DTS's New Initiative on Cultural Engagement

Part 2 of 4: Need for this Initiative at this Time
with Darrell L. Bock, Mark M. Yarbrough, and Mark L. Bailey
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Bock:

Bailey:

Let me take a step back again and talk about the initiative with Dallas Seminary. This came at an interesting time with the development of the Leadership Center where we have focused on the community with our Leader Board Program. We have focused on Christians in ministry with our grads and others, with conferences like we hold through the Center for Christian Leadership on campus.

We also have a special arm of that that's directed toward our students. We're now taking that and expanding that a little bit more. And it comes at a time when our culture and the time in the seminary's history, where there's never been more of a need to step into the public square, but do it with both truth and grace.

But, Darrell, it also comes at an interesting point in your career and in your life, as a scholar, as an expert in New Testament studies, with specialties in a variety of areas. And you've had an incredible background with exposure to media, communication, the public square. Tell us why this initiative grabbed your attention enough that you were willing to take the challenge and go for it.

Well, as you noted, I've had a lot of media experience, particularly in the last ten years. I've done a whole round of interviews in a variety of venues – radio, television. I've done a blog for six years. I contribute to a weekly blog at the <i>Dallas Morning News</i> that's gone on for over four years. My actual or initial major in college, was in radio, TV, and film. And so, I was going to be a sports broadcaster before God got ahold of me and changed me and said, "You're not going to go to baseball games."

And so, in the process of this exposure, which also has brought me into conversations with a whole lot of media professionals about theology and religion. This is one of the things that fueled my interest, is that in having these conversations and in developing relationships with some people in the media, I have an appreciation for the honest questions that they're asking about the Christian faith.

And so I thought, you know, "What better way than to bring to the seminary that array of experiences and help students think about how they communicate to the public at large, and what the possibilities are in relationship to the media, and how to do that and how to do that well and effectively."
The Table Podcast  DTS's New Initiative on Cultural Engagement

So I saw the challenge as not only meeting this huge cry that was coming from alumni for something like this, but also in the context of my own experience, to think about how to help people think about doing this. And I've had it in enough different areas in terms of topics, that I think I can draw on the expertise of people I've gotten to know as a result of my own experience. So that when we have these conversations, we not only can have them with our own faculty, who are well qualified to address this, but also with some of the key people who are recognized as spokespeople in these various areas in evangelicalism.

And so that combination, I think, allows me to present some of the things that we're going to be doing in the podcast and other things, in such a way that we can be sure that the people that people are going to hear from are some of the best, most articulate spokespeople for these topics that we could find.

What are some of the expressions of this initiative? We've mentioned the podcast. What other ideas do we have that we've been talking about as a team?

Mark Bailey:

Well, we're going to try and do weekly podcasts. They're going to be video casts. Initially, we won't stream them live because one of the things we're going to be doing is we're going to be learning as we go, and so we want to get the technical aspects worked out and that kind of thing.

But our goal is to hit a topic and not just do one thing on it and then move on. What we're going to do is we're going to focus on a topic and we're going to do several presentations, looking at it from several different angles, and then we'll move on to something else. We might even loop back and come back to a topic that we've addressed once, and come back again if there's a fresh issue on the table or a fresh angle on it.

So part of our goal is to move through various topics and podcasts, so there's a podcast developed that will be very public. That will be on iTunes. That will be available through our website. That will be for everybody.

Then we're also going to have special chapels, a handful of chapels each semester – and it looks like it's going to run somewhere between three and five a semester – focused on various topics that overlap oftentimes with what we're doing with the podcasts.
And that will involve, usually a podcast, a special presentation to the student body that includes sometimes my interviewing the guest for a little bit of time. And then we open up to the student body, often followed by a longer brownbag, where the students get to ask questions that they have for over an hour period. And we will record all of that and archive it.

Part of what we're hoping to do is to actually build a resource that wraps around the curriculum and supports certain things that are happening in the classroom, and offers support for certain things that we don't have time to deal with in the classroom. So some of this is going to be very well suited for alumni to keep them up to date with what's going on, et cetera. So you've got these chapels that are going to be done.

I also hope to be meeting with local pastors on a regular basis. I think this is something that's going to come a little later, just because of the logistics of getting launched. But the hope is to meet with pastors in the area and just let them get together in a mutually supportive way, talk about the key issues in cultural engagement. They can give me feedback about what they would like to hear about, where they would want us to draw the expertise that we can get our hands on to help them, and also create a sense of fellowship and community among pastors here in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. That's something we can do here, locally, that we can't do nationally, but we'll do that. So there's that dimension of the equation as well.

So we hope that faculty members can send us a note saying they get asked a question in class that relates to what they're doing or some aspect of cultural engagement, and they really don't feel like they can adequately deal with it in the context of the class time. They'll send me a note. I'll put together my team in figuring out who's the best to deal with this, or maybe I'll give the faculty member a longer time to address it himself. And, again, we'll record it and archive it, and then we'll make that available generally.
So there are a variety of ways in which you're going to see cultural engagement. And then once a year – this is the biggie – once a year, we're going to do a big, public event in the Dallas area that draws on expertise coming, literally, nationally, and try and have a major event for the public that tacks or connects in some way to some major issue in cultural engagement that people are facing. And we'll be doing that in April, this year, at Bent Tree Fellowship.

What's the topic?

*Mark*

*Bailey:*

Well, it's a combination of things. It's going to be which Bible, which Jesus, which Christianity. These are three areas in which the church is being directly confronted in a variety of public venues and in the context of classes taught in the universities about Christianity. A lot of different ways, so we're going to bring in an expert to talk about how can we know that the books of the Bible that we have in the New Testament are “the” books, if I can say it that way. That's a canon question.

Do we know the Christianity – what we often talk about as orthodox Christianity, does that really go back to the first century or in the beginning were there just a variety of Christianities and someone won? The skeptical take is that the history's written by the winners, and so we're going to deal with that question. And then you've got the variety of Jesuses that are out there in the public square and the various things that are said about Jesus both at a historical-Jesus level and just in terms of the public presentation of Jesus.

So we've split the day – we've split the two days up into three blocks. And we're going to deal with which Jesus first, and then which Bible and then which Christianity, and give people kind of a core equipping in each of those questions. And we've got a good array of speakers that are lined up for that event. And that, like I said, we hope to get – I'm hoping to get 1000 people to that event.

Mark, you served as executive director of our Communications before your present role that we have taxed you with and recruited you for. Talk about why the engagement, both from the campus and beyond the campus, why you see this as an important venture as it relates to what we do here on campus.
Let me start with on campus. Obviously in my new dean's position, I'm all interested in curriculum and classes and syllabi and things like that. We want to have a good cohesion to what it is that we're doing. And I love the curriculum at Dallas Seminary; all of us sitting here at this table, we do. And we hear from our grads and it contributes to why we do what we do.

I think we all have to realize – and we have done this for years, but it certainly has been heightened for us in latter days – that the seminary experience is not simply in the classroom. So, in other words, a lot of times you'll hear us talk about the curricular and the co-curricular.

This issue of the co-curricular is probably more noticeable today. We have a lot of students that are coming from a variety of backgrounds, that come out of a variety of experiences, that have been through things that we're seeing the product of our culture in many ways. And I say that, probably, in a negative light. The student that comes to us today has an awful lot of baggage compared to years past.

And I don't mean that as a bad thing for the student, as much as we are seeing students that are really wrestling with a variety of topics. And as they are wrestling with those and dealing with their culture in which they live today. It is not – you know, we joke about the fact of saying, "This is not your father's Oldsmobile." And this is not the same culture in which students, 20, 30 years ago, came to us from, and we have to recognize that.

And so when we're dealing with [cultural engagement]– it's a real struggle in today's educational environment, because all of the things that were important to us 20, 30 years ago, they're still important today. There is no doubt. We're not moving from our understanding of what the Bible is, wanting students to have an exposure to all 66 books. We believe in biblical languages; we understand all of those things.

But now, on top of that, we need to address a variety of issues and how do we do that? So now, I'm bringing up those two pieces of the curricular and the co-curricular. And so we want to have a concerted effort and that's where I'm really excited. And I say that I put my dean's hat on. A dean today, in today's world, is not just focused on the classroom. It's not just that. We are a total campus community and education is more than just the classroom.
And so that's why I'm really excited. And so I've got a fellow partner in crime across the table, [and] it's helping the curricular structure because it's the co-curricular structure. And so we're excited to see things that are evolving here, even in what we're doing in chapel and things like that, dealing with these topics.

And we're hearing from our students, saying, "Can you please help us address this particular issue?" And we're hearing that from our grads, and we've already said that. So we're looking forward to soliciting feedback from our folks saying, "What can you address, because it's going to help people?" That's just on the campus community side.

And the beauty of it is is that, as we all know, having been in the academic life for a long time, that getting curricular vision … my joke is that, sometimes, what's going to happen, first curricular vision or the Lord coming back. And so you know that is always a very slow, deliberate process. And it ought to be because it's such a community process that you're dealing with.

But this allows you some flexibility to build around the curriculum and give it support where you know it needs it, but it may not need a class. It may not be something that you put in hours in a typical academic way. And so the nature of what this is allows you to be creative in working with it. You know it's necessary, you know your students need it, but where does it fit. Well, it isn't quite – it isn't the normal thing.

It's not a course; it's not a program.

That's right. And yet there is a whole worldview and attitude thing that's important to students, that you're trying to help students grasp while they're here. And if you don't have this dimension, you know they’ve walked out less equipped than they ought to be. And so that's another reason for doing it.

I'm also excited about it off the campus though. You know for the last ten years in the communication [department], Darrell and I have had opportunity to do a bunch of things together, and it's been a pleasure to work with the media. Most of my experiences have just been really, really good.
While, sometimes, you'll certainly have those antagonistic moments and it will rear its head from time to time, but by and large, it's real people asking real questions. And if you take the time to slow down and listen to what they're asking, you have an opportunity to speak about the things of the Lord, and I'm excited to see that take place.

I mean, we have our grads; we've all talked about that. You know 14,000 graduates that are asking those questions, saying, "Hey, can you help me walk through this issue?" Dallas Seminary is a large family. We frequently reference it – and Dr. Bailey, I've stolen this from you – it's not just a bunch of individual people. Dallas Seminary's a movement. And we have people all over the world in all facets of ministry, in all cultures, engaging.

And so for them to come back and say, "Can you help us think biblically, theologically, to say, 'How would Dallas Seminary –' with our doctrinal perspective – 'handle this particular topic?'" That's an honor for us to be able to do that. And so I'm excited to be able to put new resources into the hands of our grads that are doing amazing things and to be able to assist them. So I look at it here on the campus and abroad. And I think that attaches to our mission statement. That's who we are.

Darrell Bock:

And another beauty of it is that because of the nature of the medium that we'll be using, we have time sometimes to develop some of the arguments that you don't get time to do in class because you've got a syllabus you've got to keep up with. And the value of that will be, not only will our grads benefit, but anyone who listens to what we're doing will benefit.

We're an educational institution and one of the ways that we can reflect who we are is by educating, and by educating in the most healthy sense of that term. To show how to have those hard conversations where difficult issues come up and to show what the conversation is. And, in some cases, interact with other fellow Christians who may not be exactly where we are, theologically, but on a lot of things are. And so in that way, show how you work through different areas biblically and that kind of thing.
And all of that goes to help form the way a student looks at their ministry. And some of that, you can't do in the classroom. You really can't. And so this allows us, as I say, to wrap around the curriculum and put some pressure points where before we haven't been able to apply any pressure – in formation, in spiritual formation that helps to round out the student in their experience and their preparation for ministry.