

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, friends. This is Engage360 at Denver Seminary. Welcome. My name is Don Payne. I'm your host. Very glad, very grateful that you have chosen to spend a little bit of time with us. You have probably heard the old adage that history repeats itself, and that might be a mere abstraction to those in nations like the U.S. without a lengthy national history. Now we're getting close to 250 years old as a nation. But compared to many nations in the world, that's not a very long history. And I think it's fair to say, at least as a broad generalization, that Americans tend not to place a lot of value on the subject of history. Again, as a generalization, this has tended to be a more forward-thinking nation. Now, for some understandable reasons and with no small number of benefits. But it does create a unique sort of vulnerability for Americans. We can easily think that we're somewhat immune to the historical cycles that we see played out across the stage of world history. Okay, well, that's a runway for an important discussion we need to have about our national vulnerability and maybe the church's vulnerability to some of those historical cycles that we might find chilling in their original iterations elsewhere. But we might not see the real threats they pose because they might express themselves here in a different manner than they did in other places. So, what do we have to learn from world history, even in the last century, and how some of the core beliefs or inclinations in those events might actually be operating for us? So, our guest in this episode is Dr. Ryan Tafilowski. Ryan is the assistant professor of theology here at Denver Seminary. Ryan's been teaching for us as a very popular adjunct professor for several years, and we're delighted and grateful that he has joined our full-time faculty this past fall. Ryan, welcome.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:02:24] Hey, thanks for having me, Don. Good to be here.

Don Payne [00:02:27] Well, Ryan completed a master's in church history and a Ph.D. in theology at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. And I'll tell you a little bit more in a moment about his area of expertise. But I need to mention up front something equally important. Ryan is also, in addition to his academic and scholarly work with us. Ryan is also the pastor of a small congregation in our area and beautifully blends that pastoral heart and pastoral skills with his theological scholarship. And I really want to commend him to you for that. And while I'm at that, I'm going to put in a shameless plug for our theology program, particularly our M.A. in theology. If you or anybody you know is looking to do some advanced study in the area of theology, particularly systematic theology or even historical theology, Ryan Tafilowski is kind of man you want to study under, and I really want to encourage you to think hard and prayerfully about engaging in that M.A. theology with a chance to study under somebody like Ryan. Well, anyway, Ryan's area of theological specialization is particularly the Nazi theologians and how their theology merged with their political ethics and with early National Socialism in Germany. So, Ryan, as background for what we want to talk about today, fill in a little bit more detail on that.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:03:59] Sure. I'd be glad to. So, I grew up in the church and like any self-respecting evangelical who studied theology as an undergraduate, I read Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. I immediately became enamored of it, and that led me to the writings of folks like Carl Barth. And I just became enchanted by this period, and especially Bonhoeffer. And I just thought, here is a robust evangelical vision that's intellectually serious, morally responsible. I need to write a Ph.D. on this, and I'm going to apply to these schools and I'm going to give them this proposal of a Ph.D. on Bonhoeffer. And so, I tried and then I realized I had that idea.

Don Payne [00:04:40] And so did everybody else and their neighbor.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:04:43] Yep, so did everybody else in the universe. So, I still have a great interest in Bonhoeffer. I've written on Bonhoeffer some, but the woman I ended up working with for my Ph.D., her name is Dr. Hannah Holt Schneider very helpfully said, hey, why don't you look at the other side of the so-called German church struggle? And this is basically the crisis that befell the German. State church when

the Nazis came to power in the early 1930s, and the church fragmented basically into three factions. And she said not as much attention has been paid to these folks on the other side. And there's lots of reasons for that. Right. Number one, their ideas have aged really poorly. Right. So, their theology is not often put to constructive use. And number two, they haven't been translated. So, I was up to my eyeballs in German texts for a number of years, and I came to find that, what I found so fascinating about these figures is that by and large, it is my opinion that many of them didn't set out to be Nazi theologians. They just found themselves aligned with National Socialism for other reasons. One is that they were basically conservative in temperament, were concerned about the direction their country was going, and ended up on the wrong side of history, as they say.

Don Payne [00:06:04] Okay. So, you make an interesting point there about many of these German theologians being part of a movement that was not intentionally headed in the direction that we now know it headed. Of course, there are some differences there because they were part of a nationally supported church or what we often call a state church. And that's very different from the U.S. But without, well, let me put it this way. I know that some Americans will recoil at the suggestion that some things we see going on in the U.S. today are similar to what happened in Nazi Germany. I mean, of course, there is the difference in the way the church is structured. But why is that do you think? And without overplaying the analogy, what are some possible parallels between that Nazi era and the U.S. today? If there are any.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:07:02] I get this question a lot. So how about this? I'll come around to the similarities, but I want to start with the dissimilarities. I think this is really important, not least because you see this both on the left and on the right. You'll see sort of apocalyptic rhetoric about this or that crisis that is besetting the American experiment. And then you'll see politicians actually appealing to Christians in America to rise to the challenge of what is often called the Bonhoeffer moment. What's interesting is someone like George W Bush used this sort of rhetoric to say, hey, we need to stand up for the rights of unborn children because abortion is analogous to the Holocaust. So, this is our Bonhoeffer moment. You'll also see that rhetoric used on the left, which is we need to find more humane ways to police immigration because this is our Bonhoeffer moment. As a historical theologian, I really think we need to put the brakes on that kind of rhetoric for a couple of reasons. There are lots of ways in which the situation is not similar really at all, and I'll name just a few. Number one, we are not emerging out of a continental cataclysm like World War One, which produced unbelievably taxing circumstances not just for Germany, but for all of Western Europe. So, we're complaining about inflation now at eight or 9%. We don't know the half of it. If you're a German living in 1919, right, you'll see these photos of people wheeling entire wheelbarrows of German marks to the market to buy one loaf of bread. Right. Money was literally not worth the paper it was printed on. We also don't have this sense of national humiliation that lots of Germans felt coming out of the First World War and the Versailles Treaty, which required Germans to sign a clause taking responsibility for the war. This was a source of tremendous shame that it's hard for us to understand. A third point, which you already mentioned, is that there is no state church here. Right. This is quite literally written into our Constitution that the church is not an organ of the state. That's not the case in Germany. Right. So, in the 1920s and thirties, German pastors and German professors of theology are having their salaries and pensions paid by the German state tax dollars. Another thing I think is really important for us to understand is that as you alluded to in the intro, America is the longest contiguous democracy in the world. It is the oldest democracy in the world. That's not to say there are not older democratic civilizations, right? Of course, there was ancient Greece. But in the modern world, coming out of the wars of religion in the 17th century, America is the longest standing democracy in the world, which means our democratic institutions are much older and I think much more durable than Germany's were. Germany had been a democracy for about 12 years. They had been an imperial monarchy before that, and most Germans wanted it that way. Right. So, when the National Socialist Party rose to power and basically undid the liberal structures of the Weimar Republic, a lot of Germans, particularly religious Germans, were happy about that change. And so, the Nazis instituted this policy, which usually gets translated with the word coordination. And what it meant was they tried to bring every organ of German public life into conformity with Nazi ideology. So, they did this with the court system. They did this with universities and higher education. And they tried it with the church with mixed results. Something like that would be much harder, much more monumental to undertake here.

Don Payne [00:10:56] Yeah.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:10:58] And so when the Nazis came and took civil liberties at an astonishing rate, it's because there were not the controls that are built into the American system. Okay. Last point. We don't have anything roughly even within the same stratosphere analogous to the Holocaust. So, we need to be very careful, I think, about comparisons to the Holocaust. And many scholars, particularly Jewish scholars, think that we should use the word Shoah instead, which means destruction, whereas Holocaust means burnt offering, which sort of suggests that it might be redemptive in some way. The Shoah was absolutely absurd in the sense that it defies all logics. We do not have something like this. We shouldn't compare anything that is happening now to the Holocaust. So those are my big sort of Prolog Armenia. With that said, I do think there are some interesting parallels that the church should pay attention to. Number one, illiberalism is on the rise not just here, but in a lot of Western places, increasing suspicion or outright rejection of the rule of law. There's dissatisfaction with ruling elite and establishment figures. There's all kinds of anxiety about emerging ethnic and religious pluralism, which is resulting in the rise of ethnocentrism and nativism. All of this you saw in Germany in the 1920s. You also saw in the 1920s in Germany, lots of social change in a short period of time. Right. So, kind of new liberties for what we would now call the LGBTQ community. That language wasn't used in the 1920s. Immigration. And so, I think lots of Germans were trying to cope with the idea that the world was changing really fast. There was a sense of anxiety in the air, like social norms are changing really rapidly. We're seeing that now. And we're also seeing conditions that are really ripe for what the historian Fritz Stern called the politics of cultural despair, where there's this feeling that our politics don't work anymore. And so, what we get is either grievance and resentment, anger. I think you typically see that more on the right. Or sort of self-righteous contempt on the left. So, it's a very tumultuous time in 1920s Germany. And there are important parallels for us there.

Don Payne [00:13:27] Yeah. Especially with that notion of vulnerability, which is one thing that intrigues me greatly. What is there about, in either case, however many dissimilarities there are in either nation, either context, what are the common vulnerabilities that we face which, you know, given the right set of precipitating conditions and factors, could then lead us into directions that at this point in time we might shudder to envision?

Ryan Tafilowski [00:13:59] Yeah, that's a really good question. The principal figure that I engaged in most of my research is a guy named Paul Althouse who taught theology, and he was a pastor at a very idyllic German university town. For him, what really scared him was when he went to the big city, and he heard other languages being spoken that were not German. He saw people who didn't look German, or he saw people who looked German but spoke another language. He's very, very concerned about this because Germany had historically been quite homogenous as a society. And so, he's very unnerved by the fact of pluralism. So, I think that's one too. I think, American Christians, quite understandably, don't quite know what to do with the fact of pluralism that is emerging really rapidly. I think that's one. Number two, these theologians also were convinced that Germany was a Christian nation. Actually, the Christian nation. In fact, Althouse has this very bizarre theological construct where he thinks that every ethnic group has a sort of intrinsic spirituality to them, and he thinks that Germans have an intrinsic spirituality that just happens to be Lutheran Protestantism, which he just happens to believe is the highest expression of human spirituality possible. So, he thinks that Germans are intrinsically Christian, almost ontologically. And so, when he sees religious pluralism on the rise, he feels like he's losing his footing. And I think American Christians can identify with this. I mean, we've all seen the data that America is secularizing at an astonishing rate. We're seeing the rise of the nones or the ex-vangelicals, right. And these are conditions that can lead to a kind of anxiety that may take us in directions we don't want to go.

Don Payne [00:16:08] So that vulnerability is often attached to various anxieties that we feel, uncertainties about what to make of what's in front of us. Uncertainties about where these things might lead left unchecked.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:16:25] Yeah. And what kind of place is this? Right? What kind of people are we?

Don Payne [00:16:31] Well, that's an identity question. Who am I? Who are we? And once you start tinkering with anybody's or any group's sense of identity, you're messing with the core. It's hard to get underneath that in terms of a core concept.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:16:50] And I think that's why reactions are so visceral. I think this is true on the right and on the left in our context, too, that these conversations touch a nerve because they raise the question of identity, as you say. Yeah.

Don Payne [00:17:04] Well, do you think there are some ways in which here in the U.S., we have already dangerously compromised ourselves, either in a broad political sense or maybe thinking about the church particularly. And if not, where, or how are we at risk?

Ryan Tafilowski [00:17:25] I am concerned. I see this as a scholar. I see it as a pastor, especially with the generations, kind of my generation and coming up behind mine. There, I think is a sense that evangelical is either a dirty word or not a very useful term, in part because I think a lot of younger folks in particular feel that evangelicals may have exchanged a theological identity like gospel people for a political identity. And so, if the question becomes, if I had become an evangelical Christian, does that mean I have to espouse X, Y, or Z political ideology? Then I think a lot of younger folks will say no thanks. So, I think there is a vulnerability there. And in the context of 1920s and thirties, Germany, this was a similar debate too. For example, Althouse, this guy I just mentioned had a long running correspondence with the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. Right. And I don't think evangelicals will find many affinities with Rudolf Bultmann. But Rudolf Bultmann, in a letter to Althouse, says the church is supposed to be a prophetic institution. It's supposed to be an institution that witnesses to the reign of God over and against any other claim to authority. And that's not to say there's no place for the political. Of course, Bultmann granted that. But he said when the church hitches its wagon too closely to one political ideology or another. The word he says, the word he used is it makes itself despicable. It makes itself pathetic because it forfeits that prophetic office that comes with guarding the apostolic deposit, which teaches that Jesus Christ is the world's true Lord. Like the Barmen Declaration says that Barth wrote in 1934, there is no other Lord except for Jesus Christ. I do think there is some danger. And I think this is true on the right or the left. I do think there is some danger of making ourselves despicable. Unless we hold this sort of prophetic integrity where the church offers critique of both right and left, any kind of political ideology. I think the way of Jesus demands that we can't align ourselves with one political platform or another. And once we stop that prophetic witness, Bultmann would say we've failed to be the church.

Don Payne [00:20:25] As I've heard it put elsewhere it almost necessitates that in faithfulness to the Gospel and to Christ as Lord, we be in, some sense, kind of politically homeless. Not that that implies that you don't align with any party, or you never take stands or never vote. That's not the point. But there is a sort of innate inherent homelessness that the gospel keeps us from giving full allegiance to the agenda of any particular ideology.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:21:04] Absolutely. I'm thinking here of someone like Helmut Thielicke, who I know you love, he was another Lutheran theologian, actually he was Althouse's doctoral student, who refused to sign the oath of allegiance to Hitler. He lost his position. He had to be sort of smuggled between different rural parishes during the war, and he emerged as one of the voices kind of reconstructing the voice of Lutheranism after the war. But he entitled his memoir Notes of a Wayfarer. And what he meant by that was to be a follower of Jesus Christ is to be on the way. Right. And evangelicals are familiar with this idea. You might think of the old gospel hymn like, I'm just passing through. This world is not my home. But that's not exactly what he meant. What he meant was that to follow the way of Jesus faithfully in a world like ours, which is broken and complex, is to find yourself in situations where you may have to take responsibility in ways that you couldn't have anticipated because you're torn between the ideological options.

Don Payne [00:22:16] Yeah, some of the options are not clean. They're not clean and monolithic.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:22:19] Yes.

Don Payne [00:22:20] And that's conflicting. A different question, Ryan. What might have been some of the early detection flags for the German church that might have kept them from going down the road they took. I'm talking about the National Church, not the Confessing Church. Might there have been early detection indicators for them that could have helped them steer a different course?

Ryan Tafilowski [00:22:50] Some people saw it, which is why the church basically fragments into three factions. You mentioned the Confessing Church. These are pastors and theologians who offered a sort of prophetic critique of national socialism. They weren't perfect, but they were quite courageous. And then you had a group on the other end of the spectrum called the Deutsche Christian, the German Christians, who absolutely threw themselves wholeheartedly into the Nazi platform. And then you had like a rough, unaffiliated, Protestant middle. And the ones who did see it coming were able to see, number one, that cruelty was part of the Nazi platform. Many scholars have pointed out that the thing that's remarkable about Hitler is that he told you exactly what he planned to do, and then people acted surprised when he did it. Althouse did, for example. He said in private, I never thought Hitler would actually do some of this stuff. Well, when a politics represents itself as manifestly cruel as part of how it does business, that's one warning sign. Another is when it tried to pass legislation very early on, 1933, right after they seized power, that excluded people of non-Aryan ancestry from civil office, including pastor positions and professor positions. Now, most German pastors by contemporary standards, would qualify as anti-Semitic. But many of them saw this doesn't seem right. Right. They read passages like Ephesians two, Galatians three, and they see. We can't allow legislation to create second class citizens inside the church. So, if I can put it this way, their instincts were right. And that's where I think the role of a good theological education comes in. It trains students to have the right theological instincts. And the best way I can put it is someone like Carl Barth saw Hitler, took one look at him, and he didn't pass the smell test. Even though he was saying all the right things, he was making lots of promises to restore the place of Christianity in German culture. He was saying things like, we're a Christian nation. But Barth knew. He could tell that Hitler didn't mean that, or not in the same way that someone like Barth might mean it. And a good theological education, if I can use an illustration, might give you the sort of intuitions you need to tell a forgery from the real thing.

Don Payne [00:25:47] Right. It's kind of that Blink principle that Malcolm Gladwell talks about in his book, where your depth of familiarity with something complex allows your instincts and your intuitions to take over even before your formal analysis can kick in and articulate what's wrong.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:26:03] Precisely right. Lots of theologians have likened learning the Christian faith to learning to speak a language. Someone like Stanley Howard Walsh talks like this or George Lynn Beck, and I don't think those models are perfect, but where they're really useful is if you're a native speaker and you hear someone else speaking your language, and even if they do it almost perfectly, there are still ticks that you can tell they are not a native speaker. And anyone who's tried to speak another language knows this. I mean, I studied for about a year of my Ph.D. in Germany, went to class in German, tried to run my errands in German, and I used to go to this bakery in the mornings and I would try to order a roll. And the German word for roll is almost impossible for an Anglophone speaker to say. It's really cruel. So, I would say it, and sometimes I would even say good morning in German, and the baker would answer in English, as if to say It's just going to be easier if we do it this way. But that's an interesting illustration that Barth especially, and then the later Bonhoeffer came to see that even when Christian words were being used, it wasn't in the mouth of a native speaker. So that's where the role of training intuition becomes really important.

Don Payne [00:27:21] Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that because that is one of the deeper values of theological education is that there is only so much that can be represented in a catalog or on a degree program worksheet and course descriptions that can tell you what you're actually learning. It's actually far deeper as those instincts are being trained, those intuitions formed because that's where a lot of the discernment that all of us are called upon to exercise takes place, is that level of the sniff test, as you put it. At least the sniff test first, then kind of the formal analytical verbal instincts kick in and give us some language for what it was that we were sensing.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:28:03] Absolutely. Yeah. And I'm thinking here too, of someone like Paul Tillich, who also lost his job during the Nazi years because he wouldn't sign an oath of allegiance to Hitler. This is how he ended up in America. And Tillich writes at one point commenting on political ethics, whenever you hear a politician say God, your first question must be which God are we talking about? And that's a question of intuition. Instinct.

Don Payne [00:28:28] Yeah. One final question, Ryan, and here I may put you on the spot even a little bit more, but thinking about early detection warning lights, are there some that, in your opinion, we ought to be paying attention to in our setting right now?

Ryan Tafilowski [00:28:42] There's a lot I could say here. I think I'll say this. With my congregation, I often call this the John 10:10 test, where Jesus says, I've come that you may have life, have it to the full, have it abundant. And what I take Jesus to mean there is that he has come to inaugurate the kingdom. Which we understand as God's people in God's place, under God's rule and reign. It's a kind of life that is made manifest and available in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And it is open by the spirit to God's people. And I think Paul, much of his ethical instruction in his letters is teaching his churches to follow the John 10:10 test. And so, this is where I think actually the fruit of the Spirit are helpful criteria for thinking about this sort of thing. Number one, are your political habits, the media you consume, the way that you engage on social media, are they creating life abundant? Or are they creating rage and grievance and resentment? Because rage and grievance and resentment are not fruits of the spirit, and neither is cruelty. And so, when I look at our landscape and I think about what it means to be faithful disciples to the way of Jesus in our political moment, I am fearful of the prevalence of rage. I'm worried about rage, which is dividing families. It's dividing church communities, I think as we saw during COVID. Does that pass the John 10:10 test? Is this life abundant? Or as Paul says in First Corinthians, when you act this way, aren't you being merely human? Doesn't God have something more than this? So that's one early warning sign. God's people are supposed to be people of confident hope and shalom. Not fearful and aggrieved and angry. So that's a big one. Another one would be, we need to be careful as disciples of Jesus that we don't look to the state to do the sorts of things that only the gospel can do. 50 years ago, 60 now, Leslie Newbiggin, who was a missionary to India, who came back to Britain and found Britain in the 1960s as a more challenging mission field than India was. And he said back then that we are about to witness the rise of the political religions. And I think we're living that in real time. When we look to political systems as justifying stories, as grammars to make sense of all of our reality, that is one sure sign that we have taken a false step. So, I would also just ask disciples to scrutinize their worldview. What are the basic categories they're using to interpret their experience? Are they political categories? Then that's probably a problem. That's a sign that we've bought into the idolatry of the political religion.

Don Payne [00:32:06] Ryan. Those are wise words. Thank you. Thanks for your insights, for your courage, for your pastoral work, and for the way you bring all of that together, for both the people in your congregation and for so many of our students here.

Ryan Tafilowski [00:32:20] Grateful to be here. Thanks.

Don Payne [00:32:21] Very grateful for that. Friends, if you want to learn more about Ryan, you can read his bio on the Denver Seminary website, you can go to the faculty page at DenverSeminary.edu. But we're really grateful for him and for the time you spend with us. We'd love to have you interact with us. You can email us at podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. And again, if you're on our website, please avail yourself of the many resources and opportunities there are. We have various webinars and in perspective panels that are trying to tackle a lot of issues that live out our mission statement, which is to prepare people to engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture. That's what we're committed to. If you or someone you know would love to think about studying with us, in the next few months and next year, we're going to have some new certificate programs available. Even if you're not interested in a full degree program, you can pick up a short certificate that will give you a good, solid, hard hit of some seminary level studies and equip you in a in a better way to do whatever it is you're

already doing. Friends, we're grateful for the time you spend with us. Hope you'll check back in with us next time for another conversation. Lord bless you. Take care.