

Engage360 Episode 116 | The Legacy of President Carter and the Role of Faith in Public Life; Terry Mattingly

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] Welcome to Engage360 at Denver Seminary. We're glad you're with us again. My name is Don Payne, your host. And again, glad you're with us. The first part of that mission statement, engaging the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel, that presumes some understanding of the world. And one of the ways we understand or interpret our world is to look at how we understand and navigate controversies. And I'll add how our controversies shape us as a culture. One way to understand that is to understand the figures of great controversy and our history. And for this conversation, I'll suggest that one highly controversial figure in American history who provides a mirror for understanding something important about ourselves was the 39th president of the U.S., Jimmy Carter. Now, President Carter, as we record this interview, is 98 years old. He was perhaps the first president to self-identify as an evangelical Christian, at least in the ways we think about that today. And yet, as a Democrat, he left many evangelicals somewhat conflicted. His presidency only lasted one term, and it was heavily criticized, of course, whose presidency is not. Yet, he was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. So, to help us understand something of Jimmy Carter's legacy, his unique role in American political history and what it might tell us about ourselves, we're honored to welcome back to Engage360, Terry Mattingly. Terry, good to have you with us again.

Terry Mattingly [00:01:45] Glad to be here.

Don Payne [00:01:46] Terry, I'll remind you, as a journalist who has written a nationally syndicated column called On Religion for the Scripps Howard News Service since 1988, and I think you can still find that online. Terry's a former religion editor, a writer for the Rocky Mountain News here in Denver, the Charlotte News, and The Charlotte Observer. And he taught at Denver Seminary in the early 1990s. He founded the Washington Journalism Center at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. And I would recommend you to his website, which is tmatt.net, and that'll give you a robust exposure to his thinking on lots of matters, political and cultural. So, again, Terry, it's good to have you back with us. Really enjoyed the conversation we had with you; I think a couple of years ago. But I know you have a bit of a history with President Carter, so love to have you give us some background on that before we get into a little bit more analysis of his presidency and what it means to us.

Terry Mattingly [00:02:45] Yeah, you couldn't have been a Southern Baptist preacher's kid on the Baylor campus in the mid to late seventies and not have paid quite a bit of attention to Jimmy Carter. I mean, so much so that I have a nephew named after him. His first name is Carter.

Don Payne [00:03:03] No kidding.

Terry Mattingly [00:03:04] I mean, Baptists paid a lot of attention to Carter in those years. I have to admit, I was a volunteer on his campaign on the Baylor campus when he ran for president in '76. And he came up a lot, obviously, when I was doing the classroom work at Baylor on my master's degree in the Department of Church State Studies, which was an interdisciplinary degree of theology, political science, history, and law, a master's degree there at Baylor. So, we spent a lot of time talking about Jimmy Carter and his early presidency.

Don Payne [00:03:44] What was interesting, unique, or important about the way Carter's faith functioned in his role as president?

Terry Mattingly [00:03:52] Well, there's, gosh, there's a lot of things that come into that. Let me peel off a couple of layers there. First of all, you have the reality that the media had no idea what to do with this man. The fact that he was a Southern Democrat automatically, even in the seventies, put him in a strange

position in his part. And this is before, I would say, Senator Al Gore and Governor Bill Clinton, more Baptists, pulled things more to kind of a slightly left of center. Carter was genuinely conservative on some issues and genuinely liberal on others, as Southern Democrats often were. And this was before Carter changed a lot of his beliefs, I would say doctrinally, more than politically, on some moral and cultural issues. So, he was more of a provocative figure in that, I would say he was a centrist Southern Baptist in the days before the Great Southern Baptist Civil War began in 1979. I mean, just to give you an example of something that would have been provocative at the time. Many of our listeners are not going to know that throughout the seventies, the Southern Baptist Convention was pretty much officially pro-choice on abortion. Not unlimited pro-choice, but definitely not anti-abortion. And also, of course, we're dealing with it different times, before and after Roe v Wade also factored into this. And then Ronald Reagan comes in and changes the political landscape. But back to the media for just one second. The media's perception of the word born again, and Carter's articulate ability to pull, frankly, the Bible into a lot of discussions of subjects that the press just didn't know how to handle. I will always remember one night after I was watching the ABC Evening News and Howard Smith, I believe that was the name of the anchor at the time, they had this interview with Jimmy Carter where he talked about being born again. And at the end of that section, the anchor looked out into America's eyes and went, ABC News is investigating Born Again Christians and we'll have a report in a later newscast. And remember thinking to myself, does this guy have a clue that he's talking about 45% of the nation and not like aliens that just landed from some spaceship?

Don Payne [00:06:55] Evidently not.

Terry Mattingly [00:06:56] He had no idea. So, Carter is operating in a media environment that when he says something like in a Playboy interview that I admit that I have looked at women and lusted in my heart, they think he made that language up. Like some sort of vivid thing that just sprang into his overheated Baptist imagination. And your typical reporter wouldn't know that he's using perfectly ordinary scriptural references. So then when he starts talking about the Bible and immigration, the Bible and nuclear arms, the Bible and the Middle East, and a host of other things, so he gets involved in Middle East peace negotiations and you have the great ceremony on the front lawn, which prompted the Southern Baptist thinker Walker Knight, one of my journalism heroes when I was growing up, to write the famous poem Peace, Not War is Waged. And I have the whole text of that poem up on my wall here in my office in the mountains of Tennessee. So, I know I ran on there for a while. But the listeners need to understand that the nation's early images of Jimmy Carter came largely through a media that didn't know what in the world he was saying.

Don Payne [00:08:23] Is it fair to say that Jimmy Carter created an evangelical vocabulary that the broader culture is now familiar with?

Terry Mattingly [00:08:32] Well, I think evangelical culture was familiar with it, of course. I think the public got a warped lens view of evangelical culture, which, frankly, one of my colleagues at GetReligion.org, we call him the religion beat patriarch Richard Ostling, who was the lead reporter for Time magazine on religion at that time. You had a number of cover stories for time that kind of reinterpreted the evangelical world, coming from a very intelligent reporter who did know what he was talking about. With Carl Henry, one of the founders of Christianity Today and of its religion section. I don't know if Richard Ostling was there at the founding, but he arrived really quick. So, the public began, and the press began a slow learning curve on the evangelical world, which then gets blown up to a completely other level with the arrival of Ronald Reagan. The famous speech when he tells an audience of pastors, mostly Baptists in Houston, I know you can't endorse me, but I endorse you. And you have Jerry Falwell arrive. You have the birth of Moral Majority language. And then all of that is posed explicitly as a rejection of Carter. Even though behind the scenes, Jimmy Carter and Jerry Falwell Senior remained in touch through the years. And I wouldn't call them friends, but they were certainly more than on speaking terms. And we're well aware of where they disagreed with each other and where they didn't disagree with each other. Until maybe later when Jimmy Carter's positions on gay rights and to a certain degree on abortion began to change and kind of evolve with the Democratic Party.

Don Payne [00:10:38] So it sounds like within about maybe a five-year window from 75 to 80 ish, we have some pretty significant cultural awareness shifting because of some language being introduced to the broader culture, and Carter's at least involved in that, if not at the epicenter of it.

Terry Mattingly [00:11:00] Yeah. And to this day, I think I've written GetReligion.org, the website where I write multiple times a week and several other writers like Richard Ostling write as well, I think we've done maybe 20 posts at this time over the 20-year history of that blog that the headline includes the phrase define the evangelical, please. And the fact that the word evangelical was introduced to the public through media that didn't quite understand it. I mean, for example, instead of calling Jimmy Carter an evangelical, he would occasionally have people think that the noun form of that makes him an evangelist.

Don Payne [00:11:45] Yeah.

Terry Mattingly [00:11:47] So you have people using words that they don't know quite what they mean. In the mid-eighties, I did a lengthy all day interview. Ah, not all day, but you know, five or 6 hours of recorded material with Billy Graham at his home in the mountains of North Carolina. And in the midst of that, I asked him a question that I kidded the great Baptist historian Thomas Kidd, and said he needed that in his book. What is an evangelical? He said, okay, it'll make the next edition or the next book. I asked Billy Graham; how do you define the word evangelical? Now speaking definitely in the wake of the Jimmy Carter era, Graham says, I have no idea what the word evangelical means.

Don Payne [00:12:36] That is so interesting.

Terry Mattingly [00:12:38] And I looked at him and said, sir, let's get real. If you don't know what the word evangelical means, then who does? And that turned into a very interesting conversation. In which Graham worked hard to define evangelical in doctrinal terms, very aware of the fact that the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan era had begun the process of turning it into a political term. Which it absolutely is now after the Trump administration.

Don Payne [00:13:18] Well, now that's very curious because it makes me wonder whether there was something very, very significant, very poignant that happened in the transition from Carter to Reagan in the presidency. Because on one hand, you've got Carter, who is more explicitly and doctrinally evangelical. Reagan, in my understanding, was at least not explicitly evangelical in faith.

Terry Mattingly [00:13:44] No, Mainline Protestant.

Don Payne [00:13:45] Yeah. And yet, in that shift of presidency between Carter and Reagan or from Carter to Reagan, you seemed to find many evangelicals moving in a direction with Reagan on the basis of other issues rather than doctrinal issues, which they probably would have shared more with Carter. Is that fair?

Terry Mattingly [00:14:08] Well, yeah, but I would consider abortion and sexuality to be issues that are both political and doctrinal.

Don Payne [00:14:17] Okay.

Terry Mattingly [00:14:19] And never forget that Carter faced a hard attack from the late Ted Kennedy from the left, which pushed Carter into a position of having to kind of try to get back control of his own party, redefining himself more in that direction. And that leads me to an encounter I had with Carter. I spent several hours with him. This would have been in August of 1985. So, he comes to Denver, Colorado, of course, to speak to a national convention of Lutheran young people. And that's in the middle of a farm crisis which really affects Lutherans in the Midwest. Carter's a farmer. He played that up a lot. He talked a lot about farm issues. But in the midst of it, he also made headlines by urging them that if their teachings demanded, that they should not be afraid to do what Amy did, referring to his daughter, who had just been arrested a couple of days or weeks earlier at a protest against the apartheid government of South Carolina.

And I looked it up, and this was to our best we could figure it out, the first time a former president or a sitting president had ever urged American citizens to civil disobedience, active, lawbreaking, civil disobedience. It was an interesting moment. In a Q and A with the young people afterwards, Carter was asked what his greatest disappointment was as president. And I think the audience completely thought it would be the failed attempt at a rescue mission in Iran. You know, with the Iranian hostages? Yeah, in many ways it was the thing. A major factor in torpedoing.

Don Payne [00:16:12] Yeah, that was a turning point in his presidency.

Terry Mattingly [00:16:14] Yeah. That wasn't what Carter answered. Carter, from the position sitting in the front row appeared to tear up. And Carter said his greatest disappointment was realizing that he wasn't going to be able to achieve some kind of compromise on abortion that would actually kind of reign in the post-Roe culture into more of a centrist position. That would place more restraints on abortion as a procedure. And he said we know the science. We know when life begins. I mean, he made strong statements about this. Yet at the same time, he said, we don't have the political will or the ability in our nation to compromise on that subject. And realizing that, he said, was in many ways for him personally one of the most painful realities of his presidency, which I thought was an extremely interesting answer. And if you look into his later life, just a couple of years ago, Carter gave the commencement address at Liberty University, of all places with Jerry Falwell Junior, a rather radically different man, as we now know more about that, inviting Jimmy Carter to come give the commencement address a year after Donald Trump. Which led Carter to wisecrack, why look, I think my crowd is bigger than the crowd last year. Anyway, in that speech, which I wrote a column because it was able to watch the video, Carter started viewing the world and said he thought the greatest political and human rights issue in the world was the abuse of women. Young women in particular in a wide variety of cultures. And in that context, he specifically said out of control abortion in different parts of the world. And the fact that we have, you know, many situations where women are being forced into abortions by economic culture and whatever else, and he did not back off on his concerns or thinking that there had to be some way to, maybe not compromise on abortion as much as at least politically attempt to control it. Some sort of centrist position. Something like the great Atlantic Monthly cover story called A Lincoln Position on Abortion, which wrote a speech for a Democrat to be able to say abortion is legal in our culture. Now, post Roe, we would say legal in many states, but the president could then say, but I promise to do nothing that will encourage it with the action of the state or with state funding. And that, I would argue, was what Jimmy Carter was attempting to say all the way back in the mid-seventies.

Don Payne [00:19:15] I'm curious, how was that received at a place like Liberty University?

Terry Mattingly [00:19:22] It was certainly noticed. It received more attention in some of the commentary online among evangelicals than it did from the press, which I think ignored that comment altogether. I made it a major theme in my column because I understood Carter's history with that issue. But remember, Carter received a lot of white evangelical votes when he ran for president. He did not when he ran for reelection, and I think a lot of that was a growing Bible Belt conservative evangelical reaction on abortion and on other moral and cultural issues, and the fact that Carter had been pushed left by Ted Kennedy and his own party in style and content.

Don Payne [00:20:15] What do you think we have to learn from the way Carter's faith functioned in his presidency and what that now maybe tells us about the role of faith in public life?

Terry Mattingly [00:20:31] Well, I think we have to go back to that issue of what does the word evangelical mean? Carter was very much a normal moderate Southern Baptist, you know, as president. And I remember trying to explain to editors at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, you guys don't understand. You think that the Further Baptists to get out of this Bible Belt, the more liberal they become, and it's the other way around. Baptists, in a state like Colorado, were way more conservative in Georgia. In Georgia, you would have everybody from True Fundamentalists to Baptists that I would say would be Unitarians

with better preaching. And everybody in between. And someone like Carter as a moderate Baptist was very much a part of mainstream Southern Baptist life.

Don Payne [00:21:28] Okay.

Terry Mattingly [00:21:29] Well, he begins his presidency, but by the end of his presidency, with the Southern Baptist Civil War beginning to break out and people fighting over, I remember once this came out while I was at Denver Seminary, because I remember discussing it with the late great Vernon Grounds, Baptist Press put out an article that noted that there are at least six different common definitions of the term biblical inerrancy and the inerrancy of Scripture, and that the way it would be defined at a place like Dallas Seminary or even Denver Seminary or let alone Wheaton, would not be the way it would be defined in the Southern Baptist Civil War, necessarily. And the press just heard one term again, you know, with no idea of the breadth of thinking within evangelicalism, trying, always pushing evangelicalism toward being some sort of a monolith, which we all know is the last thing evangelicalism. There's a long way from Pat Robertson, who I would argue is more charismatic Pentecostal than straight evangelical to J.I. Packer. Or John Stott. Or Late and Ford or Billy Graham or let alone Ruth Bell Graham. I mean you've got so many nuances there that the press just didn't understand.

Don Payne [00:22:55] Yeah, they're lost. The nuances are lost on them.

Terry Mattingly [00:22:58] Yeah. So, one of my takeaways from the Jimmy Carter era is it begins, something that I don't know if many evangelicals to this day still realize how much they need to stress this, Billy Graham that day when I was talking to him, was trying to define evangelical in historical terms. He was openly, he didn't say it by name, but he was referring to the historian David Bebbington. And the four-part definition and Graham kept saying, it depends on how high you raise biblical authority, you know, to get the evangelical definition versus fundamentalist accurately using that term or something. And I think a lot of evangelical leaders today still, even when they're talking about someone like Jimmy Carter, if you're going to say Jimmy Carter changed, which he did, the different set of religious beliefs and theological beliefs today, I believe, than when he was president, specifically on moral and sexuality issues. I think we need to stress to the press and even to our people in pews, we're talking about doctrine. Not voting booths. And of course, there are connections. Of course, many of us are affected when we go in the voting booth by what we believe about 2000 years of Christian teachings on abortion and sexuality and all kinds of historical realities. But I think you're going to have to force that on the press. You're going to have to say over and over, I'm criticizing Jimmy Carter here because I believe he changed his doctrinal approach. And as a Baptist, frankly, he's free to do that. Right. And Baptists to this day, the Southern Baptist Convention is involved in an update of its knockdown, drag out fight over the ordination of women. In terms of, okay, what can a Baptist body, a convention force on its members? Theologically. And that gets down into the heart of what it means to be a Baptist historically. I'm not sure the press understands that either. They probably think of the ordination of women as a political issue. Because the press views everything through the lens of politics. Politics is real. Doctrine is opinion.

Don Payne [00:25:38] That's the prevailing media view?

Terry Mattingly [00:25:41] That's the lens through which the press is viewing these discussions.

Don Payne [00:25:44] Okay. So, they do not grasp the connection for evangelicals, for people of faith between doctrinal beliefs and political convictions?

Terry Mattingly [00:25:59] Yeah. So, they don't understand that Carter at some point might say this is what I believe. But I know that the most I can achieve in America's political system and in our current political reality is this other public policy. And they don't understand the tension in a man like Carter or even say, George W. Bush on this is what I believe, but I know that I can't achieve that. And maybe in a complex, pluralistic society, nobody should be able to settle that issue completely, especially under whatever the court ruling is at the time. Politics has one set of rules, doctrine has another. And Jimmy Carter talked about

his work in politics as a vocation, as a calling, and said that there are people who are called to work in the messy world of politics on its own terms. Do you think the press understood what he meant by vocation and calling? And that's what he believed biblically about certain topics may not be what he could achieve politically. Which is, to me, the tension that puts the tears in his eyes when he answers that young person's question about abortion in 1985.

Don Payne [00:27:30] What else did you take away from the time you were able to spend with him interviewing him after that public gathering?

Terry Mattingly [00:27:44] You know how it is in life when sometimes our greatest strengths turn into our weaknesses? Carter's engineering math brain as a scientifically trained man who sweats all the details and thinks he can micromanage them. That was also his greatest weakness as a politician. This was a guy who often couldn't communicate big pictures to the public using a term like we're in a state of national malaise. He didn't understand what Ronald Reagan did about symbolic gestures and actions and broader language. But when you're talking to him, that's definitely who he is. He is a detailed, argumentative, specific thinker, and I don't think he could turn that part of his brain off if his life depended on it. As an ex-president, as a former president, especially with his work with groups like Habitat for Humanity, I think he began to understand a little bit more about symbolic action and what he could or couldn't do. But I don't think he never understood. Let me give you another comparison. There's a great book about Lyndon Baines Johnson that noted that face to face, Lyndon Johnson had to be one of the most dynamic men to ever walk the halls of the U.S. Senate. I mean, there's a picture in the National Press Club of LBJ. It's like six or seven pictures shot, one after another of him face to face in somebody's space and just working them over to convince them to his point of view. But if you aimed a camera at LBJ, and in the words of the historian Gary Wills, he turned into a cold frozen fish. Carter had similar problems. Carter was not that kind of a dynamic man. He was more the opposite in terms of how he related and talked. He was a detail man, you know, and constantly wanting to pull the conversation toward intellect and argument on the fine points. That's not the America that we live in, in the age of television and certainly not of Tik Tok.

Don Payne [00:30:24] The more so sound bite-ish we become, the less tolerance there is for detail.

Terry Mattingly [00:30:30] Soundbites are not deep. You know, at least soundbites as we define them, two or three sentences, you know, I mean, we're way past that, you know, in the world of social media.

Don Payne [00:30:45] Well Terry, what do you think Carter and his legacy maybe overall or in some specific strokes, what should all of that tell American evangelical Christians about themselves? What do we have to learn about ourselves as evangelicals from the Carter legacy?

Terry Mattingly [00:31:06] May I be bold enough to say that it should have taught them that you can't just say, well, the Bible's with me. I believe what the Bible teaches. And without realizing that even in the context of Baptist life, that's going to just throw things like wide open for debate. I think evangelicals need to learn to express themselves better in terms of doctrine and where their doctrine fits into the history of the church. And what they share with others. To give you an example. I was at the Southern Baptist Convention headquarters, the Baptist Vatican in Nashville, 15, 20 years ago during the reign of Pope John Paul, the second. And he had just put out his great magnum opus Veritas Splendor, the splendor of truth that Christians must argue that there is such a thing as absolute truth and that it can be defended in public life. Walking around in the Baptist headquarters, I saw at least two or three copies of Veritas Splendor on desks with sticky notes all coming out of the edge, and the Southern Baptist who was responsible for negotiations and talks with the Vatican. And there was a guy like that already that said to the Catholic priest who I was walking around with, who was the local Catholic representative to the Baptist headquarters, they said, you know, that John Paul, the second he sure knows how to pope. And what he meant by that was he sure knows how to argue doctrine. And make his case. And the fact that Southern Baptists in that era were beginning to have to wrestle with a document like Veritas Splendor coming out of the Vatican is sort of what I'm saying. Evangelicals are going to have to learn to make their case with other Christians and even with other world religions from time to time. If they want to have success in the public

square in terms of making a case for what they believe. At the CCCU, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, when I was teaching there in Washington, we were interviewing people for a position as the chief lobbyist for the CCCU, which would be a classic example of an evangelical parachurch group or nonprofit. And everybody was talking evangelical this, evangelical that, evangelical this. And when I was interviewing the different candidates, my question was, you've been granted an interview with Barack Obama tomorrow to discuss the First Amendment rights of Christian colleges and universities. Name the Jewish, the Catholic, the Orthodox, the Muslim, and the Latter-day Saint lawyer who will walk into the room with you to make your case. And the people looked at me like they'd been struck by lightning. Like, what in the heck are you talking about? Why would evangelicals want to do that? Except some of the sharper ones, I think realize. Oh, yeah, that's what we're going to have to do.

Don Payne [00:34:35] Yeah. What carries for one has to carry for all.

Terry Mattingly [00:34:39] Yeah, and I think evangelicals need to think frankly more like Billy Graham did in answering that question. At one point, he said, if you believe the doctrines of the Nicene Creed, I believe your view of Scripture is high enough to be considered evangelical. Isn't that a savvy answer? And so, I responded. So, the pope is an evangelical. And Graham leaned back and said, well, this pope is I know, because I've discussed it with him. I went hold it. Wait a minute. I'm thinking from the viewpoint of the Wheaton Billy Graham library. You've got John Paul the second sitting in his office discussing the definition of the word evangelical with Billy Graham. And the conversation went on to a discussion of how he should give altar calls in Catholic cultures. Wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall with Billy Graham and John Paul the second discussing how to do altar calls?

Don Payne [00:35:36] Priceless.

Terry Mattingly [00:35:37] And he read him an altar call language which Graham used in Denver, a predominantly Catholic culture in many ways, and mainline Protestant culture. And he mentioned that he had worked out this wording with the help of John Stott. And the pope instantly knew who John Stott was and they went into their discussion. Okay. This is what evangelicals are going to have to learn to do. Which is take what they believe as it's expressed in historic Christianity, run that through the filter of David Bebbington and historic arguments about what it means to be an evangelical, and then makes their case. I think evangelicals are going to have to learn to talk about doctrine more with other Christians. And they'll be more effective in the public square when they learn how to do that. C.S. Lewis and other sort of evangelical more in terms of mere Christianity. They may want to learn to do their arguments in language that will work on BBC like Lewis did.

Don Payne [00:36:59] Terry. That has been fascinating. Thank you. It is always good to visit with you and hear your insights on these matters. We're the better for it.

Terry Mattingly [00:37:09] Thank you. I would also stress my column now is carried by the Universal syndicate. The Scripps Howard Syndicate went out of business about ten years ago.

Don Payne [00:37:18] Thanks for the correction.

Terry Mattingly [00:37:20] Two weeks ago marked the 34th anniversary of the creation of my column.

Don Payne [00:37:25] Well, congratulations.

Terry Mattingly [00:37:27] 34 years.

Don Payne [00:37:29] That is a long history of productivity. That is a chunk of time. Well, Terry, it's always a delight to visit with you. Thanks again. Friends, we're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us. If you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to podcasts and please send any questions or comments to us at our email address, which is podcast@denverseminary.edu. Our

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