

Engage360 Episode 115 | Finding Perspective on Evangelicalism; Dr. Constantine Campbell

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] Hi friends, welcome again to Engage360 from Denver Seminary. Thank you again for joining us for what I think is going to be a great conversation. My name is Don Payne. I'm your host. It's terrifying and at the same time beneficial to see ourselves through the eyes of others. Over the past decade, at least, American evangelical Christians have undergone perhaps more public scrutiny than ever before, in large part because of how the evangelical movement in the US has been so politicized. So now, maybe as much or more than ever, it's time for a good, hard look at ourselves through the eyes of others. And that's where the perspectives of others can help us because we don't always see what we need to see. When we look in the mirror, we tend to see what we've always seen or what we want to see. So, it's even more helpful to have those external perspectives, particularly of people who are not enemies, but friends who will tell us the truth. Our guest in this episode is Dr. Constantine Campbell, an Australian New Testament scholar who taught for some years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the Chicago area. He currently serves as professor and associate research director at Sydney College of Divinity in Sydney, Australia. Con has authored 16 books, including Paul and the Union with Christ, which was the 2014 Christianity Today Book of the Year in Biblical Studies. And so, he knows the evangelical faith intimately, and he also knows the American evangelical scene from the inside. Con, Welcome. Welcome to Engage360.

Constantine Campbell [00:01:59] Thank you, Don. It's great to be here.

Don Payne [00:02:01] We're really appreciative of you taking time in what, for you, is the morning; for us, the afternoon. But it's great to be able to speak across continents so clearly. Con has also authored very recently this year, 2023, from Zondervan, the book Jesus versus Evangelicals, which is a foreboding title, but certainly grabs attention. Either you or Zondervan knew what they were doing in titling the book. So, in this recent publication, Con offers a kind of analysis that we in the U.S. need to take very seriously if we want our commitment to Jesus Christ not to be hijacked by ideologies that reflect cultural values more than biblical commitments. Con, thanks again for joining us. And would you maybe first give us a little bit of background on why you wrote this book and maybe your overall argument in the book?

Constantine Campbell [00:03:01] Sure. Well, thanks again for your interest in the book and for taking such a humble stance toward something that might be a difficult read for some. But the book really grows out of being a biblical scholar and teaching in seminary while grappling personally and culturally with what I've observed over the years within evangelicalism, both in my own context here in Australia but also and in particular in the US context. As I mentioned in the book, many of my critiques are things that I would just casually talk about with students in class or when we're talking about, you know, okay, what does the text of the Bible say about this issue? How do we put these things together theologically? And then what do we see happening in the church and in our experiences? And so, yes, a lot of that is anecdotal, but also at a broader perception level. How are the actions of evangelicals being perceived by the wider public and how well do those two things match up? And I think it's true to say, and as the back cover claims, American evangelicalism is at a crisis point. That might seem incendiary language, but it's something that I truly believe, because in particular, the crisis has sort of come to a head through this, how I perceive, extreme use of political power in order to push forward a Christian agenda. And I think theologically, Christian-ly, biblically, there are all sorts of problems with that. But the biggest problem for the world outside is this perception that evangelicals are interested in power, are interested in getting their own way, are interested in dominating groups that disagree with them or enforcing their views on others. And this is really doing great damage to the witness of the church, to Christ, who actually taught that we are to not only love our neighbors but love our enemies and to lay ourselves down. And that the cross of Jesus, according to the Apostle Paul, is the power of God. So, the power of God operates through weakness, which overturns worldly power structures. So, I think the crisis, as I mentioned, the crisis has been brought about by this commitment to a particular way of trying to promote Christ in the world, which is through political power. And there's a big problem with that.

Don Payne [00:05:53] Yeah, you set the stage in your book by referring, as many do these days, to David Bebbington quadrilateral of factors that, in his mind, define evangelicalism, biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. And you speak to each of those in your book. But I'm curious to hear from you a little bit more about the biblicism factor, because if anything, we evangelicals certainly want to think of ourselves as drawing our beliefs and our commitments from the Bible. So, what do you think has gone wrong or gone sideways with the common evangelical notions of biblicism?

Constantine Campbell [00:06:32] It's an excellent question. And I think for myself, my evangelical heritage, the biblicism is arguably the most important part.

Don Payne [00:06:43] Because everything grows out of that, right?

Constantine Campbell [00:06:45] Exactly. All our theology, everything. At least it ought to. And this is where the critique comes in, I think, because there is a difference between what we might say is our commitment to the authority of the Bible and our actual practice. And that expresses itself in a range of ways where we may find ourselves operating or behaving in ways that are contrary to the teaching the Bible. But even more difficult to detect than that is that in actual fact, evangelicals and everyone really who reads the Bible comes to the Bible with a set of assumptions, and you might even say a hermeneutic grid, so a way of reading the text that shapes how we understand the text. And what I try to suggest in the book is that the highest authority for evangelicals is not actually the Bible, but an evangelical way of reading the Bible. And that's an important distinction.

Don Payne [00:07:44] You mean at least in a functional sense?

Constantine Campbell [00:07:47] In a functional sense, yes. So, we would certainly say, you know, the Bible is our highest authority on matters of faith and life and conduct. But in practice, in function, we come to it with a way of reading the text that often confirms what we already think about the text.

Don Payne [00:08:07] Yeah. Operationally, something quite different is going on than what we say or what we think we believe even.

Constantine Campbell [00:08:15] Yep, that's right.

Don Payne [00:08:16] I'm curious, do you think there is something inherent to evangelicalism that makes us susceptible to the phenomena you're talking about, even though right now we're talking about an American version of that. I wonder, what might evangelicals anywhere in the world need to be wary of because of what we believe and how we believe it?

Constantine Campbell [00:08:43] That's an interesting question. I don't think actually there's something inherently problematic with evangelicalism, that wherever you put it in the world, it's going to end up in a certain way. I think you can see that British evangelicalism differs from American evangelicalism, which differs from Australian evangelicalism. And they have certain things in common so that they can still share the term evangelical, but they're quite different. And their attitudes with engagement with culture, engagement with political power, and even how the Bible is handled, preaching, all these sorts of things. So, it's always going to be a mix, I think, of how people are reading the Bible and their own culture, and that's unavoidable. And in fact, in some ways it's good because the gospel needs to communicate to every culture. And so, you want you want to bring your culture in a way to the text. But also, I think we need to do that in a way that understands that you are bringing your culture to the text and that that that actually the text might challenge your culture in certain ways and certainly challenge your preconceived notions. What we tend to do, and I think all evangelicals are able to fall into this, I'm not saying all evangelicals do, but all evangelicals are able to baptize what we already think by using the Bible. That's not a uniquely evangelical thing, by the way. I think other types of Christians can do that as well. But the Bible is not there

for us to baptize what we want it to say. The Bible is actually, there for our instruction and to correct our way of thinking about God and ourselves and the world.

Don Payne [00:10:33] It's struck me for some years now that even though we as evangelicals, I'll use this word, we pride ourselves, I hope that's not inappropriate, but we pride ourselves in having a high view of scripture. And yet what you're describing in some of the ways we use the Bible functionally is actually a low view of Scripture. To make the Bible do what you want it to do is operationally a very low view of Scripture, which would be quite bracing, I think, for many evangelicals to hear.

Constantine Campbell [00:11:08] I absolutely agree. And I think many evangelicals would disagree till they were blue in the face that that's what they're doing, or at least, you know, at least would deny the charge. But in effect, like in practice operationally, as you put it, that's often what we do. And I think we need to, myself included, we need to be on guard about that and actually have a position of a posture of humility that is open to what God is saying in the Scriptures, rather than, I already know what it's saying and it's saying what I want to say.

Don Payne [00:11:41] Because clearly it says what I think it ought to say. Let's focus on maybe a couple of chapters, a couple of key chapters in your book. Chapter four is on what you call tribalism. Tell us first how you're using that term.

Constantine Campbell [00:12:00] Yeah, well, I think actually this is probably the heart of the book from my perspective. I am using tribalism in a negative sense, understanding that it doesn't always, tribes aren't, by their nature, negative, but tribalism is generally used in that sense, in a negative sense, where we are defining ourselves against each other, other tribes, and the tribal identity is being used as an expression of power. So the key leaders of the tribe are able to, whether this is intentional or not, but they're able to, I guess, encourage is a polite, gentle way of saying it, other members of the tribe to toe the line on certain issues or to follow the leader or whatever it might be because the threat of being kicked out of the tribe or being pushed to the edge of the tribe is quite threatening. People want to belong. People are often afraid of the idea of being rejected by their own tribe. And so, it is a way of like firming up the boundaries, making sure we're all singing from the same song sheet, you know, and making sure in some unfortunate circumstances, making sure that we're not overly critical of leaders when they actually ought to be critiqued because of fear of the tribe.

Don Payne [00:13:29] Okay. Now, in that chapter, you use some phrasing, I think you call it flattening the biblical text. What do you mean by that? Say more about that.

Constantine Campbell [00:13:39] Yeah. So, this is where the biblicism idea and the tribalism idea come together. I think one of Bebbington other elements in the quadrilateral is that crucicentrism, as you mentioned, and evangelicals historically have always been really focused on the cross of Jesus, his atoning death for us, and in particular a certain interpretation of that death, penal substitutionary atonement. Now, as I mentioned in the book, I think it's totally appropriate that Christ's death is regarded as central. And I believe that penal substitutionary atonement is a biblical idea.

Don Payne [00:14:14] Yeah, that's a thing.

Constantine Campbell [00:14:17] It's a thing. It's in there. I think it's fairly clear, even though some scholars deny that it exists, but I think it does exist there in the text. However, it's not the only interpretation of the cross. And what evangelicals tend to do, and I know this is partly out of my anecdotal observations, but also you can find it in a number of books, and you can find it, I think anyone who knows evangelical culture will recognize this characterization, that we tend to zero in on that interpretation of the cross. Every time we talk about the cross of Jesus, pretty much every time. And that causes us to ignore other things that the Bible also says about the death of Jesus. Now, the death of Jesus is just one example. It's a crucial one, excuse the pun, because crucicentrism is so central to evangelicals' theology and way of reading the Bible. But we do that where you sort of find in the text again what you wanted to say. It's like, oh, that sounds like

PSA. So, I'll zoom in on that and actually ignore what the text is about or other details in the text that actually in some cases might be the main point of a particular paragraph in the text. But we miss those things because we're sort of blinded by an evangelical preference if that makes sense.

Don Payne [00:15:43] Yeah, it does. How does this discussion help us clarify and refocus our attention on the gospel? Because if I'm hearing you correctly, even though we'll use, you know, a lot of the right gospel language in our conversations, if we're only seeing the gospel through one lens, one theological lens in scripture, and not all of them, then that's clearly going to end up in a sort of truncated gospel. But I want to hear your thoughts on how becoming aware of tribalism and its intersection with biblicism, how that conversation can help us clarify or focus on the gospel. What does that do to our understanding of the gospel?

Constantine Campbell [00:16:31] Yeah. Excellent question. I think a key problem with a sort of truncated gospel or a gospel that only focuses on penal substitutionary atonement is it reinforces our Western individualism that says Jesus died for me, for my sins so that I can be right with God. And that also means that sin when we think about sin, it's personal, it's individualistic. It's just about me and my failures. Now, those things are biblical ideas because it is personal, it is individualistic, but there's also a wider concept of what sin is in the Bible, including systems or worldly powers that are described as sin or sin with a capital S, which is beyond just me and my personal failures. And now, if you only see the Gospel as being about me and Jesus dying for my sin, then one of the unfortunate outworkings of that is now evangelicals can say the most important message we have for the world is Jesus died for my sins, which means you also died for your sins. And that's the thing I'm really going to focus on, that you make sure you receive Jesus as your personal Lord and savior. Now, I want to say that's a good message and people need to hear that message. But it is a limitation of the Bible's concern because the Bible also says that Jesus, in his death and resurrection, overthrew the forces of evil, disarmed the powers and authorities. Colossians 2:15. In Ephesians 2:1-3, you see this picture of people before they come to Christ under the oppression of the Spirit of the power of the evil one. And people are walking in the ways of the world under the influence of this oppressive, spiritual domain. And one of the things that the gospel does is it overthrows those powers and sets captives free from captivity to capital S sin.

Don Payne [00:18:42] So that's kind of a one-dimensional gospel?

Constantine Campbell [00:18:45] It's one dimensional. It's too focused on the individual. And I think what it means is, because in America, I'm aware that there are these debates about, you know, does the gospel or should Christians be concerned about systems, you know, that arguably oppressed people or cultural forces. And the problem with the "Me and my Sins" version of the gospel is it's like, well, that doesn't really matter. That's temporary, that's earthly. What you really need is to be saved from your sins and reconcile with God. But actually, that view ignores the very real concern that the Bible has for justice, social justice, community welfare, and releasing people from oppression. And besides the issue of not understanding that Jesus affects those issues, the whole Old Testament is concerned with it. You see a God who's concerned for the widows and the orphans, those who are marginalized, those who are oppressed. God has a heart for the weak. And one of the ways that we don't read the whole Bible is that we think that if you're concerned about social issues, you're a liberal or you're on the left and you're not really a Christian. And to my mind, that's ridiculous. I'm like, have you read the Bible?

Don Payne [00:20:13] Yeah, like the whole thing.

Constantine Campbell [00:20:15] The whole thing. Yeah.

Don Payne [00:20:16] Yeah. It seems like that would, as you indicated, cause our understanding of the Gospel to miss, to overlook much of the effect of what Christ did to deal with sin. It just only gets at a little, not should say a little, but one part of that which is, you know, my sins, as you said, you know, my failures, but not the capital S. I love the way you put that. The thing of sin. While we're talking about sin and sins, you know, everybody's favorite subject, your very next chapter five, you call it, I think acceptable sins, and I

really appreciated the way in that chapter you kind of named the pick and choose character of a lot of evangelical theology and how we, I think use the term weighting, we weigh sins differently. Why do you think any of us end up doing that, selectively weighting sins differently? And I'm going to assume that probably happens almost everywhere. But we in the U.S. certainly have, in U.S. evangelicalism, we certainly have our version of that. But why don't we end up doing that?

Constantine Campbell [00:21:43] I can't claim to have an answer to that. I think it must be a mix of both cultural priorities, but also standing against culture on certain issues. So, it's an interesting thing because I sort of say, well, we weight sexual sin as being quite heavy compared to other sins that we tend to excuse. Like pride in particular, and it's various expressions like arrogance and dominance and those sorts of things. Now, you could argue that sexual immorality and pride are both in the culture, obviously, but one we've chosen to oppose and the other we've chosen to adopt. Now, it's not that everyone would, I think, say oh, we think pride is okay. No, of course you're going to say that pride is, you know, obviously not okay. But in practice, again, the way it works out in reality is that we tend to excuse sins like pride and arrogance and bullying and greed, but sexual sins, we really have a low tolerance for. So, I can't claim to know why we balance that. But what I want to say is that the balance is wrong, and I sort of cheekily refer to pride as the most biblical sin, because if you trace through the Bible, it is a centrally important sin that affects everything else. And most importantly, your relationship with God and your relationship with other people.

Don Payne [00:23:31] I was very impressed at the considerable list of biblical examples and indictments that you put together in one place in that chapter against pride, arrogance, hubris. To see that all in one place certainly does make the case. Where do you think we go from here? With everything that you've observed about evangelicalism, particularly in the American context. Where do we go? What signals of hope are there if you see any?

Constantine Campbell [00:24:03] First of all, I mean, obviously to offer a critique of evangelicalism, it's going to be sweeping and broad and general. And I tried at many points to say this is not fair for many individuals, and there are many counterexamples here and there and so on and so forth. So, there are plenty of signs of hope when you dig in and you see, oh, no, there are Christian leaders who are faithful and humble and loving, servant hearted people. Of course, there are, alongside those who are not like that. Of course, there are many churches that are pictures of health and loving community and mission. Of course, there are plenty of examples. But as a whole, I think what I would humbly suggest is, again, a posture of humility that says maybe we are, off course a little bit or a lot. Maybe the scriptures do have something to say to us that we've been ignoring or missing. Maybe we do need to listen to people who have a different perspective on things to check our own perspective. So, I'm not sort of saying, hey, you need to give up everything you hold dear and, you know, become a Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox or an atheist or anything like that. I'm just simply saying if evangelicalism wants to refresh, and I think it is in need of refreshing, the first point is to say, instead of just like slamming the door on what I'm saying or what others like me is saying and saying, oh, you know, you're just this or that or dismiss for whatever reason. But be open. And I know it's difficult because I know if someone has a problem with me personally, you know, I want to be open to that. But also at the same time, I feel threatened by that, and I will naturally be defensive. So, it's difficult to do. I acknowledge that. But I also think it's a very Christian thing to do. The Christian gospel says that we are flawed human beings. That's a presumption of the gospel. And if we believe the gospel, then we need to be able to say, okay, I know that I'm flawed, and that may well affect the way that I'm understanding who God is or might affect the way that I'm interacting with politics or community or my neighbor. And I need to be open to correction. And through the Spirit's work in our lives, I think Jesus offers a direction for me and for my American brothers and sisters in Christ.

Don Payne [00:27:00] That's well put. You mentioned a few moments ago some of the differences between evangelicalism in different parts of the world. You named Australia and the UK. Having studied in the UK, I picked up on some of that in my time there. But what are perhaps some examples of distinctiveness of evangelicalism in other parts of the world that you think would be instructive and helpful for American evangelicals to be aware of.

Constantine Campbell [00:27:32] Well, I suppose I obviously have the most familiarity with the Australian evangelical scene, but I think by extension with the British evangelical scene, one of the ways that British evangelicalism had a deep impact on Australian evangelicalism is through what I would describe as a kind of John Stott way of teaching the Bible. Stott was an expositor, so he would work through the letter to the Ephesians chapter one and then chapter two, and then chapter three and Chapter four. And this kind of expository preaching, it does a couple of things. First, it makes it difficult to skip parts of the Bible that you don't like or that you find difficult, because if you're just working chapter by chapter, you're going to see things. Whereas if you have a diet of mostly topical preaching, where you say today, we're going to talk about money or something, you can pick and choose things from the Bible and you can, this is one of the ways that you can make it say things that on balance might misrepresent the overall teaching the Bible. But expository preaching, if you keep working through books of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, Gospels and letters, prophets and history and wisdom, you're going to come across the rich and varied teaching of the Bible. And I actually think that just a practical wisdom, if you like, of how to preach and how to read the Bible dramatically affects so much in the Australian and British evangelical scenes. The other advantage of it is that it teaches people to read the Bible, because once you do, and I experience this for myself and I've seen it countless other times, as you see a really good expositor handling the texts of the Bible, working through sentence by sentence, you know, what is the text saying or wrestling with what it's saying, it teaches the hearers how to do that themselves. And so, when you go home and you read the Bible for yourself or with your spouse or with your children or with your Bible study group, you actually have inherited these Bible reading skills because you've had the preacher handle the texts that way. And I really think that's a key difference that shapes the way those different cultures handle the Bible and therefore what they look like as Christian communities.

Don Payne [00:30:03] That's a good word. Thank you. We're going to wrap it up now, but I want to give you a chance to say a little word about some of the other things you have going on. You have a video series of some sort on Paul. Tell us a little bit about that and maybe your website where listeners can learn a little bit more about you and your work.

Constantine Campbell [00:30:23] Sure. In Pursuit of Paul is a seven-part documentary Travelog, you might like, series that's available on YouTube and traces Paul's life and ministry and also my journey with Paul, if you like. And there's a second that follows called In Pursuit of Peter, which does the same thing for the Apostle Peter. We did film one called In Pursuit of John, but that has not yet been released, so I hope that will be released in the next year or so. But all these things and my books or whatever can be found on my website, which is ConstantineCampbell.info.

Don Payne [00:31:10] Okay, very good. Well, I hope lots of listeners will get a hold of that and certainly get a hold of this latest book and dive into it and talk about it with your friends and your Bible study group or others in your church. Jesus v Evangelicals. Constantine R. Campbell, 2023 by Zondervan. Con, thanks so much for spending time with us. It's been a real treat to meet you and interact with you.

Constantine Campbell [00:31:33] Thanks, Don. Likewise. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

Don Payne [00:31:35] Yeah, Lord bless you and all that you're doing. Take care. Friends, this is engage360 from Denver Seminary. And we would love to hear from you. You can email us at podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. And as always, I want to remind you to visit our website, DenverSeminary.edu for lots of good resources and you can get full transcripts of all of our interviews on the website. If you just look up engage360 and that'll take you to our website's version or delivery modalities of the interviews and you can download transcripts from there. But wherever and however you listen to us, we would love it if you'd give us a rating or review if these interviews have been of any benefit to you, and I hope you'll tell your friends as well. So, thanks for spending some time with us. Thanks again to Dr. Con Campbell, and we will talk to you again very soon. Take care.