DTS's New Initiative on Cultural Engagement

Part 3 of 4: Tone and Goals for this Initiative
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Let’s talk about that engagement for a little while. So often, we who are evangelicals and claim a biblical perspective, all people see from us is a desire to expose the error and convert the world, none of which of those are wrong in and of themselves. But that's not the only aspect of engagement, and that's not the only level of engagement that we can have or should have.

Both of you, talk with me a little bit about tone. How do we stand for truth, without compromise, but how do we do that in a lovingly and Christianly way so that we haven't lost the audience with those that we're seeking to engage, to ultimately evangelize without question?

I'm going to use an old metaphor or an old figure, a cultural figure from, actually, my parents' generation. I often say that the church, oftentimes, sounds like Jimmy Cagney, and his message is, "You dirty rat. You shouldn't be doing that. You're the one who killed my brother. I'm going to get you."

And the point is is that the church sounds like the only thing the church is for is what it's against, and the only time the church speaks is when it has to shake its finger at someone. And that's not really the gospel, and that's not really the truth, theologically.

Yes, we live in a dysfunctional world, and we think that God has made a statement about who we are as people and what our needs are. And our needs are deep and the dysfunction is great; and we need fixing and we can't fix it ourselves. All those things are true.

But the flip side of it is is that God has gone out of his way, in an expression of love and grace, to reach out to the very people who've turned their backs on him, and to say, "I love you and care for you. And I show you that love and I show you that care by offering my Son on your behalf, and by offering you the opportunity for life and offering you a chance to reconnect, to live life the way it was really designed to be lived."

That's a positive message; that's not a negative message. That's a restorative message. That's a message that brings resurrection and reconciliation, and it revives us. And so the church ought to communicate that message with the hope and with the joy and with the expectation and with the reformation that all that represents.
And that's what we're hoping to do, is to bring that tone to the discussion. I know when I interact with the media that they are asking questions – they're a mirror of our culture – they're asking the questions that my neighbors are asking. They're asking the question that my son's friends at college were asking, when he was in college. And so I want to help communicate that God is not just a God who shakes his finger and says, "No, no, no, no, no."

That's not it. Our God is the God who said, "Despite the fact that you've turned your back on me and you tend to ignore me as human people, I'm reaching out to you in love to show you that I'm so committed to you that I have given everything of who I am so that you can reconnect to me." And I hope that we're able to communicate that clearly in a variety of areas.

The gospel is good news. It's not just the fact that there is bad news.

Mark

That's exactly right.

Darrell

Bock:

There's a hope and a help for the issues that are there.

Mark

Bailey:

And it involves the application of resources that only God can give to us and that he gives to us when we come to him. I like to use the illustration of, "I can give someone a wonderful gift at Christmas, but if they never open the box, the gift does them no good."

Darrell

Bock:

And so that's what you're talking about in the gospel. You're talking about the offer of a wonderful gift that can change a person's life and can reconnect them to live the way they're designed to live. But if they never pull the bow off of the top, if they never pull the tape off on the sides, if they never pull the top off the box, they never see what's in the box and what's being offered.
And our hope is that we can communicate with enough clarity, and in some cases, perhaps answering some curiosity, that someone will take a look and say, "You know what, maybe I should take a look at it. Maybe the impression I had of what Christianity is, is a misimpression. And maybe my understanding of the way I view Christians is an over-generalization, and maybe there is something of substance there to take a look at."

I think one of the things that's important for us to be able to say right up here at the outset, as we're starting this initiative, is that we will have conversations with people who differ from us, who would not be distinctively evangelical and would not necessarily be, obviously, distinctively Dallas [Seminary]. But our engagement with them and our conversation with them is never with a sacrifice of those commitments that we have, but also it's a desire to engage for a purpose of encouragement, for them to think beyond what they have thought, for us to think relevantly with their needs.

But just because we have those conversations doesn't mean we endorse everything that they say or do. We have a lectureship at Dallas Seminary with our W.H. Griffith Thomas, where it's intentionally broader than we are, from an evangelical perspective, to give our students an exposure to evangelical theologians and biblical experts, who don't necessarily dot the i's and cross the t's exactly like us.

But that's a part of our educational purpose, and so I think the tone and the engagement for us to – without loss of integrity of who we are, without a loss of commitment to the truths that we hold dear at Dallas Seminary – we also want to engage from a gracious, and yet pointed, perspective. And we're not going to shrink from asking the hard questions. But asking the hard questions doesn't mean we've lost the moorings of where we hold.

Well, you know, Mark, this why the image of The Table is so important. This is why we've picked the name that we have for the podcast. And that is that at the table, in the context of the public – the public square is a bazaar. You know most of them haven't or some people haven't been to the Middle East. But if you've ever been to a Middle East bazaar…

It's a good picture.
You know what I'm talking about. You got all kinds of noises and all kinds of niches, and people are selling all kinds of things. And you see anything and everything in a Middle Eastern bazaar, and that's the public square. So the image of The Table is the picture of, "Let's come and sit at the table and have a conversation." And I might have a conversation with anybody at the table, and I might talk about what really matters with anybody at the table.

And there are going to be all kinds of ideas that get sent to and fro at the table. But the point is, "Let's have a conversation about it and let's sort out and think about what's really going on." So our plan is to have faculty members from Dallas who participate, people from evangelicalism who participate, and in certain areas where we have certain kinds of topics, we may invite someone who's not even a Christian to come and talk with us, to give us their point of view.

So I much prefer to hear how someone thinks, directly from them, than I am to have someone tell me what someone else thinks. And so it's only a matter of fairness, it seems to me in some cases, to have that be a part of who our audience may be in terms of who we might invite as guests.

So I think the expectation that people ought to have here is that this is a table. This table's in the public square. That public square is in the middle of the world, and that world is a huge bazaar. And, sometimes, we may hear some things that are bizarre, but it'll be worth it to have an authentic conversation with the people who you're going to be interacting with. Because I think that's another opportunity to model and show what those conversations can and should be like.

What's our ultimate goal in that kind of a conversation? It's obviously not interfaith conversations for interfaith purposes. But what is our goal for those kinds of conversations? Mark, first you, and then Darrell.

Sure. I think it's important that we know how other people think. I mean, I'm just going to let that one sit there for a minute. We need to know how other people think. These are the real discussions that take place in real life. And even right here – I would say just here in the U.S., I mean when we look at the migratory patterns of what's happening right here in the United States.
The Table Podcast  
DTS's New Initiative on Cultural Engagement

You guys have heard me say this before of – we have the Houston campus that I'm constantly keeping my eye on; I'm really excited what's happening there. But Houston, Texas, is now the most ethnically diverse city in the U.S. It has surpassed New York City.

Tell him about the school near our campus there.

Mark Bailey:

One mile from our campus is a public high school, and it was noted in the U.S. census as having – at that one public high school – 62 first languages spoken at that high school. That's staggering. I mean, to just let that sink in of what is really happening. So when we talk about our neighbors, and who it is we engage with, and who it is that we talk to at our places of employment, when we are in ministry and we are working in a culture that is real and there are real people that we are engaged with, I think we need to make sure that we know who people are and how they think, what their lives are about.

And so if we really have an opportunity to engage with folks, we need to take time to listen. There's a difference between interfaith – and I appreciate you using that word – and us being understanding of other people of different faiths, right. There's a big difference between those two. And so, this is going to help us.

So when Darrell is talking, I think about, you know, we may have discussions with individuals that are not like we are, but part of that is for an educational purpose. We need to learn who these people are, how they think. Because the reality is is that these are also people that are created in the image of God.

We have very significant disagreements, understandings of, first and foremost, who Jesus is, what the Word of God is. But for us to be able to have that type of discussion with people is very critical for us to know who people are. So I would just start there and just let that one sink in of saying, "We need to know who other people are and how they think."
As Bible teachers, all three of us, we can go to a passage, like Paul says, "I determine not to know anything among them except Christ and him crucified." But I go to another passage like Acts 17, and there was an engagement in order to get their attention, to get them the gospel, that was not the first thing out of the mouth. And so talk about examples that maybe come to your minds, of biblical passages where you see engagement short of confrontation.

Well, let me just start by saying how our world is different than the first-century world even that Paul addressed, because Paul first-world first-century world in Acts 17, in which people believed that there were transcendent realities, that there were gods. It isn't like our world.

Our world has – at least certain portions of our world, better way to say it – has so secularized life that the idea of the existence of God is even on the table. So even the first step that Paul takes, that there is a Creator and you are accountable to Him. Even that first step, okay, today, is not a given. And so one of the issues is, “How do you speak to a culture in which the prerequisites for even engaging in the biblical terminology – ‘God’ – is on the table?” It's on the table.

And how do you begin to get there? Well, that's a huge question. And there's a sense in which – don't misunderstand this, but there's a sense in which the Bible, in and of itself, doesn't directly address that question posed that way, because the entire assumption of the Bible is, "Well, you either believe in God or you believe in the gods." And the category of the atheist is sometimes noted, but that's about it. So that's one dimension of the equation.

But what you see in the New Testament is an attempt to connect with where the listener is starting from and bringing them into the biblical story when they don't have that background. And that's part of what we need to teach our students to begin to think about how to do. Many of our students have grown up in Christian homes all their life. They’ve gone to Christian schools, although not as large a percentage as some people might think.

It's changed drastically in the last 20 years.
Darrell Bock:

...since I came here. I mean, it used to be that that was the majority, and now, that's definitely the minority. So that's flipped.

But the point is some people have grown up in a Christian home all their life. And I didn't grow up in a Christian home. I came to Christ in college. I went to church when I was young. My mom had cancer when I was 8 years old. We stopped going to church. But it was a liberal church, and so I wasn’t taught any kind of theology or whatever, coming in. I never heard the gospel when I was young, at least that I can remember.

And so, you know I came, this kind of this empty theological vessel. I mean, I could spell the name "God." That was about it. So and I thought Jesus was just this great exemplary religious figure. I suspect that's where a lot of people are. And so someone who grows up in a Christian home, for whom Jesus has been at the center of their life from the time they can remember, that's a hard bridge to cross to think about how someone couldn't think that way or doesn't think that way.

So that's part of what we have to do in communicating what we're about, is to give a person the ability to interact with a person whose background and upbringing, theologically, is not what theirs was when they grew up.

Mark Bailey:

I know in talking with ministry leaders from Cru – formerly Campus Crusade – Navigators and others, the 1960s and '70s, when I was coming up through high school and college, sitting with a person with a "Four Law booklet" or a good news/bad news kind of a tract, at the fountain at the campus, and seeing them trust Christ, I mean, those were pretty common occurrences.

But you talk to those ministries today, the pre-evangelism, like you said, to get [non-believers] into where there can be a conversation of who Christ is, the existence of Christ and the reality of the gospel, there's more pre-evangelism conversation, [and] they would advance, it's more necessary now than ever before.

Darrell Bock:

Well, remember that not only did we say, "It's different and you've got a lot more people who are questioning whether there's a God," but you also have a second group that says, "I'm not sure the Bible is a very special book." And so the moment you present a tract and everything is, well, "The Bible says, the Bible says, the Bible says," they come back to you and they say, "Well, the Bible's the question, at least it's the question I have."
Well, if it's the question they have, then anything that the Bible says is not going to be persuasive. It's not going to be a warrant for them to have a response. So, again, how do you present that to someone for whom that's the question. And there are two elements to that. There's what the Bible says, and explaining what you think is the core truthfulness of what's being said there, perhaps sometimes in terms that a person can get without appealing to the fact that it's in the Bible.

But the second level is, "How can I know that the Bible is even worth engaging? Why even go there to begin with?" And if I can't get the person past this step, then anything I say about the content of the Bible is a little bit of a waste of time in the sense of something that the person's going to hear and be open to.

So, again, this is one of the reasons why we do this. Our culture has changed enough in the last 35, 40 years, [from] where we had kind of an assumed Judeo-Christian base at some level, to no longer having that. Those are much more necessary additional conversations people have to be prepared to make.

I think to demonstrate that, [I'll present] some of the statistics – and I won't get the percentage identical just because I'm remembering the conversation and some of the work. But in my parents' generation, the pre-baby boomer generation, 64 percent believed the Bible was God's word and at least tipped the hat towards Christianity.

That dropped to 37 percent in my generation. And then, if they've tracked generations, it was down to about 17 percent, and now it's 4 percent, and they're expecting 1 percent. That's a drastic falloff in our culture of that loyalty to what has been perceived to be authoritative Scripture. And so the need to engage, the need to understand that right up front, that you can't assume they come in with that kind of loyalty-- as you said Darrell, and both of you said – that is critical.