

Engage360 | Episode 51: Keeping the Gospel as Our Primary Identity in Politics

- 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, welcome back to Engage360 from Denver Seminary. We're glad you joined us. I'm Don Payne, your host. And here's the question for this week, what does the gospel mean when those who seriously want to follow Jesus, find themselves on both sides of various political divides? How can the gospel help us when we sometimes have to choose between intensely problematic options, but we still have to choose? So we just finished our major political conventions and the battle lines are being drawn. People are retrenching their positions. And if you listen to the rhetoric of any candidate for many party on any issue, you would think that their opponents should be tarred feathered and then exiled from this country. Now, the upshot of that is that in many cases we simply feel stuck and sadly, the church seems in many instances to be just about as divided as the rest of the country. So I'm glad to be joined again this week by our President, Dr. Mark Young. Welcome back, Mark.
- Dr. Mark Young: Thanks. Thanks, Don.
- Dr. Don Payne: Always good to have you here. Mark, it seems that Christians and people in other faiths, people who explicitly orient their lives by moral sensibilities, experience kind of an added stress when it comes to political elections, because we can't easily separate persons and candidates from their policies, and that's partly why we feel trapped. And that's certainly the case with respect to candidates from any party I've seen this described as block choices. We have to choose between ballot packages that are these disconcerting mixtures of what we like and affirm and what we're not so comfortable with. So we want to bring the Gospel as the spotlight onto all of this. How do we begin to think our way through this type of dilemma, this type of conundrum?
- Dr. Mark Young: Yeah, I think that's a very profound question. I want to compliment you on the way you framed that because it does get to the crux of the matter. And the crux of the matter is how do we live out our primary identity, which is our identity as people of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And perhaps we should begin by admitting that because we are first and foremost, people of the gospel people, God's people in the world, we are always going to be placed in a moral tension, in a personal tension, when it comes to whether or not we support a particular political party or candidate. We're always going to be in that tension because the King of the kingdom of which we are apart, is completely different. As he said to Pilot, my kingdom is not of this world. And so the values of the kingdom of God, the goals of the kingdom of God, the practices, the way we live out citizenship in that kingdom will always place us at odds with all political parties and all candidates in some way.

Dr. Don Payne: In some way. Yeah, they're always going to go beyond or stretch beyond what any political candidate, our party's agenda can even approximate.

Dr. Mark Young: That's right. And so the main battle of course, is for us to be defined and see our first loyalties there and not then transfer that identity to a party or to a political candidate. So once we begin to say, well, that's the Christian candidate, or that's the biblical way to vote. Then what we have done is subvert the essence of the other worldliness of the Gospel and given our loyalties to someone other than the King, Jesus Christ.

Dr. Don Payne: What's both fascinating, and in many instances troubling, at least to many Christians, is that we can find serious committed Christ followers on both sides of many candidates, many election ballot issues. And that's disconcerting because to the extent, as you've noted, that we want to feel like our own inclinations politically are better aligned with kingdom values, then it's even more difficult to see how any serious Christ follower could align with political values on the other side of the divide. That creates all kinds of dissonance in us. And yet here's what intrigues me, that once, and this is probably a human phenomenon. Once we make a commitment, that commitment then seems to rather blind us willingly or unwillingly blind us to the rest of the package. And we have a way of either turning a blind eye to it, ignoring it, or best case scenario, just putting up with it. So, what is, let's bring that flashlight of the gospel into all of, is, is that an adequate, I'm asking this rhetorically, I suppose, is that an adequate Gospel response?

Dr. Mark Young: I think you want me to say no.

Dr. Don Payne: I think I probably do.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. Let's think about a few facets of what you've just described. All of us are constantly faced with the essence of sin, which is idolatry in our lives. We're constantly giving allegiance to people and desires and things that are in many cases, contrary to the values and the truth of the kingdom of God. So we're always battling idolatry. What many of those idolatries seem like good things, security, independence, or in America, our favorite word, freedom. It all seems like a good thing. And there are many good things about security and independence and freedom, but when they become the end of all things, when they become that goal that we're pursuing at the expense of everything else, then they've become our idols. It seems like a good thing to vote into office politicians who support those issues that matter most to us. And it could be in fact that God might use that. But at the end of the day, the question is, has power become our idol? Are we giving allegiance to the acquisition and exercise of power that pleases us, even when we see that it creates a detriment or at the expense of others?

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, that's, you're getting at the kind of thing I had in mind when we bring the Gospel into this conversation, the Gospel has this curious as well as indicting way of shining light into what seemed like good things, but may have a sort of

idolatrous character or an idolatrous function to us. Kind of a street-level analogy is, and my fellow gearheads who may be listening to this will relate to it. But one of the favorite, one of the most useful tools I have in my toolbox is a small mirror that's attached to an extension rod. And I use that, I depend on that when I have to work on something on a vehicle that is so embedded somewhere in the vehicle or in the engine compartment that I not only can't work on it, I can't access it well, I can't even see it. So to use that extended mirror, put it behind what I'm trying to work on and shine a flashlight into that mirror has this way of exposing what is otherwise utterly obtuse and inaccessible to me. And the Gospel seems to be doing that in ways that are kind of between the lines I suppose, it's exposing things that we might not even know need to be exposed.

Dr. Mark Young: It's true. And it only works if you're willing to put it back there in that place where you can see, and typically you're only willing to put it back there and see what you can see if you have experienced some type of breakdown or some type of crisis or some type of problem. Let me take that analogy and think about it in terms of racism we've been confronted throughout this summer. And in many regards, we've been confronted with this for generations that people in this country are treated differently because of their race. Let's just start with that. We live in what Christian Smith would call a racialized society, that all people don't experience, the privilege, the structures, the opportunities. They're not treated the same way. And that often is because of race. We've had the opportunity this summer to be slapped in the face with Christ through the spring and summer with crises of jarring realities of how black men have been on one case, essentially hunted down by civilians with weapons and then killed. In another case, a black man was suffocated, or I'm not sure exactly the right medical term, was killed by having a knee pressed into his neck while for minutes, he complained about not being able to breathe, and on and on. Those scenes are jarring. And the question is when we see those, are we willing then to take that extender and put that mirror back there where it needs to be the Gospel, so that we could see the real problem, which is the ongoing, persistent pernicious presence of racism.

Dr. Don Payne: Or on the other hand, will we simply find a way to excuse it, to dismiss it and not have to think about it?

Dr. Mark Young: That's exactly right.

Dr. Don Payne: Which is not a, it's not a Gospel orientation. I would argue.

Dr. Mark Young: That's Right. Exactly. Right. It's not a Gospel orientation. So now that's translated that into politics. And you ask yourself the question, if we shine, if we're willing to put that mirror back there and we're willing to see the problem of persistent pernicious racism in our country, does that matter in the way we vote? Does that matter in the way we speak about political candidates and their policies and their practices and their character? Of course it should, the Gospel has exposed it. And so we must speak the truth. If a candidate is one who

inflames racial divisions, who refuses to acknowledge that there is a persistent and pernicious racial problem in this country, then as the church, we must speak to those candidates.

Dr. Don Payne: That is really getting at this theme of the, I guess, what we could call the hidden power of the Gospel, the subversive power of the Gospel. All Christians who hold to the authority of scripture are going to embrace the Paul line notion that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Nobody's going to quibble about that, but I wonder whether we have really seen the levels or the angles of the power of the Gospel that are there just as much just as needed as those straightforward angles that we've rightly played to for so many years. So many generations, those hidden angles of the Gospel. And so Paul makes, to stay on the Paul track. Paul makes a very intriguing comment, and it's such a brief comment that sometimes I fear it's dismissed almost as a throwaway line in Philippians 1:27. He tells the Philippian Christians, I want you to live or walk in some translations in a manner that's worthy of the Gospel. And as I've reflected on that comment over the years, it seems like Paul, in that one statement is giving a comprehensive, ethical rubric for life. I want you to walk. And the gospel itself is that rubric. I want you to walk. I want you to make your decisions in ways that I'll paraphrase here, follow the contours of the Gospel, live out the echoes of the Gospel.

So, if we think about the Gospel echoing reverberating into these kinds of situations, what does it call us to? Now, let me give a scenario and you can take a whack at this. It's one thing when we have these very discomfoting ballot blocks of voting options, and no matter who we vote for, no matter what party, what candidate we follow, we're getting a package deal. That's a real mixed bag. It's one thing simply to ignore, dismiss, trivialize, turn a blind eye to the parts in that bag that we really find problematic. The Gospel, I wonder whether there, you know, the reverberations, the echoes of the gospel would call us to more. What's the more that the Gospel would call us to? Even if we have to vote for a candidate whom we find in some ways, distasteful, disagreeable in some of their policies or other aspects, what's the more?

Dr. Mark Young: That's a great question. So let's attack it two ways. First, let's make sure we're talking about the same thing. When we say Gospel. Evangelicalism in the United States is revivalist religion. And what that means is we have fundamentally defined the Gospel as an individual spiritual transaction between a human being and God.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, this narrow thing.

Dr. Mark Young: That's right. So, and certainly, certainly we believe that when a person puts their faith in Jesus Christ, their lives are changed. Their eternal destiny is changed, and they now are made alive in Christ and have a relationship with God. We believe at that.

Dr. Don Payne: Central, no less than that.

Dr. Mark Young: No less than that. But we have to remember that this understanding of the Gospel, in and of itself, does not present the full picture of how the word Gospel is used in the New Testament. In fact, the initial use of the word Gospel, we find in the first chapter of the book of Mark, and there, Christ talks about this good news that's Gospel, right? This good news. So what's the good news? That the kingdom has come, that the kingdom is here. And so we have made a division between the Gospel of the cross, meaning this personal siloed transaction between an individual and God and the Gospel of the kingdom, which is a demand, a call an inclusion in a way of life that is different than any earthly kingdom. Now there is no kingdom without the cross, but it is a perversion of the cross to assume it does not initiate the kingdom. And so the kingdom, our calling as Gospel people is into a different set of ethics, a different set of values, a different way of life, a selflessness, a seeking of the good of others, a willing to sacrifice. In some cases, poverty, for the sake of others. In some cases, even the willingness to lay down our lives for others, there is no one in politics that embodies those values.

Dr. Don Payne: We got to make our peace with that.

Dr. Mark Young: Exactly. Exactly. So does that mean we shouldn't vote? No, not at all. But when we vote, we have to recognize that it's our responsibility. We are the only ones telling the story of the Gospel. And so we have to make up for the lacks of any political party or candidate or elected official by stepping into those arenas of life where politics and politicians simply will not go. Let me give you an example, just a quick example, in terms of election hearing. One writer has said, partisanship is a hell of a drug, especially when it's cut with a heavy dose of existential fear. Now, by God's grace, I had no desire or inclination to watch any of either of the two conventions.

Dr. Don Payne: You'll live longer for that.

Dr. Mark Young: I did not watch a minute of it because the messaging of those conventions is driven around a fear it's driven by fear. And that fear mongering, is absolutely contrary to the story that you and I have to tell, which is a story of redemption and hope. That we can do what God has called us and empowered us to do, which is to bring to the world, a message of redemption in Christ and the hope of the Gospel. That is that we will be transformed. So we know, we are the ones who tell that story, Don, it's our story to tell. No politician will tell it. So when we give in to fear-mongering and we vote, because we're afraid we have abrogated our identity as hope mongers, not fear mongers. I can honestly say to you that I don't see any political party and any political candidate in any nation on the face of the earth ever, fully being able to embrace the values and the story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Don Payne: Which means then, if I'm following you, that as we steward that Gospel as kingdom people, we do vote and we can vote, now you correct me if I'm going places, you're not going, we vote. We in our voting, vocalize our support for that, which we think our candidates of choice do support, which we think align

with kingdom values. And at the same time, at the same time, there's this more. And that more is the what differentiates between, ah, just ignore, put it up, put up with, or dismiss or trivialized the rest of what's in the bag. But we lean into that. We confront that somehow. We're doing both right?

Dr. Mark Young: We are called to speak truth. First we're called to face truth, which means that we can't afford to live in conspiracy theories, unfounded ideas. We can't give in to hints that something may be true and then find confer confirmation in evidence that doesn't actually support that. So we have to face truth, but Don we're called to speak truth. So for everything that I might think is good about a candidate, as someone who's committed to the Gospel, I will have equal, if not more reasons to say to that candidate, that's wrong, that's wrong, that's wrong. And that's wrong.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. And maybe there's a particular way that Christians need to learn how to say that, which is something like the following, in my supportive you, that is wrong. That is wrong. That is wrong. But in my support of you, this is wrong.

Dr. Mark Young: That's correct.

Dr. Don Payne: And that's a difficult place to maintain because it, it seems like there's a very easy default into a sort of binary mindset where if I'm on board with a party, with a candidate, whatever that part of your candidate is, I have to be all in and I can't afford to compromise my candidates or my parties chances of success by kind of chipping away at what I don't like. I've just got to ignore that and be nothing but purely all in.

Dr. Mark Young: That's exactly right. Let me read you a quote that I think helps affirm what you've just said. This comes from a weekly magazine called The Week.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh, that's creative.

Dr. Mark Young: And this is by the editor in chief William Falk, a historian Henry Adams, once defined politics as the quote systematic organization of hatreds. It was true in the Civil War era. And just as true today in 2020, who you hate is who you are. Voters are largely driven by what they're against, rather than what they're for. Political scientists call this phenomenon negative partisanship. And so if you're driven by what you're against Don, you fear that if you point out what's deficient about the candidate that you're for will somehow undermine his or her opportunities to be elected. So we find ourselves in a place, if this is true and it certainly is true for my experience, we find ourselves in a place that we're not only holding our noses and voting for candidates we're terrified that if for some reason the other candidate wins, somehow it's my fault, that I've spoken the truth and the other candidates going to win. Well, we should never be afraid of speaking the truth. We should always be committed to speaking the truth. And however, the election comes out, we ought to be committed to speaking the truth. And that truth is always going to be partially condemning of the

values and the practices and the behaviors of a candidate that do not line up with the truth of the Gospel.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, you're making me think of Paul's comments to Timothy. And I hope our New Testament colleagues won't chastise me for stretching this too far. But Paul, from Paul's comments to Timothy in both of his letters we get a pretty strong impression that Timothy was a pretty timid young man. Had been called and gifted by God, but was a fairly reticent timid, that was probably his ongoing struggle was his fear. And Paul says to him repeatedly, and once very pointedly, God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power love, sound mind, Self-Control. Now I know he had specific applications of that in mind when he wrote that to Timothy, but I think that we can easily extrapolate from that, that to have the spirit of the living, God is not to be living by fear and mongering fear, perpetuating fear, crippled by fear.

Dr. Mark Young: That's exactly right. Yes, that is the primary currency of politics: fear. Fear mobilizes. It mobilizes you to reach for your wallet and it mobilizes you to mark off that square in the, in the ballot. Yeah, I think that one of the real issues, let's just kind of think out loud, some things I've heard. So a lot of people, a lot of evangelicals recognize that there are practices and behaviors and particularly language ways of saying things that the current president uses that are contrary to the way that we think, contrary to our values, the dehumanization, the mocking of others, there is nothing in scripture to validate that, nothing. And then the argument comes up. Yeah. But he's, pro-life, he has been the most, I think the phrase was, the most active pro-life president in our history. He marched in the March for Life. And certainly we believe that the dehumanization of a fetus of a human being in womb in utero is a moral travesty. It is a tragedy. It is what would I say? It assaults our sensibilities. It's completely contrary to who we are, but then I'm going to overlook all the other things. Well, no, you can't overlook all the other things. We need to be just as vocal about what isn't right and good about the behaviors and decisions and the language that's used by the President. As we are supportive of the things that he has aligned with for us.

I just read interesting piece by a woman who was the chairperson of the Right to Life Organization committee and for the state of Ohio. And she writes something that I think is very important for us to hear. She writes, I believe God suffers with us. All God suffers with the unborn child being pulled from the womb. God suffers with the immigrant child, pulled away from his family at the border. God suffers with George Floyd when he breathes his last, all of those people matter to God. My greatest fear is that the pro-life movement and the evangelical church, we've become so tied to the Republican Party and President Trump. They don't all matter to us, end quote. I think what she's getting at is, is very much the tension that evangelicals must live into. We must speak for the unborn. We must speak for the immigrant who is mistreated by our government. We must speak for the black men who are being attacked in unnecessary ways, murdered by those who are charged to protect them. We must speak to those things, all of those things. And if the candidate we support

will not speak to all of those things in the areas where they will not speak to them, we must speak to that candidate.

Dr. Don Payne: And that's what the spirit of the Gospel, the spirit of the living Christ would compel and propel us to do, is to overcome the fears you've articulated so well and be willing to live in that tension, be willing to pull the ballot lever. And as one of my friends said so eloquently, I feel like after I vote and I will vote, then I need to go home and take a bath, but I'll still pull the lever or I'll punch the ballot. And then I will still speak, to whatever the, whoever the candidate is on, whatever issues are not addressed.

Dr. Mark Young: That's right. The issue isn't partisan support. The issue is uncritical partisan support of a candidate. And I've said that over and over again. Now here's the next phase of this, that's so important to us. However, we participate in the political process, it must support our identity as those who are telling the support of redemption, it must be the telling of the story in a way that those who vote differently than we do. I want to hear it from us. Our testimony is more valuable than our vote. Our testimony of the gospel allows us to express who we are more than whom we vote for. And so, as we participate in the political process, speaking truth to all candidates along the lines of Gospel values, then we have a chance to tell the story of why we're speaking the way we are. But if we remain silent, our testimony is undercut and we don't have a place to be able to tell the story of Christ's death on the cross and the redemption that he has accomplished on that Cross.

Dr. Don Payne: I want to go back to one word you used that I don't want to be lost on listeners when you first started, that paragraph, you said, it's how we engage the political process, which is vastly different from whom we happened to vote for. It is how we vote for whom we vote for how we speak after we have voted. And before how we do that makes all the difference, right?

Dr. Mark Young: And here's the thing, not speaking is not an option. By not speaking the truth, we are denying that we worship the God of truth, by following rabbit trails and conspiracy theories like Q Anon. We are denying that we worship the God of truth. Jesus says, I'm the way, the truth, and the life. And when we involve ourselves in untruths, either pursuing them or denying them or speaking falsehoods or passing falsehoods along on Facebook, then we are fundamentally denying our primary allegiance to the man who said, I am the way, the truth, and the life, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dr. Don Payne: Following this line of fear and we don't have a lot of time left, but I do want to put a hook in what you've mentioned a couple of times, how conspiracy theories, fuel fear and work basically with an entire approach to factuality that is frightening. Well, I'm going to use a fear word here, but it is frighteningly reminiscent of what the New Testament warns against with idle myths and speculations. Yeah, I'll go back to Paul and Timothy again, he tells Timothy, don't have anything to do. I know he's talking about various religious myths, but he said, don't be sucked in to mythological thinking and speculative thinking, but

keep your feet anchored in the concrete realities of the Gospel. Stay on that rail. And that that troubles me a lot because the mode of thinking that we find in so many conspiracy theory seems to appeal to people's, and maybe evangelical believers are particularly inclined to this for some reasons, but they seem to appeal to this need for intrigue or this need for insider information. And the what if principle, which is that that's probably the phrase that to my awareness is the currency of conspiracies. What if this is happening? And you raise that suspicion, you raise that fear, and then you send people on these rabbit trails, you mentioned, for which nobody can ever produce any demonstrably, reviewable facts. It's always, what if, and what about. It just pours gasoline, right on all those fears.

Dr. Mark Young: That's correct. And even if someone brings facts to the table, then there is the ability to explain a way that, Oh, well, that's false information. That's fake news. Those aren't facts. Those are alternate facts, which is language we've heard before. And so the tragedy is one conspiracy theory in particular called Q Anon, which has gained tremendous, tremendous popularity with millions of followers on Facebook, uses language from the New Testament, uses terms that Christians use particularly evangelical Christians use. And I can say to you from firsthand experience, there are Pastors in our community whose churches are being ripped apart, not my church, but Pastors have told me churches that are being ripped apart by those who adhere to queue, repeat those drops, those ideas, those themes, interpret the world through Q Anon, and those who refuse to do so. In some places it's become like a cult. And you're exactly right. Once you start down the path of admitting that something could be true, then you enter into the arena that or the way of thinking. We call confirmation bias, or some people call it motivated reasoning. Then you find information, you find ideas, you find data, you observe things, and it all confirms what might be true when there isn't anything. This becomes so difficult, because as you said, it's, unfalsifiable no matter what data you bring to the table, you cannot falsify a conspiracy theory.

Dr. Don Payne: Because that's taken to be evidence of the deception that the conspiracy theory is purporting to combat.

Dr. Mark Young: Correct. That's correct. And so I have to confess, this is one of the most troubling aspects to me of the way evangelicals are finding themselves drawn into this way of thinking. We're never called to do that. We're called to engage what is to have a steely eyed view of reality, framed by our understanding of who Jesus Christ is and who we are as his people. And we're to use facts and data and deal with reality, not dream up conspiracies, or allow ourselves to be drawn in. I don't know how to, the more you try to speak directly against this, as you just pointed out, the more entrenched those who are a part of it becomes, I have tremendous sympathy for pastors who find themselves coming up against blocks in their church who are now framing their worldview around Q Anon.

Dr. Don Payne: What this suggests to me, we'll take this back to the Gospel is that even for those whose lives have been committed to the Gospel and whose ministries are

anchored on the gospel, there's a good chance that none of us understand the depths and the nuances and the levels of the power of the Gospel, as well as we might think we do. So, when we say so often around here, that when we refer to the redemptive power of the Gospel, that's a stick of dynamite that's far more powerful than we even may know it is. And I wonder whether this, I hope this is a clarion call to anybody who has some kind of ministry of the word to drive that taproot, even deeper into the Gospel and let the Gospel shine both its direct light on things, but it's refractive light. It's indirect light, it's reflective light on things. That's our only hope.

Dr. Mark Young: I would agree with you. And I think we ought to be sure and say this, the unity of God's people around the Gospel is not worth sacrificing on the altar of partisanship or any conspiracy theory. If people of faith, people who confess the same Gospel are being torn apart by a partisan political divide or by adherence to a conspiracy theory, then we have revealed our idolatries again.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Something is just straight up wrong.

Dr. Mark Young: That's right. There are godly people in the church. People who worship the Lord, Jesus Christ, people who desire to live out their faith in coherent and in compelling ways, incredible testimony of the gospel who will down on different sides of this election. May God never allow us to look at that person who's going to vote differently and not embrace them as our partners for the sake of the Gospel, in this place, because the Gospel matters more.

Dr. Don Payne: Here here. Mark. We're just about out of time, leave us with a final takeaway or two.

Dr. Mark Young: You know, you talk about a stick of dynamite, and the truth of matter is the story we tell, the story of the one, true God incarnate in the person, Jesus Christ. Who died on the cross and accomplished redemption, that redemption now being experienced and ultimately will be experienced in a way that we could only possibly imagine that story blows up every other story. It is the stick of dynamite in the world. We have the privilege of telling that story. And so however we vote, however, we engage the process. However we speak into the world around us. That story has to be present in what we do because that's who we are.

Dr. Don Payne: Thanks. Friends, we've been interacting with Dr. Mark Young, our President, always a privilege. I hope the Lord uses his comments to stir up good things in your own heart and your own thinking about this upcoming, at least in the US if you're listening to us in the US, this upcoming political season. Let's engage this season as Gospel people in a different manner than perhaps we ever have before. On behalf of everybody here at Denver Seminary, our administration, our staff, our production team, all of whom do so much to make this happen. Thank you for listening. We hope you'll be back with us next week. I'm Don Payne, take care.