

## THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 164 | The Church & Higher Ed, Part 5: The Role Of Christian Education

Featuring: Autumn Gardner, Dave Morlan, and Dr. Mark Young



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**Autumn:** Welcome to the Vision for Life podcast, an ongoing conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and the Church at Large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, the host of the podcast, and today one of our pastors here at Fellowship, Dave Morlan, and a special guest, Dr. Mark Young, are joining me. Thank you both for being here.

**Dr. Young:** It's our pleasure. Thank you for having me.

**Dave:** Thanks Autumn. Excited for today.

**Autumn:** This discussion today is one of a series of five podcast episodes in which we're talking about institution, formation, and we've invited on a few institutional leaders from our Denver Metro context who are actively doing this sort of work that we're talking about. Dave, will you help us have a jumping-in point for today's conversation, catch us up to where we've been and then give us a little preview of where we're going?

**Dave:** Sure. Well, what sort of initiated these series of conversations and it is really an observation we've had over the past few years that people in our churches, faithful Christians, during these cultural seasons of great sort of turmoil, we've noticed that many people who are in our views have, they've been particularly vulnerable in these seasons. And we've seen a lot of them sort of drift and many more get deconverted from Christianity and converted into the broader cultural currents. And we've seen it happen right in front of us. And so, it has forced us to ask a number of really important questions. One of them is, how are we actually forming our people? Because what we're observing is that they haven't been formed enough to withstand the pressures that have been put on them in our cultural context. And so, that's really the main thing we've observed, the question we're asking.

And so, part of our line of conversations sort of go upstream enough to go, okay, what are our institutions of formation? So, seminary, you know, seminary means roots, rootedness, you know, undergrad education, Christian higher ed., in that regard. And so, how are they forming students? Is what they're doing working in terms to withstand the cultural pressures that we see today? And then, of course, we're asking that question for us as a church too, the institution of the church. So, what we're doing, really shaping people to the depth that's necessary so that they are rooted enough in their faith, in their understanding of the Bible and of their sort of place in the world and God's calling them to be able to sort of adjust appropriately and remain rooted in these cultural shifts. So, that's the main sort of phenomenon we're observing that's caused these us to ask these questions.

And so, a central question that we're now asking ourselves as a church and now asking institutional Christian institutional leaders is this question of, are people coming into our institutions fundamentally in need of equipping or in need of transformation? In other words, are people, as they come into our churches or seminaries or universities, are they coming in as people who are more or less solid and just need sort of reinforcement in the direction they're going, or do they need to become different kinds of people? And are our various institutions sort of doing that or not? So, that's the tension that we're feeling, and that's sort of the questions that we're beginning to ask.

**Autumn:** Dave, thank you. Thanks for bringing us up to speed. And we have talked to now people from a couple of institutions who you have connections to. And today we're doing the same thing. You have taught at Denver Seminary. Dr. Young is the president of Denver Seminary. And you said it would be wonderful to have him on the podcast and he agreed. So, now, Dr. Young-

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**Dr. Young:** I leaped at the chance.

**Autumn:** Wonderful. I'll use that when I invite other people on to the podcast, I'm going to just say Dr. Young was so excited to be on the Vision for Life podcast. But before we get into further conversation about what Dave just introduced to us as our ongoing discussion, would you help our listeners get to know you a little bit? So, you can share with us some about your life and then your work experience that led you to Denver Seminary and the position you're in currently.

**Mark:** Thanks for asking. Maybe I'll start with where my life and Dave's life intersected. I was on faculty at Dallas Seminary from 1995 until 2009, and I had Dave in class.

**Dave:** Mark was one of the most respected and feared professors on the campus of Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Young:** I don't understand why, because I didn't give exams. I gave celebrations of learning.

**Dave:** Right? How do you define celebration? I still want to get into that. It's not the purpose of this conversation.

**Dr. Young:** Okay, well, we'll pass on that one. I still get emails from students after all these years remembering those celebrations of learning.

**Autumn:** Did the students know that it was a celebration?

**Dr. Young:** Oh yeah. Well, one student wrote and said, I've never suffered so much celebrating as I did. So, I came to Dallas in '95 after having been involved in theological education in the Soviet Bloc from 1982. My wife and I moved to Vienna in 1982. We got involved in non-formal theological ed throughout the Soviet Bloc. Basically, that meant we wrote curriculum. It was translated into I think seven different languages. And then we would travel and visit quietly with groups of pastors who were working through that material. So, we were in Bulgaria, and, Romania, and Poland, the old Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and then even the Soviet Union. And during that period of time, I would say I interacted with a group of men and women who had a depth of faith that I had never experienced myself and never seen.

People whose commitment to follow Christ had caused many of them to either directly or through their family members suffer for the sake of the gospel. And I would say to you that, you know, looking back on those years, I'd had the privilege of studying, so I had a lot of information. But there was formation that had occurred in the lives of those students that I hadn't experienced. And I would say to you that the years spent interacting with those folks were the most formative years of my own life as a man and as a believer and as an educator. Toward the end of the Communist-eria, we moved to Poland, took our four-year-old and two-year-old and moved into Poland, and then ended up starting a theological seminary in Poland in 1990. We called it the Biblical Theological Seminary. Now it's the Evangelical School of Theology in Poland. And that true was a marvelous experience. When Communism collapsed, everything was up for grabs, the legal system, the banking system. And so, it was not an easy time to live in Poland. However, coming out of that was this amazing sense of optimism. For the first time in their lives, people felt they could actually do something. They could take the initiative, right? That they had now the opportunity and the freedom. And that was a part of the church world as well. And so, I and another Polish pastor began thinking about and then eventually started a new school in Poland, an institution that eventually gained government recognition and could offer government-validated degrees. In 1995, then

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we transitioned back to the U.S., and I taught at Dallas for 14 years in the World Missions space because that had been our experience. I should say I'd done a doctoral degree in adult education, adult cognition, while we were finishing up in Poland. So, I was trained as an educator. My life was a missionary, and you bring those two things together and you teach World Missions in the U.S. Along the way, in 2000, I also joined the staff of a church plant with a celebrity pastor. It wasn't a normal church plant. It was like giving birth to a teenager, right? You get started and you got 1400 people. So, for eight years I was involved in helping create a staff, create a philosophy of ministry, build a couple buildings. So, I had that alongside of teaching a full load at Dallas. So, it was a very intense period of time. And then in 2009, came here to be the president at Denver Seminary, which really was a bringing together of all the different leadership opportunities that I had had in a way that really captured my and my wife Priscilla's imagination.

**Dave:** I remember your presence at Dallas Seminary was one of prophetic voice. And hearing you talk about your time in the bloc, as you say, really illuminates, I think, and gave you that perspective so that as you look at sort of the Dallas version of Christianity. You had a really clear prophetic voice that I think really drew people to you, even though your class was the hardest. But I always really appreciated that. And I remember really clearly when Hunter and I first heard the rumor that maybe Mark Young is in the running to become president at Denver Seminary, I remember us praying for him, come on, Mark, let's go, let's go, we need you here, we need you here.

**Dr. Young:** Thank you. I think part of the challenge that we all have is we don't recognize just how culturally embedded our faith is, right? The way we think about, the way we conceptualize what it means to know Christ, the way we read Scripture, the way we build our communities of faith, all of that is so deeply embedded over decades of cultural practice that until we, if we haven't lived outside our own setting, we cannot recognize that.

So, the years that we spent in Eastern Europe, as well as learning a couple of different languages, illuminated for us just how deeply embedded our understanding of following Christ, of who He is, what it means to be the Church, all of that was in our own setting. And so, when you come back from that experience, you're not trying to be prophetic. You're just saying, you know, we need to take another look at this. There's another way to see what it means to be Christian. There's another way to read Scripture. There's another way to think about the church that perhaps needs to be not as embedded, not as overlaid with cultural norms and expectations, but actually is what the Kingdom is supposed to be, which is a contrast culture, right? So, if the Church is indistinguishable, if we are indistinguishable from those around us, then we're not following Jesus in the ways that the Kingdom demands.

**Autumn:** Dr. Young, as you've collected now these various experiences and years, so as a leader, but as an educator and someone who was writing curriculum for those years when you were in the Soviet Bloc and then helping establish an institution in Poland that it sounds like still exists. And then teaching and doing the work of church planting, building a church, leading a church, so pastoral work in Texas. And then now as an institutional leader in Denver, what would you say all of that has led you to understand as the role of Christian higher ed? What would you say is the proper role of maybe institutionally, but of Christian higher education sort of writ large?

**Dr. Young:** Yeah, thanks for asking that question. Very insightful. Thank you for that. You know, there are places where you can have some conversations that you can't have in other places. And some of that has to do with the simple fact that you have collections of resources in institutions, for example, that you may not find in a church or in a home Bible study.

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And so, with that collection of resources, you're able to create conversations and understandings, help build to understandings with a whole different arena of background knowledge and a whole breath of understanding. It's also true that institutions of higher education are designed to be places of working out differences of thought. And I think it would be fair to say that's not often the profile of, nor even the possibility of church, where you have different types of loyalties and allegiances that people bring to the church, different expectations of what's going to happen there to them. And so, in higher ed, we have the privilege to have really hard conversations with opposing points of view. I personally believe that in theological education in particular, you need that breadth of perspective to develop the type of, not just the breadth, the roundedness of your views. In other words, take the edges off your views so that you're able to interact with people who disagree with you and learn from them and have perhaps the position you bring into the conversation actually enriched. It doesn't mean you have to agree with them, but you're learning from them.

You also learn to how to have those conversations. Would we all agree that in the broader culture, it's almost impossible now to have a nuanced and truly meaningful conversation about controversial issues. But institutions of higher education ought to be the places where we have those all the time. And so, that's what we've tried to nurture at Denver Seminary. And I would say to you, it's just refreshing to talk to truly educated people, to well-informed, broadly-read, seriously-considered positions that people take and understandings that people had. I love that environment. I thrive in that environment. And so, I believe there's value there for the broader Church that if we're going to have truly meaningful, informed, nuanced—and I'm going to say this—even compassionate conversations with people who do not know Jesus, and take dramatically different views than we do about social or cultural or political or whatever issues, if we can't do that, we're not going to be able to live out our faith in this world. And so, the institution of Christian higher education gives us the privilege to help people learn how to make those connections.

**Dave:** Mark, I remember you saying that our best theologians, or maybe you said, I think you said this way, "Our missionaries need to be our best theologians." And hearing you describe what you just described, I think I understand even better what you are getting at.

**Dr. Young:** Yeah, if theological education isn't in conversation with the world, right? And what I mean by that is we're asking those questions that the broader society is asking, if we're not able to help people interact around those topics and those issues, then why do we exist? My ecclesiology, driven all the way back from the call into being of the people of God, is that we exist for the sake of the world. And if we're not able to enter into those conversations with the broader world, then as a Church, my opinion, my ecclesiology, is we're not living out our identity.

**Dave:** So, to me, that reinforces all the more the need for what it is that you're doing and even what it is that we've been talking about, the need for deep, profound, theological, biblical understanding, thought, and the epistemological flexibility required in order to have these kinds of, both places where we learn deeply, but then also interact with other ideas and thoughts that are existing within culture outside of the Church, right? So, being able to hold both of those at the same time. I couldn't agree more with that. The tension I feel even when I hear you say that is while in my heart I resonate with that and still do and I think it's absolutely necessary, I think that capacity to engage with the world is itself risky because what we've seen sort of experientially as practitioners just working with people is that the world itself as a shaping agent. Talking about John 17 here where Jesus prayed for the Church, I do not ask that you take them, them being us Christians, don't take them out of the world. He calls us in the world just as Jesus was sitting in the world and

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yet sanctify them by truth. So, it's this tension of being engaged with the world and yet being unstained, to use James's language, by the world.

Now, looking at sort of a congregation of Christians, it becomes, it feels more risky to elevate this idea of engaging the world without also saying that is rife with danger because the world itself has this converting powerful component when in sort of concert with trends in society and currents of various forms of philosophy that we see in progressive Denver, which is our context, and you see people get picked off by that. I appreciate also the impulse that maybe 10-15 years ago I would have called us "fundamentalist." I appreciate those protectivist impulses now more than ever as well. Not that that's my shared conviction, but I get it more than I used to and so I feel the tension on both sides of this because I resonate with you have to engage with the world in some ways on the world's terms because that's how it's what other way do they have to engage with us so we have to engage with them and yet at the same time if we model that to a certain extent, then other people begin to engage the world, and then you begin to lose those people. And that's some of what we've seen over the past few years, and so that's part of the tension with that.

**Dr. Young:** Maybe the conversation about the nature of an institution isn't really important here because as an institution you not only create opportunities to create those framing the answers, those framing questions by which you interpret what's happening around you—and by that I mean who is God, what's He about in the world, who's Jesus, what's the cross mean—all those big questions, but you also create those relational bonds. In other words, the work of an institution is not just around ideas, it's also about building relationships that endure, that the relationships themselves the identities that are formed by participation in the institution are part of the formation process. And so, with those strong relational born bonds and those identity that identity that's formed by being a part of an institution like a church, there perhaps is at least a not a tether but there's some a restraint that says, okay, so I'm really struggling intellectually, but I love these people—this is who I am going to be, a part of this institution, part of this these people even though you know I agree with them more than I agree with my fellow members of this institution. So, all that to say, when we talk about its role of an institution in formation, I think it goes far beyond the intellectual side to the relational and emotional and identity side and does perhaps create a bit of a of a protection against abandoning those relationships and that identity to really join something that's ultimately not going to be necessarily satisfying or cause them to thrive, you know I would say it this way, like when we lived in Poland, of all the people that we were around we were the only ones who were Protestant Poland as a communist country was not communist by conviction they were communist by convenience because the Soviet Union held the keys to everything they had. So, we were the outliers; we weren't Roman Catholic; we weren't Polish. We were communists, so we were very distinct, and what we observed in the small Protestant community that was operating in our city is that the bonds of identity and relationship were absolutely critical for the sustenance of that community of faith to continue to be there in the midst of a world many in some places that was hostile toward them but it also inhibited and prohibited them from stepping into the lives of those outside that community of faith. So, that's the downside of those emotional and relational and identity bonds that are formed in a church, which it is in fact clear that we are a called out people, clear from Genesis 12 through- I think 1st Peter 2 is marvelous in that regard, gives us this incredible identity based on Exodus 19, and then that wonderful phrase, "So that you may make known the excellencies, the virtues of God," where? in that broader society, live such good lives among the pagans that although they may revile you, right? So, there is I think a beautiful- the tension you're describing is certainly not unique to 2024 in Denver. It's the same tension that the followers of Jesus felt probably on steroids in the first centuries of the Church in a much more hostile environment than we find here. I think the difference here the hostility is subtle there are overt expressions of hostility whether that comes out in a legislative process or some type of

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distinct and overt usually inaccurate description of the Christian community in the broader media or in entertainment even but I think it's actually that subtle sense of now more indifference that border lines on hostility to well what good are you what good is it to be a part of a church what difference does it make right which is very much where western Europe has been now for at least 30 40 years hmm Dr.

**Autumn:** Young as you were speaking a few moments ago about the people who you encountered when you were in eastern Europe and doing that work there and you mentioned that they were remarkable and that that was a very formative time for you it sounds as if the people who you interacted with and then now as you were speaking about them again the people you interacted with there had confidence in the gospel because it had been tested in a very particular way in their lives and they had found it to be sufficient to meet their to meet them in their actual day-to-day life and needs and then as you're talking about the role of theological education in developing people developing its students to be able to think deeply about faith but then to speak to the world to encounter people in our everyday lives it sounds as though you were saying this is a part of that process that theological education holds a unique space in that process of developing people such that they have both knowledge and confidence in the gospel in Scripture such that we know that it is sufficient for all that all that we need that Jesus who is the word is sufficient for our actual day-to-day life and needs but they can do it in a deeply formed and informed way having gone through that process so I love the vision that you shared a moment ago as far as the purpose of theological education and I think the follow-up question then is do you currently see institutions of higher education doing that producing those sorts of students and probably your best vantage point into that question is at Denver Seminary so if you want to answer specific to Denver Seminary you could feel free to but that's my wonder as I listen to you

**Dr. Young:** yeah I do think that's happening certainly at Denver Seminary but in other schools as well and before I talk more about the institutional way we approach that I want to add it is in fact a sense of confidence in our faith and by our faith again I mean those big framing questions yes yeah to be perfectly frank I have very little patience over hermeneutical squabbles that take place over particular passages in particular practices. So, I don't even want to talk about those. But these big questions.

**Autumn:** But you can go to seminary and talk about that.

**Dr. Young:** But you but these big questions that's where I think the genuine foundation of formation is one of the one of the things we say at the seminary is everybody starts somewhere when they think about God where do you start and why do you start there because as people move through life of their experiences and the Christians that they encounter they create these ultimate understandings of God that become a paradigm through which they view and read Scripture so what we're finding is having folks probe those questions of, what are the answers to those big framing questions about who God is, what He's about in the world, where you fit into God's work in the world. Those are really very important in a formation process, right? And then you can begin to have those conversations around and ask good questions about, well then how are you going to live that out as a pastor or as a counselor or as a teacher or as a businessman or as a teacher or as a doctor or whatever professional. So, can we do that at Denver seminary? The answer is yes, we can and we are doing that now.

As you move in through the process you do get down into those really fine nuances of the finer details of faith and the arguments historically, but one thing that I think is for me a critical part of the question is, can we help people form in



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their faith so that they can engage in the in the conversations in the broader society is whether or not you honor that the differences in answering the questions of faith in the context of your institution. So, if I'm advising a person, they ask me where should I go to seminary, one of the foundational values that I would bring to the table is you want to go to a seminary where there is breadth of historical traditional theological viewpoints, where you're going to learn from people with whom you may not now disagree. So, that breadth of viewpoint for me especially at the graduate level is a *sine qua non*. I would not advise someone to go to a school where all the faculty have all the same degrees, they all have just one theological perspective, they all agree with each other on all the bigger questions. I think you want that breadth especially as an adult. That's different I think when you're talking about education at a younger age. So that breadth and then the willingness to say people of faith people of good academic skill people who love Jesus and the world can come to different conclusions about different aspects of the faith at a secondary and tertiary level, different interpretations of passages all right now we disagree let's go talk to the world about Jesus. That's the place I want Denver Seminary to be, and I that's the place I think can truly create that formational experience that a believer in our society today really needs

**Dave:** As I was hearing you describe that, I couldn't help but having flashbacks to my seminary education, which you were a part of, and it's interesting because you know where we came from, seminary is different than Denver Seminary. Very much the cultural context is different. So, it's not apples to apples, it's apples to oranges I think in some in some regard. However, you know now twenty-plus years on the other side of my four-year THM at DTS, and I've mentioned this on the previous podcast, I'm now more grateful than ever for that time. And even though I think you know Dallas Seminary had a lot tighter theological conformity, there's no generous orthodoxy at DTS just orthodoxy preferably you know dispensational orthodoxy which is oxymoron you ask a lot of people, right? But even in its quirkiness I feel that the alignment of those four years from all those different professors, and of course the more you get to know them they were radically different and theologically different even though there was an orthodoxy there with everyone I encountered. It did form me, for sure. It shaped my confidence in Scripture and my both firm belief that if this is God's Word, if we trust it, if we understand it by God's grace He'll show us through His Word ultimately to Jesus, right? But there's great confidence in its authority that to me has been really critical now that I've been here in Denver and a very progressive classically liberal context for almost 20 years now. I really am grateful for that formation, and so I do wonder at times with the vision that you've articulated that I resonate with of being able to have these kinds of deep alignments with each other while also vigorously debate and disagree, but not sever relationships because there is that bounded set core orthodoxy there that holds us together. I'm seeing people go into our churches and seminaries and graduate places of higher learning without this. It goes back to our original question, they're not as formed as they once were. And so, then does that mean that they need a formation experience that is more aligned and has less theological diversity in it in order to make them the kinds of people who can have the very conversations that we're talking about. Does that make sense? And so that's kind of some of the tensions that I see right now. I don't really know exactly what to do about it because I'm, in some sense, I love the kinds of conversations you're talking about more than anything, and got to experience it not at DTS but in PhD studies over in England, and that's really where I got to sort of be able to have the fruit of that but it was all sort of I think because there was this security of my DTS experience, it firmly rooted me and so I can go to the left or to the right and have these conversations without feeling an identity crisis in the process.

**Dr. Young:** I think what you're describing is the simple fact that, I'll go back to my phrase, the framing questions in and of themselves aren't adequately addressed in the lives of many, many, many folks who come to seminary. They come because they want to serve Christ. They come because they either have a vocational pathway that requires a degree like a licensed professional counselor, or their denomination wants them to have an MDiv, or whatever else. But a lot of

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them come without ever having had an opportunity to understand what are those basic theological questions that ground the conversation. Or whatever we're going to have by conversation or belief on top of those foundational questions. And they also don't know. They also typically, I would be and put myself in this category when I went to seminary way back, I didn't know how my distinct history in North America had so profoundly shaped the answer to those framing questions. What is salvation, right? What does it mean to be converted as a Christian? What does it mean? What's the Bible? And why is it important to us? The way we answer those questions, particularly in the Bible Belt, but throughout evangelicalism in North America, are so deeply narrowed and informed by our distinct historical context. Unless we take the time to step back and say, here's why we think that about the Bible. Here's why we think that about salvation or the Church. I'm not sure we can critique it. And so, what's I think happening today, Dave, is as we as we as the Church continue to try to figure out, what does it mean for us to be the people of God in a culture unlike any other most of us have ever experienced? We can't critique why we're sensing that we need to be able to differently articulate our faith because we don't know the historical foundations upon which they were built. We've never been challenged to ask those questions.

Perfect example, Evangelicalism in North America is essentially revivalist religion. It has been from the from the late 19th century through the, well, you could go back even before that to the Great Awakening, right? And all those. But fundamentally you take revivalist, all revivalist Christianity and pair it with the most individualistic society and culture on the face of the earth, and you end up with a view of salvation that is very much driven around the individual and "get me into heaven," right?

**Dave:** Right, right. That's it. And in your book, I think you call it sort of created a possibility to have salvation without the Church.

**Dr. Young:** That's correct. A churchless Christianity and salvation apart from the church. That's correct. So, all I'm trying to say is back to your question. Yes, we have to have opportunities to really solidify those basic doctrines upon which then we can begin to build a vision of what it means to be Christian, what it means to read Scripture, what it means to be engaged with the gospel in the world. That common, those common convictions, however, have to be questioned because as the culture changes around us, unless we're questioning them and understand where they're coming from, we aren't attuned enough to be able to have then the more nuanced conversations with people who are coming from a very different point of view. Now I would say to you, secularization in the U S. is beginning to approximate the secularization that we experienced in Western Europe, even in the nineties. And certainly the Canadians and the Australians are ahead of us. I'm not sure that the basic evangelical orientation as to what is the nature of the Church and how is it present in a truly secularized, both in different and hostile environment. I'm not sure our ecclesiologies are apt for that. So, what happens as a result, because we have a diminished view of conversion and salvation, because we have an impoverished view of the Church, and I'm speaking broadly, not here at Fellowship Denver.

**Dave:** Of course not here. People just assume you're not- yeah.

**Dr. Young:** So, because we don't have those things, we've never asked the hard questions of why we believe what we believe. We haven't delved deeply into whether or not those are theologically validated and hermeneutically responsible. When we're under pressure and we don't know how to live or act, we latch on to something else. So, what am I going to latch on to? I'm going to latch on to my identity, which provides for me a sense of "us versus them," a sense



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for, well, somebody has the answers and a sense for, you know what, now I know who my enemies are. What do we call that? Politics. So, what happens in the framework of a diminished view of soteriology and a diminished view of ecclesiology, the diminished view of the kingdom, people who claim to know Christ and do know Christ have latched on to a very different, and I would argue arguably not testified or justified in Scripture, view of what it means to be a Christian and what the Church needs to be in society. And it's what it's talking about, And how it's talking about it. We are wholly and completely lost in the fog of war. 50 years of cultural war, some could argue longer, has completely and wholly caused us to lose our bearings. We don't know who we are. We don't know why we exist. And so, we latch on to an identity and a purpose that is in no way has nothing in common with what the Kingdom of God purports to be. Well, now I just got all ranty.

**Dave:** Well, I'm glad you, I'm glad you did. And I do want to introduce to our readers a book that you've written, published a couple of years ago, where you get into some of these rants, but in a sustained argument and in a sustained way. It's called *The Hope of the Gospel*. And it's a vision of really theological education for what you call the next evangelicalism. And in, in of that, you articulate, I think, some of these, these fears, these warnings, what you're observing, and based on all of your experience and based on recounting of the history of evangelicalism, specifically in America.

So, a couple of things. One is, so I didn't want to ask you about why *The Hope of the Gospel*, what is it about, that phrase that so sort of captures your imagination of where we need to go, not just for evangelicalism, but really for theological education and institutional stability. That's more in line with these series of conversations. But even before I ask you that though, I do want to, since you brought up sort of politics and we're going to, I think we're going to, have a series on politics coming up sort of, you know, in light of it's political cycle right now, right? Election cycle. So, and it's a topic that we talk about pretty often here. Now, what is fascinating, though, is the when people are in crisis, they can latch on to politics, sort of concrete or whatever. And we lose people that way. I'm not going to say that hasn't happened at Fellowship. It has. Autumn and I were just sort of reminiscing a little bit over the, you know, you serve together long enough, you know, you see people, and it has happened. We haven't stood up enough and we haven't been in cultural worry enough. That happens, but it's actually a very small group of people from in our context. The much larger group of people who we've seen sort of fade into the broad currents of culture who just lose their Christian distinctiveness and no longer identify as Christian altogether is the opposite impulse of that. It's not sort of cultural worry. It's sort of so resonating with sort of the progressive touch points on the other end, if you can see the left or right, like much more left.

And then, not just that, but it's the Christian impulses in that more liberal vision of society, equality, the justice that initially is what's attractive. And then it's something else. And then we can see it in front of us. It's like one of those bad dreams where you're running slow motion, there's nothing you can just stop it. It's just, they're like locked in this pattern and then they're gone. So, it's on the other side of it. And that's sort of more of what we see in our context. Is that accurate? I've described the conversation that we've had.

**Autumn:** Yes. We've noticed that people in our congregation have moved to Denver, often from other places, and there is a resonance that they see a sort of maybe freeing from a past context, especially if it was more culturally Christian. And they find themselves in a new place in Denver and our society at large because it skews more progressive. There are areas, as Dave was saying, in which a gospel vision actually resonates with that. Of course, this happens in all cultures. There are areas in which the gospel, you can see the way that gospel truth actually is demonstrated via any culture if you

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look for it. So, those values that are inherent in Christianity, they find resonance with them, and then the values of progressive society simply begin to act as a substitute for distinct Christian values. And so, that is what we've observed more in our context, slow drifting away and replacement with a set of values that in which you can see some evidence of the impact of Christianity in the gospel, but they tend to.

**Dr. Young:** You know, it would be interesting, I think, for all of us to ask the question, what are those values that are attractive that a person who's drifting away believes aren't a part of gospel-centered, biblically grounded Christian faith, right? What would those be?

So, we say equality. Well, certainly there's a wonderful history of biblical and theological anthropology that talks about human dignity for all. And there are strong emphases towards justice in the history of the Church as well. And so, I wonder sometimes if what we're saying is really there's a difference or a divergence of values, or whether there's a different or divergence understanding of how those values are worked out in very concrete relationships, whether that be to law or to economic systems or education. And so, I think part of the challenge that we face always, we're always going to face, is finding those points of context where we can say, we truly do believe in the dignity of all people. We truly do believe that all people are created as the image of God, even those with whom we have distinct disagreement or whose lifestyles are even destructive. I'm not of the persuasion that the image of God is eradicated in humanity. And so, I would continue to say there is human dignity there.

How can we begin to find points of contact where that dignity is something we can talk about. I mean, we all know what we're talking about. We're talking about sexual ethics. We're talking about questions of social justice. Some cases we're talking about questions of systemic or historic racism. We're talking about gender. You know, all of this gets distilled down into very distinct issues. And it's not, as you're saying, it's not so much a disagreement over basic understandings of what it means to be human or what is justice in a broader society as to how did those then work out in distinct relationships? Indistinct cultural, political, legal, social questions that are being asked. And I think it would be fair to say that in many, many, many conversations, instead of talking about what we have in common, we just immediately talk about what we disagree on and then assume we have nothing in common. So, one of the things I've been pretty regularly criticized about is a willingness and even a desire to be connected to people who are distinctly different than I am in these areas that I just discussed, whether, and all of them are people of faith, except for a couple. But I just by nature, I want to be in relationship with them. I want to hear what they're saying. I want to try to understand it and I want the opportunity to explain why my view may be different and the opportunity to illuminate what we have in common. And so, why do I want to do that? Because I want them to come to know Christ. And I'm pretty confident that they won't come to know Christ if they're only understanding of someone who claims to follow Jesus is someone who's yelling at them or discounting them or pointing out all the ways that everything they do and say is wrong. So, and I get- I have some inbox activity over that.

**Dave:** Well, this I think maybe connects to why you entitled your book the way that you did.

**Dr. Young:** One hundred percent, 100%, Dave.

**Dave:** Can you unpack that for us?

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**Dr. Young:** Yeah. So, go back to this American view of salvation, right? For us, the hope of the gospel is I'm going to go to heaven. But the hope of the gospel is this much grander vision of the restoration of all things and the reconciling work of the people of God through the reconciling work of God through His people in bringing people into some foretaste of what the restoration of all things and the reconciliation of all things will be. So, the Bible lays out for us a vision, first of all, of the end that is hope on steroids. It's the most hopeful vision for human history that we could imagine. And then the hope that that vision of the full restoration, reconciliation of all things can in some measure be experienced by us today. So, it's hope for today. It's hope for the future. And so, yes, I believe hope is the dominant value. And let's be honest. The primary voices in our broader culture today are fearmongers. If you want somebody to reach for their wallet and give you money, or if you want to build loyalty with someone, make sure that you have convinced them that they need to be afraid and you're the answer to their fear. And let's be honest. That's been very much the tone of some of the preaching we've had through the years. I mean, how many of us got saved because we're afraid of going to hell, right?

**Autumn:** Maybe we got saved again and again and again.

**Dr. Young:** And I go- well, I did. I mean, we had revival at our church every year. So, why not just to make sure it took the last time?

**Dave:** That's right, exactly. Twice a year, right?

**Dr. Young:** Exactly. So, the point is my vision of the gospel, my understanding of the span of the biblical story, where the centerpiece of which is the gospel is a hopeful vision of the restoration of all things, the reconciliation of all things unto God. And so, because of that, if we are able to live out that vision of the future, and if we are able to help people taste that reality of what God can do in the world, I think we have a presence that is compelling and credible in a world where that vision is absent otherwise.

**Autumn:** That is an enduring vision. It's one that I think, as you were describing the Kingdom and this Kingdom mentality, I was thinking of Jesus' address in the Sermon on the Mount when he was describing His Kingdom and the unusual nature, the people who would experience life and blessing in His Kingdom and who would experience a sort of power that in their political power systems of their day, they didn't experience at all. And when He described them as salt and light, that very much was what came to mind as I was listening to you describe how we truncate the gospel and talk about salvation in a very individualistic sense, or we can. But we've worked ourselves into an interesting turnabout here because we began by asking, Dave was asking, are institutions of higher ed actually forming people? And so, Dave is sort of posing this question to you. Dr. Young, is Denver Seminary transformative in such a way that the students who come out of it are rooted and do have this perspective, this enduring perspective that will keep them rooted in spite of cultural pressures and shifts. And Dr. Young is sort of posing the question back to us, Dave—well, is the church doing this work of formation that historically the church was meant to do to call people into something that is unique and distinct?

And so, I think we're asking this together. How did the church and institutions of higher learning that are Christian in nature and intend to shape and form people in this way? How are we doing this together? And what are the ways in which both maybe have to some degree found because of the evidence that we're talking about that maybe in some cases we're not doing this well and both the church and institutions of higher learning, I think we desire to, desire to give the people who are part of our churches, the people who are part of our institutions, our seminaries and colleges and

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universities to give them that rootedness, to give them this vision of life in God's kingdom and the way in which we represent that and experience it as God's family in our context, in our local context now.

So, that brings me to one other question for you, Dr. Young. How do you instill that enduring vision through an institution when culture is rapidly changing? So, when you have to answer not only pressures of culture, the things that you laid out a moment ago, so questions of identity that involve sexuality and gender. So, not only those sorts of pressures, but also the pressures of rapid technological change. And so, just a small simple question.

**Dr. Young:** Well, I think it's important for us to recognize that educational endeavors, working at different life development stages have different possibilities, right? So, the average age of a student at Denver Seminary, for example, is 36. So, we are talking about adults. Well, hopefully they're all at 36. We're talking about-

**Autumn:** If anyone's listening to this and you're 36, you should be-

**Dave:** -You're an adult. Dr. Young said so.

**Dr. Young:** So, what I would say to your question is we give people an opportunity to understand what it takes to develop that type of foundational faith. You use the word instill, to at least see how the values of the Kingdom, how the great truths of the faith can mesh together in a vision of a life that truly brings life, a life that is thriving in and of itself, but brings life to the world in ways that aren't present in a culture of death otherwise, right? So, I like to be very careful about the language we use where it's not a factory. You don't pour in the ingredients and out pops the same product. So, what we're saying is we're going to present a vision of what it means to live grounded in the great truths of the faith and live grounded in and leaning toward the hope of the gospel. Some of our students will embrace that and will live that way for years to come. Some will hold it at a distance still, right? So, we just have to be honest about that. And I think in the church setting, you have the same thing, right? You have folks who are going to just buy the whole burrito and some who won't even get to the filling. So, Jesus told us the parable about that, I think. Not the burrito part.

**Autumn:** I like that characterization though. Just take the whole burrito.

**Dr. Young:** Yeah. So, what I think is happening for us because so many more of our students come without having had an opportunity either through a local church or take an advantage of a local church to create that grounding, those frame—I'll go back to my thing—most framing questions, we're finding ourselves starting at a different place than perhaps we started years and years ago of going back and saying, so we're not going to have conversations about the nuances of theology. We need to talk about do we really believe God exists and do we believe that Jesus, and the answer is, yes we do, of course. But we need to make sure we talk about those foundational beliefs that then the differences that we have can be less divisive, I would say.

I think it would be- I want to be fair here because those of us of a certain age, meaning older, or old, tend to always think about, well, those young people, you know, and then we list off all the things we think are wrong. I find, frankly, that a lot of those who are Gen X, not Gen X, Gen Z, even older than millennia, younger than millennials, Gen Zs, and then the next generation as well, I find many folks coming to us, particularly from Gen Z, who are asking really good questions that they haven't had answers for, but they're still asking. They haven't given up. There's some depth of desire to know Christ and

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to live as a follower of Christ that causes them to push through whatever disappointments they've had and keep asking the question. I find that inspiring.

**Dave:** Yeah, I totally agree with that.

**Dr. Young:** Is that right?

**Dave:** Yeah, I think that matches our experience here. I think part of it- well, I have three Gen Z'ers for sons. They've tasted enough of what the world has to offer. They can't not taste it by just the nature of living where we live. And so, it's like they've had counterfeit- they've been promised things that don't come through. And so, I think experientially, many younger Christians are recognizing there's something unique, special, powerful, unexplainable in Jesus and the gospel, that I'm not just going to discount or totally throw away because they've been given alternatives to it. And they know that doesn't work. So, I'm really happy to hear you say that, Mark, because that's really- I think we've seen that. I've seen that in my boys and their friends. And it has it, you know, I wouldn't describe it as revival, to go back to the revivalist impulses, but it is encouraging.

**Dr. Young:** It is. I think part of the challenge, right, we know that generationally there are some suspicion toward institutions, a lack of trust in institutions.

**Dave:** I don't really notice that. I don't know what you're talking about.

**Dr. Young:** Well, I think sometimes that emerges because there are some institutions who won't abide those questions, right? There's not that freedom to openly question what the institution is built upon rather than a welcoming of those questions. You know, it's so interesting to me, this past summer, I spent some time thinking about the Apostle Thomas and looking at the events in his life, of course, the culminating event, the one which gives him his nickname for now millennia. How would you like to be known by one event in your whole life? Right? But what I think I see there is not a doubter. And I'm going to go against some of the mainstream commentaries here. I don't think Thomas was standing off to the side the whole time. And then his lack of faith was exposed at the end. I think Thomas bit hard and followed Jesus wholeheartedly from the very beginning. The question he asks in John 11, when He says, okay, let's go back to Jerusalem, we're going to, or yeah, to Jerusalem, we're going to die. That's not the question of somebody who's holding Jesus at a distance. That's a question of someone who says, I'm all in. In John 14, he says, "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" That's not because he was criticizing Jesus. He desperately wanted to be where Jesus was. And so, when you get to John chapter 20, and you have that experience and Thomas isn't there, I think what you have is a person who by nature may have been a skeptic, but who had bit hard and faith, and it had all crumbled before his very eyes when Christ was crucified. He is a person who doubts with hope. He wants it to be true, but he can't believe it. And what does Jesus do when he shows up in the same room with Thomas? He doesn't tisk, tisk and say, Thomas, you doubt or get out of my sight. He does what is probably the most intimate act in all of the New Testament. He allows Thomas to touch his side. In my mind, I see Jesus guiding his hand. That deep doubt, those questions that go to the very core of our faith, if we're not willing to take those people and those questions and guide them right into the heart of Christ, then we're not being like Jesus. So, at seminary, at college, at church, people have these deep, deep questions. Let's just take them by the hand and guide them closer, bring them in, not shame them, not tell them they can't be a part of it. Maybe then with institutional love, institutions that show that love, it's okay to ask those questions. Maybe some of the

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distance, maybe some of the doubt, maybe some of the lack of confidence in our institutions, our churches and our schools, could begin to be addressed.

**Autumn:** Dr. Young, you've mentioned this a couple of times, which, that was so beautifully described—thank you—this desire to converse with culture, to do it in a knowledgeable way, in a loving way, in a way that is connected to an evidence of the love of Jesus, the love that we actually be a conduit of and then point towards, point towards something greater to a greater reality and to Jesus who can sustain and will sustain that faith. What is your advice for doing that well and then doing something else that you've mentioned in our discussion today? And that is being very different, maintaining that distinctiveness.

**Dr. Young:** Good question. Yeah, I honestly think the more you invite people into your life to have these hard and good conversations, the more the difference in your views becomes evident. You know, it's so frustrating to me, we have these issues, right? I don't want to talk about issues. I want to talk to people. So, once an issue is politicized, then it's dehumanized, trivialized, tribalized, and weaponized. And once that happens, you can't have a conversation. So, if I'm talking with a gay man or a gay woman or someone who takes a very different view on abortion or all the other issues, when I'm talking with them, I'm talking to them, image bearer, however marred, however flawed, just like I'm marred and flawed, and I want to know them as a person. And I want to know why perhaps they hold the view they do. What about their lives has brought them to that point of view? What were the social networks they were a part of that helped develop and frame that view? Have they ever met somebody who has a different point of view in the matters that we might be discussing? So, I never see Jesus dehumanize people, even the ones he goes after. And Jesus excoriated some people from time to time. I never see Him, however, making them an issue. They're people.

If we're not willing to have those conversations face to face with people, then I don't know that we can ever hope that they would want to know our Christ, that they want to know our gospel. So, how do you do it? You do it by drinking a lot of coffee or whatever beverage of choice the other person has. You do it by being willing to be seen, having a conversation with people that some others may not be willing to have a conversation with. You do it being willing to bear the criticism of some in your own camp. You do it because you love them and you want them to know the One who's died for them.

Honestly, how much of what we do in the broader society loses sight of the fact that the one thing, the one person we want them to know is not what we believe about X. It's who Jesus is. And so, to be honest with you, Dave, I like living up here as a believer more than I like living in the Bible Belt simply because up here, having conversations with folks, most of whom don't know Christ, not at the seminary, everybody outside the seminary context, it's just so comfortable for me to be around folks who don't know Christ because I love them. I want them to come to know Christ.

**Autumn:** Well, Dr. Young, thank you for spending time with us today and for sharing, not only answering our questions, but for sharing your heart with us.

**Dave:** And before you wrap us up, Autumn, I do want to mention one thing. Since you were talking about personally taking time with people, about nine years ago, I was taking a sabbatical and I needed a time of refreshment and I reached out to a handful of people to spend time with me, to help me as I asked, how do I lead and serve in ways that we're talking about here in ways that I don't destroy the church and wreck my family. And one of the people I reached out to was you, Mark. And that time has been really important to me. And I want to share what you shared with me. And



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I think it was printed—my imagination of this, what my memory is that I remember—you had this printed off, so you're on your desk or on your computer, but when I was asking this question, how do you leave and not shipwreck your faith or your family? You read this to me, and it's Philippians 2, it's from beginning of verse 6, and this is The Message, the translation, it says this, it says, "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers. Let God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness. Everything coming together for good will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life." And when you read those words to me, I've never forgotten it, and it's been really formative. And that was sort of, for a pastor in middle-aged years, that was you bringing me closer to Jesus. Thank you.

**Autumn:** Well, Dr. Young, Dave, thank you for taking time to be on the podcast with me today. I've enjoyed this conversation. To those of you listening, if you have questions about today's episode or suggestions about what you'd like to hear us discuss on the podcast in the future, you can send all of that anytime to [podcast@fellowshipdenver.org](mailto:podcast@fellowshipdenver.org).

Thanks for joining us on the Vision for Life podcast. Special thanks to Adam Anglin for our theme music, to Jesse Cowan, our producer, and to Judd Connell, who provides transcription for these episodes.