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Davenant Hall: Rethinking Christian Higher Ed (with Brad Littlejohn and Colin Redemer)

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Find out more about Davenant Hall here: <https://davenantinstitute.org/davenant-hall>.

Transcript

Hello and welcome. Today I'm joined by Brad Littlejohn and Colin Redemer of the Davenant Institute, with whom I do a lot of work. We're going to talk today about Davenant Hall, which is a venture that's been going for over a year and is entering a new stage of its work.

Thank you very much for joining me. Thanks for having us. Glad to be here.

So first of all, we've been hearing a lot, presumably, about the context of higher education, the crisis that it's facing at the moment with the coronavirus situation affecting the number of people who are enrolling in new courses, the number of people who will be able to attend the next semester, and then more generally some of the structural and other issues, ideological issues, that are going on on campus. How is the work of Davenant Institute relating to that crisis? What is the way that we can respond to it? There's an intersection there. Of course, most seminaries are still doing some theology, they're still doing languages, Bible study.

On the other end, there's just the structure of it, right? So as colleges and universities have, at least in the United States context, that you can't cancel the student loan debt without proving some extreme financial hardship, so not even in bankruptcy oftentimes. And so as a result of that, universities have been able to increase the cost of tuition. I think the number is, in the last 50 years, something along the lines of 3,000 percent increase in the cost of attending a four-year university to get your degree.

So if you think about those as related issues, right? As it becomes more and more of a commodity, as it becomes something which is sold more and more as the path to getting a job, I think there's a real loss of focus on what the point of education is. And at

Davenant Hall, which is this new project that we're working on at the Davenant Institute, we really think that we can move beyond the way the current university system is structured and just give people the content that you used to be able to get by going to colleges and universities and give it to them for shockingly cheap. And in fact, one of our goals is if you attend Davenant Hall and you get your degree from Davenant Hall and then you go on and finish with your PhD, we will give you all of the tuition that you've given us back.

So we want it to be a net zero. We want to basically just take the entire model of how Higher Ed is working at the moment, flip it completely on its head, and rather than you walking out with \$20,000 in debt, which is what the average seminary student shows up at seminary with, we'd like you to leave Davenant Hall with a promissory note that you'll get your \$8,000 back should you go on and finish your education. That's very exciting.

I think it's certainly something that has been a concern for many people I know, that you're entering this course of education and at the very beginning of it, you know that you'll be incurring an immense debt. And you don't know if there's going to be jobs at the other end for you. And for people who are entering into Christian courses of education at this point in time, that can be a very real concern.

And I think there are a great many other concerns that go along with that, particularly at certain institutions where you're not sure you're going to have a strong Christian education, you're going to have the grounding in theology, church history, these sorts of things that are a concern for any Orthodox student. So I think it's exciting that we can address that particular area of need. You have to say something about the situation, Brad, and how it provides a background for your vision.

Yeah, sure. I think, you know, in many ways the coronavirus is exacerbating tensions that are already there. And so many of our institutions have just become degree mills where there's a... everyone knows the quality of education has gone way down.

But there's this expectation that you've got to get this degree to have this kind of certification. And so people are paying, you know, 25% of what you're paying is the actual instructional value, and the other 75% of it is the certification value. And that's really an unsustainable system.

And I think, you know, what's happening with coronavirus is forcing, you know, it's putting all kinds of strains. Of course, a lot of people, potential students are under more financial strain. They don't know what the job market is going to be afterward.

So that puts a pinch on people's ability to pay tuition. But you also have, of course, the fact that many institutions have had to move online this spring in the U.S. At least many of them are going to continue to have to be online. And the online is, you know, really tends to... it levels the playing field and helps you realize, it sort of isolates, okay, what is

the actual instructional value here? You know, so much of the college experience now is about, you know, the tennis courts and the swimming pools and the frat houses and everything else.

Less so for Christian colleges, but still many Christian colleges have been sort of competing with the bells and whistles. And the actual instructional value is not remotely justified by the tuition. And so people are saying, well, I could pay \$50,000 a year to get this online instruction that's not really materially better than what I could get for maybe \$5,000 a year somewhere.

So I anticipate that what's going to happen is a lot of people are going to say, I can learn what I need to learn without going into a traditional degree program. And so at least what I hope is going to happen is that that kind of stranglehold of you have to get this particular certification in order to, you know, go anywhere in the marketplace is going to break down. And there's going to be more of an emphasis on smaller, more targeted certifications that actually show that you've really mastered a particular, the particular discipline that you need.

And those can be supplied by more modular online and residential programs, such as we're seeking to do. And I think this is going to be important. I think it's important reckoning for seminaries as well in a way, because I think seminaries have been, you know, on the one hand, one problem you have is that seminaries used to be able to count on a certain caliber of student coming in that had a rigorous liberal arts education.

You know, I mean, one thing, you know, seminaries didn't teach Latin because they assumed you already had Latin coming in. So you had Latin, now you moved on to Greek. Of course, now you don't have Latin coming in. You don't get Latin in seminary, you don't get it anywhere.

And the Greek and Hebrew requirements are usually have been whittled down dramatically. The assumption is you just really need to know enough to use a, you know, use a concordance. And so the academic rigor of a seminary education has had to go down and down as the quality of student coming in has gone down.

And it's, so then people who were looking to seminary for really strong theological formation are then having to go on and do an MA or PhD in theology at perhaps a secular institution afterward. And so it's really just adding all of these extra years. And so what we really want to do is provide something that is a rigorous, but affordable theological and philosophical training that is not attempting to be comprehensive, of course, at all.

It would be a miracle if we were able to be, you know, a short program that is also very rigorous. It's also very affordable. It's also comprehensive, right? But the idea of being really focused on equipping students with the skills that they need to continue their self-education in delving into the Christian tradition, understanding their way around

scripture.

And so it's really focused on, you know, for instance, right, instead of having a whole kind of survey course on the doctrine of the atonement throughout church history, in which you kind of learn a bunch of categories, you know, you learn how to sort of schematize adoption of atonement and all these, you know, somewhat artificial simplifications. And you hear a little smattering of what Aquinas said and what Calvin said when Anselm said and so forth. Instead, we really want, we might have an atonement course that is focused on reading a single classic text on the atonement and really getting inside the mind of that author and knowing, understanding how the distinctions work.

And by becoming master readers of key texts, students are then equipped to navigate the tradition. I think more than these sort of 30,000 foot surveys that often seminaries are reduced to giving. Perhaps one of the challenges in the modern university is the more that you've had this emphasis upon lots of facilities and amenities as part of the university experience.

And then as you've had this bloat in administration, so much of the weight of the university and the power of the university has shifted from the faculty to administration. And as a result, the integrity of the university has suffered in part because you have all these precarious academics and precarious jobs. They don't have control of the institutions that they're working in.

And increasingly what's controlling it are the concerns of administration, the concerns of students who have to be pandered to as very much, that it's no longer a formative institution, it's a consumer-based institution. Now I think the model of David Hall provides ways to resist some of those damaging trends and to maybe return to something closer to the dynamics of an early university model where the faculty are very much driving the institution. I mean I think one of the problems of course in the contemporary university is the incentives get all skewed such that there's so many factors that are determining student admission and so on that are beyond the professor's control that it can be, it's demoralizing for the professor.

He doesn't actually, by being a master teacher, by doing the very best that he can in teaching, he doesn't increase the number of students he can get. In fact, he may decrease them because he gets a reputation for being a hard teacher and so nobody wants to sign up for his class, right? And what we are doing at David Hall is really, you know, trying to, as much we are in many ways a kind of just a matchmaking platform between master teachers and students and we want as much as possible to remove, you know, any unnecessary bureaucracy there and create a platform in which good teachers have an opportunity to build a reputation, build a following, and they are directly rewarded for their excellence because that they're compensated in entirely in proportion

to the number. I mean there's a base compensation and then beyond that it's entirely on the basis of how many students they can bring in.

Yeah, I wrote an essay last year for the American Mind about exactly what you're talking about, Alistair, the expansion of the administration, the sort of flipping of the university's reason for existing away from the faculty relationship to the students to, you know, the administration's ability to pay their mortgage. And I think since then my thinking has tried to shift and say, well, how did we actually get here to the point where we're at? Like what was the good that these people were seeking as they expanded the administration to a monstrous size? And what I think I've concluded is that it was something like community. There's this desire to build a happy little life for students on campus, but community is one of those strange things like fun, you know, the more you aim at it the less likely you are to arrive there.

But I think they're right that whatever's going on in the classroom happens as the method around which education actually circles, if that makes sense. So you have to do this classroom thing so that you can get these people in proximity with each other and so that you can remember what we're really supposed to be talking about here. But then I'm sure you guys both had the experience at some point in your education that I've had where, you know, the real meaningful and impactful moment was when I went to the professor's office hours or over to his house or we met and had coffee and, you know, we really, there was an interest that had been sparked in me in the classroom which I just wanted to go deeper.

I wanted to know more. I went on a hike with that one, you know, graduate teaching assistant and, you know, stayed up late doing logic problems with this, you know, strange tutor who my professor had advised me to go see. And so that stuff, as the university has tried to micromanage and build the community into the experience and make that community methodological in the way that they can say, read these books, this is the curriculum, that stuff just evaporates.

And so if you talk to students, you know, we're not living in a world where people are having those experiences as often, I think, on campus. When they are, they're being watched. They're scared.

The administration is trying to really make sure that the thing is happening and that it's happening in the right way, in the safe way, in the sterile way. And so, you know, we're not, not only are we not in animal house land, we're not even in like the good parts of your university land. We're in a strange place where the interest in making the community happen has hot-housed it to death and it's not there.

But because we at Davenport know that that's part of what you have to do, I think one of the things that motivated me to get involved with Davenport was that I saw that that's really all Davenport was, at least in the first few years. So, you know, Davenport didn't, we

weren't offering degrees. You got no special gold sticker for showing up at a Davenant function.

And yet when you showed up at a convivium or one of our regional conferences or if you went to a Davenant reading group, you know, you get the sense that these are people who know that there's something really, they all believe in truth. They want to figure out what's going on. And as they pursue it together passionately, it has an edifying effect.

So it's useful, right? And that usefulness, I think, in higher ed is always construed in terms of you'll get the job, you'll increase your market value, you'll get a salary. But the usefulness, yeah, sure, maybe it'll do that for you. But that's incidental.

It's always been incidental. The usefulness is in the way it forms you. But beyond the usefulness, and this is so key, it's just so pleasant, you know.

When I get together, we had a conference in Oxford and Eric Hutchinson, who I rarely get to see, got to fly from the Midwest in the U.S. And he and I, here we are in Oxford, you know, where he's presenting his lecture. I'm giving him feedback during it. I think that's online.

You can hear it. But what you don't hear in the recording from our convivium is the late night conversation the night before and the night after, where we're just walking around Oxford arguing about stuff. And, you know, it's a memory that sticks with me.

That's the sort of secret fire at the heart of higher education. And I think we have bottled that. We have that at Davident.

And that's what makes me confident that, yeah, we can throw these online classes out there and we can read these great books. We can put these great teachers and professors in front of students. Students will show up.

But then we can always direct them back to, well, hey, man, this is great. You're reading Plato at a high level, you know, come to South Carolina, come to the Davident House or come to a regional convivium. Let's keep the conversation going.

I don't think the point of the education is what happens in the Zoom classroom. And so I'd say a key part of the program is the residential intensives at Davident House. So someone, for instance, who's doing our two-year MLIT degree would be required to do two-week residential intensives at Davident House, plus a kind of one-on-one mentoring discipleship week there with the Davident House directors.

And a big part of those programs is just that building in lots of time for that kind of informal conversation and relationship building. I think what you find in Davident House is just a context in which these things happen very organically. You're spending a lot of time looking at great texts, reading them alongside each other, questioning and pushing

ideas around.

And then you're just enjoying absolutely incredible scenery and a context where you can really relax. You can disconnect from the world. It's set away from everything else.

And you can just decompress a bit and get out of the context, which is just charged with all these conflicts and ideas flying around and get into a context where you can think more clearly and you can have time to think. And you can also have a community that are interested and concerned in the same sort of subjects. And I've found it to be an incredibly conducive context for reflection, for friendship, and just for growth.

And that sort of context is the one that we really want to provide to students on these courses, to give them the opportunity to also become part of our community. This is not something where you have a very clear divide between students and faculty. We are part of this community and the ideal is that we bring other people into it.

Yeah, absolutely. I think, I mean, part of, as Colin and I have talked about this, you know, we've talked about how did the university start, right? The medieval universities began as these just communities that grew up around master teachers in which there was a, and it was, the relationship was not, it wasn't so formalized in terms of faculty-student. It was, it was senior learner and junior learner learning together, coming together around these classic texts and really had a sense of an organic partnership in the task of seeking truth.

And in many ways, you know, we think the online forum, I think, has been, the internet as a tool for education has sometimes been thought of in terms of, okay, this is a way to sort of maximize the efficiency of delivery. We have these MOOCs, you know, where you can now have someone blast out a lecture to, you know, a hundred thousand people. And that's, that's the primary benefit.

And, you know, we want to say is no, actually, you know, people, you know, I think old timers like to say, well, the problem with the internet is, you know, it's distance and it's not organic and so on. And I think people, one of the good things about coronavirus is a lot of people have been forced now to connect on Zoom and have realized actually, no, it's not perfect. It's not a perfect substitute.

It's not, it's not the same as hanging out at a Devon house or whatever, but it is possible to use the internet as a means of bringing people together in these organic communities of seeking truth together. People who would not otherwise be able to because of distance. And so we do, we want to say, what, what is it actually capable of? And let's, let's try to harness it to that purpose.

One of the exciting things for me has been seeing students who would not be able to be part of a regular seminary education, they wouldn't have the time or the resources or

people who wouldn't be able to take up a theology course at a university. They are able to take our courses and it's a student group that is far more diverse in age. There's a lot of diversity in background and just the level of interest is so much higher as well, because the students are invested in the courses.

They've very much chosen to study this particular subject with a particular teacher. And often the students will return for class after class. It's something that has clearly caught their interest and they want to be part of it in the longer term.

And since it's very affordable, it means that you can really explore a lot of different subjects and grow over time. There's no, this is not designed to be the entirety of your education and then you don't open these books again. Rather, the point is to give you the skills and the instincts that will help you as a long time, lifelong learner.

Yeah. And it's not just that the students I think are more invested in it. You know, if you, if you look at the average age of professors in higher ed in the U.S., it's been climbing, you know, year by year for decades now.

To the point where not, obviously not all, you know, hashtag not all professors, but many, you know, are kind of like nearing retirement. They're not particularly passionate about the material anymore, but their wages have been driven down as the administrative state of higher ed has grown and grown and grown. So they kind of have to keep teaching longer than perhaps a generation before them would have, would have wanted to keep teaching.

So, you know, it's not just the students who are passionate about the stuff, which is not to say that they're not passionate, but many of them have sort of lost a little bit of the young fervor that they had when they got into whatever their subject matter is. At Davenant, you find a bunch of guys who, you know, my upcoming Plato class, I'd be reading this stuff in the fall anyway. And I'm, you know, I'm looking for people who I really, who want to dig into Plato with me and have this conversation, because to me, you know, this is something that I'm passionate about at the moment.

So I would say it's also the faculty that we're bringing in as well. Brad mentioned the medieval university, and I don't know, this might be heresy on this podcast, but I've been reading John Henry Newman, as well as the history of the medieval university, and he has the idea of a university, and actually in another place, he has another essay, *The Place of the University*, where he just talks about the necessity of proximity and what the place is like. And he says that this goes far deeper even than the medieval university, because the medievals are just attempting to retrieve something that had existed in their minds, at least in ancient Athens.

You go back to the sources, and sure enough, you see almost the same model that we see in early Paris, Oxford, you know, Bologna. You see it happening in Athens. You have

a master teacher.

He's teaching a group of students his subject matter. You know, you can see Socrates and Xenophon and in Aristophanes in the Ponderatorium, you know, sitting down thinking about texts with students. What's interesting though is you never see that showing up in Plato's dialogues.

You know, Plato's dialogues are all about the conversations that happen late at night, you know, after you've had a beer and you're, you know, on a walk, you know, through the woods. And, and Davidant Hall is trying to recapture that exact thing. You hear the same thing in testimonies of students.

And if you go look at the letters of students of C.S. Lewis, the same story, it just happens again and again and again. You need the structure, where you're remembering that, okay, we're here piously focused on these texts, having particular conversations. We were, this is what we need to be passionate about, because this old wisdom, paradoxically, can answer the questions of the problems we're currently living through.

If you're just focused on the problem in front of you, you can't really see what the answer is. So you're focused on this old stuff. But then you leave the classroom, you walk around, you open your eyes, and you sort of ask the bigger question of what that all has to do with this.

And you do it in the presence of a teacher who you trust and have a relationship with. Right. Could you say something about the courses that are on offer and also the shape of the program for the next year? Yeah, sure.

So the idea here is we want it to be very modular in terms of, and part of that is because of the wanting to make it very responsive to professors' interest. We don't want to create a situation in which we have a teacher who's sort of, okay, you're supposed to teach, you know, Intro to the Atonement year after year until you get totally sick of it, right? If you're into the Atonement, then he might teach, you know, John Davidance on the death of Christ one year, he might teach John Owens on the death of death another year, he might teach Anselm's Courteous Homo another year. So what we have is broad subject areas, and we have rotating offerings in those.

And so the degree program, there are a few fixed courses, the Davenant core foundations courses that really, I think, capture what we think are the distinctive themes that we've been trying to recover here at Davenant over the last few years. And just, I'll just read off those course names, you can read the descriptions online. Hang on a second.

So Natural Law and Scriptural Authority, which Alistair and I here will be teaching this fall, God and Creation, the Reformation and the Modern World, Approaches to Defending

the Faith, and Cultivating the Human. So there's those five, and then your sixth, your last, so there's, sorry, I should have said earlier, we're structured on a trimester system like Oxford and Cambridge. So we have three 10-week terms, Nicholas term, Hillary term, Trinity term.

So you take one of those, if you were doing our MLIT program, which is our kind of, that's what we really want to steer people toward, is this two-year Master of Letters. So you take those five core courses, and then your last term you do an integrated essay. And we could work with folks to kind of expand that to make that a sort of thesis, a master's thesis.

And then you do your two residential intensives over the summer. Beyond that, then you'd be doing rotating offerings. Every term you'd be doing one dogmatics course, one Bible course, one church history, or philosophy course.

You could mix and match, or you could go on a church history track, do church history courses every year throughout your time there, or philosophy courses throughout your time there. You have to do three Latin courses, and then three Greek or three Hebrew courses. So that's for the MLIT.

So every term you're doing a theology, a dogmatics, a Bible, church history or philosophy, a language, and the core course. There's a certificate program, a one-year version of that, that has basically the first year of the MLIT, and the language requirement isn't there for the certificate. And then, of course, we think probably for the foreseeable future, majority of students will be just mixing and matching, taking occasional courses, not necessarily pursuing one of those degrees right now.

And there's the option, of course, to just take them on an auditing basis, which is what we have done for Davenport Hall this past year. And sort of the trial run was we just offered, it was just a Zoom meeting with required readings, but there was no assessment. So you'll still be able to participate in that way.

If you just want to read something, come to class, hear the professor talk about it. But students who want to do the four credit option, where they're actually submitting written responses and writing essays and that, can do that for a slightly higher price. So what are the advantages for a student who goes through this program? What do you expect that they will end up with? What's the expected result and hopeful formation? Yeah, well, I think what we want is, we want well-rounded Christian humanists.

So that's why we have, I mean, the philosophy component is important in here. And the language component is important. You know, the historically renewal movements in church history have all kind of begun as translation movements.

And the importance of of understanding, of knowing the biblical and classical languages

that have, that are our great texts written in. And the way in which they've shaped our theological vocabulary is tremendously important. And being able, being equipped to read some of these sources in the original, I think we're prone to think so much stuff has been translated now.

Sometimes we think, oh, everything important has been translated. And that's so far from the case. There's so many important things that haven't been translated.

And even things that are available in translation, it's a valuable skill to be able to go back and compare to the original and be able just to understand. So you just gives you perspective on not taking your current, you know, current English translation for granted and recognizing sometimes the complexity and ambiguity. So we think language skills is an important part of what we want to emphasize.

The philosophical background is important part of what we want to emphasize. And then dogmatics, Bible, and church history all being very important. But as I mentioned earlier, a lot of it is about, it's not, we're not, not giving you a big overview map of the whole landscape.

Rather, we're going on exploratory tours of key high points so that you, so you know, you know how to be a theological mountaineer, as it were, instead of just imagining that you, that you know the mountain range, because you look at the broad overview map. So yeah. I mean, I think that actually some of those courses, the ones where you study sort of like a thousand years of church history in, you know, two weeks, I think that those courses actually obscure far more than they expose.

And so I think a number of, many people have probably had the experience of taking some course in, you know, British literature and walking away, basically knowing nothing, you know, like they, and maybe even worse than that, they have sort of a meme stuck in their head about what British literature is, which makes it impossible for them to then go and actually read British literature, right? Because you now see all British literature through the, through the strange meme or lens that your, your survey course has given you. And so as you say, you know, I would rather help people see in great detail, extremely important things and learn a posture, which will enable them to go to any other hard thing and, and taking that posture, learn it, learn how to study it, learn how to ask questions in a group well of it and, and grow in relationship to the, the craggy, hard, difficult thing. You know, I think as, as, as I answer the initial question, Alistair, just real quick, I, what do I think people are going to get out of it? I mean, think about how many, how much time and money is spent on things like apologetics in the United States, in the church, or, or sort of just defenses of the faith or explanations of the historical or the, the artifacts that are dug up, you know, out in the deserts and how that can prove, you know, Christianity.

What, what is it that people are, that's motivating everybody to do that? I think it's a

sense that Christianity somehow doesn't, there's something nonsensical about it in the modern world. And by looking at the sources of people who sort of towards the beginning or, or just at the end of the pre-modern world, you know, these older sources helping, helping modern people realize the questions that were being asked, the postures that were being taken, the, the possible solutions from this other era are strangely going to help us a lot more to think through whether Christianity makes sense, both for myself, as well as for the fellow Christians that I run into and the non-Christians. You know, if we're going to give a defense of our faith, I think it's going to be a lot harder than, than people think.

It's, it's not going to be as simple as, you know, here's the silver bullet argument that, you know, solves the problem of secularism or something like that. You need to give people this whole context, what C.S. Lewis called the discarded image, that helps you understand what's the backdrop of reality in which Christianity makes sense. And, and that's something that I think we fundamentally, I think that's what you get if you walk away from, from the Daven Institute.

Whether you take that and go on to become a pastor, a professor, just a gifted lay teacher. But I think ultimately it's something that Christians you see doing for their, for its own sake already. So I can imagine that there, there are some of those people who will realize, okay, my, my sort of hundred page apologetics book didn't quite cut it.

Maybe I need to ask a slightly, the question is a slightly different way. So if any of my listeners are interested in one of these courses or programs, where should they go and how should they find out if it's good for them? [Daven Institute.org](http://DavenInstitute.org) slash Davenet hyphen hall. Or I imagine if you Google Davenet hall, it's probably the only result that will come up.

So D A V E N A N T. And they've got, we've got all the FAQs on there. So, so be sure to look through those, but also you can fill out an inquiry form and our registrar will get in touch with you. And you know, just to give you the price points, we talked about how affordable it is.

It's so our 10 week courses, two hours a week would be our \$149 for an auditor, \$199 for four credit if you're enrolling full time. So that works out to you get an entire master of letters degree for \$8,000. But you said, and potentially get all that credited back later for grad study.

And then \$299 for a part-time four credits. Thank you. I'll have the links to all of those things in the show notes.

Thank you very much for joining me, Brad and Colin. Absolutely. Yeah, it's been great.

Thank you. God bless. And thank you very much for listening.