

Episode 91

Dr. Walter Kim: Shaping the Next Evangelicalism

Intro [00:00:04] Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminaries 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.

Don Payne [00:00:16] Hey friends, welcome again to Engage360 at Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, your host. And we are very glad and grateful again that you've chosen to spend a little bit of time with us. This conversation today is got just a significance with tentacles reaching in all kinds of directions, because you can hardly have a conversation today about cultural events, about politics or any other number of issues without the word or the concept of evangelicalism coming up in the conversation. Somewhere for good or ill, in people's minds, that word, that concept of evangelical and evangelicalism, tends to crop up all over the place when we're having conversations about what's going on in our nation. And we're really privileged, this episode, to have as our guest Dr. Walter Kim, who serves as the president of the National Association of Evangelicals. And I'm joined also by our Seminary president, Dr. Mark Young. So Dr. Kim, welcome to Engage360. Thanks so much for being our guest.

Walter Kim [00:01:25] Thanks for having me. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Don Payne [00:01:28] Mark. Welcome back as well. You've been a co-host for a quite a number of episodes. Always good to have you here.

Walter Kim [00:01:35] Thanks, Don. And it's always a pleasure. I learned so much at these conversations.

Don Payne [00:01:40] Well, Dr. Kim's experience of America, I'm going to give you a little bio that I've drawn excuse me selectively from his Web site. His experience of America actually reflects the diversity of the country and of the evangelical community. I've actually seen Dr. Kim interviewed on the PBS NewsHour and deeply appreciate his reasoned voice as he represents this movement called evangelicalism that occupies such a volatile and sometimes controversial place in the public eye. Dr. Kim's own Christian journey has taken him through charismatic, mainstream, evangelical and reformed traditions, and all of that has enabled him to enter a variety of denominational streams and learning from the best of what each tradition offers. After serving as pastor for about 15 years, I believe in Boston's historic Park Street Church, which was a congregation that played a very key role in the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals. He then served as pastor for leadership, and he currently serves as a teacher in residence at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Virginia. Dr. Kim received a B.A. from Northwestern University in Philosophy and History and Media from Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., and a Ph.D. from Harvard University and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He taught classes at Boston College, Harvard University, and has contributed to a number of publications and has about three decades worth of preaching, writing and engaging and collaborative leadership to connect the Bible to significant intellectual, cultural, social issues of the day. So again, we're just really grateful. Probably the most important feature about him I'm taking is that he's married to Toni Kim and they have two teenagers. I'll take it. That's probably your most your most significant claim to fame. Dr. Kim.

Walter Kim [00:03:35] Absolutely. It is the most treasured thing in my life.

Don Payne [00:03:38] Yeah. As we get under way. Anything you want to add in terms of background or how is it that you perhaps found your way into your role as president of the NAE?

Walter Kim [00:03:51] Well, thank you for that very kind introduction. And it is true that I've had something of a migrant experience and not only in different denominational traditions, but also different areas of the country. And my own experience as the son of an immigrant and refugee, I think also plays into this journey of faith. I did not grow up in an evangelical household. My family did attend church for a while, a Korean church in New York City that was very much a central hub for the new immigrant wave of Koreans that were moving into the city and also attended some churches in rural western Pennsylvania. But I would have to say, for the most part, that was a function of just this is what communities did. They went to church. It wasn't until I hit high school and during my high school years, I was introduced to the gospel through a local evangelical youth pastor that I came to what I would say is a real vibrant, saving faith in Christ. And even at that point, I didn't know that that was evangelicalism. And all I knew was that my life was changed by Jesus. And that journey led to something of what you have described as being campus ministry. I used to be on staff with CRU and in the pastoral ministry and then thought of teaching at a secular university to try to be a witness for Christ and hence, to a degree and at Harvard in the Eastern languages, but then pivoted back because of my experience at Park Street Church, which you noted was instrumental in the founding of the NAE, as well as a number of pivotal Christian organizations in the mid to late 1900s. And it was there that I had this deep sense of what could be accomplished in the local church, both in the city, both toward the university being Boston, Boston being university town, historic evangelicalism, but deeply engaged in contemporary issues. And so serving as a pastor there, being introduced to World Relief and the National Association of Evangelicals, through my connection there, both kind of brought me into this world and into this current position. Hmm.

Don Payne [00:06:27] I know Mark has a probably a laundry list of questions for you that I certainly want to defer to his questions. But just initially, I'm curious, Dr. Kim, as volatile as the word evangelical and evangelicalism are in our American culture today, what made you want to take on the presidency of an organization with that name?

Walter Kim [00:06:56] Yeah, that's right. You know, when I stepped into the role in 2020, I was offered many congratulations, but I would have to say some condolences and warnings as well. Yeah, it's complicated, of course. And it's a deeply contended issue, and it's deeper than a mere branding problem. There is something substantial going on right now, some soul searching, as well as refinements of the evangelical movement in America. But know this is true of the essence of evangelicalism as a renewal movement. That's something of a populist revivalist renewal movement. It has experienced waves in its own history of strength and weakness and has required a renewing work of God's spirit. I sense here in this particular moment. A deep challenge, but also an opportunity. Of course, we don't know in the providence of God what will be the outcome a decade from now. But I do believe that this is an inflection point, a critical inflection point, in the movement of evangelicalism. And again, while it is something that is contended and at times profoundly problematic, it also holds some real opportunities of renewal. Mm hmm.

[00:08:31] Mark.

Mark Young [00:08:33] Yeah. Thanks so much, Walter, for being with us. As I said earlier, I want to follow up with you, share much of the same sentiment that you've voiced and have used, even

that phrase inflection point for the movement. I think terminology is something we need to probably all agree upon. Evangelicalism, evangelical movement. How do you, if not define how do you describe the contours of how we use that word, those words, evangelicalism and evangelical movement?

Walter Kim [00:09:17] You know, it's, you know, a classic word in the sense that historians have referred to it to. Describe a certain type of impulse and movements within Christianity before the Reformation was called the Reformation, as you and maybe many of your listeners will know, that it was evangelical. So. Luther described himself not as a reformer initially, but as a commoner, because for him, in a German context, what he was seeking to do was recapture the gospel, the good news, the essence of it, the vitality of it in a primitive and direct way. And by primitive, I don't mean barbaric. I mean primitive in the sense that recapturing the initial essence of what gave rise to the good news of Jesus Christ. And ever since that moment, whether it's the period of the first Great Awakening, the renewal movements in England and in America and increasingly all throughout the world, the way that God has used this kind of evangelical renewal, this impulse throughout the world, that it captures a real powerful, not only theological set of commitments in a high view of Scripture and conversion to Christ, an expression of transformation that results in action and a real strong focus on the central to the cross. Those may be some theological commitments that are distinctive of evangelicalism, but there's also, I would say, beyond the principles there, there are the postures. And that posture, I would say, includes this sense of yearning for the authentic, renewing, recapturing of the essence of Christianity. So. That presumes a context in which such renewal is needed. So ironically, evangelicalism has baked within itself an assumption that there's periods of moribund faith where the church is, in fact, in need of renewal. And so that posture, it's not just the principles, but the posture, this kind of ever deepening sense of a need of renewal. I think that's one element of the posture and other element. And this is both its strength as well as its weaknesses. Because it's highly popular, because it's very transformational on the individual level, you know, think of the person, whether it's at the tent revival meeting or a Billy Graham crusade coming down to trust Jesus to this, you know, "just as I" am being sung with an individual transformation, there isn't as much given in evangelicalism to public theology. You know, the structures of how do we understand the nature of biblical faith with respect to institutions and systems and culture? So it's strength of populism and personal transformation, renewal sometimes comes at a cost of the enduring institutional understanding of Christian faith. And we see ourselves right now groping for that kind of public theology.

Mark Young [00:12:53] Do you think that it is, in fact, perhaps a lack of that sense of institutional expression or public theology that's brought us to this time that you've described as an inflection point?

Walter Kim [00:13:09] I think so, because, you know, when America was predominantly Christian, at least, you know, there was a civic religion that was deeply informed by Christianity, you can make all sorts of assumptions about the underlying values that would give a foundation to our institutions or social mores. But when those are no longer shared in an increasingly pluralistic post-Christian context, then you really have to consider, well, what are the theological, philosophical, moral values that, you know, provide that underpinning and the lack of that, you know, really thought out, really engage really disciples into the life of the church, coupled with a general kind of proclivity toward the populist and renewal movement. And it means that in the vacuum of that kind of robust public theology, we are going to be formed in our political views by the media, by our peers. So, you know, the average evangelical probably has a ton of books on how to pray, how to study the Bible or a bunch of Bible studies, books on marriage, singleness,

you know, how to have integrity at work, be honest. But probably not so many books on public theology, the nature of culture, of the integrity, not at work, but the integrity of work itself. You know, how do I think about economics? Churches have plenty of marriage retreats. Where do you go for a retreat on public theology formation in our civic duties, particularly in a pluralistic society? I think the lack of those things are really telling right now, debilitating, frankly. And in the absence of it, we really need to be formed. We're social, political creatures. I'm not saying political in the sense that, you know, a political party or anything like that, but we're creatures that need to be organized in society. And if there's not some common worldview that holds us together. Then in the absence of that, you know, we're going to have a cacophony of voices coming in to shape us. Yeah.

Don Payne [00:15:36] Dr. Kim, at some point in the conversation, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the current state of the evangelical movement. But before that, I want to pick up on a connection you've already made between evangelicalism and sort of populism or being a more populist movement. And I'm wondering, what is it, if anything, about evangelicalism that has lent itself to that or kind of paved the way to where we are now?

Walter Kim [00:16:05] Again, you know, so much of life is about a strength that has a shadow, a weakness. I think this is true personally. You know, many of our real strengths in life that enable us to thrive at our work or in our friendships, they contain or shadow weakness. And I think that's true of evangelicalism. It should be noted that it is a powerful renewal movement, that God's spirit and I owe my salvation to this. You know, when I became a Christian, I went to this. You know, meaning and which, after hearing the four spirituals from a youth worker, I've been pondering it for a year or two in my life and then went to this retreat. I've never seen hundreds of high school students gather together singing about Jesus before. I'd never seen that. What do they have that I don't have? And when I went to the gym that night, that was left open for people to reflect and to pray, I decided, I just want to encounter God if God is real. That's what these kids are singing about is real. I want to meet you. And so I went there to pray, to meet God. And after what seemed like an interminably long moment, declared my religious experiment of failure, I got up to leave and it was probably just 10 minutes. That was my attention span as a high school student. I got up to declare my religious experience, experiment a failure, and God met me in a powerful movement of the spirit. It was almost as if my head was opened up and God poured the Holy Spirit. I felt this tangible sensation from my feet up through my head and my life was absolutely transformed. I have transformed much of my Christian life has been trying to unpack what just happened in that in the encounter of God.

Don Payne [00:18:10] That's what makes a theologian out of a person.

Walter Kim [00:18:13] Yeah, that's.

Don Payne [00:18:13] Right. I tried to figure out what happened to me.

Walter Kim [00:18:16] This is this is I think I'm just very typical in the experience. We'll have different details, but the sense of a person giving a testimony like I just gave would be totally typical in an evangelical church. Details may differ, but the tenor, the nature of the story can be repeated millions of times over. That is the strength. But with such a personal transformation, renewal of the spirit. It can be the case that we spend our time from one emotional high, one experience to the next, to foster a type of spirituality. To maintain that initial fervor, or at least to maintain the fervor that we've heard about from our parents in their conversion. And so at some

point, the questions need to arise "Is there something more that will sustain us beyond the experience as true and real as the experience may be?" I'm simply going to say, you take my experience, you multiply it over, and there's something that seems to be true about evangelicalism, that its great strength, personal transformation, revival renewal, an emotional encounter with God, that even if we don't have it ourselves, we know how to recognize it and we actually want it. But that authenticity, that renewal carries with it again, the weakness of and an over centered, you know, sentimental, experiential kind of faith that when it doesn't happen, when the questions are too complex, when life experiences don't match up with the problems that we face, and what do we do with that? And systems, institutions, they're not emotional things. They're just beyond the individual. So with this transformation of spiritual revival, look like in those context. And that's what we're facing right now.

Don Payne [00:20:28] Yeah. Is that perhaps what accounts for the impulse toward simply simplifying everything and reducing it to kind of bumper to bumper sticker sloganish approach to very complex issues that we face in society?

Walter Kim [00:20:44] Yeah, I think there might be a combination of that with something that's distinctly American. It's a you know, American society is entrepreneurial. It's a country of immigrants. I mean, other than the Native Americans, everyone had immigrated at some point. And with an immigrant mentality, I hear this and I I've seen this in my parents. There's a certain entrepreneurial spirit that would cause you to uproot yourself from your own home country, throw yourself in a completely new and maybe even dangerous context to start life again and again. That entrepreneurial spirit brings with it all sorts of strengths, but it also brings with it a need for immediate results. You have stepped into a crisis moment. It needs a result. And there's something about, I think, the national psyche that we have that's very pragmatic, very immediate in its desire. And Americans just get stuff done. And that does mean an instinct to turn complex things into a neat business plan. If you're that, you know, oriented it that way or three points sermon, if you're a you know, a preacher or, you know, here are ten things you can do to improve your life or three steps. I mean, you name it, they're just there's something about the American psyche that enables us and predisposes us to. So when you have the convergence of evangelicalism, which already has this populist streak in it, and kind of this American entrepreneurial pragmatism, risk taking that those things converging, I think it's particularly American.

Mark Young [00:22:44] Yeah, I would a follow up as well on a couple of things that you've said, but I was working on this recent book that came out. It occurred to me and the process of that book that the ability to narrate a personal experience with God is probably the single most differentiating factor between those who would fall within the ranks of or identify with something like evangelicalism and other Christian expressions. We talk about having a relationship with God or walking with Christ. And I find that terminology almost uniquely used by those who are a part of institutions and churches that are identified with the movement. It also occurs to me that there's a strong, strong streak in our very individual understanding or individualistic understanding of salvation that really leads to the possibility through the revival movements of the church. Less Christianity, a church, less faith. And so we, you know, you blend in, this entrepreneurial spirit, you blend in this populist ethos with American individualism, and you end up with millions of people who talk about a personal relationship with Christ, but really don't have institutional forms or even theological foundations for creating presence in society. That goes beyond. I'm going to share the more spiritual loss with the guy I work with, right. Which is that there's nothing bad with that. But if we're talking about creating a public theology or a presence that speaks the public life, those

theological foundations and historical and cultural factors that we've just talked about really mitigate against being able to create a coherent public theology. Right. And then I would take it a step further and say, not having in our understanding of what it means to be Christian or to have a relationship with God, anything related to or framed by an expressive and meaningful ecclesiology or concept of the church, that we don't have those social identities and social underpinnings that allow us to find anything more than some vague understanding of patriotism or citizenship, which then quickly devolves into partisanship in the way that we work out our thinking. I would argue that it is these weak theological foundations. That individualize everything that really have create has created the context that. However, to say this that has spawned the crisis we find ourselves in, where evangelical in the broader society really means little bore and a partisan political identity. And that, I think, is the essence of the inflection point in my mind. Is what I'm saying resonating with your experience, Walter? Or how would you like to take that and reframe it so that it perhaps makes more sense or is more reflective of what you're saying?

Walter Kim [00:26:14] Mark, there's so much about what you said makes sense and it is compelling in terms of a present moment. You know, let me pick up with this notion of individualism and the lack of our own ecclesiology or understanding of know broader structures of church and life and society. It's one of the, again, great strengths of evangelicalism in that it cuts across denominations. So you can have an evangelical who's a Pentecostal, who's a Presbyterian, brethren Baptist, Methodist, Mennonite, and they're actually all part of the network of the new these denominations. And you also have the renewal movement that happens in the Catholic Church. And many times there's a great a greater similarity between those within the Catholic Church who are part of this renewal movement with other evangelicals and with other Catholics. Because there is this testimony that could be given an experience of the spirit of personal relationship with Jesus that transcends denomination, that is both beautiful. The ability to transcend the denomination to make is the strategy of what holds us together as Christians. But it also means because you can transcend that there's nothing particular and it's made in something of the least common denominator. There's nothing particular about evangelicalism with respect to its denominational institutional affiliations, because it transcends that. And again, there's a beauty in it, but there's also weakness in that. And so this individualism that you describe, I think, is a part of the political element right now. There is nothing that in what we have just said that would necessarily lead to evangelicalism becoming political, much less partisan in its politics. So I would say in order to explain how we get from individualism or transdenominationalism or an experientialism to the partisan politics of the particular moment requires something more, something outside of just evangelicalism in and of itself, because it doesn't seem to me a sufficient explanation. And curious to see you, Mark, in your writing, if in consideration, if there's this added element that you would bring forth the stakes consideration.

Mark Young [00:29:07] Yeah. Thank you for that. I would add one thing that I think is critical. We use the word revival as a renewal movement, and then we usually or often throw that word populist around it. And I want to be clear, I want us to be sure that when we say populist or not, just really popular populism as a movement has some distinct characteristics that I think are very much a part of the evangelical ethos, particularly in relationship to the other sectors and other presence or other entities in society. In almost every movement and evangelicalism where things have changed or the rhetoric has changed, there's been a sense that we're against something. So we're not just a renewal. We're a reactionary movement. And even the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals was a desire to react against perhaps some of the more fundamentalist voices and thinking and disengagement and create a presence within society that was willing to engage outside of the boundaries that had been very thickly drawn in the evangelicalism in the

early 20th centuries. So populism almost always has an image of an enemy, of a threat, of something that we have to fight against in order to sustain our movement. And I think evangelicalism, particularly in the last 50, 60 years, has allowed itself to fall prey, to constantly be in a war mentality, constantly be the aggrieved, threatened entity that has to protect itself. So it's defend and attack, defend and attack at all points. I personally believe this has been exacerbated significantly since the seventies, then again in the nineties, where we see a dramatic shift in political rhetoric from the Republican Party. Certainly we can see it in the last two election cycles with just an overt willingness to dehumanize those who think differently and cast them as the enemy. In that regard, I think we find ourselves at perhaps a more acute moment of crisis and in need of an inflection point, because we've given in to those urges, those populist urges, seeing ourselves as the embattled and aggrieved population.

Walter Kim [00:32:06] It also strikes me that this inflection point, coupled with the increasing diversification of the country, secularization of the country, adds you know, many other dynamics and the regionalism of our country as well. It used to be the case that you could live in a particular region and by and large had multiple generations that have just stayed in that region. So when I lived in New York City, you know, despite the fact that it had many different nationalities moving into the city, you could always find, you know, die hard New York Yorkers who would be there for generations. Same was true when I lived in western Pennsylvania. And when you're in those regions and you by and large have a homogeneity of world view that you can live comfortably with when you tend to think, well, this is America. And but with the transience of our country now, with social media, with the ability of people to constantly 24/7 be engaged with what's happening in different parts of the country. So, you know, whatever happens in a particular city is no longer just local news. It's now national news if something happens. Charlottesville is an example of that in 2017 with the Unite the Right rally. It was not just regional news. It's not counted in central Richmond. It was national and frankly, international news. So then, you know, what you're talking about are the possibilities to be aggrieved or dislocated, at least if not aggrieved. The sense that there was there's a loss of this country. This is not the country I thought I knew or grew up in. It's because all the regional differences, all the differences that are now added with waves of immigration, which has always been true, but now we see it. And in in fresh and dynamic ways, it just means the plethora of issues for which we feel some measure of reaction. You describe it or dislocation. It's it's there's a constant cycle of it. So, yeah, we feel barraged in a way that is unprecedented, even if there have been other periods of our time where dislocation has occurred. The mix is really unique because the pace of it, the constant barrage of that, because of our access to information. And the weakening of those social ties means that there is little to anchor us with a firm, either civic faith or communal identity. And that gets coupled with religion. And when it gets coupled with religion, then there's a whole mix of things that make it potentially, potentially, you know, deeply problematic for and for Christian faith, because then it now becomes accumulate. You know, it accumulates all sorts of other issues, identities that we now have to tease apart.

Don Payne [00:35:37] Dr. Kim, this is this is so fascinating. And if we could maybe put one final question in front of you or maybe a two-part question. What is what is your vision for where you'd love to see evangelicalism, particularly in this country, move? And what can we do either at a macro or on individual levels, to kind of change our current trajectory in that direction?

Walter Kim [00:36:09] There are three things that I would say and then I'll unpack. One is that we have to learn how to lead from the margins and not the middle. I think Christians and evangelicals, because of our heritage, because we were founded as a nation, deeply imbued with faith. It feels

like we have lost our central place of power and influence. And frankly, we have we are no longer the middle. We are now in the margins and a plurality of margins that exists in this country. And that that's unnerving to many people. And it could come in the form of racial identity, like, wow, this is no longer the kind of country that I thought it was going to be. I think of Charlottesville in this way, that in 1980 it was 80% white, 18% black, and in 2040 it is projected to be about 40% white, 29% Hispanic and 13% black, 14% Asian-American. Like that is dramatically different. And so the sense of transformation means we've got to figure out what it means to lead from the margins, not from the middle. And secondly, I think when you have that dislocation, it's possible to experience fear, a sense of loss, of being unsettled. And we have to recover a deep, deep sense of what does it mean to be people of faith who do not trade in the language of fear, who do not give in to the rhetoric of fear, but realize that we have an incredible missional moment right now. And thirdly, I think we should be open to the fact that, according to 1 Peter, judgment begins with the House of God, that this is a period for us to experience the refining crucible of God. And it may not be the case that when we come out of this and that we'll look at ourselves and say that we become the dominant power again. It may be that we should look at ourselves and say the first or last. That the least are the greatest. And as we read from the margins, as we have an attitude of faith, as we open ourselves up for the purification of God, maybe the church becomes smaller, but in the smaller size, it becomes more deeply committed and rooted to being the kind of followers that honor God and make a transformation of society. I think this is an extraordinary moment that we have. My son just graduated from high school a year ago, and in his graduating class, there were more Muhammad's than there were Michael's. I mean, this is an incredible transformation. And rather than thinking about lamenting the loss of the America that was, I look at this and I think this is like the greatest missionary opportunity that we have witnessed for Jesus. Like, this is an incredibly fertile moment for the church infected with destroying itself from the inside, right from the inside. If he could keep this fervor toward Jesus and not toward identity and preserving place and culture. And I think we have an incredible opportunity to proclaim Jesus Christ in a fresh way. Well, I say I say amen to that. And I would add that one of the blessings of doing the kinds of work that Don and I do, theological education is being around those who are going to shape the next evangelicalism. And quite frankly, they know in many cases that the movement has to be different, that the posture has to be different, that what we value in our faith and in our presence in the society has to be different in order for the gospel to be first and foremost what we're known for. I'm very hopeful about those that I see preparing and currently leading ministry who are thinking deeply and thoughtfully about how we need to be different for the sake of the gospel, in this wonderful, I love your phrase missional moment that God's created for us.

Don Payne [00:41:09] Well, what fitting and poignant words for us to put some deep roots in. Dr. Walter Kim, thank you very much for sharing your experience, your insights, your perspective with us. We're so grateful.

Walter Kim [00:41:26] What a gift it has been to be with you. Thank you, Don. Thank you, Mark. Yeah.

Don Payne [00:41:30] Friends? Yeah. We've been talking with Dr. Walter Kim, who is the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, a good, good friend of all of us who are trying to figure out what faithfulness to the unchanging gospel looks like in very complex times. We're grateful for his time, grateful again to Dr. Mark Young, our president, for participating with us in this conversation. Friends, we'd love to hear from you. If you would like to contact us, you can do so with our email address, which is podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. And I would encourage you to give us a rating, a review on whatever podcast platform you utilize to excite access these

conversations. We'd really appreciate that and that will help us extend the reach to some other listeners as well. Friends until another episode, we hope the Lord continues to work faithfulness out in and through your life. Take care.