

## **Naked Bible Podcast Transcript**

### **Episode 279**

### **Interview with Stovall Weems**

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**Host: Trey Stricklin (TS)**  
**Guest: Stovall Weems (SW)**

### **Episode Summary**

On this episode of the podcast Mike chats with Stovall Weems, lead pastor at Celebration Church in Jacksonville, FL. The conversation focuses on the story of how Mike and Stovall met and how their initial phone conversation was the catalyst to Mike accepting a job offer to start a school of theology for Celebration Church a little over a year later.

### **Transcript**

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 279: Interview with Stovall Weems. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you doing this week?

**MH:** Very good. Busy. I'm at my new job, and we're going to talk to my new boss today. [laughs]

**TS:** I can't wait to hear all the new things you all are cooking up.

**MH:** Yeah, I think this is going to be really useful to a lot of people and answer some questions. So I'm glad that this worked out—to do this. So I'm ready to go with it.

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Well, we've been looking forward to having this conversation on the podcast for our audience for some time. Most of you who are listening to this know by this time that I'm no longer with Logos Bible Software (FaithLife Corporation). I've joined the team at Celebration Church in Jacksonville, Florida. I'm still living in Washington until the end of 2019, but we will be moving there. The short version is that I'm tasked with creating a School of Theology for Celebration Church, and of course we'll be writing things. We'll be continuing to do the podcast. Everything I do now, we'll continue to do. But we thought it would be a really good idea to have Stovall Weems on. He is the lead pastor at Celebration Church. And we'll be bringing him into the conversation.

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I wanted to start this off by relating to everyone how in the world this got started. What in the world happened? And it's over a year in the making. So I'm going to go back to last April and give you the story from my perspective, up until the time when Stovall and I actually met. And then we'll bring him in and have a conversation about what in the world is going on here with Mike and with Celebration Church and this new School of Theology, because I've gotten a lot of questions already about it. So this will be the beginning of unpacking it for everybody in this audience.

So last April, I was at my parents' house in Delaware and I was checking email (as I do periodically throughout the day). And in my Logos email, I got this email from Lisa Stewart, who is the Administrative Assistant (or at least that's what her signature said) at Celebration Church. It was just a short email and it said something to the effect of, "Hi, my name is Lisa. I'm the Administrative Assistant here at Celebration Church"... a little bit about the church and its campuses. "Our pastor is Stovall Weems, and he'd like you to call him." And that was, "Okay...?" I didn't know who Stovall was. I didn't know anybody connected with Celebration Church. I'd never heard of it. And as you could imagine, I get a lot of these kinds of emails, with some frequency.

My usual tendency is (I hate to say this) not to reply, because I think two thoughts. 1) If I reply to emails like this, is that giving this other person permission to consider me their private scholar, and then I'll get peppered with questions? The disclaimer on my Gmail is actually quite real. I don't have a lot of time for email. My day is pretty much full with 10-15 other things every day. So I kind of dread those emails where someone wants to start a conversation. 2) And the other thing I think of is, "Well, if I don't reply and it's really important, they'll try again."

5:00

So I'm looking at this email and thinking, "Do or don't I? Do I make this call, or do I not?" It's one of these, "Do I make the left turn or the right turn?" kind of things. And what struck me about the email that kept me from just ignoring it was that there was no explanation in it as to why I'm getting it. That was unusual. Because usually, there's something like, "Oh, I heard you on the podcast." "Oh, I saw you on a mobile ed. video." "Oh, I read one of your books." Or "Oh, I heard an interview..." There's something there that tells me why I'm getting the email. And this had nothing. "He would like you to call him." That was it. So I thought for a few seconds, and then I did something that I had not done before, and I haven't done since. I decided to google Stovall. [laughs] And when I did, I got a few newspaper articles about a particular Sunday morning message that I found on YouTube. So I looked at a couple of things on YouTube.

The short version is, there's Stovall at his church, up front on the platform, and they're wrapping the service up. And he has with him a guy who's doing music whom I'd never heard of before named Paul Wilbur. He's a messianic musician. He does a lot of worship music and is apparently well-known. But I'm just (as I've

said before on the podcast) almost completely divorced from the world of popular Christianity. I don't know who any of these people are. So I'm just watching the service, and there's Stovall, and he gets on his face what I can only call a lost, distracted, shell-shocked expression. And that's that. He leaves, which I thought was odd. Then I find another morning message from a few weeks later, which in my timeline corresponded to a week or two before I got this email (or something like that; it was within about a month's time of when I got the email). And Stovall is trying to explain why his behavior... And he's saying things like, "Well, I owe everybody an explanation. This is going to sound really weird. It's going to sound strange. I don't really know any other way to say it. I'm hoping this doesn't split our church." [laughs] I'm like, "What is it?" [laughs] And long story short, he's trying to explain, "Well, I was up here, and I don't know exactly how to express it, so I'm just going to say it this way. But I was up here like I am every week, and I think I saw the Lord." And he starts talking about these impressions he got—this visionary kind of thing. And I could tell (and he more or less said so) that it was troubling. It was something that really bothered him (shook him up).

So I spent a few minutes watching the video, and then I really thought, "Do I make this phone call?" So the thought occurred to me... I had two things pop into my head. One was "What's the harm? You call this guy. Maybe he just needs somebody to talk to, to talk him off the ledge or something like that. You could do something useful here." And that's my drumbeat, "Try to do something useful." And the other thought was, "Why did I get this email?" Because I still don't know, and it's bugging me. So I thought, "Okay, I'm going to make the call." And I made the call, and it wound up being a short conference call with Stovall and his wife, Kerri.

I haven't told Stovall this before, but I went into the conversation thinking, "Okay, I want to try to maybe scare the guy off a little bit." But I started out with this. I said, "Before we even have a conversation, you need to know exactly who you're talking to. Everything I've ever experienced with some of this charismatic stuff is..." And I gave him the grocery list of adjectives, just for shock value. "It's lame, it's heretical, it's shallow, it's blah blah blah." And Stovall (he's listening), I don't know if you remember this. You can tell us when you come in. But the first thing you said after I went through my list of adjectives of why I don't approve of the charismatic movement was, "I'm so glad to hear that." [laughs] "I'm so glad to hear that. Because we're not charismatic. We're not a charismatic church. We're just a normal evangelical church." And I was glad to hear *that*. I have charismatic friends, so I still want to do something useful here, but that was nice to hear. So then I add, "Why did I get this email?" And the answer was, "We were looking for a couple of people on our end... After my experience, I needed to talk to somebody. So we're looking for somebody that we can trust to talk to about this and help us to parse this and what's going on here. Because this is..." They really didn't have a category for this. And they got some inkling about Mike Heiser and his books, *Supernatural* and *Unseen Realm*.

10:00

So when we had the conversation... I don't know if Stovall remembers this, but it's so memorable to me because it was funny, but it was meaningful, too. After I heard that, "We heard of you and we heard of these books and we started to get into them," Stovall says, "Now I don't really read books with footnotes, but my wife does." [laughs] "She's the academic." And she's in on the conversation, and I could tell that in five minutes... When Kerri starts talking, you can just tell. I've spent a lifetime around people who do read books with footnotes, and it's like, "Okay, I know what she's about here."

"I don't read books with footnotes, but my wife does. I'm reading *Supernatural*." He was almost through that book, and she's two-thirds of the way through *Unseen Realm*. And I was struck by what came next. Stovall said, "This book has helped me sort of have the vocabulary and the framework for whatever I experienced—the content of whatever that was—the things that I saw, the impressions I got. I now know how to talk about a lot of this, and some things have become really important—the fullness of the Gentiles, the fragmentation of the Church, the whole Deuteronomy 32 thing. These are like pieces just falling into place." They gave him a framework for whatever it was that stimulated him to think about this stuff.

So we only talked 10-15 minutes, because what they wanted was a really simple request. Stovall said, "Look, I have to preach in Yakima in another month," (so that was May), "and we have a stayover in Seattle. We want to know if you and your wife would be willing to come to Seattle for that day and spend an afternoon with us so that we can talk about this stuff." And this is the point where I got on board, because when he told me the date, I was already going to be there with my wife on something totally different. So that was, to me, the Lord saying, "We have this worked out. You have to go because you're going to be there anyway. You can't lie to the guy." [laughs]

There it is. So it was very providential. So I said, "Sure, we will come over and meet you at the hotel and we'll talk about this." So I want to bring Stovall in at this point and we'll just talk about our meeting, because out of the meeting I got the history of his church in Jacksonville. I learned about him and his wife. We learned a little bit about the impact of whatever this thing was that happened to him had on him and his plan (or vision or why he wanted to talk to me) and a little bit more detail.

This audience knows where I'm at on these sorts of things. I'm not a charismatic. I don't have any experience in the charismatic movement. I have friends who are charismatic and they're good people. I enjoy them. But I'm not a charismatic. But I also am not comfortable with the idea that God *can't* do certain things. I believe that God *can* invade somebody's life. I believe God *can* intrude upon a person and take them out of their comfort zone in a supernatural way. Most of what goes on in the charismatic movement I think is nonsense. But I am not comfortable concluding that God cannot act in some really extra-normal ways today. So

everybody in this audience knows that, and that's the attitude I took into the meeting. So Stovall, why don't you just jump in here and feel free to introduce yourself as well to the audience. But we want to talk about this meeting and what happened after that.

15:00 **SW:** Yeah, Mike. Thanks for having me. It's really an honor to be on your podcast. And just listening to the story from your end, it brings back so many great memories, especially the part about my wife. Because I can remember numerous times when you were saying, "Now, you're bringing your wife, aren't you? Your wife is going to come, isn't she?" [laughter] In other words, "We're going to need a translator between you and I."

But yeah, it's... I had an encounter with the Lord. Passover of last year (not this year) happened on Good Friday. It was unlike anything that I've ever experienced in my 49 years of walking with the Lord. And I was so shook up by it. What I began to do in the days following that was really just to try to seek context, try to gain an understanding, try to gain... "What is this? What just happened to me?" All the things that I felt like that I was shown, all the impressions that I had.

So one of the things that we quickly began to follow was the voice that I heard (which I believe was the Lord's voice) that started the whole encounter was in Hebrew. So Kerri and I and our team really thought that that was God setting us on a path. So we did two things. 1) We started devouring the book of Hebrews. 2) And we started reading Hebrew scholars. And your name... Kerri is the academic, and she was pulling up all kinds of books and resources. And your name came up, and we quickly got into *The Unseen Realm* and your material. And there were certain things, especially in *Unseen Realm*, when I saw those things and when I saw language around certain things... When I saw certain things that you describe in that book, the first thing was that I was convinced that you had had a vision or an encounter with the Lord as well. I was telling Kerri, "This guy, he's seen what I've seen. He has to have had an encounter or some type of a vision. So we have to get in touch with this guy, Mike Heiser." [laughs] So that's where you got the email, and then the phone call. And I quickly found out that you hadn't had a vision or an encounter, and strictly all of that was from the texts. And that was really encouraging.

So we came out to meet you in Seattle. And that's what kind of started this whole process. I feel like there's just a whole lot in the unseen realm... I don't know if we want to get into some of the things of the encounter, some of the things of the unseen realm, but it just gave me a language around what I saw, or the impressions that I had. I saw things that were in your book. So that was the catalyst for this whole thing of us meeting up together in Seattle.

**MH:** Well my judgment on these sorts of things... And I'm not... I don't have lots of people contacting me and sharing these sorts of things from their lives.

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Occasionally, I get emails like that. But having said what I said earlier, I'm not real comfortable with the thought that God can't do X, Y, or Z. The only way that I can evaluate these things (and this is what the Lord expects of me, and I think expects of all of us)... You listen to somebody's story and then you have to ask the question, "Does it bear fruit?" "Is the content of the story scriptural? Is there anything that's clearly not? And does it bear fruit?" So this is how I'm approaching going into it. And you started to describe... This is May, so this isn't that long after this episode. And you had already started to make changes in how you were doing ministry. And I was struck by that, that this wasn't just some sort of weird thing and "Now I'm going to use this weird thing to be popular and get an audience." It wasn't that. It actually prompted some specific... They were initial steps, but then... I'd like you to talk a little bit about what it prompted you to do. And then as we kept in touch after May and throughout the year, I could see that this actually has changed this person's direction. And to me, that was meaningful.

**SW:** Yes, I would say, just speaking freely, my encounter with the Lord... A couple of things about it: It was awesome. It was wonderful. But it was very humbling. And that way, it was also very disruptive. In that encounter, there was obviously a great deal of repentance that I needed to do. And that repentance, I like to say, just to kind of put it in biblical language... If someone were to say, "Stovall, what happened with this encounter with the Lord?" I would say that it caused me to return to Jesus as my first love. And in returning to Jesus as my first love, there's also a return to imaging, to honoring his name, to understanding that he's sacred and holy. Also a return to family. You know that you're so good at describing the Eden to New Eden narrative—that God is all about family. He wants family. It's a return to his adoptive family, but also our families as well (prioritizing them). And then a return to what I would call a metanarrative, biblical Christianity. I call that "wholeness." I call that engaging the whole story of Scripture and then creating habitats of wholeness in our congregations and in our people.

The things before... I would say this. I think it's important for our audience to know this. Before this encounter, by way of American church standards, our church was doing very well. It was doing well. We were a "church growth" kind of a church. I actually was instrumental in coming up with a lot of those systems and methodologies.

**MH:** When you say "systems and methodologies," I think my audience will need that unpacked a little bit. What I think you're alluding to there is church growth techniques, like the Bill Hybels thing. (That's the only name I think I know under the label of church growth.) Is that what you're getting at there?

**SW:** Yeah. And also, all of the things that I was doing (that I'm now not doing), I was doing in ignorance. It's what I grew up in. It's what I was taught about how to do church. Now I didn't get saved like that. When I got saved in college, I

immediately went down to the Amazon jungle and spent most of my time down in the Amazon preaching to people who hadn't heard the name of Jesus. But when God called me to plant Celebration in Jacksonville, I was just looking for help: how to plant a church, how to build a church. And then shortly after that, that's when all of the Bill Hybels and different streams of church growth and more of the *how to do church*... Unfortunately, what that has grown into is a lot of pastors who know *how to do church*, but they don't have the substance of the message—the substance of what it means to be an elder or a pastor. And that's kind of where it is today. So in this encounter with the Lord, there were several things that... I like to say that I realized that I had substituted things. There were things that should have been tools, but I had taken those tools and I had made them... I had substituted the things of God for a lot of those tools. So in the church growth value system, what's valued is numbers and how fast you grow and how big you are and how well you're seen.

**MH:** You used the word *competition* a few times in our conversation, which I was struck by.

**SW:** Yes, it's very competitive. When you have things like Christian magazines coming out ranking the churches... [MH laughs] "Here's the hundredth..."

**MH:** I didn't know they did that. [laughs]

**SW:** Mike, I'm sorry. Unfortunately, as you're with me, you're going to be opened up to a whole new world. [MH laughs] So yeah, there's actually magazines that rank the largest churches in America, the fastest growing churches in America. We've been on those lists several times. So what is rewarded, what's celebrated, is numbers and growth and all those things. That's what's celebrated, and even how fast you can get there.

So here's the thing. There are tons of guys out that, yes, numbers are celebrated, but they really are trying to reach people. They're trying to make disciples. But what it does is... What gets celebrated is what is valued. It creates a system where it's extremely detrimental to pastors. Pastors are burning out one after the other because there's just a ton of competition and there's a ton of a lot of those things. It's just very worldly. It's corporate. I don't know how else to say it. I can assure you, Jesus is not up in heaven saying, "Rank the churches!" [MH laughs] He's about as far from that as possible. So all I can speak for, for myself, it was just several of these things that I was doing in ignorance. It was just very humbling. There was a lot of repentance. There was a lot of... I just had to own...

**MH:** And you did. We had never met, and when we met in May you weren't holding anything back as far as your own self-assessment in light of this experience. And my wife and I needed to see that. Because that marks something genuine. There was no... I'll put it this way: there wasn't a whiff of self-interest in the room. [SW laughs] And that was important for us to see.

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**SW:** You know, I obviously can't speak for anybody else, but I know that the Jesus that I encountered... When I was with him, I experienced what I call a full spectrum of opposing emotions or opposing impressions. One of those things is love. Just total love. Total acceptance. A bonding, a covenant bond, a deeper love. It's not a love that we know of here. And then at the same time while experiencing that acceptance and love, there's terror. There's fear. It's the purest fear. It's the purest terror. And then all things... Before him, you're naked. All things come to light. And then he's just so wonderful. He's so awesome. He overwhelms everything. And then the way he treats you. He treats you... Even though he's God and he's king and he's the savior, he treats you the way he treats you. He treats you like a brother. He treats you like an equal, even though we're not equals. So I like to say that he showed me his covenant. And then what I saw with family, what I saw with sacredness... I think your language of sacred space really helped me define a whole lot of what I experienced there, Mike. And then how everyone is equal. There's not a hierarchy in God's kingdom. We're all equal. We're all kings and priests. We're all one before him. Right now, he's the only ruler. There's no rulers. We're only stewards. And I think what I had done was that I had stepped into a place of rulership when I should have been a steward. And when we step into rulership, that's when we begin to take God's glory, and that's when we begin to substitute and think that we have authority to change things or substitute things, when we don't have that authority. We're stewards. Now if we're faithful stewards, then we can rule and reign with him in the millennium.

**MH:** It's a partnership, not an underling kind of relationship.

**SW:** Exactly. I experienced that there. This past year has been trying to walk all those things out.

**MH:** Tell us what that's been like at your church. Because when we... At the May meeting, you eventually told us what you wanted to see happen was... You start every year with 21 days of prayer and fasting. And out of that, you said there will be a theme that emerges for the year for the church. And then you'll preach messages that link into that theme, and you'll do other activities that help the congregation track with that theme. And what you wanted was for me to show up toward the tail end of that and present my content in one day, and then Sunday we would do a couple of Q&A sessions during the service. And we did that. It's all on YouTube if people want to watch that. But we got to meet staff people. We got to meet some of the SEU students that were down there, and just people... I probably stuck around after both events for at least an hour or an hour and a half, just chit-chatting with people and having conversations. So we got to meet a lot of people. And it's had an effect on your congregation. So why don't you just tell us, what's it been like trying to live out some of these changes in direction or the way you approach things? What's that been like at church?



**SW:** So how I like to describe that is, in my encounter with the Lord (or just after that), I feel like it was like looking at... Like when you buy a puzzle. You look on the front of the puzzle box and see the picture. And then you open up the box and dump out all the pieces. And you're constantly looking at the picture, trying to fit the pieces in the right place. So it began this process where taking all these pieces... Like how God's distinct—he's other—but we're one, we're family. Essentials. Things that I thought were not important, and now I see how exactly important they are. And obviously one of those things was really engaging Scripture. Obviously, my hunger for the word exploded. But then bringing that into the church, where all of us are engaging the whole story of Scripture and the text, from pre-school all the way up through every age demographic. So initially, it was very disruptive, to say the least. [laughter] It was very disruptive, because what I needed to do was to... It's kind of like, when you see Jesus teaching, he'd be teaching a group of people and he would say, "You've heard it said this, but now I say unto you this other thing." So I felt like that.

**MH:** Yeah.

35:00

**SW:** "I know you all have heard me teach this, or you've heard me say this, but now, I'm saying *this*." And because our church was 20 years old... By the grace of God, Kerri and I and a lot of our staff have a lot of integrity and longevity, not only with our people but in the community. And initially, I thought we would to lose half the church. I know what it sounds like when someone says something like this. But the Lord was just so faithful. So at first it was deconstructing a lot of things, and then it was implementing... I like to call it a new wineskin for the new wine. Then it was implementing a system and a ministry structure where all these things could really take place in the life of the church. So that's where... Now how we engage the whole story of Scripture, that's a big part of what we do. The family, the communion in the home, obviously, because the Lord's table was such a big part of my encounter. That's a big part of our church now. And then really just what we would call habitats for wholeness. It's really just focusing on getting people into a habitat for wholeness where you know that when they're planted, the growth is going to be automatic. When you plant a seed, if it's in the right atmosphere (it has the right sunlight, the ingredients, the soil), it doesn't have to strive to grow. It just grows. So I would say, that's what we've been working on. So it's really been a complete overhaul of all of our ministries, everything from Foundations to how we do groups to how we do services, and then also what we value.

**MH:** I remember when we went down there, my first question when we got to your place was, "So what's the pushback been?" [laughs] Because I knew that you had... Having stayed in touch with you during the course of the year, there were little things like you just described leaking into the text or the conversations. So I was curious, thinking you had to have had some resistance. How is this really going? And you were just so pleasantly (I don't know if "surprised" is the right word) pleased that, "Hey, this is what a church is." [laughter]

**SW:** Yes, yes. God was faithful. And I knew that... I did feel that if I stewarded it well and that if our team stewarded it well, and we did the things that we should do, which is seeking out a lot of scholarship, seeking out you, processing slowly with our team... I know this, that whenever God visits someone, or whenever he visits a group or there's a move of God, it's never, ever, about one person—for one person, to be done by one person, or anything like that. That one person is just one of many. And God... Bringing a people, forming a people, forming a family, for himself.

We have had resistance. I think that the people in our church that... People that are not willing to take responsibility for their spiritual growth, those people would have a much tougher time staying in our church for a long period of time now. Before, that didn't really matter. They could just come every Sunday. But now, because we see ourselves... (Ephesians 4) As we equip the saints to do the work of the ministry, now we're equipping people with everything they need for their home so that they can go through Scripture themselves with their kids or in groups of friends. So it's how to be a light in your workplace. The priesthood of the believer... that's a big, big thing for us now—actually functioning as that in your home. Seeing the home as the first church and really functioning in that.

So we kind of call it a Gentile Sabbath (for lack of a better word). Really just getting families to the table, Mike, and giving them the tools that they need to have communion together. And if there needs to be forgiveness and prayers of affirmation and things like that... I think even all the secular studies today will tell you that the reason that society has just gone so far off the deep end is that families can't get around the table anymore. And ironically, that's the narrative. It's Eden to Eden. We started at a table with God in his garden, and we'll be at the table—the marriage supper of the Lamb eventually in the new Eden. So it's establishing those tables and those environments where people can really get whole and have meaningful discussions that lead to meaningful transformation.

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**MH:** It was interesting... Shortly after we met in May, I had told you I was working on the little book, *What Does God Want?* For those in the audience who have read it, they know that the family metaphor drives the metanarrative in that book. It's a book for seekers and new believers. So the first third of the book is Scripture—salvation history as story, very family-oriented. And then it talks about what the gospel is and what it isn't—a little section or a primer on discipleship. And I had asked you and Kerri to read that, because you're experienced with dealing with the seeker right there or the new believer... Because I don't know if people know, you have a very large church, so you're concerned about whether this is going to have a damaging impact. Any church would feel that. If you're a church of 100 and you lose 50 people, that's a big deal. Here, it's not so much the numbers of the people who might leave, but when you're as big as you guys are, you have lots of staff personnel and they really *have* to be on the same page for this not to descend into chaos.

When we got there in January, one of the things we noticed was that you... I think you're correct about how you're not a new guy coming in and changing things. You have a long history with these people. And they were willing to trust you. So that really spoke well of what's going on there. But you have certain sweet spots as far as the experience of your ministry and building it up from nothing to this really large network of campuses. So you've had to deal with people who I was trying to target in this book, basically every day. So we sort of traded. I gave you that and asked you to read through it, and you gave me your little Gentile Sabbath handbook and asked me to go through that. [SW laughs] So we were sort of trading off on things that we're both interested in, maybe a little bit of skill set. And Kerri was really thorough with the manuscript. Because the idea was, if you guys can use this, please do, because that's why it exists.

And I thought the Gentile Sabbath idea was really a good one. It's something that we're looking forward to as a family to be a part of when we're not detached from you guys—when we actually get down there. To me, it's a simple thing, but I agree. It's really, yeah. It's... Maybe it's profound because it is simple. [laughter] You know? But it really has had a ripple effect, and we just had people telling us that, "Wow, this is new, but we really kind of like this!" They like learning things. They like the time to basically get away from the world a little bit, more than 20 minutes or whatever it is in church. And it's with people that they're supposed to like [laughs]—their family. But yeah, just the whole carving out of an environment. So we were sort of cross-fertilizing a little bit almost from the very beginning with some of these ideas. But something you just said about just needing to do certain things so that people take ownership. And everything you're describing, you got to the point in our conversation where you wanted to (for lack of a better word)... You knew this needed to be replicated.

**SW:** Yes, yes.

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**MH:** This needs to be replicatable and self-sustainable, where people can pick up on this template. And you're not designing a template that's new. [SW laughs] This is all rooted in Scripture.

**SW:** Exactly. What I love... One of my favorite things to say when I'm talking to a group of pastors or leaders and they're asking me about what's going on, I start off by saying, "I want to be real clear. There is no innovative idea here." [MH laughs] "If you're looking for what the next whatever is to make your ministry this or that, I have nothing new. No innovative ideas. Nothing. This is all basically plain as day in Scripture. And that was part of... What the Lord did in me was really understanding the kingdom of God and that as Jesus told us to pray, with so much of the language you give, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name." So there's our Father, so we're family. But he is hallowed in heaven. There's his distinction—his sacred space. But we're his sacred space as his family. But we're to honor his name. That leads into imaging—functioning as imagers and all those things. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as

*it is in heaven.*” And at least for me, what I feel like the Lord showed me was I saw the kingdom (or a dimension of it)... I saw that as it is. So it’s like the kingdom of God can’t be improved upon. It can’t be innovated. It needs no improvement. You can’t make it better. So for me, it was just really getting back to the kingdom and understanding my role as a steward. And it’s God’s church. I felt like I was giving God his church back. And then in that, with that and family, that’s really when... Even the way that we used to preach the gospel and having people make decisions—just raise hands or whatever. That was the goal, to get them to raise a hand and pray a prayer. Now, we don’t do any of that. We’ve had more... I don’t want to get into numbers. But we had thousands of water baptisms last year. Now we preach, “Surrender to Jesus. It’s loyalty to Jesus.”

**MH:** Believing loyalty.

**SW:** Believing loyalty. And if you’re serious about that, let’s get into the water. We keep baptismal tanks outside our locations. And it’s just been amazing to see how (what’s the right word?)... what a deeper experience of repentance and sounder conversion (if you want to call it) that we’ve seen in the lives of people. We don’t need to do near what we would call the follow-up—the trying to keep people connected and trying to get them... What we’ve seen in this process is, it’s almost like if they get saved with the right gospel and in the right way, well then... They get water baptized. They go into Foundations. It’s just...

**MH:** If you can get them... Like with the Gentile Sabbath thing, just... Get them with a group of believers every week that you get to have conversations and fellowship and...

**SW:** Exactly.

**MH:** It sounds suspiciously like what they were doing in the book of Acts.  
[laughter]

**SW:** You don’t say. [laughs]

**MH:** I have the same kind of “problem” with my content. I don’t know how many interviews I’ve been on where I’ll say something like, “Hey, the dirty little secret of *Unseen Realm* is that Mike doesn’t have an original thought.” [SW laughs] All I’m doing is connecting dots. All the dots are from peer-reviewed scholarship, but I’m a dot-connector. I look for patterns. I don’t *have* to make anything up. There’s so much good stuff right there... [laughter] I don’t *have* to make anything up. People don’t intuitively understand that. Because the first impulse is, “Heiser is off doing something really bizarre and new. We’ve never heard this before. The problem isn’t that it’s new. The problem is that it’s so old.”

**SW:** Exactly.

50:00

**MH:** “And you just missed it. So try to adjust your thinking a little bit. This is old. It’s right there. It’s from the text. It may not look exactly like your tradition looks, but it’s there and it’s not new. It’s just really old. And just be patient with it and think about it. Trace down the bunny trails. You’ll find that you’re going to be led to Scripture.” So yeah, I have empathy [laughs] for what you’re saying here. You had a much bigger vision for this than I... I’m going into this, “How can I help this guy? Let’s try to do something useful here. I can see that something has really happened here. God’s up to something. So I need to be as useful as I possibly can be to this.” And then when we were down there, you got really serious about this school idea. Because this is intended to be a catalyst toward reproducing not a new template, but a really old one.

**SW:** Yes, a really old one.

**MH:** In your network. And how you... You’re boots-on-the-ground ministry. And I go out speaking a lot or if it’s by email, I meet pastors and people in churches who are teaching classes or they’re doing discipleship. This isn’t just you. There are people really everywhere making an effort to try to take the content that we produce either in the books or on the podcast or wherever it comes from and trying to make it applicable and useful in church so that more people get it and do the same. So what is this school idea? Tell people... What is going on with Mike and Stovall here?

**SW:** [laughter] Well, the big picture for me now... And once again, going back to my encounter, it’s like the Lord gave me a new schema. Like there wasn’t a place in my mind to land what I saw and experienced. But what you see, you can’t un-see. And what I see is this: All of this connects. All of this is crucial. Everything is so fragmented in the Body of Christ now. But if you get... Let’s just go to your basic 101 book that you came out with, *What Does God Want?* Let’s talk about family. Well, so if we’re talking about family, how can we fulfill the Great Commission if we don’t understand what the Great Commission is for? How can we fulfill a Great Commission where we’re not modeling the Great Commission? So if God wants family and that’s what he’s restoring and that is what is... It just means everything to him. And I could talk about my encounter with the Lord when I felt that, and the mission from our heavenly Father, and for the Bride to be purified. It’s all... Everything is for family. He wants family. And so how can we understand that narrative without engaging the whole story of Scripture? If we don’t, we’re going to think that there are things that don’t matter. We’re going to think that the gospel is about some type of personal escape instead of about becoming a people and becoming a family. We’re going to think that the Great Commission is the great suggestion. We’re going to look at all kinds of things in the Bible and there’s going to be a disconnect because we fragmented them.

One thing that... Even seeing King Jesus as a whole person. What I’ve found a lot is people look at the Old Testament and New Testament and it’s kind of like Bad Cop/Good Cop. And the Father is doing all this stuff in the Old Testament,

and nice little Jesus with his baby lamb is just hiding behind the Father somewhere and his ministry kind of begins in the manger. We forget that Jesus has no beginning. [laughs] He was and is and is to come. It's the same Jesus. You talk about this, I know, in several of your works. Any time that the Lord would engage humanity... If there was any kind of form or person to engage the humans (all the way back to what Paul talks about—how God created the world through Jesus), Jesus has always been there. He's always been merciful. Thank God he fulfilled... He came as the perfect sacrifice. But I think people getting the whole concept of God... I've never seen a generation so averse to justice, or that God is also a God of judgment. His judgment and mercy are two sides of the same coin of his love. And if we don't get the whole truth—the whole narrative, the whole story, the whole picture of the whole King Jesus—then we're not going to be a whole people. We're not going to be the bride that God's looking for. I'm not talking about perfection. I'm not talking about being great with your behavior all the time. But what I am talking about is just coming into a wholeness with God that produces love.

**MH:** Yeah.

**SW:** I didn't mean to go on a rant there. I don't know what...

**MH:** That reflects... I'm going to be coming down there... To me, this sort of became like a...

**SW:** Oh, the School of Theology! [laughs]

**MH:** Yeah. I'll let you jump back in, and then I'll chime in a little bit later with what I was going to say. But go ahead. Yeah. Because that was where this idea... "Hey, we need to do something useful now on a bigger scale." And it's not just the school. The content... You have the infrastructure, and more importantly, the will—the vision—to take all of this that we've been talking about global in an intentional way. And the School of Theology is part of that. So go ahead and just give us a short overview of what you want to see happen. Why are we doing this?

**SW:** So basically, if you had asked me, obviously, a couple of years ago, "What drives Celebration Church?" I would say, "The experience drives Celebration Church, especially the presentation. And yes we preach the Word," and all those things. But it was really about creating a really good experience for people with as few barriers as possible to engage God. So we still value that. We still value a good experience, as long as God is the object of our worship and he is who our experience is aimed toward. So we still have that. However, what drives us now is content. If you would ask us, "Hey, what really drives the church now?" I would say, "We are a content-driven church."

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So the content, whether it's the person coming into the Foundations class or whether it's a pastor that's going to come in to our leadership reboot program... because we have so many pastors that are burning out. They're hooked up to a system that's driving them to burn out. So we have the wholeness spectrum from the person that just gets saved all the way to the guy or the couple that's been pastoring for 30 years. That's the whole scope there. So that school... I like to think of it... There's the theology (that would be the school). There is the methodology (that would be the church). That's how to take this and implement this wholeness into your church in a practical way, which will really set some pastors free from a whole lot of the stuff that they're putting energy into now. So there's the methodology. And then there's also what I like to call... (It's really not psychology. It's really biblical psychology. But we're just calling it psychology. And that's what Dr. Henry Cloud is doing for us. We were just out with him a couple of weeks ago in Los Angeles and we are redoing his book, *Changes that Heal*, into two things. One is a leadership version for pastors and leaders. Because he, like you (it's real interesting Mike), is all about imaging. He says, "The foundation for all mental health issues is a lack of imaging." So there's the leadership version and then there's also the church version. And why that is so important is because then it walks people through how to take ownership. All the things that... All the family content... If we're going to be about family... All those family issues that people can get into in unhealthy ways, he's got a great, biblical way to help apply the Word and get them to a place of freedom.

**MH:** Yeah, imaging is discipleship. It's being like Jesus. It's imitating Jesus. And how would Jesus do a string of relationships? How would he relate to business partners? How would he relate to a spouse? How would he relate to kids? Just these... They're basic, they're simple. They're basic, and yet they're hard, because they just make demands [laughs] on what you say and do and... Imaging, of course, is bearing the name... These are concepts that this audience is familiar with. But a lot of people in the church have no familiarity at all with these sorts of things. Or they know bits and pieces of it, but there's no framework for it.

**SW:** Yeah, there's no framework. And it leads into a lot of unhealthy things.

**MH:** That's the lifestyle or just living life component of it. I've said on lots of podcasts or interviews, we have lots of churches that are filled with people who have bites of information. They have lots of data points under their belt. But they have no framework into which they fit. They can't see any interconnectivity, because they lack a framework. This is just the practical side of that, that you're talking about here. So...

**SW:** And without that framework, Mike, what happens is then the root can't go down deep. The Word can't take a deep root. So it sets people up to be easily led astray—for any type of hardship or persecution or even inconvenience, in the West. All of a sudden, they're disconnected. And unfortunately, they can find a theology on the internet or in certain camps that say that's okay. So what we

want to do, going back to the school is, we want to take the supernatural worldview—the metanarrative— and we want to take it global. We have churches and ministries in Europe, and also in Zimbabwe. We have a partner church in Tel Aviv and several churches here in the US. And then we have some really exciting open doors in different places. We have another partner church down in Columbia. So we just really believe... Everywhere I've been, there is a hunger. God's people... There is a hunger for the truth and to step into what's next for the kingdom of God. And I think that this is a crucial part to it. When you get into restoration, which is like we talked about, which is uncovering things that are lost or things that were broken and putting them back... There's nothing new here. This has all been there. Some of it's been buried or hidden, or we just haven't seen it. So now we have this restoration that needs to take place—all the fragmented type of Christianity and theology—a restoration of wholeness that needs to happen. And if that's going to happen, it will. It'll bring some type of reformation. I know that's a big word.

**MH:** It's a loaded term, yeah.

**SW:** It's a loaded term.

**MH:** You are not the first person to use that word to my face [laughs] as they get gripped by the content. That word has come up. Let's just put it that way. It's too big of a word to get fixated on. But at the end of the day, it doesn't matter what the word is, we're here to just do our job. It's real simple. [laughs] You know? Just do your job.

**SW:** Exactly. Yeah. And not to make too much of that, but there has been reformation going on probably since the 300s. Of course the big one with Calvin and Luther and all of those guys. But we're not there yet, because we're not... God's work of restoring and reforming his church is not done, or else we would have fulfilled the Great Commission and seen the fullness of the Gentiles come in. So I think the sooner that we can get to the understanding and humble ourselves that we've not arrived... We're not there yet. And we've got to pursue God in a whole new fresh way. I think the sooner we can do that, the better.

**MH:** Yeah, and to wrap up here, when I... Just being in conversations with you... And I'm going to make a video to try to... Once I can describe what the school will look like... And I've already handed in a couple of things. This is my second day now at the new job. [laughter] But I couldn't wait! Over the weekend, I sent some things to some of the people we have to work with on creating the school—starting points for a whole bunch of things. When we actually have some decisions made and some concrete structure to it... It's already taking shape. It'll be a little bit before we kind of know what it's going to be. I'll make a video and get into the explanation a little bit more. But the short version is (the unformed version is), we're going to cycle through my content in a year. And then beyond that, we will add things that are really important for anyone in ministry (and I



would say, any serious Christian) to think well about. So it's the content that this audience is used to, like in *Supernatural* and *Unseen Realm*. We are going to systematically work through that in class form over the course of a year. And then we're going to be adding stuff, as well, to create a School of Theology that focuses on the supernatural metanarrative. And then you will begin... You'll see other things that work into that as far as, "How do I start this in my own church? How do I try to transmit this to other people and live it out and whatnot?" We're going to be tackling all of that, because we want it to be something that people can take and adapt and put it to good use. So we're back to the, "we want to be useful here." That's all we're trying to do.

**SW:** Amen. Yes.

**MH:** So I think this will be a big...

**SW:** Just so your listeners know, the website is up: [SchoolofTheology.com](http://SchoolofTheology.com). And they can go there and just fill out a request for more information. And like you said, as we put some things together over the next month we can get back with them. But I think there's going to be a great response for the school. And we're really, really excited about it.

**MH:** So the message to this audience is, if you want what you're used to on the podcast and in my books... If you want that sort of content to go global, just tell somebody about it. Participate in any way you can. Tell somebody about it. When I heard Stovall's vision, I'm sitting there thinking about, "I've got 25 foreign language translations of *Supernatural* living on the Miqlat website, and the problem is that nobody knows that they're there."

**SW:** Yeah. They're about to know. [laughter]

1:10:00 **MH:** Yeah. I was just going to say, I remember telling you, and it's like, "Oh, we'll fix that problem." [laughter]

**SW:** They are about to know.

**MH:** The wheels are turning. This is a big part of it. And linking up with Celebration to start the School of Theology is a big way to give me far more control of my time to dedicate to these sorts of things, and also to produce content that can be put to good use. So it turned into sort of a Macedonian call for me. Like, "Would you please just come over here and do something?" [laughter] "Come over here and help us." And really, it became that. I'd end up being ashamed if I didn't do this. I just knew I was supposed to go. It's like, "I don't know this person. I don't know anybody there. The megachurch kind of scares me." [laughter] But it's like, the Lord doesn't call us to feel comfortable all of the time. [laughter] Otherwise, he'd hand us a pillow and tell us to take a nap. [laughter]

Well, thanks for being on with us and talking about all the things that have gone on over the last 14 or 15 months. And I think this will give people some context to latch on share the vision of what we're trying to do. Again, right now, the best thing you can do is get other people to start paying attention, because it'll take form. It'll take shape. And we will get the ball rolling here.

**SW:** Very excited, Mike. And thanks so much for having me on. I really appreciate it. And I'm just super-excited about the future.

**MH:** Yep. Thank you.

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**TS:** Alright, Mike. It was a great interview. It's interesting to hear what you all are doing. Do you have any idea what your target date will be for the first semester of the School of Theology?

**MH:** Yeah, the start date that we've picked is going to be February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020. So about a month after I get there. But in the meantime, the thing will exist and be ready to roll before I leave. So that's really what I'm tasked with in the next six months—to create this school and order my classes and create website content. All that stuff. So there's lots of little things to do that go into this. But February 10<sup>th</sup> is the kick-off date, at least as far as we know it now, and there's no reason to suspect that's going to change.

**TS:** Now, is there going to be an online portion, or do you have to physically be there?

**MH:** Yeah, there will be an online element to this. As it stands right now (and again, this is in its infancy) they are going to record the content. We don't know what we're going to do with it yet. There will be an online element to this, where students who live in other parts of the world and obviously aren't in Jacksonville can take courses. But all of those things are on the table. They are all anticipated elements to the School of Theology. So I think in the next month or two, we'll know pretty much how that's going to work. But yep, all of that is on the table to do.

**TS:** Alright, sounds good. We're looking forward to it! Next week, we're back into Exodus. And with that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.