

## Engage360 Episode 136 | Navigating the Complexities Guns and Gun Violence; Dr. Michael W. Austin

[00:00:00] **Don Payne:** Hi friends. This is Engage360 from Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, your host for this episode. And before we begin, I just wanted to let you know that some of the material in this episode may be problematic or triggering for some listeners. This podcast episode contains discussions of gun violence, and so we do advise listener discretion, especially for any individuals who might be sensitive to, or have been affected by, this kind of content. Please take good care of yourself and prioritize your own mental wellbeing while you're listening, and if you find the topic overly distressing, we encourage you to seek support or maybe even to skip this episode.

Welcome, friends, to Engage360 at Denver Seminary. We are very grateful for you spending some time with us. My name is Don Payne. I'll be your host for today. And we have a very important topic to discuss. One of the most tragic plagues in the U. S. is the rise in gun violence. As we are recording this, we are coming up on the 25th anniversary of the shootings at Columbine High School, which is only a few miles from our campus. And that type of tragedy has only increased and gets more national attention, but the gun violence that does not get attention affects even more lives. Running parallel to the wrenching effects of this trend are the polarized and the sometimes-paralyzed public reactions about what to do. So, we're really honored to have as our guest on this episode, someone who has given considerable attention and has devoted substantial research to that problem, Dr. Michael Austin, who is Foundation Professor of Philosophy at Eastern Kentucky University. Dr. Austin, welcome.

[00:02:07] **Michael Austin:** Thank you. Appreciate you having me on.

[00:02:09] **Don Payne:** We are very grateful that you could spend some time with us. He's also going to be one of our key presenters at the upcoming Gospel Initiative event, on this very topic. Dr. Austin's research has focused a lot on ethics and spiritual formation, especially issues related to character and connections between character and the common good. He has published 15 books, including *God and Guns in America*, which came out in 2020. And that will be the subject of some of our conversation today. Dr. Austin, tell us a little bit first about your background and how this came to be an area of such attention for you.

[00:02:52] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, it wasn't intentional. Sometimes I think of what I want to do next and have a plan, but I had read some stuff online and saw people defending different views about guns that were Christians, and like a lot of issues, definitely some proof texting and not some well thought out things. And it struck me wrong. So, I thought, well, I want to look into this more, do a little online writing in some venues. And then it was in conversation with Eerdmans, the publisher, and they were looking for somebody to write. Something like this ended up being sort of a, some kind of compromise position, right? So, when we normally think of gun violence in America, we think of, you know, some views like "abolish the second amendment" at one extreme and almost "everything goes" at the other. And neither of those I thought were necessarily, well, actually I wanted to see what Christian ethics would have to say about that and look at scripture with these questions in mind.

So, I ended up writing a book in 2018, 2019, came out, as you said, in 2020. So, I got it. And plus, I mentioned this at the preface or start of the book, I grew up in Kansas. And so, I grew up around guns. My dad's a hunter. I mentioned in the start of the book that I owned a rifle before I was born. My dad bought me a .22 rifle at TGNY, an old discount store.

[00:04:09] **Don Payne:** Oh, I remember that place. Yeah.

[00:04:11] **Michael Austin:** So, I mentioned that to my students today, I'm teaching a class on violence and honor seminar. And of course, none of them knew what it was, but I didn't expect they would. But anyway, so it's been a part of my family, hunting and shooting sports for a long time, but it was normal for me. And so, I was interested to look into those ethical issues from a perspective of Christian Scripture and Christian thought.

[00:04:33] **Don Payne:** That's something we may want to come back to, but I find that to be a somewhat unusual posture, because many who engage topics about guns, gun control, gun violence, will, apparently, often come at this from a rather polarized position, either utterly terrified of guns, no background with guns, no tolerance for guns, no interest in guns, or you know, full on, guns are everything. And so, it's interesting to have somebody engage this topic as a gun owner.

[00:05:10] **Michael Austin:** Yeah. But that's the thing too. I think you're right. I think a lot of the people that are maybe to my right, I guess, about guns or towards that end of the spectrum, you often get the question more, about do you own guns? Are you familiar with them? Because there's sort of a credibility issue, right? How can you make a strong claim if you don't know anything about them? And that's true. People say things about guns that just factually aren't true, and then people a little to my left are more concerned about giving too much, so to speak, to the gun culture. But yeah, I struggle in the book, like when I actually started reading Scripture about violence more generally, I found myself not there, but closer to some kind of pacifist or nonviolent situation or position than I was before, but still think that there's a ground in between for gun violence and violence in general.

[00:06:06] **Don Payne:** You know, I suppose we have two levels of this conversation. One level that many are familiar with would be the topic of gun control, and there, of course, we get into immediate legislative issues, legislative questions. But the topic of gun violence seems to be somewhat larger than the specific issue of gun control, though certainly they're related. So, when we're thinking about gun violence, that has been more the focus of your research, right? Even though it may have some implications for the question of gun control.

[00:06:38] **Michael Austin:** Yes, that's right. And usually the debate just, I mean, we know the news cycle, something happens. And as you mentioned, usually it's a mass shooting and even those are a small fraction of the deaths by gun violence each year, and then you get, "We need gun control." "We don't need it." And then we kind of move on to the next one. But gun violence is a lot broader. Not just mass shootings, but murder, defensive gun uses, suicide by gun, people that are injured, or even just psychological trauma. So, there are a lot of issues related to gun violence that really don't immediately take us to the gun control question. And there are a lot of strategies, is the way I would put it, to reduce gun violence, that don't necessitate changing the law. I mean, I think there are some good things we could do in the law, and I'm sure we'll get to that, but broadly speaking, there's a lot that we can do as a Church, as the Church of Jesus Christ, to reduce gun violence, that doesn't have anything to do with the public policy debates necessarily.

[00:07:38] **Don Payne:** Well, I'm really glad that your research and your thinking has focused in that direction, because it seems like there is, as I said in the intro, a lot of paralysis, or maybe even a sense of helplessness. If we can't legislate it, and we can't ignore it, then what in the world can we do that is of any substantial impact? But before we loop back into that, I'd be curious to know: what are some of the results of your research on gun violence?

[00:08:10] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, so like big picture, to cover the broadest ground, the view I landed on, because I had some opinions before I started this, but I thought I'm just, I don't know enough to have a firm conviction. And as I got into it, I think, for me, my big conclusion was that we really can reduce gun violence in the United States while actually still protecting the rights of responsible gun owners in ways that are, you know, true to the second amendment. And then as Christians, we have special reasons to do so, just given our views about, you know, human dignity and human beings made in God's image. And that God's, even though there is violence in Scripture, right? It seems like in general, it's something God rejects for a lot of different reasons. We're called to peace, even if in a fallen world, that's difficult. So those things came to mind. And really, I just had no idea. I'd heard numbers, but when you realize that depending on the year, roughly, give or take 60% of deaths by gun violence in the U.S. are by suicide, right? That changes the focus of the discussion in many ways or suggests a lot of things we could do that aren't related to gun control necessarily, things that we can do policy wise, but also as a Church. So, as followers of Jesus and just as human beings, that gives a special burden, I think, for us that we need to do something.

[00:09:58] **Don Payne:** How about trends? You, you kind of alluded to this, but what, what kinds of trends have you seen?

[00:10:05] **Michael Austin:** Yeah. So, if you look, the Gun Violence Archive, I like as a source of data, because, and I'll explain why in a minute, but they have strict verifiable data. So, they, if you go back to roughly 2014, there are about 32,000 deaths by gun violence in the United States. And then in 2022, somewhere around 47,000. So, in those roughly eight or nine years, went from 32,000 to 47,000, there's been a dip in 2023. But one thing that's interesting is, they no longer, for 2023, they don't have data for suicide because the data they were getting from the CDC didn't really meet their tests. So, they're trying to figure out that, but basically the upward trend is what I've seen in gun violence, and that's alarming, right? Because it's, it's not just the mass shooting. That's all these other things.

[00:11:03] **Don Payne:** And maybe, maybe we should even more carefully define the phrase gun violence, because that can connote a sort of conscious, intentional act of aggression from one person to another. But are we talking about it more broadly? Just death by gun?

[00:11:20] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, that's a good point. It is death or injury, like death by gun or injury. So that would include things like murder, homicide, but it would also include suicide, as we've talked about, but it wouldn't include defensive gun uses, right? So, someone who's using a gun and self-defense or defend their family, it would include accidental deaths and injuries by guns. And those happen. Often by children because of adults who leave guns out, or who are easily accessible by children. So yeah, gun violence is the term, but you're right. It's really broad. Basically, anytime there's a death or an injury by a gun or guns are involved, and fired, that's gun violence in the discussion.

[00:12:02] **Don Payne:** Well, I'm particularly curious about children. You mentioned that's a significant number or significant percentage of deaths by gun, from like parents who leave guns out, leave guns unattended. Do you have any isolated or disaggregated stats on how many of these are affected or involve children?

[00:12:23] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, it was hard to find. I'd have to go back and look, but what I will say is the rate of suicide, the rate of just suicides, that 10 to 24, children plus early twenties, that's the fastest growing demographic in terms of the rate of increase. I think it was 140% increase from 2022 to 2023. So as far as like hard numbers, I don't have those right now, but it's

increasing. Accidental deaths, I think, involving children over, like, around 140 I want to say, in 2022, or died due to that. So that could be. And this was one of the really difficult things when I worked on the book, is coming across actual concrete stories. Because, you know, we throw around numbers. And when you start hearing stories, you know, there was something where I live now in Kentucky of a younger-than-5-year-old who killed his 2-year-old cousin with a gun that the grandfather had left on the coffee table. Right? So just. You know, other times it's where parents think kids don't know where the guns are, but they're not secured by a safe or by some kind of locking mechanism where kids find them and either accidentally shoot themselves or another person. So, yeah, that's a difficult trend.

[00:13:58] **Don Payne:** Well that does kind of suggest, doesn't it, that in a kind of a meaning, a meaningful set of strategies has to be quite diverse because we're not talking about any, when we talk about gun violence, we're talking about a number of different things that all involve death by gun, but that would imply quite a varied approach or a set of approaches to try to meaningfully address all this, would it not?

[00:14:28] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, most certainly right. So the things that would be effective at reducing suicide by gun are not going to have much impact necessarily, or at least not in the same way as murder, domestic violence or homicide or accidents, you know, so there'll be overlap in the strategies but, and I said this more generally, as much as we want that, there's no one or two laws that are just going to solve the problem. And so, my approach, and I think others, and it's a wise approach, is it's a patchwork, not in a bad way, but there are different things we can do to reduce gun violence in a fallen world. We're not, I mean, I'd love it if there was no gun, no one died from a firearm in the United States, or in the world, that would be great. But I don't know of any magic law. But just like other laws, we can do things to reduce it and protect rights at the same time. So, but yeah, you're exactly right. There's no one-size-fits-all solution because there's no one-size-fits-all problem.

[00:15:24] **Don Payne:** Well, yeah. And what you're describing is far more of a realist position because, you know, from one end of the spectrum, and this is always heard from one end of the spectrum, the outcry is, "Well, just get rid of all the guns." If you have no guns, you have no death by guns, which, you know, mathematically, that computes. But realistically, at least in the U.S., we're not in a place where guns are just going to disappear. So, a different set of tactics, far more nuanced, far more complex, perhaps, and far more patient, would seem to be the order of the day. You do talk, and you alluded to this a moment ago, in your book, *God and Guns in America*, you suggest a Biblical, non-pacifist perspective. Say more about that. What does that mean?

[00:16:19] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, I think we tend to think of the two Biblical views within different Christian traditions is basically Just War Theory or Justified Violence Theory, right? That under certain situations, whether it's in warfare, wars of self-defense, or protecting vulnerable other nations, and then those things apply at the individual level, or so where violence is justified with a certain set of conditions. And then the other major school is pacifism of some sort, right? That we're supposed to reject all forms of violence as followers of Jesus. And look, I see like there's, you can make at least a plausible initial case for both of those from Scripture. I think that's why there's not unanimity, at least one reason, on Christian ethics on this and different traditions. Uh, so for me, I think, you know, it's something like, Bonhoeffer actually is probably something like this, where his default position, and I think this is the right one, should be pacifism or peacebuilding, let's say. Peacebuilding is what I say in the book to avoid some of the connotations. Like we should be working to foster peace. We should do all that we can to create peace, whether it's in a family or between nations or in a society that's the default position, but there just seem to be, in a fallen world, cases where maybe there's such a greater, a good require, something that's valuable requires the use of violence in a fallen world.

So that's why I think Bonhoeffer was part of the plot to assassinate Hitler as a self-described pacifist, because he realized in a fallen world, in extreme situations, there are times where violence actually does prevent great evil. And so I think what I want to push in the book, and even more since then, is that as Americans and American Christians, there are large segments of us that we go to violence too quickly or we're too quick to say it's justified, and so I want to like place the burden of proof on acting and violence rather than it being a default that is often a go to in our in our country.

[00:18:22] **Don Payne:** Okay. So, when you talk about peacebuilding, passivism, that whole discussion certainly presumes a choice between taking a consciously, intentionally violent approach or an aggressive approach to something, or not doing that. How do you figure that into this broader discussion of gun violence, where in many instances it may not be conscious acts of aggression involved. Connect those dots for us.

[00:18:59] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, that's right. So as Christians, then we're thinking about this question. I mean, in the long run, right, ultimately the swords will be beaten into plowshares, and we need to work towards that now, but that's, as we've said, or as you've mentioned, it's going to look differently. What are some, what are some things where people just react in violence spontaneously? This goes to, you know, things that are near and dear to my heart, things about character formation and spiritual formation and the presence of anger and how that leads to violence. These, you know, as many people point out, it's not just a gun problem, or someone says it's not a gun problem. It's a sin problem. I would argue it's both, but it is a sin problem, right? It's fallen human beings. And so, what can we do? I just think of the ways anger, whether it's in domestic violence situations or stalking or these different kind of things, or even abuse of children, and then with gun violence, how presence of a gun in the home can exacerbate those kinds of situations. I think it's not always conscious. Then you think, well, how can we provide, how can the Church, I think, specifically provide the kind of support for people in our community? Where those things happen less, where people, where violence, people aren't, not pushed to violence, I don't want to say it that way, but where the more apt to act in violent ways because of things internal to them and things external to them, what can we do to help people and where that's not their reaction? So that's all kind of vague, but I think, I mean, just think about the Church already does things about gun violence, couple care, engaging youth in society, providing job training, alleviating loneliness. And those are actually gun violence reduction strategies. We just don't think of them that way.

[00:20:39] **Don Payne:** Right, we may not make those links. And that's interesting that you put it that way because when we, when we isolate gun violence as a particular form of violence, we're really talking about a particular iteration or set of iterations of violence. And I'm sure you've thought about this, I'd love to hear your thoughts, maybe one of our approaches or strategies has to be addressed just the culture of violence, whether it's related to guns or not. But is it that fosters the kind of violence or inclination toward violence that seems to characterize so many people in this country anyway? I think I could safely say in many cases, Christian or non-Christian alike, there is an undercurrent or an undertow of violence that may not iterate in overt, explicit acts of aggression, but they put us ever closer to that, given the right kind of promptings.

[00:21:45] **Michael Austin:** Yeah.

[00:21:46] **Don Payne:** Does that make any sense?

[00:21:47] **Michael Austin:** Right. No, yeah, it definitely does. I mean, I've thought about this recently. It does seem like, like the space between when there's conflict or any kind of disagreement, like the gap between that initial, whether it's a verbal or whatever's going on and violence. It just seems that it, that it's gotten smaller in some ways. It makes me think of like the, I don't want to alienate your listeners from Denver. I grew up in Kansas City. So, I'm a Chiefs fan.

[00:22:22] **Don Payne:** We'll just, we'll just edit.

[00:22:24] **Michael Austin:** We'll just, yeah, you can just get that out. So, I'm not, you know, people don't shut me out after this, but the Super Bowl parade and the incident that happened there. So, there were, there were 2 people in a disagreement, 1 pulled a gun, the other pulled a gun, and then at least 12 other people pulled firearms in that vicinity. And at least six of them fired their weapon. So, it's kind of amazing that only one person was killed and 22 injured. But just the, the escalation from a disagreement to now people are pulling out weapons, you know, weapons designed or that can kill. And so, I think, I mean, I guess I'd put it this way: When I was growing up in Kansas City in the '70s and '80s and middle school and high school, a fight at school was just going to be a fight. Right. And, you know, maybe they're not in my school, so maybe a knife some places. But now, I mean, you have to think about or road rage. You have to think about presence of firearms, and it's not just the presence of firearms. It's that plus, as you mentioned, this sort of, we just seem angrier, and that's not a unique observation, but it just seems like we are as just generally in America and to see Christians kind of be influenced by the culture in that way. It's distressing. I've noticed it in myself sometimes, and think I just have to guard against because there seems like there are these pressures to anger in our culture and to sort of seeing other Christians as our enemies, rather than just fellow Americans and fellow Christians. We have disagreements, we start seeing them as enemies, and once you see somebody that way start seeing them as maybe morally or spiritually or culturally inferior to you, there's plenty of social-scientific evidence that removes some barriers to violence as empathy gets undermined as Christians. Empathy is vital because it's the heart of all these important Christian virtues, compassion, love, all those sorts of things. So, yeah.

[00:24:13] **Don Payne:** Well, you're putting your finger on all these, these under-layers to gun violence, which, and, and I wonder whether we can meaningfully even try to address gun violence without addressing those under-layers of violence. What does it mean to be a violent society? What are the contributing factors to that? What are some of the shifts over time in particular cultures toward more violent? Predispositions people have. And of course this has been analyzed from a number of different angles, not least media, you know, violence in film violence, uh, portrayed in entertainment venues, that glorifies, that desensitizes us to violence of various forms. Of course, that pushes the discussion into a lot of different places, but I wonder, you know, if we can even have a meaningful discussion about gun violence without addressing those things that might even be closer to home for people who don't own guns.

[00:25:17] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, I mean, I think we have to, as you mentioned, if you think of gun violence is just one subcategory or subset, so to speak of violence in general in the United States that includes, you know, different weapons, physical, verbal aggression and see, yeah, it's hard. It's hard. It'd be like trying to cure disease without looking at a bunch of them, you know, maybe looking at 1 cause, but not a bunch of other 7 or 8 causes, right? And in terms of physical health, we just can't do it.

[00:25:44] **Don Payne:** Yeah.

[00:25:45] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, which in some ways makes the problem more daunting because it's, you know, it's part of this larger issue, but I think when we think of it more broadly, as I've already mentioned, than just public policy stuff, we include that, but go beyond that, then we start seeing things the Church can do where we don't have to depend on the government or on law enforcement. You know, there are things we can actually do just to address the problem and try to bring the Kingdom of God to bear on this part of society.

[00:26:17] **Don Payne:** Yeah. Well in service to that, why do you think this conversation gets so polarized and so stuck?

[00:26:25] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, I think a big part of it is, both for Christians and non-Christians, guns play a unique role in some ways in American history. Right? I mean, it's part of, like, our nation was founded after an armed revolution. Um, second amendment is fairly unique to our founding documents, right? And there aren't other nations that haven't something like that. Even if they allow, you know, for presence of firearms and those kinds of things, that's not this core belief from the beginning for most other nations. And I think when you go beyond just our history, it becomes a part of people's identity, like in my own childhood, like what, you know, I just grew up, there was a gun cabinet in, on our, in our family room, in the same room where we watch television and it wasn't, my dad got a safe in later years, but at the time it was one of those little, just wood with a glass front, little chintzy lock that, you know, like you see in the store slide over. We just, that was just normal. But I think it's a part of people's identity in certain ways that like we think of ourselves. So, Christians think of ourselves as Christians first and foremost, obviously, or at least we should. But, you know, whether it's Christians or others in America, we think of ourselves as Americans. That connotes the history of guns in America, the Revolution, the Wild West, you know, I still love Westerns, right? But I think there's a family thing here too, like a family tradition of passing guns down or that this is part of our family, right? That guns are part of what we do. A year or two ago I was at the barber here in Kentucky, and one of the ones I went to, the guy had in his pocket, just a small firearm. And it's something that his grandfather passed down to his dad and passed down to him. Right? And so, it's not just an idea, but it's when someone says, "Guns are evil," Some people hear that is your evil and you need to get rid of your guns. Right? And so, it's hard to have a non-polarized discussion when you feel personally attacked in that way.

[00:28:29] **Don Payne:** That's very interesting. That had never occurred to me, that the sense of identity that many people have with guns is sort of rooted in their families, because of artifacts that are passed down. And like you, I have that same thing. I have guns that have been passed down to me from uncles, my father, you know, and those have all kinds of significance, all kinds of relational significance.

[00:28:59] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, that's right. I just have a couple now. One's a shotgun, sporting clays you can use for hunting, like waterfowl hunting my dad gave me, and a deer rifle. And I haven't used either of them in years because I was coaching soccer for a while, doing other things. And it's not, I don't enjoy it as much as my dad does, so it's not something I would just, you know, choose to do right away. But if I never use them again, which I probably will at some point, it's that same kind of like, it just reminded me of my childhood of going hunting or going to the gun club and shooting skeet or trap. Good memories. I mean, some of them not so good. I remember hunting for pheasant on the plains of Kansas and having to chip ice off my gun in an ice storm. I mean, just the misery of hunting in the winter. We're a cold goose blind, but still good memories, right? They stick out. Yeah.

[00:29:49] **Don Payne:** Yeah, they're meaningful and they become part of our own sense of who we are in ways that non-gun-owners might have difficulty appreciating, but everybody has some

parallel to that in their upbringing, I would imagine, or in their family history. So, guns are complex. Gun ownership is a complex thing, and that's probably what complicates the conversation, is that guns don't have the same meaning to everybody. Yeah. And the violence that ensues if a person has never been either a perpetrator or a direct victim or even really close to an act of gun violence. It may be a little bit of a statistical abstraction to them. I don't know, it may not have the same kind of existential impact. But particularly when we're inundated with so many statistics about so many things that are of egregious nature in our world, it's really easy to get desensitized about that.

[00:30:56] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, I don't think I mean just whether it's gun violence or just broadly the violence and suffering in the world, I just don't think God designed us to bear the weight of the world's suffering in that sense, right? That's why we're part of a Body of Christ and so that the Church can do it. I did some reading with the research, just terrible stories of gun violence. There's also beautiful stories of where gun violence was averted. But I mean, if we spend our days thinking about, we need to act against human suffering, of course, but I think that if we spent too much of our focus is on it, yeah, I think we, there's like a defense mechanism. We just have to shut down. Uh, and

[00:31:37] **Don Payne:** Survive psychologically.

[00:31:38] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, that's right. And so, we want to fight suffering without letting it without real up, without making that the whole story. Cause there's so much good as well on the planet.

[00:31:46] **Don Payne:** Hmm. Well, give us a little advice, a little counsel on some meaningful steps forward. What have you found that can be, if not prevented, you know, eliminating the entire problem, which none of us are going to do in our lifetimes. Probably. What are some meaningful steps forward? Where do you begin to find hope?

[00:32:07] **Michael Austin:** Yeah. So, I'll just mention a couple of things having to do with legal things like policy things, but then spend more time on other. So, my own view, I do think that extreme risk protection orders are what people call "red flag laws." I think that there are versions of those that could be effective to protect gun rights, but also can reduce violence. And so basically, the idea is, let's say, medical professional, or even I have a family member, and I think that they're in danger of harming themselves or others you can sit. I can't remember the legal term. I don't know about you, I mean, I'm worried at 54 the things I can't remember off the top of my head. But I'm just going to let it go for now. But basically, you can submit a request to have the guns confiscated in a hearing. And so, the judge would determine in this hearing whether or not, you know, there's reason to confiscate the guns temporarily. If not, then person doesn't lose, you know, like my neighbor doesn't lose custody, so to speak, of his guns, if so, that depending on that could be for months or a year, and they can reapply and get them back. Now, the trick there is you want to make sure there's due process and not frivolous when have safeguards. So that's not done frivolously, right? Just like any law could be abused. But it looks like there's some of the states that have these. I mentioned in the book, Maryland, like, they were documented about 300 shootings, including 7 or 8 school shootings that were arguably averted due to this and so there's been some success, and there are definitely people in the NRA even that, sort of far to the more conservative view, that see that this could have a potential benefit and would reduce gun violence. So, it's something that's got a limited track record of success. And then I'm really becoming interested more recently because this deals with the suicide thing, too as, as that would, but just safe storage, right? I think that's what's difficult for me because the, and probably you and many people part of a gun ownership, the ethic I was taught as a kid was safe. Storage was vital. We didn't just my guns. My dad's guns weren't just



laying around the house and, and, you know, it was the sort of, you don't pick up a gun unless you know what you're doing, unless you're going to be safe, conscientious, all those things. And so, I think safe storage technology and laws even mandating it could be. Okay. Could be useful. You could do that in fairly inexpensive ways. Those two things together could make a big difference along the, I guess what I would say, moral or spiritual or just non-legal solutions. You know, some of the things we've talked about already, just the Church doing what it does, providing care. I mean, there's an epidemic, as we know, of loneliness right now coming out of the, even before, but especially coming out of the pandemic. And so many people if we could start alleviating that by inviting. People are reaching out to people who are lonely, whether it's the 16-year-old or the 46-year-old white male. I mean, the majority of most often people that died suicide are older white men.

[00:35:04] **Don Payne:** Well, I think it's, yeah, I think it's middle and upper middle aged white men.

[00:35:08] **Michael Austin:** That's right. And so, let's and, you know, we tend to be, especially that age, I'm Generation X. We're used to kind of going on our own, you know, and the church is like, that's one thing I've loved the past 15 or 20 years of, like, developing much deeper friendships, but we can do that. We can. We can reach out to those people intentionally, provide places for youth to be loved, provide places where, facilitate people who maybe are struggling with unemployment or poverty, provide care for them, and even job training or jobs. So, all those sorts of things. You start thinking about the causes of crime, the causes of gun violence, it's multifaceted. So, let's do those things. And then there are even specific things I would say, what a church could say, we're doing these things, what's maybe one other thing we could do and within our capacity and our context, you know? So, it's going to look different in a church where I'm in Richmond, Kentucky, compared to Louisville, Kentucky, or Denver, Colorado, you know, versus Los Angeles, all these different things. So, I think just being creative and really being willing to talk about this issue. I think in some churches it can be taboo because of the polarization. So even just discussing it. A friend of mine or an acquaintance of mine who's a pastor for Southern Baptist Church in West Virginia, he's an NRA member and also does some stuff to try both legally and spiritually reduce gun violence. He mentioned the older guys in his church, he brought it up and they just said, look, we don't talk about that. Just sort of a sacred cow. One thing, as a Christian, we should be able to talk about anything, otherwise it's a warning about idolatry. Second is, yeah, it's polarizing, but if the Church, if we've got to start setting an example here and in all these controversial issues of, we can talk to one another in ways that, even if we have different views, we're standing shoulder to shoulder in love, trying to figure out what's true, not face to face. I want to win the argument. And if we can do that here in another places, man, we could, we could, yeah, we could see a lot of good things happen.

[00:37:08] **Don Payne:** Well, I really appreciate that, and particularly your emphasis on a, I think you called it a patchwork approach, which is far more realistic, and, you know, if we can make our peace with small gains and realize that small gains add up to significant gains, we can probably get somewhere. Um, so, so much of what you've said just strikes a, a note of, of, of realistic hope, uh, for us. And, and I appreciate that. Thanks for all the work that you've done to, to bring the conversation to this point and to share some time with us. We look forward to more of that, uh, with you here in a few weeks, at least from the time we're recording this.

[00:37:49] **Michael Austin:** Yeah. I'm looking forward to the, I mean, that's one of the things I appreciate about what the Gospel Initiative is doing. It's taking some of these difficult issues that some seminaries and churches just wouldn't touch because they're difficult, but providing a forum where people can do it in a way that, that is, yeah, Christlike, I think. And, you know,

figuring out what can we do and getting different views and trying to do the hard work of working through it. So, I appreciate that too.

[00:38:14] **Don Payne:** Yeah. That certainly is a desire of ours, to provide a different way of having these conversations so that they're not just recycling the same old polarizations.

[00:38:22] **Michael Austin:** Yeah.

[00:38:23] **Don Payne:** Um, and, and hopefully we can get somewhere, and the Lord is honored and, and the Lord's purposes are fulfilled.

[00:38:29] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, let me add that the reason I have hope is that, and with all these things, is it is not just up to us, right? We can, it's our efforts, but it's in partnership with God and the Holy Spirit. And, yeah, I mean, amazing things have happened in history when Christians band together and, and work with God to try to make the world, make the world better, spread the Gospel.

[00:38:48] **Don Payne:** Absolutely. And the Lord is with us in those endeavors, however flawed our efforts may be.

[00:38:54] **Michael Austin:** Yeah, that's right.

[00:38:55] **Don Payne:** Yeah. Well, we've been talking to Dr. Michael Austin. I'm very grateful for your time with us. Again, the book that he has written, published in 2020 by Eerdmans, is *God and Guns in America*. I encourage you to get a copy of that and engage in this conversation too. Again, friends, we're really grateful for the time that you've chosen to spend with us. And if you get a chance, please leave us a rating or a review, wherever it is that you happen to listen to podcasts. And if you'd like to send us any comments or questions, you can do that at the following email address, which is [podcast@denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@denverseminary.edu). Additionally, if you visit our website, [denverseminary.edu](http://denverseminary.edu), you'll find a lot more information and resources about us here at Denver Seminary, advanced degree programs, other episodes of Engage360, and you can always get full transcripts of each of our podcast episodes. So, until next time, friends, may the Lord bless you. We look forward to interacting with you again very, very soon. Take care.