DTS's New Initiative on Cultural Engagement

Part 1 of 4: Importance of this Initiative at DTS
with Darrell L. Bock, Mark M. Yarbrough, and Mark L. Bailey
Release Date: October 2012
Welcome to "The Table," a new initiative for Dallas Theological Seminary. My name is Mark Bailey. I serve as president and professor in Bible Exposition. Seated with me is Dr. Darrell Bock, who serves as research professor of New Testament studies and in a newly appointed position, as executive director of the Center for Cultural Engagement, our new initiative. Dr. Mark Yarbrough is our vice president for Academic Affairs and dean of the faculty, and also teaches in the Department of Bible Exposition.

So, gentlemen, welcome, and we're delighted to have you here and to introduce this new initiative for the seminary and the new combination initiative of the Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement, which is an extension of the ministry of Dr. Howard Hendricks, Dr. Andy Seidel, [and] now with Dr. Bock present. And let me begin by asking and answering the question, Why have we embarked on a new initiative at Dallas Seminary in cultural engagement?

And first, I can take it all the way back to the roots of a course that all of us had a part in. I, in terms of teaching, and both of you in terms of having taken it and then taught in the school. And that is when Prof. Hendricks introduced us to the men of Issachar in that great passage in 1 Chronicles 12:32. And you can almost hear him in our hearts and our minds, can't you?

You can. You can hear him saying it.

And he said it was sons of Issachar, "men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do. Their chiefs were two hundred; and all their kinsmen were at their command." It was in a lecture on that impassioned plea to not only have the ability to exegete our Bibles, but also exegete our audiences and exegete the culture.

And so, first and foremost, we want to carry that mandate on of our beloved prof and our dear colleague. But, second, I want to turn to both of you, and that is that as you both travel, you hear the questions of the church, you hear the questions of our alums, and why is this initiative so strategic for us at Dallas Theological Seminary?

Go ahead, Darrell.
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Darrell Bock:    Well, I do share a fair bit of travel, both nationally and internationally, and I get a lot of questions from grads and from alums and then from people even in other schools, who aren't associated with Dallas. And there are certain questions that consistently come up and certain issues that consistently come up. And they don't always come up directly in the class in the context of a curriculum.

And the fact that they're being asked in the public square tells you that they're not always being addressed in the public square, in the churches. And so when this began to happen to all of us, we began to talk about it and discuss what might we do. The seminary has a rare combination of resources that it can draw on and expertise – people who've spent their lives in different areas and concentrated on those areas, and so you can bring a lot of expertise to the study of an area.

And so the thought was, "Let's put together a variety of ways, really, to address some of the concerns that we're hearing that aren't more naturally directly addressed, oftentimes, in the context of the church." And we began to discuss it, and the initiative that you're about to announce is the product of those discussions.

Mark Bailey:    We were in Lausanne, Darrell and I together with a number of our alums, at the Lausanne Conference two years ago. And we had a meeting with our alumni. And what was probably the number one request when we asked them how we could serve them?

Darrell Bock:    Well, the number one request, for sure – and it came from several directions, from several continents, from several graduates – was can you please help us, particularly, with issues of topics that are kind of in front and center in the culture that, again, aren't directly addressed in the normal flow of things, but obviously that have a biblical and theological dimension to them. And it ran from abortion, to homosexuality, to issues of how to deal with business, materialism. I mean there was a whole swath of topics, none of which you will find in our catalog under a course title.
And, as a result, we came back – we walked out of that meeting – I still remember this conversation that you and I had. We walked out of that meeting saying, "Whoa, that was significant," because it was such a strong, consistent multilevel voice that was coming at us, almost like quadraphonic saying, “You need to do something in this area.”

Mark Bailey: And these were not just your run of the mill. These were international leaders. That Lausanne Conference was made up of a minority of western representatives in a majority world at that conference. And it was – without question, the number contribution they felt we could make, was to speak in to these issues from the seminary's perspective.

Mark, talk to us a little bit about how this also dovetails with some of the very purposes that we have within our studies and our curriculum here at Dallas Seminary.

Mark Yarbrough: Sure. You know, we find a lot that there are things that you just can't cover in the classroom. I mean, you can cover certain things in the classroom, but it will give us an opportunity to address things in a more expanded view. And we're really blessed with a wonderful faculty, our colleagues that we have an opportunity to teach with. But we can take those topics and we can engage with other people, maybe even sometimes from other schools that have expertise, and we can bring those in.

But as it dovetails directly into the classroom, we have core competencies that all of us that teach are focused on. There are goals that we have for all of our students in all programs. And one of those core competencies that we have is listed as cultural engagement. And over the last several years, I think it was safe to say that as we've done some evaluation, we were able to focus in and say, "That's an area we want to improve on, and how can we do that?"

And that started this process of saying, "We need to have some more focused ways to be able to address cultural engagement." And so this is, in many ways, one of the offshoots of some of those discussions. So we want to be able to address our core competency of cultural engagement, and this is one way that we can certainly do that.
Mark Bailey: One of the reasons for this initiative also comes just to address where we are as Christians and as the church of Jesus Christ in a rapidly changing culture and, in many ways, a rapidly becoming post-Christian culture.

Darrell, talk about a minute how important it is for us, as Christians, with both the engagement of truth, but also with the tone with which we engage and why that's so important.

Darrell Bock: Well I think that seminaries, generally speaking, if they're committed to Scripture, do a pretty good job of teaching people how to move from the Bible to a topic. But the ability to move from a topic back to the Bible and make an assessment, that's actually a different kind of skill and involves a different kind of process. And so we want our students to be able to switch hit, and we want to talk about issues in such a way that the community is able to reflect on and do a better job of switch-hitting, if I can say it that way.

And so our hope is that by discussing these topics and bringing a tone in which we engage seriously and represent a position on the one hand, but show a graciousness in the engagement in the way in which our goal is to help people live the way God designed them to live and to live well – that, hopefully, the way in which we engage comes across not only dealing with the issues and discernment and assessment that needs to take place when you're dealing with culture, but does it in a tone and in a matter that exemplifies a Christian character and a Christian response, and a Christian caring not only for those in the church, but also for those outside the church, that you're trying to draw into appreciating what the gospel is all about.

Mark Bailey: It really is looking at a balance. We teach Scripture. We teach how to study the Scripture. We teach the history of the church. We teach systematic theology in categories that we have used to summarize the entirety of Scripture.
But, in one sense, when we're faced with a topic in the culture, an issue in the culture, whether it's sexuality, whether it's the origins of life, whether it's marriage and the family, whether it's justice and injustice, that's where the biblical theology skills, as you say, coming from that topic back to the Scriptures, what does the Scripture say about [it], that needs to be more and more developed. Not just by our students, but also as they go and are involved in ministry. Is that a fair assessment?

_Darrell Bock:_ Yes, that is. And the other half of it is is the ability also – if I can say it this way – to exegete the culture, to have an assessment about what's happening in the culture, what's driving what's happening in the culture, and knowing how to address that as well. So there's an appreciation not only for your subject matter and what the Bible is saying about that subject matter, but also – if I can say it that way – the audience to which you're presenting that message, interacting with.

And, in some cases, it means, as Christians, doing a good job of listening to what the culture is saying about an issue so that you're able to respond to them at a level and in a way, in some cases, that they will appreciate.

You know one of the hard things for a student sometimes is that we believe the Bible is true. And so, when we speak and say, "The Bible says," that speaks to us, that resonates with us. But for someone for whom, in some cases, the Bible is the question, you've got to go almost to a different level. I like to say to students, "Is it true because it's in the Bible, or is it in the Bible because it's true?"

And that's not the same thing. And so, unpacking how it's true because it's in the Bible, not because it's just the Bible, because it's true, and God is telling us something that's true.

Unpacking how it's true sometimes can be helpful in interacting with your audience. And teaching students how to do that is a skill that takes them beyond just the words on the page, but gets them to think through, "What is it God's really trying to communicate here and why?"
Mark Yarbrough: I've heard this picture used so many times. And it's in a variety of books, and I don't know who actually first stated it, but it's almost irrelevant. It's very true. When we talk about the issue of Acts 2 versus the Acts 17, that issue of knowing your audience. Paul's strategy in Acts 17, when it's [a situation where] you're going in and you're talking to clearly a culture that does not have a Jewish background, his strategy was totally different.

So when you're talking about exegeting the culture, I think that's something that the church has to wrestle with today. And that's one of the things we're trying to model and to be able to even teach.

Darrell Bock: And I think, just to add to the imagery, if you think about Romans 1, when Paul writes in Romans 1 about the culture that he addresses in Acts 17, it's pretty harsh. It's pretty hard nosed. It's pretty direct. There's a challenge.

But when he gets up to address that culture, there is a communication of a respect and an engagement and an invitation for them to walk into an open consideration of what God is doing and what God is about, that has a completely different feel and tone to it. So that, in one sense, the in-house conversation has a certain element and feel to it, but that's not just directly transferred to what's being said to people on the outside.

And it's not duplicitous. That's not what I'm suggesting. It's just simply an awareness that the need of humanity is great. That's what Romans 1 is communicating, even with the sense of how God reacts to that.

But God, in his love and grace, just transcends that so that when the gospel is offered, you can see the extending of a handshake and offer of a handshake with God to reconcile that which is broken in the way that's done in Acts 17. And so the tone is completely different.

And that's part of the skill is knowing when to do what. When is a direct confrontation called for and when is it an opportunity to offer an invitation to someone to step into a way of looking at life that they may not have considered before.
Mark Bailey: Your reference – and for our listeners – Alister McGrath, from England, came and did a series of lectures in our Griffin Thomas Lectureship, our W.H. Griffin Thomas Lectureship here, where he walked through four lectures, but three of those dealt with the context of Acts 2 and the context of Acts 17. And when Paul was between the Roman – you know, in front of the Roman leadership, his method of engagement was very different, like you said.

With the Jewish audience who could presume a knowledge of the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures, there was a lot of Scripture references and references to that, whereas in Acts, it was theology. It wasn’t backed off of; it was fully frontal. But it was from a theological [approach], without a quotational aspect.

And then the Roman, the loyalty issue between when they worshiped Caesar as God versus him worshipping God alone, those three were different approaches. But it's very instructive that God would give us a book like Acts that would help us look at those different methods, and I think we learn a lot from that.