

Engage360 Episode 144 | The Gospel Initiative and Engaging in Conversations on Complex Topics;
Drs. Mark Young and Patty Pell

[00:00:16] **Don Payne:** Hi friends, welcome to engage 360. This is Denver seminaries podcast. And my name is Don Payne. I'm one of your hosts. We're really grateful that you would join us for today's conversation. Today we have kind of a difficult conversation because we're going to talk about why it is difficult to have difficult conversations. We're joined by two guests, Dr. Mark Young, our president, Mark, welcome,

[00:00:44] **Mark Young:** Thanks, Don.

[00:00:45] **Don Payne:** and Dr. Patti Pell. Patti is the executive director of the Gospel Initiative and also directs our Theology, Justice, and Social Advocacy program. Patti, welcome back.

[00:00:56] **Patty Pell:** Thank you. Good to be here.

[00:00:57] **Don Payne:** well again, let's, let's have a conversation about conversations. Okay., as a nation, the U. S. right now may be as polarized or more polarized than ever before on more issues than ever before, and we can observe a couple of different reactions to that polarization. One response is to just intensify arguments and widen the divide. The other response is to invite conversation, which often feels more rational and calming, but it often appears to take place without the resources to have difficult conversations. , now some would argue, I think that the church does not need to be part of conflicted cultural conversations, but simply needs to be a prophetic voice, , that, you know, there's really not a conversation to be had, but there's simply a stance to be adopted. , and, and others may argue that participating in these in difficult cultural conversations merely hijacks the church or distracts and dilutes the church from its primary mission. So what the two of you to help us get into this, why is it difficult to have difficult conversations about difficult issues?

, why is it important that the church be part of these difficult cultural conversations?

[00:02:18] **Mark Young:** Yeah. Let me begin. If I, if I may, we're in the conversation, whether we are having actual conversations. What I mean by that is because of our identities. And in this case, particularly, we would say our identity is evangelicals. We are by extension, attached to viewpoints that are made or actions that are taken by others who have that same identity. So, in these controversial and divisive issues, when you have one group of the movement saying something extreme or something particularly inflammatory, whether we want to, even though we haven't said that we have to admit that we're identified. So, let's give it, let's just use a concrete example. When you look at the storming of the Capitol a couple of years ago and you see flags related to the former president and Jesus and crosses and the rhetoric around our nation and God and taking over from, you know, making us a godly nation again. None of us were in the Capitol physically. But in the minds of those who see those images and know that we are identified with the movement that was a part of that, some, some of whom were a part of our movement, we're in that conversation,

[00:03:44] **Don Payne:** Whether we like it or not.

[00:03:45] **Mark Young:** whether we like it or not. So that's why we thought it was a good idea to say, well, let's step back from the ways that we are perceived., by our identity and show a different

identity, a different posture, related to these difficult conversations. And that's why we started the Gospel Initiative here at Denver Seminary.

[00:04:08] **Patty Pell:** Yeah, I'll follow it up to Don. I think that it's important to be in the conversation because these conversations are about our common life together. And even though we are people of faith and, that doesn't mean that we don't participate in the common life. And so engaging conversations about social issues, how, how do we treat one another.

How do we use our resources best, you know, are all conversations about the flourishing of others. And we're a part of that. And so, I think having difficult conversations about the issues around us are a part of the bigger conversation of the mission of the church connected to the mission of God.

And if, if we're a part of that, and a part of the mission of God. And the flourishing of others, then we have to be involved in the conversations about how do we make that possible for more people?

[00:05:09] **Don Payne:** Well, I love the way you both have framed that so far. And, and I particularly appreciate the admission, the, the acknowledgement that we're in it like it or not. The only real question is perhaps how we engage. In it, what we, what we hope from it and, and, and what it even means to, what a conversation is.

But we'll come back to some of that. Talk to us a little bit about what, what kind of outcomes do you think are possible from having these difficult cultural conversations about difficult issues? What do we hope to emerge from, from this?

[00:05:47] **Mark Young:** Yeah. Well, Patty is the executive director of the Gospel Initiative, uses and we helped frame early on this language of credible, compelling, and compassionate presence of the gospel. So, what I think we want to do is first understand what different points of view in these divisive issues, actually mean and how they are being framed. But the end of it all is that we as a community of Jesus testifiers, create the opportunity that what we have to say or create the perception that what we have to say about Jesus is credible. Because we have credibility in these difficult conversations, right? And that as we engage them in ways that are, honoring to others, that listen, then our gospel becomes more attractive, more, I'm, I'm not, I don't just see it as credible, but I want to hear it. And then by being able to engage in ways that show that we honor other people, that we respect them, no matter what their views are, that's a way for us to show compassion. So credible, compelling, and compassionate would be three attributes that we want the church to help develop in the midst of divisive, explosive, and angry, and other, bad adjective types of conversations.

[00:07:18] **Patty Pell:** Yeah, I would land on those three words as well. So, Mark did a great job of explaining them. I think those three words give us a posture, the way in which we want to approach complex, controversial issues. , the, the credibility, that outcome is that I, I think we learn, we understand, we seek to understand, and, , part of what we do at the Gospel Initiative, and I think part of our call as Christians is to do the hard work of understanding.

What is going on around us? Why is it going on? And then what should be going on? So that all falls within that credibility piece for me. And then the compassionate and compelling, I think we are compelling in the world, if we are, if we have a posture that is compassionate and that, and that is credible.

The desire is to be compelling, not just in seeing people come to faith, but compelling in our relational connectedness to the rest of the community. But we also want to be compelling in terms attractive and that people would see the way in which we engage controversial issues and complexity around us, and we do that in a way that is attractive, meaningful.

, draws people to, to faith and to a different place within the conversation.

[00:08:46] **Don Payne:** Yeah. I, I want to, I want to name something that I think is in the minds of many believers, and it goes something like this, the, the tendency to use the word conversation or the invitation to a conversation is used in a lot of settings. In, in the broader culture, we see it used in various media outlets.

Let's have a conversation. Let's have a conversation. Now, what seems often to be meant by that is, or I should say, what seems often to be implied by that is that there is really no overarching transcendent truth. We just want to learn from each other's truths. Let's have a conversation. So, when, when we use that same phrasing, let's, let's have a conversation, how, how are we differentiating that from a more pluralistic approach that says, we, we just all want to learn from each other without being dogmatic about anything. And in other words, let me say it maybe a little differently. What does it mean to have meaningful, compelling gospel driven conversations while still taking a stance?

[00:10:03] **Mark Young:** It's interesting, Don, because we often hear distinctions made between stance and posture. And so the idea is if you take a stance, you have a position, you have a truth that you're going to, you're going to, , voice and in some, and sometimes you're going to voice it, you're going to state it, you're going to hang onto it regardless of how it's being heard. Or regardless of its impact on the minds and hearts of the listeners. Posture then is a little different idea. When you, when you take a posture of wanting to understand, doesn't mean you don't have a stance. When you take the posture of wanting to understand what the other person is saying, you're actually entering into a, the full scope of communication, which isn't just stating your opinion, but understanding how.

Or at least inferring or intuiting how your positions are being heard and the effect that they're having in the lives of others, right? So have very clear understandings of human sexuality, very clear understandings of justice, very clear understandings of lots of different controversial issues. It's not that we don't believe and don't take moral positions. But we want our posture to be one that says I want to hear your point of view while I continue to explain my point of view so that we can understand each other. One of the challenges is that we tend to dehumanize issues. Right, so we want to talk about issues and somehow avoid recognizing that we're interacting with human beings. And when we personalize, or when we say, I want to talk to this person, rather than talk about an issue, we're essentially saying, you matter. You are an honored person in this, in this whole conversation. And to be perfectly frank, I think far too many times, we have taken positions not really wanting to understand, not really diving into the impact of those positions in the lives of other people, as if those people don't even exist. We're just saying something. So, we want to personalize the issues and say, we're talking about real human beings here, and we're talking to real human beings in the, in the course of the conversations.

[00:12:41] **Don Payne:** Yeah. I really appreciate that. And I think maybe the, the better word would be a commitment., a stance to, to talk about having a stance does have a sort of impersonal abstract feel to it. It can, it maybe sets us up to depersonalize, others, but to, to work from a posture of

having commitments, can still be done while in a deeply personal humanizing way. Yeah. I appreciate that distinction.

[00:13:12] **Mark Young:** I think one of the big challenges, I'm sorry, I'm rattling on and on here. So, one of the big challenges is that the national conversation or even the broader public conversation is really driven by politics, right? So, and the way I see it is that once an issue is politicized, it's trivialized, tribalized, and weaponized. And so, we take positions that dehumanize those really that we're stating our positions to. And you can't have a conversation in that perspective. You're not honoring that other person. You're not entering into their humanity and recognizing that the ideas that are a part of the conversation have real life impact.

[00:14:01] **Don Payne:** I want to have both of you reflect on the, the type of, , changes perhaps or growth that you have seen as you have led people in difficult conversations, or as you've watched people have these difficult conversations, what, kind of, , what kind of difference have you seen? Hopefully, seeing that make,

[00:14:28] **Patty Pell:** Well, I want to go back to what you were just talking about, Mark, because I think that humanizing of, of something, it, causes us to grow, moves us along the spectrum of compassion. And I constantly struggle to come to come up with a different word than issues for that very reason. I'm constantly looking for a better vocabulary word because issues makes it abstract.

, it pulls it out of the realm of human relationship. But when you're in conversation with people, around the complexity of life., and the things around us and they're able to understand from a different perspective. There are those aha moments which deepen a person's compassionate response. It's that proximity.

When we are far from a particular situation, when we're not affected by it necessarily, it's really hard for us to respond in a compassionate posture. But when we do have proximity, when we engage in relationships or hear from those who are most affected or who have been through experiences related to whatever the, you know, topic or issue is.

It suddenly takes on, flesh. It takes on that, Real life experience that I think moves us along the spectrum of compassion. So, in the conversations that I have, students are with the gospel initiative. It's those aha moments of suddenly seeing life from a different perspective when maybe you're like, oh, that hasn't been my experience.

I would never have thought that because that's not the way I go through life or that's not What I've experienced and suddenly you see it, from a different perspective. And then I don't think you can go back to the place you were before because it's now kind of blown wide open. So that's, that's part of the journey that I think is important and where I see people, the journey I see people take.

[00:16:35] **Don Payne:** Okay, so there's a broadening mm hmm. of perspective, broadening of outlook. Yeah. Even if, not adopting where another person is coming from, there's a, they could broaden the capacity to respect, and, and recognize, why a person might feel the way they feel or think the way they think.

[00:16:59] **Patty Pell:** That's right.

[00:17:00] **Mark Young:** There's a history. There's a personal history. There's a set of experiences around whatever it is we're talking about. Either directly or indirectly, right? So., I think the reality is we think we want to think of ideas as disembodied, right? We think of truth as disembodied. But everything we think is a part of and shaped by and touched by our own personal experiences. Where we are, where we've been, where we think we're going. And, yes, obviously we talk about truths that are universal. The triune God is universal, eternal truth, right, so, but I have experienced the language around that idea.

I've experienced the persons of the Trinity in ways that may be different, certainly different than someone who's grown up in another part of the world or someone whose language even has different nuancing than ours does in relationship to these universal truths. So again, Patty's right on target. Like when you're talking to a person, you're talking to them in their history, in their context, in the midst of what they're experiencing currently, and all of that affects the way they hear what you say, the way they receive it, the way they understand it.

[00:18:23] **Don Payne:** one, one distinction that I have pressed in with many of my students over the years is the distinction between ontology and epistemology. That is the nature, the nature of what simply is, , in contrast or in comparison to how we understand what is, , our, our knowing is never, , Exactly the same thing as what we know, the thing, the thing we seek to know, you know, God, we got God simply is right.

God is God is who God is. And yet our knowledge of God, our understanding of God is very approximate, very partial where that's why we're always learning more and more about who God is and what God's ways are.

[00:19:13] **Patty Pell:** That knowledge isn't just cognitive, right. Or intellectual. It's

experiential as well. as well. Yeah.

[00:19:21] **Don Payne:** is. It is. It

[00:19:22] **Mark Young:** I think part of the challenge for us in our movement where we have, we have convictions, we believe things with deep, deep passion. Yeah. I think one, one of the maybe conversations that we need to have internally is, do we worship certainty? Did the certainty become our God?

Hmm.

So, when we, when we want certainty, then we're not that interested in understanding how others are questioning the ideas that we hold to be true.

[00:19:55] **Don Payne:** And can even be very threatened by it.

[00:19:57] **Mark Young:** We are threatened by it. Exactly. So, what do you do when you're threatened? You yell. Right? You step back and you just say it louder. It's like those of us who've gone through the torture of learning second languages. You know, when you're trying to say something in a second language and you're butchering it, and the person says back to you the very same thing, only louder and slower. Right? As if that's going to help. I Well, we do that as well when

we're all speaking the same language, but we have different understandings, and we, we, we, when we're threatened, we just dig in and say it louder and harsher. And, and then it gets even worse when you begin to assign motives for those who have a different point of view, thinking you understand what's bringing them to the positions that you don't, you've never asked them. And so. When you, when we dig in our heels and when we speak louder and repeat the same things over and over again, believing that somebody's ultimately going to see the sense in it, we're not connecting. We are not, in any way, helping a person move toward understanding, that could actually bring about some common belief, in the conversation.

[00:21:15] **Don Payne:** Yeah, it's, it's very ironic, is it not, that the more intense the, the yelling or the, the positioning gets, the more deeply entrenched everybody gets in their own opinion.

[00:21:28] **Mark Young:** Correct.

[00:21:29] **Don Payne:** It, it does, there is very little, if any, persuasion. that actually takes place.

[00:21:35] **Mark Young:** 100%. that's the, that's the talk radio world. That's the news world, the celebrity news world, where all you're doing is stating the same positions to the people who already believe them in ways that are louder and in ways that are more exclusionary and provocative.,

[00:21:56] **Don Payne:** And that leads, that just leads to more self-aggrandizement, more self-satisfaction withholding to the position one holds. Patty used a word a moment ago, compassion. And that caught my attention because the, the force, the power of compassion is quite intriguing. I heard a, a speaker some decades ago give, give her own. , story of coming to faith in Christ as one who had been extremely antagonistic to Christian faith, but a very simple act of love from a Christian coworker broke her defenses and she captured that by saying, there is no defense against love. There is simply no defense against love., tell us a little bit about, the role of TGI, the gospel initiative and why, why, and how that is so valuable in these conversations that we've been talking about.

[00:22:54] **Patty Pell:** Yeah., the gospel initiative, really is an initiative of the seminary that seeks to come alongside the church. Big church, individuals., congregations and help equip them to engage the public square to engage the complexity of life and the controversial issues with those three things that we've been talking about with credibility, compassion and, in a compelling manner.

And so, we, we do that in a variety of ways., we, we have public engagement events where we're trying to pay attention to what's going on around us and then talk about those topics. But to approach whatever the topic is by bringing in experts in the field who can help us be more credible.

So, help us understand what the issue is, come at it from different perspectives and angles so we can grow in our understanding and learning., the public engagement events. I also think about modeling.

So, one of the goals of those events isn't just to learn content about whatever the topic is, but it's to model.

How do we learn and hear from one another and engage one another? Well, compassionately, respectfully, respectfully. in honoring ways., and then, and then there are other kind of aspects of the gospel initiative., you know, workshops, we're starting cohorts, but with the same mission in

mind of helping, helping believers and local congregations to be positive participants in the public square.

[00:24:38] **Don Payne:** especially for those who may not have a lot of familiarity with the gospel initiative or may not have been a part of any of the events so far. Give us some illustrations. What are some of the issues that have been tackled so far through TGI?

[00:24:52] **Mark Young:** The very first year we, we spent the whole year talking about racism that was in the aftermath of the George Floyd murders. We talked about racism as it's found and expressed in healthcare systems, in, in, economics. Education., and then from there we thought we'd do something a little easier, so we talked about sexuality and gender and did three, had three events around what is the Christian view of sexuality, how is it different from the world's view, sexual identity, and then gender identity. And then from there, I think abortion, right, was that the next one?

[00:25:29] **Patty Pell:** And then a couple of events on environmental justice, climate change, , we've looked at, , human origins this past year, as well as Christian nationalism, and then youth mental health, , which isn't necessarily controversial in the sense that some are for and some are against, but the, the conversation around what's going on in terms of the crisis of mental health and how do we address it? And then gun violence as well. Yeah.

[00:25:58] **Don Payne:** What have been some of the encouraging learnings or, fruits of the conversations we've had so far? What's encouraged you?

[00:26:08] **Mark Young:** Oh, gosh, you know, it's so nice to hear educated people talk about something and that they're fully engaged with and not just get sound bites and clips., let me tell a brief story. The event we did on human origins really made me uncomfortable because I don't know a lot about that arena. And there's one speaker in particular who takes a view of the authority of scripture. That's a little different than mine. And still believes in the full authority of scripture and the truth of the gospel and all that. But at that event was a former neighbor of ours, two former neighbors of ours, both of whom were scientists. And they, they, when we knew them, they hadn't yet made a public confession of faith, but they had come to faith since they left our neighborhood. And they had a very hard time as scientists Understanding and interacting with what they were hearing from the pulpit related to creation and human origins. And so, they came to that event. We invited them. They came to that event and, it, one of the persons, one of the couples said, I feel like I can be myself and follow Jesus now.

[00:27:22] **Don Payne:** Wow,

[00:27:24] **Mark Young:** I can be a scientist and follow Jesus.

[00:27:26] **Don Payne:** that's kind of what it's all about.

[00:27:27] **Mark Young:** That was very satisfying to hear.

[00:27:33] **Patty Pell:** Yeah, I think I'll share a story as well. At our event on exploring and trying to understand Christian nationalism, there are a group of pastors around the country who all find themselves in situations in their pastorates where this is a very real and prevalent kind of issue for

them in their congregations, and they're trying to learn how to navigate that well, , to care for their people in their congregations, and to listen, but also to maybe challenge, , aspects of this that are, are really not the gospel.

And so that this group of pastors all came to that event and then spent some time on their own afterwards, just supporting one another, talking through how, how do they take the content into their congregations? And that feels like that's what we're trying to do with the gospel initiative is to help pastors to help Christian leaders and nonprofits or wherever people are serving and ministering to, engage the issues well.

And if we can support, encourage, provide content, expertise, knowledge, a place to process, then I feel like we're living out the mission. So that was encouraging to me.

[00:28:52] **Don Payne:** Oh, good. Let me ask you one final question. For those who may be listening to you and really resonating with the, with the heart of what you're saying, but maybe they've not been a part of any gospel initiative events so far and they're thinking how do I even get started? I only know one way as a committed follower of Jesus.

I only know one way of being when it comes to these hot issues. And it's the, you know, the defensive lockdown posture, but I want a different way of being. Where do they start? What's a good first step or maybe a resource?

[00:29:35] **Mark Young:** It's actually part of the Denver Seminary website. There are pages dedicated to the Gospel Initiative, and one of the, one of the pages is a resource page, they can go to that resource. After every event, we invite the community to provide resources that often have different points of view. And there are, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of resources available for them, so if they just want to begin by reading the resource page on the Gospel Initiative website is really, really very positive and very helpful.

[00:30:06] **Patty Pell:** And we have many of, , the speaker videos from our past events on that resource page as well. , and that would be a good place to start, , watching some of those videos that I, I think will probably necessarily challenge, , people in terms of what they might know about a topic or their perspective of it.

, and so I would encourage people to, To do that, , I think that may push against, I think, Mark, what you said earlier, that almost an idolatry of certainty. , when, when we're constantly looking for certainty in everything, anything that might challenge our thinking becomes really disorienting. And it's being willing to live in the tension of that and, and maybe, you know, A little uncertainty.

And that might mean that you watch a video with a small group at church or, with some other, you know, group of other people of faith in your life so that you can talk. And there's some support as you enter into that uncertainty because it really can be a little disorienting, uncomfortable, but it's a good journey.

So, I would say take advantage of the resources and maybe do that in community with some support.

[00:31:24] **Don Payne:** Yeah, what we're, what we're really after is what the, the well-known English missionary Leslie Newbiggin called proper confidence. Yeah, we don't worship certainty, but we

can have proper confidence. But that proper confidence is, pretty, pretty different thing from the embattled, defensive, Posture that demands everything be locked up airtight with nothing left to learn,

[00:31:51] **Mark Young:** Yeah, exactly.

isn't Yeah.

[00:31:53] **Don Payne:** how does how does somebody we somebody get started get a little pastoral advice on how even to have a different kind of conversation with neighbors who think very differently than we think about things.

[00:32:06] **Mark Young:** Hospitality is always a wonderful way to not only begin to understand topics, but just move into each other's lives. That's something that we, anyone, or most anyone can do. Use your home, invite people into your world and lives, feed them, share a good meal and a good evening together. I think for My wife for Priscilla and me, hospitality has been a linchpin of how we've lived out our faith in every neighborhood we've lived in.

And I, I think we could honestly say God has used that hospitality more in the lives of our neighbors than anything else that we've ever done.

[00:32:52] **Don Payne:** That's great. Well, Mark Young, Patty Pell, thank you both for spending time with us again and for all the, for the insights, the encouragement, the challenge, and for your leadership. , in , helping us at Denver Seminary, , take, take some measure of point on having a different kind of a conversation that truly is gospel oriented, not only in its message, but in its character. , very, very grateful for your leadership in that. , friends, we're, we're grateful that you've Chosen to spend some time with us as well, and would ask that if you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you happen to listen to podcasts. And we would love to hear from you. If you want to send us any questions or comments, you can do so at podcast@denverseminary.edu. Additionally, if you visit our website, denverseminary.edu. You'll find a lot more information and resources about the seminary, about the gospel initiative, about the degree program that Patty directs, which is the M. A. in Theology, Justice and Social Advocacy. You can also find all of our other episodes of Engage360, including full written transcripts. So, friends, we're grateful for you, for your interest, for your support and for your prayers. And until next time, we hope the Lord blesses you and encourages you and gives you some really good, fruitful conversations. Take care friends.