

## Engage360 Episode 157 | What Does It Mean to Be the Church?

**Pricelles Dominguez**

Hi friends. Welcome again to Engage360. We're coming to you from Denver Seminary and glad you have chosen to spend a little bit of time with us. My name is Don Payne. I'm one of your hosts and we're very delighted to have a conversation today with, one of our students. I'll introduce to you in just a moment. first, let me, lemme say this. As a, as both a pastor and an academic theologian, I have read quite a few books about the church and just about every one of them addresses some combination of themes that focus on the theological nature of the church, the sociological cultural expressions of the church, the mission of the church, and in many cases what's wrong with the church. But I've rarely come across a book about the church that is as personal and sensitive and inviting, while still being prophetic as this latest publication by Pricelis Dominguez, who's gonna be our guest today? Pri

[00:01:18] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Thank you, Dawn. What a intro. My goodness.

[00:01:22] **Don Payne:** Well, your latest book, I'm really excited about. It's called Being a Sanctuary, the Radical Way for The Church of Christ to be Sacred, soft, and Safe.

And so we're really honored to get to talk to you about it today, Pri. Thanks.

[00:01:38] **Pricelis Dominguez:** you for having me.

[00:01:39] **Don Payne:** Yeah. Now Pri lives in New York City, the Bronx, to be specific. And, as I mentioned a moment ago, I'm glad to say he is also a student in one of our women leader cohorts, in the MA in Biblical Theological Studies program. That's where we got to know each other. Pri, tell us first a little bit about your own background and how that became part of the reason you wrote this book.

[00:02:04] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah. so what a journey of life has been in being a part of the church. so I'm 34. and most of my life has been being within the church. I don't always say, I know some people say like, oh, I grew up in the church, or I grew up Christian. And I don't know if I would say that I just grew up going, I think there is a distinction. so I wasn't necessarily disciplined so much when I was younger or knew too much about the Bible, or even Jesus. I actually grew up in a Presbyterian church and did a real crazy switch to a Pentecostal church and that,

[00:02:41] **Don Payne:** you've run the gamut.

[00:02:42] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah, that was very interesting. very, different and. So in all those years, I kind of, accumulated a little bit of information about Jesus in the Bible, but I don't, I wouldn't say I was, developed in formation within, really being formed into Christlike likeness and, being a follow of his. And so it was kind of easy to just leave. I did, I left the faith when I was 17, and all of this was in New York City. I'm born and raised in New York City, and I left the faith left Jesus. I was just like, yeah. I'm done with this. and not to deconstruct, not to, not even like angry. I was just like, I'm okay with just leaving this. My,

[00:03:20] **Don Payne:** go through the process. I just hit the off

[00:03:22] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yep. My family was distraught. I'm like, why are y'all so sad? Like, it's fine. I wasn't even really Christian. but God and his kindness still pursued me in those years. I searched for him, even though I didn't realize I was searching for him. and a lot of the different things and philosophies and people and communities and. When I was about 21, 22, my boyfriend at the time, who is now my husband, started inviting me to church and I was like, oh, you're still Christian. Oh, interesting. Got it. Okay. and then my friend started inviting me to church. I'm like, where did all these Christians come from in my life? Like, it just felt like I hadn't

[00:03:57] **Don Payne:** lurking, waiting

[00:03:58] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah, they sure were so, they were inviting me and I was just like, yeah, no, I'm good y'all. and so really I went to church outta being annoyed. I was like, if I go, will y'all stop? And they're like, yes. I was like, cool, let's go, but let's just, but I didn't wanna go to the church that had previously where I had met my husband as a teenager. I was like, I'll go somewhere else. So we went. Surprisingly, it was Hillsong, New York City, and in a very, dark room where I could not see anyone and see anything really that was happening and felt like it was, a club party situation. I think like in the middle of announcements, I just started crying. And, felt like Jesus was saying like, welcome back. and I just ran towards him From there, if you know me, I'm, all in, in all the things that I do. And so I went all in. I got baptized, a lot of things and my husband and our relationship shifted. and so yeah, we just moved in that direction. and somehow I think about a year or two later, I ended up working at a church. that was not my plan. I was in grad school. To be a social worker. I was working with human trafficking survivors. That was not my vision at all. but the church I was a part of invited me to work there. and that was a really hard experience. it included spiritual abuse and manipulation, racism, just a lot of difficulty and pain. and so we decided to leave. together, my husband and I, and I didn't really actually know to name it, I didn't know what it was. I was like, oh, that was just a bad experience. Like, that's what I, thought of it. and so then we kind of quickly moved into another church and did not spend time healing and we experienced some similar things. And so then we, when we left there, I worked there again. that's when I was like, Hey, I think these things aren't normal. I think these, this is not what's supposed to happen in church. I think I may be wrong, but let me go to the Bible. and so what I found I was, it was the pandemic. And what I found was this beautiful idea of how the church was described in the Book of Acts and how God described his people and how Jesus described the body of Christ and what he was calling us to. And I was like, man, I think we have it wrong. I think we've missed the mark. and. I have two doors I can walk through. I can, be angry. I can be angry that we've missed the mark. I can just decide to bring down the church and say we, let's start over again. And, or maybe even leave the faith or I can walk through the other door and help her, help the church be what God have has called her to be. And although I hesitantly walked through that second door, that is the door I chose to walk through, and that's where this book came from.

[00:06:53] **Don Payne:** Yeah, I've gotta applaud you for that.

[00:06:55] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Thank you. Yeah, it included, friends, community, my husband. It, wasn't, by myself. and it's also because I saw that just because what I had experienced, I experienced, doesn't mean every Christian is that way because I had really faithful. Christian friends in my life showing up for me, not just inviting me to church on Sunday and saying like, you'll heal if you just go to church on Sunday. Like, no, just saying like, Hey, here's a resource that you're, you seem curious, like here's a resource to learn more about this idea that you're thinking about. and so yeah, that's where the journey started. And thinking about this book, it really started first as a book for those who've been wounded by the church, but it then became, I was like, there's a bigger

problem here. People are being wounded, but there's also a lot more things happening. And so I wanted to address more than that. And that's where the idea of, yeah, the book was born.

[00:07:49] **Don Payne:** Well, I'm really grateful for the way you've probed into these ideas. Now, with, as the title suggests you, your, overarching vision for the church is. To be a sanctuary. Now, a lot of people might associate the word sanctuary with the church building, or specifically the room where we gather for weekly worship services. And, in some instances people have avoided the word sanctuary because it implies that God is only accessible in certain spaces. And so there's that reaction. But what is it about the word sanctuary that captures for you something we've lost as the church.

[00:08:30] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah. so it actually came from, I'm a daughter of immigrants. And, it came from this idea that in the United States we have cities called sanctuary cities, which are meant to be safe places for, immigrants, whether they're trying to get resources, housing, but it's just. Like likely they will not experience certain things that perhaps they would experience in other cities or other places of the country otherwise. So that's why they're called sanctuary cities. And so for some reason that word came to mind for me because those cities aren't just sanctuary cities because they're a place, but it's because people make it a sanctuary. And so I was like,

[00:09:06] **Don Payne:** a good distinction.

[00:09:07] **Pricelis Dominguez:** sounds like the church. Yeah. Like that sounds like the church should be that, that it's not just a place, but people are making it sanctuary cities. And so that's where it came from. It came from this idea of like what it would it look like for just, not even just Sunday, or Christian spaces, but in our relationships, in our encounters with Christians, we would experience safety, we would experience softness, and we would witness the sacredness that should be held by Christians.

[00:09:36] **Don Payne:** Okay. that, kind of leads to the very next thing I was gonna ask you, which is about the subtitle, because you break that word sanctuary down into those three words, sacred, soft, and safe. Can you say more about those? What do each of those words express that is so often tragically missing or distorted in

the church?

Yeah. Unpack those three words for us.

[00:10:04] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah. actually, a lot of people ask me like, why those specific three words? Because it could have been every, any other thing. And the reason for the three words, which I'll explain them in a second, is because I feel like these are the center of God's heart and his invitation to his disciples. So the first is to be sacred, to be people who are Bible based. To be people who are guided by the Bible that we're not just making things up or we're like, oh, that works 'cause those people over there are doing it. Or Let's be Christians because like the way those Christians over there are doing it. But even just as Paul says, imitate me as I imitate Christ. He didn't just say imitate me, period. He said, imitate me as I imitate Christ, and that it, that's what it looks like to be a Bible-based Christian, that we are walking like and being like Jesus based on the guidance that the Bible has given us. And so sacredness is returning to the Bible as the answer, as a guide. Versus just like occasionally. Yes, I'm sure I'll find things in there. It's like, no, that the picture of the church is pretty, pretty much in there. And so using that as a basis for how we are in the world as Bible-based

Christians, I. The second part is to be soft. And this word I kind of hesitated to use, particularly because I was like, wow, will this word resonate with men? and also this will, this word resonate with communities of color where softness is weakness in our spaces. and so I really hesitated, but actually I was like, no, do it. So it actually can invite. Men in communities of color to embrace, embrace softness, and really it equates to the fruit of the spirit that is gentleness and the idea of Jesus being compassionate. So that part of the book is centered around being a trauma-informed Christian, which a lot of people, would maybe be like. Oh, that's like such a trendy word and we're just trying to do the, all the most, yes, we should be trying to do the most and trying to care for the people God has called us to care for, to extend, a hand and a hug even if we disagree with someone and who they voted for and how they live and how we, are different from them, right. Or people who are suffering or going through different things, that we would see them as Jesus sees them and that we would extend our gentleness and softness towards them. And so that's what that section kind of concentrates on. and then the last one is to be safe, is to be people who are justice centered. And what that means is that. justice has become too much of like a Department of Christianity or a Department of God, and it's like, nah. If you read Genesis to Revelation, justice is pretty consistent. Actually, the word righteousness is the word justice. It just some, and we're not gonna talk about that today, but certain translations choose to not put justice a lot, and they rather put righteousness. But really seeing that the heart of God from the very beginning is justice. There's countless examples of it. And so the last, part of it is to beat people who are safe. As in that we're centered around being justice oriented and living justly. Not performative, not when it's trendy, not like, when we're reactive to it, but being people who are responsive to justice. And so that's kind of how I broke it down in those three different parts.

[00:13:30] **Don Payne:** Well, I love the way you're describing safety and justice in particular because quite often in, in many communities anyway, when we think of safe places, we think of places where nobody's going to challenge us. Nobody's, gonna stretch us. But you're talking about safety in a little bit of a different way, more of a stretching way when you equate safety with justice. I, I confess, I've, I don't think I've heard safety described in those terms, and I love it.

[00:13:58] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah. Yeah, I think, particularly for my lived experience, because I've experienced a lot of injustice, is that I find safety in God's arms knowing that he fights for me, that he is a God of justice, that he does not see the injustice and is okay with the injustice I experience, and that's what I, would hope that people experience too, that people can lean on Christians and feel safe with them, but also feel so safe that they know that those Christians are angry at the racism, are angry at the sexism, are angry at the injustice. Not just embrace and hug, but also respond and have a feeling towards the injustice.

[00:14:38] **Don Payne:** Well, I love the way you're expanding our. Understanding of safety in those ways. Now you mentioned when you were talking about some of your hesitations about using the word soft, how that might come across in, communities of color. I'm curious what kinds of reactions you've received. How, has the book been received? How's it gone over

[00:14:59] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah, I'm very surprised. I was kind of be ready to be canceled. so, and I may still be, but, I was, I've been very, encouraged, how people have just been responding with specific words too, of saying like a gentle correction, or a thoughtful rebuke. or an encouragement that leads to action. Like those are the kinds of the highlighted things that I've been noticing that are frequent, frequently used. And I really appreciate that because that's actually what I was going for. I just didn't know if it would be received that way. And so I've been very encouraged actually by the responses. am I still waiting for a crazy response. I don't know, maybe from somebody, but

[00:15:44] **Don Payne:** there's always time.

[00:15:45] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah. Right. Exactly. But it's been really, received, which I'm really grateful and it, it really shows me like, holy Spirit, I really did lead, let you lead in writing parts, certain parts specifically. and thank God for my editor too, who. We wrestled even, particularly with chapter seven, where souls over size and stances, which I would say is the hardest chapter, for people to kind of digest. 'cause I address certain topics like January 6th and critical race theory and things like that, that people just, it get, it gets them riled up. Just hearing that, those certain terms. And so I think too, just being, being really mindful of people's hearts and perspectives and lived experiences. In writing, hopefully is that's why has resulted in this way that people notice that I was just trying to be, I wasn't picking sides, as I said in the chapter, right. I was really just trying to help people see what is the way of Jesus in all of this.

[00:16:43] **Don Payne:** Well, I, yeah, I appreciate that, and I think you've accomplished that quite well. you've done a good job of issuing challenges, but in a pretty disarming way. In a kind way that doesn't mute the challenges. but so gets at the point I. And I, I mean, I would fully expect that there'll be overtime. There'll be some folks who will take umbrage, at some things. any time we're saying something of substance and getting at the core of things, somebody's going to get in a knot, about it. but we have to say what we have to say. And you know your comment about your editors. Yeah. Thank God for editors. They save us from ourselves.

[00:17:21] **Pricelis Dominguez:** That's right.

[00:17:22] **Don Payne:** they not?

[00:17:23] **Pricelis Dominguez:** That's right.

[00:17:25] **Don Payne:** They rescue us from ourselves. Yeah. Now you also. In the subtitle of the book or on the cover of the book, you call this a radical way. Now, why'd you choose the word radical? What is there about this that's radical.

[00:17:38] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah. Yeah. So actually the second idea of a book name was the way of the Radical, so I wanted to keep, and we decided on that one. But we, I wanted to keep the word radical in there because I wanted to create a picture of realizing that we kind of have moved into a place of contentment or, being complacent with how things are within the Christian world, and the invitation of saying the radical way is that we have to move in a different direction, and the direction is following The one who was considered radical. Which is Jesus. Even people who don't believe in Jesus have called him radical. And so that's kind of where that word came from, of an invitation to say, we have moved in a direction that is not radical, that does not look sanctified, that does not look consecrated from the world. That, is a little bit of a mess. And so let's walk in this other direction, kind of thinking about what I said before of the two doors. Let's walk through the door that the radical has opened up for us, and that is the radical way that he is leading us into.

[00:18:51] **Don Payne:** Okay, now you tell a lot of stories in the book, a lot of personal stories, which are, very engaging and, each of them seems to portray a lack of the features that you're calling us to, in, in various ways, in various ways that are often. Damaging life draining for people. and in your own experience, toxic, spiritually damaging, how have you seen, or how are you seeing instances of the church beginning to get it right?

[00:19:28] **Pricelis Dominguez:** I love that question because I've had to intentionally look for that. Not that it's hard to find, but we can, based on our experiences and also based on, we have to be mindful of. What we read, how much information we consume, because we can think it's all like bad. So I am, I've had to be very mindful. Like I know when the, rise of Mars Hill Podcast came out, I, was like, I. Be mindful of yourself. I can't listen to all of this because I want to protect my heart and mind. And so in doing that, I have been able to see how, people are doing things differently and shifting things. And so what I'm noticing and seeing, particularly in actual church organizations and spaces, is leaders. Willing to learn and, not just say like, I'm learning. Like literally get their team to do a training and get their team to walk through maybe like a Bible study around justice if they haven't been justice oriented before. or even publicly repent of a way they were doing something before and then doing it differently, and publicly, right? Because we. And I'm sure there's people doing it privately, but that helps too in just seeing how people are shifting. And then within Christians, what I'm just everyday Christians, what I'm noticing too is a little bit more of the open eyes and open mind to notice what's going on, perhaps in their church or church spaces and Christian spaces. and not just like notice but say something. And acknowledge that as a member of the body of Christ, they actually have a say in how things shift. A part of what I want in my book to do is remind people that leaders and pastors are not the only people who can, impact, create change in our churches. And often we lean on them only. They're like, well, they're, in charge. No, you are the finger. You are the elbow, you are the shoulder, like you are part of the body of Christ and you have a say and you too can be a part of the change within your church. And so that's what I've been seeing too, like people kind of stepping up and acknowledging, well, I'm not just a member, I'm not just a congregant, I'm. I'm a part of the body of Christ and this church and the health of my church is also my responsibility. And so I've been really encouraged to see that and people just stepping up and to, and taking action and not just noticing a part of what I wanted. Also, my book to do is to teach people, not to just, complain or notice what's wrong, but actually be people who actively do something about it. 'cause what is just complaining gonna do. What is Pointing Fingers gonna do, right? Like it's really not gonna do anything. And so that's what I also find people use Instagram platforms, all this to do that, when really we should always point out with also a solution in mind. If you don't have a solution in mind, maybe be quiet. like maybe keep, that to yourself until the Lord has given you a solution. So that's been what I've been seeing too, and I've been really, encouraged by that.

[00:22:34] **Don Payne:** I'm really. Appreciative of that Pri because, that's just a, that's a generative spirit. That's a problem solving spirit. that does not hold back. And I don't think you do hold back on calling out the, on the problems and naming the problems. but, it really helps to, see where you, as the one naming some of these problems are finding hope

[00:22:56] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:22:58] **Don Payne:** you, you have some really practical exercises in each section of your book, which, I thought were really thoughtful and to go back to what we were just talking about, you don't simply beat up on the church and then leave us to wallow in how poorly we've done. I'd like you to give listeners a taste of maybe some of those exercises. Where do they start? Well, I guess the first, the starting place is of course, by the book. Right? Yeah. By the book. but where, do we start? How do we begin to move practically in some fresh, faithful directions as a church?

[00:23:39] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah, I think, and this might be a hard first step for some folks, but it's noticing to the point of repentance, the truth is that a lot of us, Our, the problem is not one person's fault, and the systems that we created is not just one group of people, one denomination, one kind of person. We have all either perpetuated, accepted or permitted things to be the way they are. And so I think it's taking time first to notice our own position within the body of Christ and



perhaps repenting. Of the ways that we have been a part of the problems. I think when we start there, then we can approach the other things from a place of humility and already having done the work. Right. I can't go to my husband and be like, go to therapy and go do this and that. And I'm like, and he's be like, well, you've never been to therapy and you've never done. And I'm like, that would be the right thing to respond to me. Like, 'cause I should start with me. And so I think the first step is starting with ourselves, and being in communities that we can reflect on perhaps how we have perpetuated, celebrity culture and, abuse and all these different kinds of things. And then from there, going to the Bible. And rereading and relearning and re-understanding what is the picture God has created and called the church to be and look like in the world. I. I just saw the, new Christmas movie, the, greatest Christmas pageant ever, or something like that. it was so cute, but I hadn't, I didn't know what it was. I didn't, I never read the book, but it was such a beautiful story to, the guy who did chosen, did this movie and how he was kind of just trying to communicate, how like people really, the movie I would say is about like. Remembering what the story of Christmas is about, like returning to the initial thing, and that's a part of the movie is like the Sunday school teacher says, she's like, why don't we just read the story of Christmas? Right? And like everybody's asking all these questions and it's chaotic. And she's like, let's just read. The Bible and I was like, wow, what a simple step that we also, what a thought that we miss. And so I think the second part of that, after we reflected on and done an introspective work on ourselves is going back to the Bible, read the book of Acts, read the gospels, even read throughout the Old Testament, seeing how Israel kind of function and the ways they fell short and the ways that maybe we are repeating what they did, and seeing what maybe how God corrected them or how he encouraged them and how he moved them in a different direction. Like it's really returning to our framework and our, grounding A guide. To know what it looks like. 'cause it's, 'cause I think if we don't do that, to try to feel that we need to contribute, like, okay, well what church is doing well or what model has worked we'll still be trying to replicate the outside approaches, but we need to go to the Bible to see what God initially wanted and desired for his body to look like. And so I think that would be the next step. And from there it's the Holy Spirit will do all the things right. We just have to listen. And be aware, and that's also why I put at the end of each chapter, those sections, because I think too sometimes we are just so quick to move to a next chapter. We're so quick to move to a next step in, in our lives. And so being able to just sit in some thoughts, answer some questions, and meditate, I think are essential. And so if people are wanting scriptures to know what to look at, the end of each chapter has about 10 to 15 scriptures that you can study and look at that can guide, in those directions.

[00:27:26] **Don Payne:** Beautiful because that really illustrates what it. What it means to be radical. quite often people think of the term radical as meaning extreme, but the core meaning of the term is core go back to the core. And I think what you're calling us to is to get underneath a lot of the accoutrements, the programming, the models, all of the things, the glitz, all the things that are really appealing and. Cool. And to get underneath those and get back to the core of what does it really mean to be the church and to have the courage and the faith to let the Lord leave us back into that, even if it's gonna tax us and stretch us in some ways.

[00:28:12] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah, just that question alone, what does it really mean to be the church? I would go, I would dare say, I think most, a lot of Christians have never asked themselves that question,

[00:28:23] **Don Payne:** Yeah.

[00:28:23] **Pricelis Dominguez:** so it's even processing like questions like that, right?

[00:28:27] **Don Payne:** Yeah. And it's interesting, as I mentioned in the, Introduction. I've read a lot of books on the church and it seems like this same conversation. What does it mean to be the church recycles through almost every generation? And I, what that indicates to me is that the church will always have to keep asking this question. Nobody's going to put this question to bed because with every, generation. And every new set of church models, there are going to be those same temptations for the people of God to recycle those problems that they've had throughout the centuries. So we, yours I appreciate is yet another current installment of a prophetic, compassionate and sympathetic look at the question, what does it mean to be the church?

[00:29:12] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah.

[00:29:13] **Don Payne:** We, always have to keep asking that question.

[00:29:15] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Amen. Amen.

[00:29:17] **Don Payne:** Pre. Is there anything else you wanna leave listeners with about the book? Anything we haven't talked about that you think would be important for them to know?

[00:29:23] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Yeah. I think, one other thing that people have been writing a lot in reviews is. That, they'll share. They're like, I went into this book, being open-minded. And being willing to, change my mind. And so I think that is a part. And that also, honestly, we should go into any book with that in mind. but particularly this one because what might happen for some people is like, yeah, for sure all that's happening. Oh yeah, they're doing this, they're doing that. When it's considering the open-mindedness of like, well, have you done this? Have you contributed to this? I think the, church will deeply and quickly shift when we can step up and take responsibility, individual responsibility. And so that's also what I hope for when, as folks read the book.

[00:30:15] **Don Payne:** Good. Well, pre May, may God bless the impact of this book. again, the book is titled Being a Sanctuary, the Radical Way for The Body of Christ to Be Sacred, soft, and Safe. Yeah. And the author is Presell us Dominguez pre Just a treat to have you here. Thanks for spending time with us.

[00:30:33] **Pricelis Dominguez:** Thank you so much.

[00:30:34] **Don Payne:** Yeah, friends, we're really grateful that you too have chosen to give us a little bit of your time and if you get a chance, please give us a rating or a review or a comment wherever you listen to podcasts. And if you have questions for us or comments, you can send those to us at [podcast@denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@denverseminary.edu). Additionally, you can visit [Denverseminary.edu](http://Denverseminary.edu) for more information on our programs and resources, events, and other episodes of engage 360. And full transcripts on the website for each one of these episodes. So we're grateful for your interest, your support, and your prayers. And until next time, may the Lord keep you and bless you. We'll look forward to having another, conversation for you very soon. Take care.