my colleagues that Christians in the public square should see themselves as guests at someone else's dinner party. It's not our homes, not our table, not our food. But we've been invited and we've got a seat at the table and we can laugh and chat and throw in comments like the best of them. But if we want to be invited back, don't be a jerk. Don't act like it's your dinner party. And it's so easy for some Australians who remember, maybe are more Christian past in Australia to like, it's their party. You know, they host the party, and the children at the table are acting out. And so there's an arrogant posture. Now maybe exaggerating it for clarity's sake, but it's this posture of generosity and cheerfulness confidence. I don't mean we have to be sheepish confidence, but a cheerful confidence that's happy to be invited into every argument, but then criticized and that's fine. It's the ancient art of losing well is.

Dr. Don Payne: Hence the title of your.

Dr. John Dickson: Well, the forthcoming book. Yeah. So, but, but I do think that the new Testament speaks a lot about losing well, about, about Christians not complaining when they're stuffed in jail or when they are harshly treated, don't be scandalized by the fact that people shout you down. But approach the world with gentleness and respect because we know who the Lord is. I say all this not because, not simply because women to be humble and just lie in the corner. I say it because we know who the true Lord is. So it doesn't matter if we come off

badly, we can afford to lose. It's only the insecure person who can't afford to lose.

Dr. Don Payne: Are there any distinctive questions? The big questions you face in the Australian context? What are some of those?

Dr. John Dickson: I have detected in the last sort of 15 years the increase of a cluster of questions that are all very similar actually, even though they seem different, but it's the cluster of questions around whether Christianity, Christians, the church is good for you or whether it's bad, pernicious. And so, you know, maybe 15 years ago, the criticism of Christians for being too moral or too holier than thou, now it's more common to hear people say no, it poisons everything. And so you get questions like old Testament violence. What's that doing there? We find a lot of non-Christians who aren't biblically literate have heard that there's all this slang and killing and raping and pillaging in the old Testament. And that's a complaint. The treatment of LGBTIQ members of the community. And in Australia that was a particular thing cause there was a national vote about same sex marriage in 2017.

And some Christians posture themselves really well and some really badly, you know, almost like they were the hosts of the dinner party instead of just delighted to be in the conversation. Here's our view. And so, what that's left a lot of Australians with, quite recently is that the church is just bigoted, mean, spirited, horrible people. The history of the church, the cover-ups of sex abuse of children in the church. These are the dominant questions that present is Christianity and the church bad for you? Now, the other questions haven't gone away as in, you know, the big ones suffering existence of God, the other religions, they are still there, that kind of base questions. But the mood of the last 10 years at least is very much around this, what you might call ethos questions, the character of the church.

Dr. Don Payne: Is it a good, is it a good thing?

Dr. John Dickson: Is it a good thing or is it going to harm? Is it [inaudible] I mean, at the center of public presentity, we have so disturbed by this or so struck by this as a mood that we produced a documentary came out in 2018 called For the Love of God, subtitled, how the church is better and worse than you ever imagined. And I mean, it was major production in 15 countries and three of us hosted and we have 40 scholars interviewed. And it's a warts and all account of church history, crusades, witch trials, slavery, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. But also an account of the beautiful things Christianity gave the West. Human rights, the doctrine of humility and schools. And whatever. And then we sort of move the viewer toward the question, which of these traditions is truer to the founder of Christianity, the violence, the raping, the pillaging, or the setting up hospitals for people educating, caring. And you know, even the most stark atheist in the West knows the answer to that question. And therefore the problem with bad Christianity isn't Christianity. It's the departure from Jesus that is the real problem. And so this is where we're trying to move people to see that Jesus

wrote a beautiful tune. I might use that analogy and that it's been sung beautifully for much of world history and it's been sung really badly, completely out of tune, but the tune is still beautiful. It's still a gorgeous melody. God's love for us. Love your enemies, which Jesus himself took all the way to the cross.

Dr. Don Payne: What you're describing sounds almost like a strategy of engagement because when you take that kind of a forthright posture to owning the dark side, the downside of Christian history, that probably takes a number of people off guard. Is that fair to say?

Dr. John Dickson: It really does. But the more we got into, you know, the writing of the documentary and production of it, which took three years, we actually as a team saw this not really as a strategy, but as the truth. The truth is.

Dr. Don Payne: The truthful way to go about it. You mean?

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah. It's just the truthful way to go about it. Christians have done terrible things and they thought they were doing it for Jesus. And it's hard for us today to look back and think how could they have done that? But that just makes me think a hundred years from now, what will people be looking back on us saying, how could sure evangelicals in Australia or in America, how could they have thought that? So I come out of it having lost any sense of triumphalist Christianity the experience of really researching and then filming these things sort of flattened me on the one hand, but on the other, I am more confident than I have ever been. That actually the tune Jesus brought into the world was not just unique, but it transformed the Western world. And gave the secular West some of the things it loves most. Human equality, humility, charity and on and on and on. Things that are now regarded as secular virtues, which did not exist.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, they have their roots elsewhere.

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah. They did not come from Greece and Rome. They came from the Judeo Christian influence.

Dr. Don Payne: Right. Tell us about your podcast. Undeceptions.

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah. So we had names in it, but I pinched the word from a title of CS Lewis's essays, which hardly anyone's heard about because it's now out of print. But he published a series of essays on the Christian faith called Undeceptions. And it's actually a 16th century word. So you go to the Oxford English dictionary and it's to undeceived means to reveal the truth, actually. And I've always loved the word and so it just seemed like a cool, cool thing to do, gets people's attention. It's all about letting the truth out. And it's a once a week, 40 minute program, documentary sort of based, and we'll take science, we'll take the history of the church. We will take modern psychology, we'll deal with issues that the thoughtful skeptic is thinking about.

Dr. Don Payne: What's been the toughest episode you've done?

Dr. John Dickson: Probably the one that is about to air on cancer. The episode, it's episode one of the next season, which starts in a few weeks. And what made it so difficult is not, you know, I interviewed one of the leading cancer researchers in Britain, a professor at Oxford who's leading multiple teams trying to rid the world of cancer. So I interviewed him, but actually my best mate in the world has been going through a very, very dangerous immediate cancer scare that ended up having to lead to major surgery and facial reconstruction. And he's still, I mean, he's, he's in ministry. He was in my band. He goes right back to those days, converted with me in the band with me. He's a minister in London. And so he's still recovering. And we just wait and see, but I, the podcast, that particular episode, it revolves around not just the academics stuff about cancer and this professor of cancer is a Christian, evangelical Christian. But my buddy going through it and his reflections on it, that's probably the hardest.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Wow. I'm going to borrow or to use your word pinch a question from one of my other favorite podcasts on script. And so I'll give my host friends on script a credit for this question. They love to ask this, but I thought it would be good to ask of you. What is one common belief held by evangelical Christians that you think needs to die?

Dr. John Dickson: Brother, you're going to get me, get me into trouble.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I'll just you know, I'll blame the question on them.

Dr. John Dickson: Well, it depends what you mean by evangelical.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay, fair enough.

Dr. John Dickson: So I feel like saying the view that we have rights over the culture, the view that we are the prophet Ezekiel, and the culture is backsliding, Judah. And therefore we speak to the culture like the prophet did, you know, with an era of entitlement, with an era of moral authority, calling them back to what they should know that our.

Dr. Don Payne: High ground, as if we own the high ground.

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah. And that model, the profit model that influences the churches posture toward the world. The language we use about the world when the world's not listening, let alone the language we use to the world, I think is deadly. I mean, it's theologically rubbish because it assumes, you know, Australia is Israel and I'm the prophet, right? Or America is Israel. And you know, you're the prophet. That's the role model. We, we in Athens, not Jerusalem, where up in the area alpacas and it's a culture that has been influenced by Christianity. Absolutely. But we mustn't think of it as a Christian culture that's just backslidden and needs to be admonished back. We're in Athens and they need to be wooed to

even think there's something good here somewhere. Ah, and that requires a different, a different posture. So the profit model sucks. Okay. I hope I don't get you into trouble.

Dr. Don Payne: You said it, I didn't, you're going back home. So we mentioned you're a musician, you told us a little bit about that. And I need to tell listeners that a good bit of your music, apparently you're still producing music. And a good bit of it is on your website. I listened to a little bit of it. I'll say this not simply because you're sitting across the table from me, but I really did resonate with that and I'm going to be downloading some of it.

Dr. John Dickson: Fantastic. Thank you.

Dr. Don Payne: Tell us about that.

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah, well you can also go to Spotify and just listen to it on Spotify, but there is another John Dickson on Spotify.

Dr. Don Payne: Get the right John Dickson.

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah. Because he's got a very different sound from mine. But my, yeah, my lightest track is turn everything around. So if people want to Spotify, John Dickson, Turn Everything Around that just came out last month. Look, music, I don't do much. But it was a big deal in my life. You know, I was six years full time touring, writing, writing material, recording. And then I record another three albums after the band disbanded, I did two albums with my guitarist. The guy who now has cancer. I did one, Or did I do two? No, I did two. So I've got four albums after the band, two solo albums as well. And then I have all these songs that I never recorded that I wrote back in the day and I'm now slowly recording them. And the one I just mentioned is an example of that. I don't do enough music and my life's been so full, you know, leading a church, half time, writing books, etcetera, etcetera. But I'm in a new space now where I'm no longer leading a church. I'm just full time writing and speaking and trying to make Christ public. And part of that is a sort of return to music. But I mean I love music. I, anyone who's done music professionally and then stops, I reckon misses it like the best friend you haven't seen for 20 years. And you just walk around with an ache, that's what it's felt like. Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: What's your music about? Is it, is it, does it share the same ethos with your, the other facets of your ministry?

Dr. John Dickson: It does, it's almost all trying to communicate with a person who doesn't believe. So my musical influences are, you know, if you can imagine U2 crossed with like an Aussie band In Excess or something, but nowhere near as good as either of those. But it's trying to engage the thinking skeptical person. So it isn't, you know, Jesus loves me music as good as that sort of music is. But there are Christian themes in everything.

Dr. Don Payne: Over the course of your ministry and your career, have you noticed any ways in which your thinking has shifted, deepened, progressed? How have you changed over your career?

Dr. John Dickson: I used to be more uptight about, more anxious about the world. And its way, its drift and I think I'm way less anxious, far more. I don't think it is a loss of passion, but it's, it's more a sense of confidence that Christ has this. He owns every room. It doesn't depend on me. And so I feel far more relaxed about going into public and getting whacked around the head, metaphorically speaking, and smiling sweetly back. Cause I know Jesus owns the room. So I think that has been you know in terms of the psychology of my ministry and how I've approached it, that's been a big thing. But there've been lots of things I've changed my view on. I, I don't know if I'll ever get an invitation back, but I used to be staunchly complementarian on women's ministry, would never want to see women in the pulpit. I became convinced simply on exegetical grounds that while male teaching elders may be the biblical model that women preaching what we call sermons, I think is to be entirely encouraged.

Dr. Don Payne: And so you have a book out on that, do you not?

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah, yup. I do called Hearing Her Voice and I've, over the years I've just become, I can see why it makes a lot more sense of all of the data we have to say women ought to be giving sermons in our churches. And while I myself still hold a semi complementarian view about the, in my Anglican context, the priest of the congregation. The main teaching priest. Actually, I'm also very, very comfortable working with other churches where that's not the case. So I do a lot of work in Melbourne and I'm very comfortable working with women priests and you know, serving them and being invited to do evangelism with them. So that's a, you know, that's a change, but that's a sort of intra church thing that is very much secondary for me. Even though I'm sure women listening to this will think, Oh, it's not secondary and I can understand why.

Dr. Don Payne: Right. Okay. So you're wearing a green Bay Packers jacket, which if anybody sees your photo on our website, they will notice that and think that may be a little odd for an Aussie. What's the story? What's the deal with the Packers?

Dr. John Dickson: Well, I did deliberately wear it today to raise the question, but it is true that back in 2011 I got an email from someone inviting me to come speak to this football team on the topic of humility. My book on that topic had just come out and I didn't, I had never heard of the Green Bay Packers. Honestly, I had never, I mean, maybe I'd heard them on the news, but I'd never, it didn't register. So I texted my son and said, buddy, I've just been invited to speak to a team called the Green Bay Packers. Are they any good? Should I go? And I still have that. I still have that text. And he goes, What?! Are you kidding! They just won the Super Bowl, right? Can I come? So he did. I went and I spoke to the Packers. But when I spoke to the Packers, I had never watched one NFL game. Not one, not on TV, not anything.

Dr. Don Payne: Or American football of any sort?

Dr. John Dickson: None, no American football, football for me is the game where you actually use your foot, you call it soccer. But I went and spoke to the team on a Saturday night and then I went to the Sunday game at Lambeau field. My introduction to American football was at Lambeau field watching the Packers smash Tampa Bay. And I was hooked. I've now gone to 10 or so games. I've spoken to the Packers at least that many times. And it's very special for this Aussie who knew nothing about them has become quite a fan. And I can't tell you how much merch I have.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, you've also just become the bitter envy of every cheese head in the country, many of whom reside in this area because this is a an area of transplants. So we've got lots of lots of packer fans here. And to know that someone who did not even grow up with the game was given that kind of privilege is going to make them just excruciatingly envy and they'll almost need a theodicy for that. How do you explain the injustice in the world?

Dr. John Dickson: It's just grace, this ignorance deprived Australia plucked out of obscurity in, into the Packers.

Dr. Don Payne: Thrown into Lambeau field. Unbelievable. Okay. Now you do have another version of football though. Australian Rules. Or as one of my own Seminary classmates who is from Adelaide Rules.

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah. Rules or they'll just call it Footie. Down in the South of Australia. So South Australia and Victoria Footie.

Dr. Don Payne: What's the best thing about, what's the best thing about Australian Rules?

Dr. John Dickson: The Fitness required. So they did a fitness test of all the codes, the top players in all the codes. Soccer, well, what you call soccer, AFL, rugby union and rugby league, rugby league. And the IFL players, the Aussie rules players killed them on the fitness front. And when you watch a game, it's extraordinary how much running they do. I mean at least double what a rugby or rugby.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, I was just thinking about rugby because they run all the time.

Dr. John Dickson: Yeah. But it's so stop-start, but you watch an AFL game. It's so action packed. Hard to take in on the tele. My mate, Darrell Bock is a huge American Australian football fan. He watches games over here and, but I think watching it on the TV doesn't quite get you there. I've taken him to a live game in Sydney to watch the Sydney Swans and he loved it. Mind you, I will say having been a football fan all my life, English football, you know, I would now say I watch way more NFL than anything else. Way More!

Dr. Don Payne: So the crossover is amazing because my own sense now watch far more soccer, premier league soccer than they do American football. They become I think tired of the game in some ways. And they are, they're Divo Ts.

Dr. John Dickson: It is the beautiful game and there's no doubt about that. Yup. Yup.

Dr. Don Payne: Wow. Yeah. John, what a future projects other than the books you have in the offing right now, what work do you envision going forward?

Dr. John Dickson: Well, I mean I've still got a lot of regular things. I teach a course on the historical Jesus at Sydney University. I teach at Ridley College in Melbourne. I'm a senior lecturer there in Public Christianity. What does it mean to take Christ out into the public? So I'm loving that role. I take history [inaudible] of Israel, I've got evangelistic missions rolling out over the coming year and more of the podcast Undeceptions. So it's a full dance card, but I'm loving it and you know, as I said at the outset, it's, for me it's very simple. It's just one thing. I'm just trying to make Christ public.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Dr. John Dickson. Thank you very much.

Dr. John Dickson: Lovely to chat.

Dr. Don Payne: For taking time to be with you on Engage360 and may the Lord just give you great favor in everything he's called you to do and given you the opportunity to do.

Dr. John Dickson: Thank you very much.

Dr. Don Payne: I want to thank Shaun Trueman. He is on the boards for us today and for him and the rest of our production team here at Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, your host. We look forward to being with you again next week. Take care.