

Episode 106 | Understanding the History of Evangelicalism to Build Its Future; Dr. Randall Balmer

Intro [00:00:04] 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.

Don Payne [00:00:16] Hello again, friends. This is engage360 from Denver Seminary. We're glad you're with us. My name is Don Payne, your host. And we're going to have another great conversation for you in this episode. One term that is dear to many of our hearts has also experienced some seismic shifts in meaning and significance. That word is evangelical. These days, there is a plentitude of chatter about that term in the history of human language. Some terms change over time, not merely their definitions, but their significance, the cultural weight they carry and the emotional force that they wield. So, these days, many embrace the term evangelical in ways that make many others want to abandon it. It's a sort of religious or ecclesial identity crisis, and identity crises affect us relationally. They affect us vocationally, they affect us spiritually, maybe even in other ways as well. So evangelical may be among the most misunderstood, ambiguous, multivalent, and controversial terms that currently float around the United States. In episode 91, we had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Walter Kim, who is the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, about the current state of evangelicalism and the prospects of a next evangelicalism. But in this episode, we have the distinct privilege of interacting with someone else who has also given considerable attention to the phenomenon of evangelicalism so as to help guide us toward some self-understanding of how we got to where we are. That history is crucial for us to be able to move forward responsibly, sustainably, and in ways that are going to be genuinely beneficial to the world around us. So, our guest in this episode is Dr. Randall Balmer, who is a prize-winning historian and Emmy Award nominee. He holds the John Phillips chair in religion at Dartmouth College, which is their oldest endowed professorship. He holds a Ph.D. from Princeton as taught it as professor of American religious history at Columbia University for 27 years before coming to Dartmouth and has been a visiting professor at Princeton, Yale, Northwestern, and Emory and in the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Dr. Balmer, welcome.

Randall Balmer [00:02:40] Happy to be here. Thank you.

Don Payne [00:02:41] We are very glad and very grateful that you can spend some time with us. Randall is published widely in both scholarly journals and in the popular press, including op ed articles in the Los Angeles Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, Dallas Morning News, Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, Minneapolis Star Tribune, and The New York Times. His work has also appeared in The New Republic, New York Times, Book Review, and The Chronicle of Higher Education. I could go on and on with a lot of his accomplishments, but I want to get right to the conversation with him, because for the purposes of our conversation today, I want to draw attention to his 2016 book entitled Evangelicalism in America by Baylor University Press. And in this book, he chronicles the history of evangelicalism, its origins and development, as well as its diversity and its contradictions. So, Dr. Balmer, when you talk about evangelicalism, are you speaking about it more theologically or more in its socio-cultural iterations in this country or in some other senses? How are you using that term?

Randall Balmer [00:03:46] Well, I'm not a theologian, so I'm not going to wade into those waters, but I'm a historian. So, I'm interested in how evangelicalism has interacted with the culture at various times in American history. And so, for example, one of my focuses has been looking at 19th century evangelical social and political activism. And what I find so remarkable is that evangelicals, if you would kind of plot them on a political spectrum using today's understanding of what is left and right, conservative and liberal, 19th century evangelicals would list decidedly toward the left of the political spectrum in terms of their concerns about those on the margins of society.

Don Payne [00:04:27] Okay. More social issues, social action, social justice issues, those things?

Randall Balmer [00:04:32] Exactly. So, for example, evangelicals were very much interested in issues like prison reform. They were involved in peace crusades. They were very much advocates for common schools,

as they were known in the 19th century, we would think. But we would use the term public education today, because they recognized that was the way to elevate those on the lower status or lower rungs of society into middle class America. And they were also very active in the whole issue for women's equality. So I look at that and then I juxtapose the current situation and I find it a bit jarring.

Don Payne [00:05:11] Yeah, you might say things have changed.

Randall Balmer [00:05:14] Yes. I think so.

Don Payne [00:05:15] What's shifted, if you can reduce that to just a few factors?

Randall Balmer [00:05:18] Well, I think you have to look back at the history of evangelicalism in the 20th century. And I think the Scopes trial was was pretty big moment. Because that essentially drove evangelicals underground. That is to say they began to withdraw from institutions in the larger society and create what I've come to call the evangelical subculture, which, as you know, is this vast and interlocking network of churches, denominations, Bible camps.

Don Payne [00:05:46] Yeah, what we call the big tent.

Randall Balmer [00:05:48] The big tent, right. But this was really a defensive posture on their part because they regarded the larger world as no longer congenial to them in some way as both corrupt and corrupting. They want to protect themselves and particularly their children from what was going on in the larger culture. And so for the middle decades of the 20th century, evangelicals were really not involved politically, certainly not in an organized way. And perhaps you remember that from your own past. It was just not part of the conversation about being politically organized and it begins to change in the 1970s. A couple of things. I usually want to talk about the Chicago Declaration in 1973, which we can certainly return to. But I think it was really Jim Carter's campaign for the presidency in 1975, 76 that begins to draw evangelicals out of their subculture and beginning to engage in the larger world. And I think in many ways they voted, many of them for Carter, probably out of the novelty of being able to vote for somebody like them who was unabashed about being a born again Christian. And then, of course, during the Carter administration, everything gets flipped upside down.

Don Payne [00:07:02] Yeah, and certainly, well, I would imagine no small amount of ambivalence in voting for Carter since he was a Democrat and yet represented many of those values that evangelicals would embrace.

Randall Balmer [00:07:14] That's right. And I think that the issue of party label was not quite so important at that time as it came to be after 1980. But yes, and I remember very clearly, I was a student at Trinity College at the time, when Carter began to come onto the scene. And here you have this governor of Georgia, who is being taken increasingly seriously as a candidate for president of the United States, speaking unabashedly about being a born again Christian. And, for me, I'd always been a little bit sheepish about that sort of thing, even though that's certainly how I identified myself. But for Carter to be very clear about that and also, of course, in the wake of Watergate, saying, I'm never going to knowingly lie to the American people, you know, that was a kind of revelation.

Don Payne [00:08:05] Yeah.

Randall Balmer [00:08:06] Lyndon Johnson had lied to us about Vietnam and Richard Nixon had lied about pretty much everything. And so Carter comes along and says, I'm not going to lie to the American people. And that was an aha moment, I think, not only for evangelicals, but for the populace in general.

Don Payne [00:08:23] Well you mentioned or alluded to the many different denominations, and we might say traditions and iterations that historically have comprised and I think still comprise what we call

evangelicalism. What is it about all of those varieties that makes some sense of the perplexing landscape we see today.

Randall Balmer [00:08:48] It is perplexing indeed. I think evangelicalism is a unique movement. And I'm fascinated by it not only because it's a movement with which I identify and in which I was reared. But it's unique in the sense that it's a tradition, a religion that is not governed by hierarchies. It doesn't pay much attention to tradition. It's not defined for the most part by creeds or confessions. And so you have this kind of radically decentered movement. We don't have a pope. I mean, Billy Graham probably was the closest we had to a pope.

Don Payne [00:09:29] Or a patron saint.

Randall Balmer [00:09:31] Exactly. And so it goes in all sorts of different directions. And I think that's both the beauty and probably the complexity of evangelicalism. And I think the danger, if I can be pretty blunt about this, is that churches tend to organize around a cult of personality. And I think we've seen, you know, for a long time, but certainly in the.

Don Payne [00:10:00] No debate about that, I don't think.

Randall Balmer [00:10:01] In the last year or two, the real dangers of that sort of thing, because you don't have anything else holding that group together. So it's a fascinating movement. I've been studying it for far too long, I suppose in many ways. But the other thing about evangelicalism is that evangelicals know almost instinctively how to speak the idiom of the culture. And this goes back all the way to the 17th century or probably the 18th century with George Whitfield. The revivalists coming over to the American colonies and using his theatrical voice and his dramatic pauses to really capture the American audiences. In the 19th century, you had the circuit riders in the coal Porters who were riding the railroad lines, bringing the gospel to the West, for example. In the 20th century, you had urban revivalists, people like Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. And more recently, of course, you have the megachurches. And now evangelicals are all over the social media landscape as well. So evangelicals know how to speak the idiom of the culture. And that, I think, is one of the great geniuses of the of the movement.

Don Payne [00:11:13] You're reminding me of something that goes back even further, and that is with John Wesley in England, who appalled one of his older brothers, who was also an Anglican priest, by daring to take the Ministry of the Gospel outside the walls of the church and preach the gospel in the open air to, you know, at the entrance to the mines. And one of Wesley's brothers just could not believe that John had the audacity to do that outside the church's walls. And that may not have been the first, but it certainly was part of that that impetus, that movement toward populism or just grassroots accessibility.

Randall Balmer [00:11:51] And again, speaking the vernacular of the culture as well. And, you know, in many ways, megachurch is probably the best recent example of that sort of thing. You have Willow Creek and these other megachurches. Well, you know, what are they imitating? They're imitating the local suburban shopping mall. You know, with the food court all the way down to the food courts and all that stuff. And, you know, the airport style parking stanchions and things like that. And again, they're understanding the local culture and they're appealing to that. And that has been one of the great geniuses of evangelicalism throughout our history.

Don Payne [00:12:22] And yeah, captured and often captured in the word relevance.

Randall Balmer [00:12:25] Yes.

Don Payne [00:12:26] For for good or ill. But that seems to be one of the words that is a container for all of that, all that multiplicity of emphases that are culturally connected.

Randall Balmer [00:12:39] I think that's right.

Don Payne [00:12:40] You talk in your book about myths that need to be debunked and how some of those relate to evangelicalism's future. Speak to us about that.

Randall Balmer [00:12:50] Well, I think probably you're referring to what I call the abortion myth, and that is a long story and I'll try to keep it short. But what happened was that I was asked in November of 1990 to go to a closed door gathering in Washington, D.C. and I found myself in the room with people like Ralph Reed from the Christian Coalition, Carl F.H. Henry, who is, of course, the founding editor of Christianity Today magazine, Richard Land from the Southern Baptist Convention. Ed Dobson, who was Jerry Falwell's lieutenant at Moral Majority, and Richard Viguerie, the direct mail guru. And Paul Weyrich, who's really the architect of the religious right. And during the first session, Paul Weyrich, who again, is a central figure here, he made a very impassioned speech. He said, let's remember that we, meaning evangelicals, did not become involved in politics in the 1970s in reaction to the Roe v Wade ruling of 1973. Abortion is not what got us interested in politics. And then he went on to say that what really got evangelicals interested in politics was a defense of racial segregation at places like Bob Jones University and other so-called segregation academies. Ed Dobson, who again had been one of Jerry Falwell's lieutenants at Moral Majority, quickly agreed. He quickly concurred with that statement. He said, I'm paraphrasing here, I sat in the non smoke filled back rooms when Moral Majority got going and he said, I don't remember anybody talking about abortion. Right after that session, I went up to Weyrich and I said, I want to make sure I understood you correctly about this, that abortion was not the catalyst for evangelical political activism in the 1970s. He said, absolutely not. He said, I'd been trying since the Goldwater campaign in 1964 to get evangelicals organized and active in politics, he said. I tried the abortion issue. I tried the pornography issue. I tried the school prayer issue. I tried the women's rights issue. Nothing got their attention until the IRS in the 1970s began coming after places like Bob Jones University. Well, that kind of launched me into a research project that lasted far too long, trying to figure out what the real origins of the religious right were. And I have to say that Weyrich was absolutely right. And if you look back at the early reactions on the part of evangelicals to the Roe v Wade ruling and I'm not saying their reactions were right or wrong, that's not my purpose. I'm just laying out the historical narrative. Evangelicals, in fact, applauded, many evangelicals applauded, the Roe v Wade ruling in 1973. It was only later in the 1970s that abortion became part of their issue. They considered abortion a Catholic issue until roughly 1979. So that's one of the myths I try to explode, and that is what I call the abortion myth, which is the fiction that evangelicals became politically active in the 1970s in response to Roe v Wade. I'll just give you one bit of evidence. Jerry Falwell, by his own admission, did not preach his first anti-abortion sermon until February 26th, 1978. That's more than five years after the Roe v Wade ruling. Southern Baptist Convention, which is, you know, evangelical through and through. It passed a resolution in 1971 calling for the legalization of abortion, which they reaffirmed in 1974 after the Roe v Wade ruling. Again in 1976. Now, again, you know, I understand that this is kind of difficult fact. These are difficult facts for a lot of folks. But I think if we understand the origins of this movement, then I think we can understand exactly where we are and where we're going as a movement.

Don Payne [00:16:47] Well, what I hear you suggesting, I think, is that there's not been a strictly linear consistency of emphasis.

Randall Balmer [00:16:55] Not at all. I think that's right. And, you know, I can go into how abortion became part of that agenda, but I can say without fear of contradiction, that was not what got the religious right organized in the 1970s. It was frankly, it was a defense of racial segregation. And that's tough medicine. I understand that. But I think we have to come to terms with that.

Don Payne [00:17:20] Well, on that note, many believers who at least in a theological sense, would consider themselves evangelical, are members of underrepresented groups and have a lot of misgivings about the term evangelical. You know, assuming that that's pretty much a white expression of Christianity, and that they're having a very different set of conversations that are not encompassed by, that the conversations going on within white evangelicalism and are not really sensitive to the theological and social conversations going on in their Christian tradition.

Randall Balmer [00:17:59] I think that's absolutely right. And I'm sure you're seeing this here at Denver Seminary among your students as well. And I think my guess is, I haven't spoken with your students. My guess is that even a lot of young white evangelicals are becoming uncomfortable with that term.

Don Payne [00:18:16] Disaffected, yeah. One of the conversations that we find ourselves in quite often is whether the term evangelical is even salvageable or whether we need to ditch the term and go on to something else, or whether the term can be redeemed because of its admirable and appropriate theological origins. But has it become encumbered with so much baggage that it's irredeemable? Now there's not a consistent voice on that even here, though, I think many of us would, because of the genesis, no pun intended, but the genesis of the term being rooted in the gospel, we don't want to ditch the term. We'd love to see that redeemed. And so we talk about a next evangelicalism, not a new, but a next evangelicalism and what that might look like. But no small number of challenges.

Randall Balmer [00:19:07] And I think those are good conversations to have. And I agree with that. I think, you know, if I have a contribution to make to that conversation, I want to say to contemporary evangelicals, look, you have quite a distinguished history in terms of social engagement. If you look back into the 19th century, I consider this a noble legacy. And I think we need desperately to tap into that once again and also to tap into the words of Jesus.

Don Payne [00:19:40] Yeah, there's always that.

Randall Balmer [00:19:40] You couldn't have a better source than that. Right? And Jesus has something to say about visiting the prisoners. He has something to say about welcoming the strangers. And, you know, I understand that immigration is a vexed issue and national borders are troubling. But it seems to me that those sorts of principles have something to say and it should inform our policies.

Don Payne [00:20:06] Yeah, it makes me think that when we come to issues like that, our starting point for the conversation is, even if we do end up with different tactics and different strategies, our starting point or our point of orientation is significant because if we start from a defensive protective posture, we're going to end up in one direction. If we start from a posture of Jesus told us to welcome the strangers, we may still come up with strategies and tactics that are restrictive in some ways that take into account a variety of national security concerns. But starting from that point, that posture is going to make for a different character of the conversation, I would think.

Randall Balmer [00:20:43] Absolutely. I think that's right. And we have to you know, for me, those are the two sources. That is the Bible itself as a whole, of course, but particularly the words of Jesus, because he's quite clear about these sorts of things. And this, I think, noble history that evangelicals can claim for themselves. I'll make an observation, if I may. We may be trailing off into the raspberry bushes here, but I'll give it a shot. Well, one of the things that I've reflected on about my own evangelical upbringing, which I, by the way, I honor, just as I honor both the ministry and memory of my father, who was a pastor at the Evangelical Free Church for 40 years. But most of the sermons I heard growing up as an evangelical were from the epistles, particularly the Pauline epistles. And I have to say that as an adult, I've come to appreciate more and more the Gospels because they reveal Jesus. And if you take John 1 seriously, Jesus is the Word of God. And we come closest to understanding God by looking at Jesus, it seems to me. And so I think even which parts of the Bible we read tells us something about ourselves.

Don Payne [00:22:03] That's interesting. I love that you make that point, because I've often made that same point to our students that when the Bible itself uses the phrase word of God or the shorthand the word, it is far and away most often talking about Jesus. And it's entirely appropriate to talk about the Scriptures as the word of God written. But most of the time, when the Scriptures use that phrasing word of God, it's talking about either Jesus or the message of the gospel about Jesus. It's easy to overlook that. You talk a bit about the First Amendment, the relationship of evangelicals to the First Amendment, kind of a curious and complex relationship. What do we need to know and learn about that?

Randall Balmer [00:22:44] That's a great question. I think the First Amendment is America's best idea, the idea that you would have both an assurance of religious freedom as well as no established religion. And again, as a historian, I look to the past and I see that religion has flourished in America, the United States, as nowhere else, I think precisely because of the First Amendment. The First Amendment set up a free marketplace for religion where the government had no stake whatsoever, one way or another, in any religious tradition or another. And in that free marketplace, you have a lot of competition. And that has led to a vitality and a vibrancy to religion in America that is unmatched anywhere in the world. So when I see contemporary folks, including evangelicals, I'm sad to say, really trying to whittle away at the First Amendment and the separation of church and state. And first of all, let me dispense with this, because people are going to say the term separation of church and state is not in the First Amendment. Yes, I understand that. But Thomas Jefferson, who was largely responsible for the First Amendment, his letter to the Danbury Baptists, clearly gives his understanding of this. This is what the First Amendment is all about, is separating church and state. But let's go back to that metaphor of separation of church and state. That really derives from Roger Williams, who is the founder of the Baptist tradition in America. And what people miss about that metaphor is that Roger Williams wanted to separate the garden of the church from the wilderness of the world by means of a wall of separation. So, to understand what that means, you have to go back and understand what Roger Williams thought about wilderness. People in the 17th century were not members of the Sierra Club, let's put it that way.

Don Payne [00:24:41] The wilderness was a hostile place.

Randall Balmer [00:24:42] Wilderness was a place of darkness where evil lurked. And so when he's talking about protecting the garden of the church from the wilderness of the world, what he was concerned about was the integrity of the faith. And that is compromised, he believed, and I think he's absolutely right about that, by too close an association with the state. So those people who are out there trying to whittle away at the First Amendment, whittle away at the separation of church and state, I think are doing a terrible disservice to the faith. I'll give you a quick example of how this played out a few years back. I was one of the expert witnesses in the Alabama Ten Commandments case when Chief Justice Roy Moore plopped a granite monument into the lobby of the judicial building at the same time bracketing out any other religious representation in that space. So it was only the Ten Commandments. Now, if he had put other, you know, religious sentiments in that space, I would have had no trouble with that. It would not have been a violation of the First Amendment. But when judge Thompson, Myron Thompson, ruled correctly that that represented a violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment, and he ordered that monument removed, one of the protesters said, get your hands off my God. I think you and I both know that one of the commandments etched into the side of that granite monument said something about graven images. And that was precisely Roger Williams point. If you conjoin church and state, it's ultimately the integrity of the faith that is compromised. And that's why it's so important.

Don Payne [00:26:24] Yeah, so curious, I remember that trial and how many evangelicals lost their minds at that ruling.

Randall Balmer [00:26:32] It was an absolutely correct ruling. And the best thing for the faith.

Don Payne [00:26:40] What do you think it's going to look like for evangelicalism to maybe regain its footing and be a faithful Christian presence in this country? If you have any hope that can take place.

Randall Balmer [00:26:52] Well, I do have hope. I'll frame that by saying that I was asked recently to write an essay about hope. And in the course of writing that essay, it occurred to me that of the three theological virtues in first Corinthians, faith, hope and love, we talk a lot about faith. We talk a lot about love. We don't talk much about hope. And it also occurred to me that hope is the only one of those three that is volitional. That is, we can choose to be hopeful. We can't choose love very often. Faith, especially if you're Calvinist, comes from somewhere else, right, outside of ourselves. But hope is the one virtue that is volitional. We can choose to be hopeful. So I choose to be hopeful. Getting back to your question, I think that, if

evangelicalism is to have a future, and I'm repeating myself somewhat from the earlier portions of our interview, I think evangelicals need to reconnect with their own traditions, both the scriptures and their own history.

Don Payne [00:28:02] And connect with them honestly, perhaps.

Randall Balmer [00:28:06] Honestly. Yeah, that's pretty that's pretty basic. Yeah, do so in an honest way. And if you look at people in the 19th century, evangelicals in the 19th century, they were really remarkable. I mentioned some of the issues where they were active. But the other issue that was quite a hot issue for evangelicals in the 19th century was a critique of capitalism.

Don Payne [00:28:31] I did not know that.

Randall Balmer [00:28:33] Most people don't, Charles Grandison Finney said, in effect, I'm paraphrasing him. He said that a Christian businessman was an oxymoron. Now I'm not saying that we should take it that far. But what he was saying is that the ethics or the mores of business necessarily elevate avarice over altruism. And if we take those critiques seriously, which is not to say we have to adopt them out of whole cloth or in a wholesale way. But if we take those critiques seriously and examine them and understand the biblical basis for some of those statements, I think that would leave us in a very different place as we go into the future.

Don Payne [00:29:25] Well, yeah. For one thing, it would at least, I suppose, make us be honest about the fact that our evangelical theological commitments do not necessarily work their way out into any consistent economic policy.

Randall Balmer [00:29:47] I think that's right.

Don Payne [00:29:47] That was a very long and convoluted statement.

Randall Balmer [00:29:50] I understand what you're saying. But at least if we look at some of those statements from the real titans of the faith who have gone before, and rather than simply dismiss them out of hand as being naive or whatever sort of criticism we want to assign to it and examine them, as you say, honestly, I think we might come to some different conclusions in terms of the policies we favor.

Don Payne [00:30:19] Yeah. Interesting. Dr. Randall Balmer, we are so honored for your time with us and your insights. Thank you.

Randall Balmer [00:30:27] My pleasure. I enjoyed it.

Don Payne [00:30:28] Yeah. So glad you could be with us. Friends, thanks for you spending time with us as well. We're always honored by the fact that you would take a half hour or so every now and then to listen to one of our conversations. And we hope and we do pray, in fact, that the Lord will make them beneficial for you in some aspect of your ministry or your journey, your faith. I want to put a plug in for Dr. Balmer. You can learn more about him and his resources at his website, which is simply RandallBalmer.com. He's got lots of good books and resources out there that I think you'll find fascinating. Let me encourage you as well to check out our website, DenverSeminary.edu. We have some new resources on there. We've got webinars and lots of good stuff that'll resource your ministry and your journey and other ways. And if you have comments or questions for us, please email us. Podcast@DenverSeminary.edu is our email address and as conventional to say, but we really mean this, please do give us a rating or review or just simply tell a friend about us if you found something beneficial about what you hear on Engage360. Until we talk to you again next time, friends, may the Lord bless you and just give you a refreshing and renewing sense of His presence in everything you do. Take care.