

## Engage360 | Episode 32: COVID-19's Impact on Theological Education

- 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: Thanks for joining us here at Denver Seminary for Engage360. I'm Don Payne, your host. As COVID-19 expands its reach and impact across the globe. We're all trying to figure out how to navigate waters that most of us have never encountered. If you didn't hear last week's episode, I would encourage you to go back and take that in because in that episode, Dr. Mark Young and Dr. Heather Gingerich offered perspective and strategies for faithfully engaging some of the anxieties and the temptations of these times. And there's much here that we need to consider. So over the next few weeks we're going to devote more attention to themes that affect us related to this world crisis. We don't want to obsess over them, but nor do we want to gloss over them and act as if life is more normal than it really is. And that will help these times not be wasted on us, which really has been the focus of many of my prayers in recent days. So Dr. Young is with us again this week to help us frame some of that conversation moving forward. Welcome back, Mark.
- Dr. Mark Young: Thanks Don. I always appreciate the chance to be with you.
- Dr. Don Payne: Mark, you sent a message to the entire Seminary community last week and have some brief video messages going out to different constituencies, and maybe you can use those as a launch pad to talk about how Denver Seminary is responding to the COVID-19 crisis and then some of the matters that we all need to consider in these times.
- Dr. Don Payne: Sure, I'm glad to do that. Let's begin by framing as we hope we always do, our lives theologically and certainly we are exhorted in scripture to bring our requests to God, bring our desires to him. We see that certainly modeled in the Old Testament as the Psalmist bring their heartbreak, their desires, their fears to God. But I think also of the Apostle Paul's admonition that we cast our cares before him, that we bring them to him. And it's certainly interesting is we ask what are the, what's the result of that? Where do we then find the peace that Paul promises? Sometimes I think we want to find that piece in the result we get. But in reality, it's that he's hearing, he's listening, he's responding. So the one message that I would want to give theologically to everyone and to myself on a daily basis is the constant reminder that in the midst of uncertainty and fear, Jesus is enough. That knowing his presence, his participation in our lives is the same now as it was at the beginning of this year before any of this crisis began to unfold. So being able to live with that constant sense and depend upon that constant sense of God's presence is a tremendous help for me as I attempt to lead through this kind of uncertainty. But I think a tremendous help to all who have the privilege of calling out to him as well.

Dr. Don Payne: What are some of the specific commitments that would express that moving forward for us as a Seminary?

Dr. Mark Young: Well, certainly the basic approach that we want to take as we lead and as we interact with the world around us begins with don't panic, don't slip into a sense of despair, and then begin to make decisions that are against the data that you have or even against the values that you've lived by. Fear is such a powerful motivator. It almost dominates all other emotions when it becomes intense in our lives and it certainly dominates our thinking. So if we panic and we slip into this deep sense of foreboding doom, then we're going to make decisions that are in the long-term detrimental. And even in the short term. So not panic. Christ is with us. He's walking with us. We can depend on his presence. So when I feel as a leader, when I feel overwhelmed by the sense of uncertainty that I face, I literally step back from the keyboard or step back from the conversation. Physically move back, take a deep breath and say, Christ is with me.

Maybe that's a little, that's a bridge too far for some, maybe that's not the way you practice your walk with Christ, but I have to hear myself say it in order to sometimes to believe it. The second thing Don, I think as we face a crisis, particularly if you're leading an organization, is to recognize that your goal is to make evidence based decisions. So we have been very intent on seeking data, seeking the projections and the viewpoints of those who come from those disciplines and are well-informed. Whether that be epidemiologists or physicians, public health officials, as well as economists and those who have the ability to use what's called metadata. Massive amounts of data to give a clear snapshot of the current situation but also project the threat that the current situation brings. I would highly encourage us as a community to not allow those who give opinion or necessarily or bet toward a particular perspective as our primary source of information. We need to depend upon those who are well educated in dealing with real numbers and real data and real people and real scenarios.

Dr. Don Payne: Now this may be the most important time of all, not to indulge ourselves in the news channel talk shows.

Dr. Mark Young: That's exactly right.

Dr. Don Payne: That maybe always important, but I this, it may be even more important now than ever not to do that.

Dr. Mark Young: There is not question. There's no question. I think clearly there are media voices whose primary concern isn't the wellbeing of the nation, whose primary concern is either supporting a particular political approach or candidate or just simply keeping their ratings up. This is a time to listen to experts, people who have in their fields distinguished themselves. And I'd like to say that there is good data available. We have now a bit of history to look at the way an epidemic or a pandemic of this nature will develop, as well as what happens in scenario planning if you take aggressive and early action. So that would be the

third point I would make after get the data that you need, be decisive. So when we face a life of uncertainty, if we are able to make decisions that take some of that uncertainty off the table, we serve our community well. I'll just give you a practical example. Here at Denver Seminary, we've already made decisions about how we're going to deliver theological education through the end of the semester. We are making a decision to postpone commencement. Now these are decisions that are 60 days out. But those are decisions we can make now. Now, there are no projections that the effect of the virus or the disease or the illness associated with it will be diminished by then. So those are, to a certain degree, those are easy decisions. But by making those, we take a level of uncertainty out of the decision making process that students and faculty and staff are going to have to make about how going to live out the next 60 days. Right? So admitting that we never have enough data that we're always going to have to be making decisions that feel less informed them, we want them to be, to the degree that we can, let's take those uncertainties off the table. One less thing that folks have to worry about in a scenario where they're inundated with uncertainties.

Dr. Don Payne: For those, among our listeners who may not get the regular communications that come out from the Seminary, can you give a brief overview of what we'll be doing for the next few months?

Dr. Mark Young: Right. Okay. I'm glad to do that. And thank you for asking. So the first decision we made is that we would offer all of our classes until the end of the semester via a technology mediated process. So there are no in-person classes that will take place until the end of this semester. Let me just back up and provide a foundation for why we did that. With no vaccine available and no therapeutic intervention on the immediate horizon, the only concrete steps we can take to try to diminish the spread of this virus involves social practices. That means you've heard the phrase social distancing, not gathering together. So we believe that knowing what we do with the limitations we have, it's in the best interests of our community and the broader community to begin to put into place behaviors that allow us not to have that kind of contact through which this virus is spread. So that was our first decision. The second major decision we made was to move our workforce off-campus. So only those personnel who need to be on campus to accomplish a particular task on a given day are on campus at any given time.

The rest of the facilities are locked down, and as a result we are keeping that social distance that's necessary so that we don't participate in the spread of the virus. Then we looked at events, we canceled all public events through commencement. Again to honor the desire that we not create scenarios where the disease or the illness, the virus can be spread more easily. So those are the three major ones. Now here's the next step. We've got to look very carefully at attempt to project what are the financial implications of this situation. And at this point we don't feel like we have adequate data other than we know that this will have long financial tale. So as a leadership group, our next responsibility is to ask what are we going to do in this fiscal year? Expecting that we will have

less revenue than we originally projected. And then what are we going to think about budgeting wise for the fiscal year 2021, which will kick off July 1st. Now you're talking about decisions that are going to affect people's lives. So these are burdensome decisions I would say. And I'd be the first to say, and confess, I feel overwhelmed by them. I feel as if I'm almost on an hourly basis, more inadequate because of the way the consequences are piling up and the uncertainties are remaining. And so this is where going back to saying to myself, Jesus is walking with me, and then being aware that there are some very talented godly, insightful people walking alongside me as well. That gives me the courage to actually think we can make reasonable decisions in this time.

Dr. Don Payne: I'm going to use that at the end to ask you, our listeners to pray for us and maybe an even more intentional and regular way than I assume many of you already do, but I'll certainly come back to that. Mark, I'd love to have you reflect at an even more strategic level about theological education. I remember an essay that CS Lewis wrote during World War II about the importance of learning during war time. This is published in his book the weight of glory. And I think that's actually the title of the chapter learning during wartime or something close to that. And he mentioned in that essay that there really is no such thing as normal times and that in one way or another, we're always actually living on the edge, in some fashion. I'd love to have you reflect on the importance of Seminary education during times.

Dr. Mark Young: Yes, I'd love to do that. Thank you. Uh, let's go with added a couple of ways. The first is that solid theological education provides the framework intellectually and in terms of values and in terms of lifestyle that allow us to walk into uncertain scenarios, threatening scenarios without wobbling all over the place. So if you want to think about it this way, would you rather physically walk through a dangerous scenario, inebriated or sober-minded? Would you rather walk on a tight rope, losing your balance on a regular basis? Or with the confidence that you know, the width of that type wrote the length of it and what it takes to get across it. So theological education provides a framework in terms of what we deeply believe, what we value and how we behave that allows us to navigate uncertain and dangerous scenarios. Secondly, theological education allows us to begin to understand what we can learn is God in this with us. What can we gain? How can we reflect? One of the greatest gifts of theological education is the willingness to step back and say, I need to think about this some more. And then have the tools to be able to do that.

Dr. Don Payne: They had to know how to do that and what that it.

Dr. Mark Young: Exactly, the third thing is helps us avoid the illogical errors which create more panic and more fear. I guarantee you that unfortunately, there'll be some voices out there who are going to say things like, God has sent this virus to condemn this nation, and then they'll pick out the group of people that they detest the most and make them the cause of this kind of pandemic. They're going to be people out there say if you get COVID-19, that means that you have unconfessed sin in your life. These are egregious and abusive theological errors.

Even heresies. Theological education helps us avoid those kinds of extreme misinterpretations of the realities that we're walking through. Think about it this way. I have vision issues, right? I wear glasses in order to see clearly, theological education provides a lens of clarity that allows us to see the world and to see God in the world in ways that the theologically uneducated may not have at their disposal. That's a gift. It's a huge gift, which is why we believe that those who are going to have any role of helping others navigate this kind of uncertainty need to have that clarity, that theological education can bring.

Dr. Don Payne: I appreciate that very much cause that moves Seminary education from the margins, from the periphery of our value system right toward the epicenter of that.

Dr. Mark Young: No question about it. I mean, let's be honest Don, the prospect of a church, of the people of God, being led by those who haven't gone through the disciplined inquiry into who God is and what he's about in the world, but simply kind of making it up as they go, isn't one that I look forward to. Now, let me back up and say this. I fully believe that God uses people who haven't had the privilege or opportunity of doing formal theological education. I'm not saying that. I am saying that those of us who have had that privilege and opportunity are often able to see more clearly, are often able to see nuances, are often able to make decisions and draw conclusions and interpret reality just because we've had that privilege, in ways that those who haven't simply can't.

Dr. Don Payne: It seems, Mark, like crises such as the type we're facing right now have a way of peeling back layers of our attention and exposing issues and questions that have perhaps always been there, but we haven't been forced to look at them. They had to change the metaphor. They haven't been bubbled to the surface by particular pressures. And in order that this time in our world history not be lost on us. What do you think are some of those questions and issues, whether it's in the church or in society at large, that might bubble to the surface now as a result of this that we really need to pay attention to?

Dr. Mark Young: Well, that's a very, very insightful question, which by the way, is an old professor's trick to give yourself time to think about what you're going to say before you answer. So, let me just begin by saying that certainly that question is certainly going to be answered more thoughtfully and more comprehensively a year from now and five years from now and 10 years from now. And I do think it's important for us to resist over interpreting what we're learning or what we can learn while we're in the throws of a crisis. That being said, it's important to always be self reflective and to ask what is being revealed about me or what is being revealed about us, as a community. Uncertainty always raises, it seems to me, or gives us an opportunity to begin to see emerging. What is it that we really value? We tend to worry about those things that we value the most. So for a lot of folks, it might be security.

For a lot of folks, it might be a measure of the sense of control that they think they have. For some folks it might be the ego strength that they've gained by

having a lot of financial resources, we begin to see that there are things that we value that we perhaps haven't been willing to admit to ourselves. And as a result, when we're come face to face with them, our reaction either is to step back and repent and say, Lord, forgive me for making this so important in my life. Or we have the opportunity just to keep marching on in defiance and continuing then to fight against and try to protect and try to control and try to assuage the attack on our ego, our sense of pride because what we thought we had in place is unraveling before our eyes. So self reflection I think is a really good beginning point. And then I would argue, I think it's a great opportunity to ask questions about what we believe. So one of the examples in a situation like this, I think is what do we really believe? Or what do we really mean when we say God is sovereign? Have we developed a theology of God's sovereignty that somehow allows us to think he controls everything?

Is that what sovereignty actually is? And if that's the way we've thought about sovereignty, then all of a sudden you have God as the author of something that is certainly contrary to what else we know about his character. So I think it's a great time to refine our theological understandings and ask are they holding up in the face of the questions that are assaulting our belief system, do I believe that once I trust in Christ, I'm promised happiness that I'm promised health that everything is exactly now on an even keel. If I believe that, then my view of what it means to walk with Christ as his child in the midst of a desperately fallen world has been skewed.

Dr. Don Payne:

Your comments are reminding me of a remark from the mid 20th century Lutheran theologian Helmut Toluca, who was part of the resistance movement to the third Reich and Toluca from within the crucible of his nations suffering during that time commented that a theology has to work at the broken margins of life if it's to make any sense and be credible at the safe center. And so many, it seems of our theological reflections when we're not under pressure, can make a lot of sense if nothing really is at stake. We don't have any skin in the game or there are no pressure points. But the acid test of those quite often is, does that work? Does that theology hold up when things are really broken? And there are lots of pressure points?

Dr. Mark Young:

Well, that's a great observation and certainly we could make a further case that most of the theologies and theologians that folks like you and I have availed ourselves of, have come from places of prosperity and from people whose lives were relatively secure. That's why it was such a bombshell when all of a sudden we began to hear voices from the developing world, voices from poverty, voices from revolution, and even more voices from our own black community, who have suffered from persecution and oppression and going even further back dehumanization and slavery. So those voices disturb us theologically because they're coming from those margins of brokenness and uncertainty. And we hadn't opt to say I hadn't been used to reading them. It's a great opportunity for us not only to question ourselves, but also ask, are there theological voices and thinkers and interpreters of scripture, who've lived in the midst of uncertainty?

Who've experienced brokenness and financially and health wise? Who can now serve us in ways that some others may not?

Dr. Don Payne: Right. And that's far from letting raw experience dictate theology. But it is, I think to the point of letting those experiences of brokenness clarify what God has revealed that maybe we haven't seen or we have interpreted in an unbalanced, skewed ways.

Dr. Mark Young: Absolutely. And let me just say one thing. I have, I have this feeling that this conversation, I've been too gloomy. So I want us to also recognize that voices from the margins, let's talk specifically about the black church and some of the great black theologians. They were clear and honest that suffering is a part of the human experience that everyone ought to expect. But they also had voices of hope. They had voices of tenaciously holding onto the promise of redemption that is ours in Christ. The promise that God is going to make everything that's wrong in the world, right? And everything that's broken in the world, whole. And everything that's ugly in the world, Beautiful. So that's also a part of what it means to walk through uncertainty and suffering with a strong theological underpinning. This causes us to yearn even more for what we know Christ will do.

Dr. Don Payne: That's interesting because some of, now that I think about it now that mentioned that, some of the most robust and vibrant theologies of hope, sometimes even using that phrase, have come from theologians in the most broken circumstances. And look at historically African American hymnody, if there's not a more vibrant expression of hope and promise, I don't know where it would be found.

Dr. Mark Young: That's so true. I think that, you know, at the end of the day, the spirits work in my life is often feels like a constant stripping away of the illusion of control and a constant reminder that in fact, it is in my dependence upon Christ, that any possibility of a meaningful and wholesome life comes for.

Dr. Don Payne: And that's, that is deeply hopeful. Maybe not the kind of hope that we've been addicted to in many cases, but deeply hopeful.

Dr. Mark Young: I mean, let me mention one other word of hope. I fully believe that the church in the midst of this kind of uncertainty that our nation and the global community faces, I fully believe the church has the position, the privilege, the message, the compassion, the sense of mission, that our nation, our communities needs the most. And so as a result, I'm hopeful that through these uncertainties, how the broader world thinks about the church will also be changed. And that the credibility that the respect, that the willingness to hear, that's the right word, the message of the church will be increased in our land. It's there for us if we're willing to step into it.

Dr. Don Payne: That probably is the additional layer of challenge for us as the people of God, the people of Christ, an additional challenge or a challenge in addition to the challenge of how are we going to get through this? Adding to that, how do we rise to the occasion and make Christ known? Make Christ attractive. How has the Gospel become even more real in the public sector because of how we wisely but courageously and faithfully rise to the occasion on this?

Dr. Mark Young: I would agree with you too. I think I shared this before. I'm sorry if I'm repeating myself from last week. I'll never forget when a Lutheran Pastor said to a group of us, the world needs a Pastor. They just don't know it. And so now the church has the privilege of basically being world's Pastor.

Dr. Don Payne: Wow, I Love that.

Dr. Mark Young: Isn't that a great metaphor? Even if I said it before, it's still good. It's still good. Right? Well, thanks for giving us an opportunity to think about this, Don. I appreciate so much your willingness for us to dive into these topics that people are living on a daily basis.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, that will be our focus or our focal points for the next few weeks. We, as I mentioned earlier, we don't want to obsess over this, but nor do we want it to be lost on us and we want to use this as an occasion to send a probe a little more deeply into a number of issues that are prompted by these times so that they're not lost on us. Mark, thanks again, always, always a gift for us to interact with you and learn from you. And to you, our very gracious listeners. We would love for you to send us examples that you see of wise creative engagement with the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the Gospel. We'd love to collect those and share some of those with others on the podcast. And so please use our email address [podcast@denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@denverseminary.edu) to send us, anecdotes that you see and we bind together, join forces together and I encourage each other with those examples. And we would encourage you, invite you as well to let us know if and how we can pray for you. We take that seriously and we will in fact do that. I use that same email address. I hope you'll join us again next week as we continue this exploration of the redemptive power and implications of the Gospel, for the pressure points of this particular crisis. Until then, we're grateful as I've said, that you've chosen to spend this time with us and for our production team here and for all of us here at Denver Seminary, both in Littleton and in Washington DC. I'm Don Payne. Please stay safe, stay wise, and stay engaged. The Lord is with you. We'll talk to you again soon.