

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 338

Conversation Series, Part 5

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Host: Trey Stricklin (TS)

Guests:

Justin Hartpence (JH)

Sam Sears (SS)

Sebastian Van Wessem (SVW)

Caleb Brown (CB)

Episode Summary

Recently Dr. Heiser reached out to his audience asking whether pastors who follow the podcast had tried teaching the content of his book, *The Unseen Realm*, to their congregations. The response was amazing, with close to 150 responses. The interest in sharing the experience of teaching the meta-narrative of Scripture to congregations stimulated the idea to have guest pastors and teachers on the podcast to tell us their stories. This episode is the fifth of a series in that regard. Join us as we listen to pastors of diverse denominations and congregations talk about the impact of teaching biblical theology in its original context to their people.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 338: Conversation Series, Part 5. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you doing this week?

MH: Pretty good. How are things in Texas?

TS: They're hot. And school has started back up.

MH: Still so.

TS: Yeah, it's still hot, and school is back in session. So we're going to see how that goes, and hopefully everything will go fine. It's a different, new world. I'll tell you. It's crazy.

MH: Yeah, we've been through our first summer here in Florida and it's stinking hot. But I have not seen any flying cockroaches yet. So that's good.

TS: Yeah, that is good. And when you do, trust me, you're going to scream and run.

MH: [laughs] Right. No, I'll just get one of the pugs. The pugs will go after him.

TS: There you go.

MH: They don't reach too high, so...

TS: [laughs] Yeah. Well, Mike, we have our last episode of the Conversation Series, where we're talking to people out there who are repurposing our content. And I think people are enjoying them. I'm getting lots of feedback that people are enjoying the series. So we'll have to keep it going, probably.

MH: Yeah, I actually got an email this week from somebody that asked, "Hey, how do I introduce this to my church?" And it was funny, because they were telling me, "I've listened to all the podcast episodes a couple of times." So I said, "Well, I don't really have anything to add, other than the Conversation Series." [laughs] And he emailed me back and said, "Well, I have to admit, I skipped those." [laughter] So that was just the thing he needed. So for those of you out there who either haven't listened to those yet, you should. Listen to this one and then go back and listen to the other ones. And if you have friends who are thinking about trying this, that's where to direct them. That's why we did the series.

TS: There you go. And no skipping any episodes, ever.

MH: Correct.

TS: You've got to listen to all 300+ of them.

MH: Shame on you. [laughs]

TS: There you go. Alright, Mike, I'm excited to get started. So let's not let these guys wait any longer.

MH: Well, we have four guests on our episode today. This is the fifth conversation we've had with people who are out doing ministry in various capacities, who have dipped into the *Unseen Realm* content and tried to transmit it in some way or teach it in some way to people, just to get a feel for what's

happening in churches (and youth groups and whatnot) with the content. So today (as I mentioned), we have four. We have Justin Hartpence. Am I saying that correctly, Justin? I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself a little bit to the audience. But did I get your name right?

JH: Yeah, that's correct.

MH: Where are you at?

JH: So I am in Dayton, OR. It's about 30 miles or so from Portland, kind of on your way to the coast. So if you've ever heard of the Spruce Goose, the museum that houses it is right outside of our town.

MH: Ah, okay. And you're a pastor there?

JH: Yeah, I'm a senior pastor at a small church here. It's an older church, as far as it's 125 years old. I came here about seven years ago. Followed a guy that had been here for 32 years.

MH: Wow.

JH: Yeah. So just been doing ministry here. And a lot of people in the church had a very established and long history within the church. We've seen some fluctuation and growth in and out over the years. But it has definitely presented (for what we'll get into a little bit later) some interesting dynamics when it comes to presenting the content.

MH: Right, right. So what was your entry point? How did you discover the content?

5:00

JH: I get together once a month with the other pastors in my town. We get together and just hang out, share life, mostly have camaraderie. And myself and one of the other pastors (the pastor of the Dayton First Baptist Church) here in town... He and I get along really well. And we like to talk theology and also we share podcasts back and forth. So kind of every month, we're trading new podcasts to listen to. And about two years ago, he said, "Hey, you should look at this." It was Bible Project and then Naked Bible Podcast. And I thought, "Huh, Naked Bible. That sounds weird." But I'm sure you've never heard that before.

MH: [laughter] Right. We've never heard that before.

JH: [laughs] And so I kind of began listening. And I'm kind of a podcast binger. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. [laughs] But I'll turn on and just listen to one and a half to 1.7 times speed and just blaze through stuff. But as I listened to that, at first, hearing you talk about *Unseen Realm* stuff, I thought, "I need to get this." So I got the book and I read the book in about two weeks. And

that's pretty good for me. I'm not the fastest reader in the world. [laughs] But since I've... It was really good, because when I was getting acquainted with this, the Bible Project was doing some similar stuff. And so that kind of helped over the period of time.

MH: Well, good. Next we have Sam Sears. And where are you, Sam?

SS: I'm in Visalia, CA. It's just a little bit south of Fresno. I'm the senior pastor here at The Fountain. I've only been here a year and a half. And it's been an interesting journey. And I've incorporated the *Supernatural* and *Unseen Realm* stuff as I've taught chapter by chapter, verse by verse.

MH: Mm hmm. A year and a half. You're a brave soul. [laughter] Just to jump in when you're new there. [laughs]

SS: Yeah, I knew that... California's kind of crazy anyways. [MH laughs] So I had done apologetics ministry with Ratio Christi. And the only place crazier than a college campus was California. So I... This church where I was had a... It's 160-something years old. I think we're about to turn the mark to 167 now. And they had spent this time being in a very liberal denomination. And the pastor before me had kind of led them out of that denomination and set things straight again. When I was with Frank Turek/CIA, someone from the Jew and Gentile Podcast told me about your work, as we kind of just talked about different problems we encountered and questions that skeptics would have. And then when I got here, the previous pastor had already laid a little bit of a foundation in a small group. And he brought you up again. So I dug in. And I was going to teach through Acts fairly quickly early on, because, you know... new direction for the church. Let's go back and model what the early church did and their viewpoints. And I just used Acts 7 as a launching-off point to get into this material.

MH: Hmm. That's interesting. We'll loop back to that. [laughs] Next we have Sebastian Van Wessem. And you are where?

SVW: We're in a place called Hilversum. That's about 40 miles outside of Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

MH: Wow. You and I sort of know each other, because you're connected to Celebration Church. I don't even know how to describe the connections that Celebration has internationally. I don't know if there's a way to do that. But we've known each other by name for a little while. But I think this the first time we've actually talked. Is that correct?

SVW: I think so, yeah.

MH: Yeah.

SVW: It's great to talk to you in person, though.

MH: Yes, same here. So you're the senior pastor there. Is that what your title would be?

SVW: Yeah, I would call it "lead pastor," because we just recently teamed up with Celebration Church globally. So we actually rebranded to Celebration Church back in February. And so Stovall Weems would be our global senior pastor, and in all the different cities and countries they would call the lead guy there the lead pastor. So that's my title, really.

MH: Huh, interesting. So what was your entry point into the content? How did that happen?

10:00

SVW: Actually through Pastor Stovall Weems. We joined the Celebration Church... We were planning to join the Celebration Church family back in 2018. And I was talking quite a bit to Pastor Stovall and he said, "Hey, you've got to read this book. You've got to read this book," which was the *Unseen Realm*, obviously. And I'm a slow reader, too. So I started reading it, and in the beginning was, like, "Yeah." [MH laughs] I didn't [unintelligible] right from the beginning. I mean, I have a Theology background. I got a Masters in Theology from a school in Belgium (an Assemblies of God School). So I had been exposed to biblical theology a bit. But it really took me a couple of chapters to get the point, why this was so important within Celebration Church. But then when I finally got it, it was, like, man, God started to open my eyes, and just see how important this was and how superficial, actually, my sermons had become up to that point. And I really felt like, "Man, this has to change radically." So when I started getting into the *Unseen Realm* material, it really... My hunger for the word of God just went through the roof as a result of that. And just seeing Celebration Church in Jacksonville and making use of it and sharing it in different ways for a sermon series and so on, it made a lot of sense to me. It wasn't just a theological construct. It was really something that actually matters for everyday life as a follower of Jesus and as a member of his Church. So I got real excited about it.

MH: Wow. Well, yeah, as only Stovall can do. I'm sure he was quite persuasive [laughter] to get you to read the book. I'm glad he did. Yeah, I enjoy hearing stuff like that. And Caleb, can you introduce yourself? This is Caleb Brown. And where are you at, and who are you?

CB: Hi everybody. Thanks for having me. My name's Caleb Brown. I am in Hattiesburg, MS. And from Crosspoint Church in Hattiesburg, MS.

MH: Boy, I keep... Hattiesburg is famous for something. What is it? Why is that ringing in my head here?

CB: Probably Brett Favre. That's where he went to school, at Southern Miss. That's where I went and did my undergrad. And then I married a Mississippi girl, so I'm kind of stuck now.

MH: Now, I have a note here that you are a high school friend of Trey. Is that true, or did Trey just sort of put that in there?

CB: [laughs] Yeah, so that's a... Well, that leads into what would be the next question, of how I came into the content, which is crazy. So I was actually a student of yours at Liberty. And so I actually... Obviously, it was an Old Testament class that I had. We didn't engage this content. But for some reason (it was right after the semester was over), I was watching TV, really just kind of recovering from work. [MH laughs] And SkyWatch TV was on. I don't think I'd ever even seen SkyWatch TV. But you were promoting your book. And I'm sitting there with my wife, and I'm like, "Hey, that's my Old Testament professor I just had!"

MH: Yeah. We didn't get into it in the 500 class. That wasn't a class I had created. [laughs]

CB: No, we didn't get into that. But anyways, then I start listening to the podcast and then I'm hearing the name "Trey Stricklin," and I'm like, "Oh, I went to high school with a Trey Stricklin." But anyway, I just really absorbed the content, got the book. And then y'all were going on that trip to Jerusalem. And that was what I was going to be getting myself for my graduation gift. And my wife wasn't having it. She just wasn't thrilled about wanting to sit in the plane for 24 hours. [MH laughs] So we actually drove to Lynchburg and were going through the ceremony there at Liberty when I was graduating. And I never get on Facebook, but obviously during that time, I wasn't as busy. So I'm on Facebook, and then I see Trey, who's a friend of mine on Facebook, posting pictures from Jerusalem. And I'm like, "You've got to be kidding me." [laughter] It's the same Trey Stricklin that I know!" So that's kind of I guess the shortest way I can possibly put it. I reached out to Trey. And that's how it all began. And now, because of you, I'm a doctoral candidate at Evangelical Theological Seminary in Myerstown, PA.

15:00

MH: Oh, I grew up in Lebanon. I grew up just a few miles from that school. Lebanon, PA, is my hometown. So I know the campus well. Been there many times in the 90s when I was in grad school in Philadelphia. I actually did most of my research at that school in Myerstown. Wow, that's a small world right there.

CB: Yeah, it is.

MH: That's really a small world. [laughs] I have a half-sister and her husband, they teach at Elco. Everything's just right around there still. So that is really a small world. That's crazy.

CB: Yeah, it's crazy!

MH: It is. What I want to hear from you all is, relate for our audience a little bit of the experience you've had making the decision as (whatever capacity you've done this in)... The decision to, "You know, I'm going to try to teach this in church. I'm going to try to put this into sermons. I'm going to try to do something and expose the people who I'm charged with teaching and leading... I'm going to dip into this content with them and for them." So I want to know, was that a difficult decision to make? What led up to the decision? And then, of course, both in terms of what was the positive feedback and what was the pushback as well. So I guess we can just start with Justin. We'll go back up to the top. But we don't necessarily have to navigate through everybody in order. It can be whoever wants to chime in. But Justin, since we need a starting place, let's start with you.

JH: Yeah, when I first got acquainted with everything, for one, it's getting familiar with the ideas. And I listened to the podcast last week, and somebody was talking about teaching as you go. And that's kind of how I am. I learn as I teach. Because it's about mastery. I can get it in, but until you have to stand up and actually teach people, you don't quite feel like you have a mastery over it. But for me, I wanted to make sure I had all the kinks worked out first. Because initially, one of the first things that hits you when you're starting to see some of the connections and things like that, especially with the Divine Council, is, "This is starting to feel a little Mormon." [laughter] And so...

MH: Yeah, if you start in Psalm 82, that's what you're going to feel like. [laughter]

JH: And so you've got to... And so for me, it was, like, "Wait a second. I've got to pace myself through this and work this out and make sure." Because that's going to be... We have a lot of Mormons in Oregon. And so that's something people are going to immediately think of. And so how to... "What are the differences? What's going on here?" And so I wanted to make sure I had that down. But for me, it was... Once I kind of saw the overarching scope of the story, it was a no-brainer. I had to present it. But I had to do it in a way that is judicious and methodical. I'll give hints here and there in sermons, just dealing with whatever theme is tangentially associated with what we're talking about. But I wanted to teach the whole thing. So I started with a Sunday school class that I was leading. And it was, well, the "old people's" Sunday school class. [laughter] Let's just put it that way.

MH: Okay. [laughs] So you're talking in terms of their age, or that they've been there a long time, or both?

JH: Both. The teacher that had to step back and I took over for her, she had been teaching that class for, since she was a young married. And she was in her 70s.

MH: Wow.

20:00

JH: So I went into that class approaching the whole thing as, “These people have, as far as time put in to their study of the Bible, a couple of doctorates’ worth of time, at least.” And so my approach has always been that I want to turn the facet of the gem of Scripture for them. I want them to see it in a new way because it had become so rote and familiar to them. So I’ve always had that approach. But when I got this content, I thought, “This is perfect for this because they will actually learn something new. [laughs] And it will get them to really engage their Bibles.” And it was healthy, to a certain extent, because this class was the most familiar with their Bibles in the church. And so as we’re going through, there’s good back and forth. A lot of confused looks on some of them. [laughs]

MH: Sure.

JH: So I took the slides from some of your presentations that are in that folder that you make available through Miqlat. And I took those and put together my own 167-slide presentation (over time, built on that). But there would be times when we wouldn’t leave a certain slide on a Sunday morning [laughs] because they were just wrestling with some of those themes.

MH: Right.

JH: But no pushback. Really, it was just curious questions. Some of it was just unfamiliar. But the way that you’ve laid out everything... It really helps because you’re just constantly going back to your Bible. And they’re familiar enough with some of those themes through years of study that they were, like, “Oh, okay, that makes total sense!” And I’m sure there are one or two that weren’t buying it. But they didn’t say anything. [laughs] So I did that. And then we would talk a lot about it in our staff meetings. In fact, some of our staff meetings would end up being us just sitting there talking about this stuff instead of doing maybe some of the other stuff we should be doing. [laughter]

MH: So you actually experienced that great oxymoron of an interesting staff meeting? Is that what I’m hearing? [laughs]

JH: Yeah, totally. Totally. In fact, our most interesting ones are when we sit there and talk about stuff like this, or other things. We have a gal on our staff that classifies herself as (and I don’t want to throw out a bomb or anything, but) a “recovering Calvinist.” She’s kind of rejecting that. And I see, obviously, in this content, a lot of problems for that worldview. But this has been really huge for her in sort of breaking through some of those strongholds in her mind that keep drawing her back when she doesn’t want that worldview anymore. But she’s driven by a deep love for Scripture. So it’s been good for that. And then I also did a small group of the content a little bit later. What was nice about that is as I was teaching that was when all of the Bible Project videos [on the content] started

coming out. It was super helpful. Because basically we'd talk on something and, "Oh look! There's a new video that just came out this week!" [MH laughs] Fortunately I was just ahead of it, because they explained it so much better than me. So it ended up being good review for everybody.

MH: Wow, that's interesting. Who else wants to jump in with what you tried?

SS: Sure, I will. It's interesting that Justin brought up Mormonism, because my wife grew up Mormon. And that was part of what attracted me to digging in deeper into this. But since there was already a little bit of a small group that had gone through the material when I showed up, I looked at the church... And this was an older church, and they had been through a split a few years earlier. And we were kind of in a recovery spot. So I figured if anyone was going to lay new groundwork, now would be the right time. But I intentionally eased into it. I covered Jude first. I covered a couple of smaller books. And then when I got into Acts, and Stephen's going over the history of Israel, that was my lead-in to go off on this tangent. And because the folks here are kind of diverse in their background of where they came from... Two decades ago this church (which is not the case now) had an elder that didn't even believe Jesus rose from the dead. So it's kind of like a replant almost in some ways. We're really refocusing things. I was very clear that I understood that this was not what everybody was used to. I was upfront that this wasn't a salvation issue. And I invited them (after the sermon, after I got into this stuff) to keep talking with me, and ask questions, and things like that. And as I did so, I did have people take me up on that. A couple of people wanted to go out to lunch. We really tackled a lot of this over a couple [of weeks], or really a month. In between that, I had some pushback, but by the end, everyone was pretty much swayed around. But it took a little bit of processing time.

25:00

MH: Sure.

SS: They needed some... "Hold on. I was the same way when I read this stuff. I went, 'Wait a minute. What?!'" But if you think about it, if you think about those dangling questions, this is the best answer to all of those different questions that are happening at once.

MH: Hmm. Well, that's interesting. Your church has really come a long way, then. That's good news. Usually you hear the reverse, you know?

SS: Absolutely. The guy before me was a military chaplain, and I really think he was the right man for the job to clean the church up. And then he brought me over. And they intentionally wanted somebody who was into apologetics, and I come from a Calvary Chapel background. They wanted to go back in deep. And so they were on board with this. "Let's go back to our roots and figure things out. We've kind of gone astray and gone weird. Let's see what it actually says." So the whole Naked Bible concept of, "Let's kind of peel away... We're not a

denomination. Let's look at this for what it says as opposed to what we've been told it says." It fit in very well with everyone here.

MH: Wow. Either Sebastian or Caleb. Which one of you wants to jump in?

SVW: I can share a few things. So I was exposed to the material some time in 2018. And in early 2019, I really sensed that the time was ripe to let the church go a little deeper into the knowledge of the Word. I'd been talking quite a bit at that point already about the need to interpret the Bible in its original context (a very novel idea for a few people, I guess). [laughs] And so I'd been preparing the hearts of the people for that. And then sometime in March or so, I started with a series basically based on the book. I think it was six Sundays or so. Actually, it was seven Sundays that we talked about a couple of key topics from the book. And I was surprised by the positive response of so many people. I mean, people came up to me after service. They said, "Man, I wasn't so sure anymore about our teaching here in church, but what you're teaching us now just goes so much deeper. There's just so much more that I'm learning. And I'm really committed to staying here and to really be a part of this. Because..." Basically what they were saying was, "We became so shallow years before that..." So a lot of positive feedback.

But then my own team started to give me pushback. "No, you're going too long. It's too deep. People can't handle it." And it's like it was totally different than what I heard from the people in the church. And then, actually, there were a few people that they weren't too happy with me as their pastor. And they couldn't find a reason to force me out, so they started to use what I was teaching. [laughter] And they spread the word "heresy." And you know, when the H word shows up, it's kind of hard to defend yourself, even though you can prove everything wrong. So they basically said that. And then there were a couple of small group leaders that had a lot of influence in the church that started to rise up against me and basically used the people in their groups to [support the rebellion] type of thing that was going on. [laughs]

30:00

Anyway, so I had to try to manage that. But there was no reason for... I could prove everything. And we had good backup from our overseers and from Celebration Church globally as well. And these people ended up leaving, which really cleared the way for us to continue in this. Of course, I had to do quite a bit of damage control at that moment and focus on some more basic things. But then in the fall, I actually did a Bible study. In that Bible study, I used a lot of *Unseen Realm* material, but also the book *Insurgence* by Frank Viola and a couple other themes that kind of stuck with me that relate to it. And man, people were into it. There was a big, big Bible study group. I could never have done that before the spring of last year, before the crisis. I never could have done that. Because there's so much hunger for the Word of God.

MH: You know, this is encouraging. Because I know a couple of people (and they're scholars) who probably feel a bit more impinged on than maybe just a church-goer... And I'll grant you, the guy I'm specifically thinking of was not from Amsterdam. He's from Denmark. But I've just heard this kind of thing before, and that is that anything that is evangelical... In other words, anything that looks like the people in church (or especially if they're professors) are taking Scripture seriously is really dismissed or frowned upon or something. It's almost... This guy I'm thinking of would say that there's actually academic censorship intentionally marginalizing what we would call a high view of Scripture. Just taking the content seriously. Do you run into that where you are? Do you think that contributed in any way to the pushback? Or was it just the perceived novelty of the content?

SVW: I think there are a couple ways to look at it. I think there were two... Let me just not talk about any liberal influences. Because you have that, too, and it's quite big. But let's just dismiss that. And let's just look at Evangelicals in the Netherlands. I would say there are two basic camps. There would be one that is Fundamentalist Evangelical. They're steeped in probably, in more... If they were academics, if they'd been academically trained, maybe steeped into German scholarship or Dutch scholarship, which actually lags 30 years behind. So in a lot of the stuff that you're teaching, I do see some Dutch scholars that actually say similar things about the Divine Council. There's one good one that actually does write about it, even though it's very limited. But most of them, they will be so stuck in their old fundamentalist ways that they're not open to actually look at things from a new viewpoint. So you've got that going on from the fundamentalist approach. And then on the other side, there will be the people... I was looking for the word earlier: "Contemporary Church." So they get what they do. And I'm sure it's the same in America. I've been there, around the States, quite a bit. And Contemporary Church basically is, like, you see a nice story. It's inspiring and you build a sermon off of that. But you could have easily taken a story from your own life, or something like that.

MH: Sure.

SVW: So it's like... I don't know if you gave that example in *Unseen Realm* or if I picked it up somewhere else, but if you talk about David and Goliath and it's about the smooth stones and it's about the giant slayer and it's amazing what David did, and it can be very inspiring. But you miss the supernatural worldview that's behind it, because it's uncomfortable. And so I have people that even studied theology (like at a bachelor level) on my team that just felt uncomfortable with going deeper in the Word and really interpreting the Bible in its own context. And it freaked them out, or they just didn't even want to learn. They just... I asked them to read *Supernatural* because I didn't want to throw *Unseen Realm* at them. Because I knew they wouldn't read it. [laughs] And they wouldn't even read *Supernatural*, you know? Or dismiss it. "I already knew this. There's nothing

special about this.” Well, great. If you knew it, let’s look at what it means for our ministry model today. Because it does mean a lot.

MH: Hmm. Wow. Caleb, what about you?

35:00

CB: Well, let me first begin by talking a little bit about the scholarship that I’m in. I am in an emphasis in Biblical Theology and Narrative Interpretation. So for those of you who don’t know, Biblical Theology... You use that language a lot on your podcast. Biblical Theology is basically your bridge. It’s a discipline that bridges your History of Religion school of thought to your Systematic Theology. And so what my thoughts are is, what’s happened... And you talked about this idea of filters in the beginning of your book, that unfortunately we’ve been taught (no matter what tradition that you’re coming through, if you grew up with a tradition of some sort from a faith background) is that this biblical content as we knew it was also filtered through some kind of a systematic way, rather than looking at it as you were teaching us in school, which of course is the biggest challenge—to be able to remove these filters. And so when I look at *Unseen*, I see *Unseen* and the content that you presented as what we’re doing is reverse osmosis. Reverse osmosis is a water treatment process, and what it does is it removes the contaminants from the water by pressure and force. So we talk about this thing about embracing the tension. And that’s what reverse osmosis does. It removes the contaminants. *Unseen* is going to remove some of the contaminants and let the full truth of Scripture come through.

And so my experience was highly uncomfortable when I started presenting this. Obviously my wife was the first guinea pig. [laughter] She eventually got it, but she said, “Oh, you can’t teach that in class! They’re not going to be able to handle it.” And really what she meant was that they weren’t going to be able to handle it the way I presented it to her. And she was right. And you have a lot of those stories of the uncomfortableness and friends that you lost because of all of that when *you* started this journey. So I had very much those similar types of experiences. So really... And I think with what we’re doing with all this, it’s kind of a working idea. I definitely had to change my strategy. And there’s also multiple strategies, depending upon the context of the environment and who you’re communicating with. But from a classroom perspective, really I can take each chapter part of *Unseen* and break it down. And so I started doing that teaching youth, rather than dealing with adults. Well, the youth don’t have all the contaminants in there.

MH: Yeah, they don’t have years and years of...

CB: That’s right, and so they just get it. They get it. And I just see this excitement, for them to actually want to read their Bibles. And so my biggest thing is to first of all create an environment where they’re safe to ask questions. But as we go through... The first part of your chapter, you go through rules of engagement and first things. And so that’s one of the things that I do with biblical theology with any kind of content that we’re presenting, is we use this language

of “worldview, worldview, worldview.” And so when it comes to biblical interpretation, we’re wanting to see things through the eyes of the biblical author. So when we do that, and create that environment to get the students in that mindset, we can start introducing the material. And I do it in a way where there’s comfort that some of the content... But there’s also some warning that, “Some of the content is going to be shocking, maybe, to some of you, maybe, from what you’ve heard, but it doesn’t compromise any of these attributes of God.” And so once that comfort level is introduced, we start bringing the text in. And so we’ll start with Psalm 82. And I really kind of do this with anybody. We’ll start with Psalm 82, and I’ll just sit back and not say anything. [MH laughs] “Tell me what this says. What does this say?” And you really start seeing... And I’ve seen it from scholars to seasoned pastors to kids, that you can see the wheels turning. Because you know where it’s going to take them.

MH: Yeah.

CB: And that’s what *Unseen* does. There’s some actual scriptural verses that you can kind of use in a certain ordered way. And whenever you can get their wheels turning and get them to asking questions, they start absorbing it. There’s very few people that I just can hand the book and say, “Here, read this.” Most people don’t read anyway. But the ones that have, you communicate that probably better than anybody. It is a very good way... Because this is the next thing I would say. “*Unseen* is just scratching the surface of what’s in the Bible.” [laughs] And so it’s been revolutionary in my scholarship. It’s changed everything.

MH: Yeah, I have to actually remind people of that. It kind of... On the one hand, there are... I guess I would just use the term “lay people,” people who aren’t a scholar or on some track to get a higher degree or something like that. But they’ll get the mistaken notion that, “This is everything. It’s a theory of everything.” Naw, actually not. It’s just... This is your entry point. This is your framework. That’s all it is. And then on the other side, you’ll get scholars that want to... And I’ll use this word: they want to pretend. They know better, but they want to pretend that, “Oh, well, this is the only way that Mike can really defend this idea. And it’s not really a good defense.” “Well, actually, no, I’m about ten percent into how I would defend this.” [laughs] And you have to sort of remind people that it is what it is. It’s a starting point. And the sooner they can... I think that’s actually helpful. It’s more helpful to just the lay person. Because if you can convince them of that, I’ve seen that ignite their interest in Scripture. Like, “What do you mean this is just the beginning point? What else is there?” They start to really enjoy drilling down into their Bible, which ultimately is what I want. I don’t want to write things and say things that essentially... “I’m here. I’m just telling you what to believe now. Now there, you heard it. So you’re done now.” That’s the opposite of what I want. I’m not asking for total agreement with where I land. What I am asking for is engagement. Not engaging *me* or my book, but engaging the text. Because I know... The little secret is I know that if you do that, that’ll change a lot for them. People need to get back into the Bible. And so that’s one of the major goals here,

to have them reconsider their involvement with the text. And then, of course, how the read the text, in context or not. So that's good to hear.

Now as I'm listening to all of you, Justin, I have to ask you this specific question before asking something more general. But in view of the makeup of your congregation... You had people in this class for decades. Did you ever get the question from any of them, "Why haven't we ever been taught this before?" And how did you answer them if you got that question?

45:00

JH: You know, I don't know if anyone ever asked that question. I think that I anticipated it, more than anything. Because I've heard you talk about that in various forms, that whole struggling with "Why haven't I heard this before?" So I kind of anticipated it to a certain extent and tried to, in how I presented things, couch it in people understanding that there are different things that happen as far as the scope of theology over human history. And we all have blind spots. And how in the Reformation, people thought that they had it right. And they *did* have it right in a few ways, but there are a few ways that they had hard blind spots. And the people today that are still stuck in that hard Reformation format are dealing with the same blind spots. And so we need to be people that are willing and open to go where the text leads, and really be unafraid to press into that. So yeah, just anticipating, talking about blind spots.

One of the things that I've thought is postmodernism, for all its ills, has given us (I think) a good staging ground in history (as far as thought is concerned) to deal with some of these. Because postmodernism is questioning authority. It's questioning the established way of doing things. And so it gives us a way of looking from another angle. We all acknowledge we have bias. But it at least helps us to acknowledge our bias. Whereas, I don't think before, in history, people really ever acknowledged their bias when it came to that stuff. So I think just sort of anticipating that is what I did, in helping ease people into that shock that could... Because I know, I experienced that shock a little bit. There's frustration I had when... My freshman year in Bible college, I had a class, Christ in the Bible (sort of Intro to Apologetics class), and my professor (who is awesome)... One day during class I asked about Peter's quotation of Enoch. "What does that mean?" And he just sort of dismissed it, like, "Oh, well, you know, it's just a thing." [MH laughs] It was just a terrible answer.

MH: [laughs] Just a thing...

JH: And honestly, he had no clue, is what it was. It was just Peter quoting Enoch. He didn't really interface with it, I don't think. But it's funny, because then I just went on with my life. It wasn't a big hang-up for me. I was just like, "Eh, oh well. I have other things to deal with." And then the question of, "Where on earth did demons come from?" You don't hear anything about demons in the Old Testament, but then you get to the New Testament and they're literally everywhere in the Gospels. Where does this come from? And so I wrestled with that to a certain extent. I wasn't angry, but it helped me, knowing that we're all

products of the time that we live in, whether we like it or not. And as much as we try to battle against it, we have to at least acknowledge that.

MH: Mm hmm. Anybody else want to chime in on that? Did any of you get the question of, “Why haven’t we ever heard this before?” But I just thought Justin may have specifically run into that because his people had such longevity there. But anybody else run into that?

SS: Yeah, I ran into that several times. Not just on this topic, but other topics. And we also would run into it when guests would come if we were in the middle of a series or something. Like, “Wow, no one’s digging this deep before.” And kind of like Justin, I tried to prepare people as I was teaching. “Maybe this is why you haven’t heard it before.” And I was trying to carefully frame it in, “It wasn’t that people were hiding things from you, necessarily. They may not have known. And you do have a responsibility to dig in and be Bereans and to really check into this stuff.” But a lot of people have kind of just tuned out and they’ve gone with the tradition or the denomination they’re in and they’ve just accepted this list, and it’s easy for them to just check through this list, and when there’s something outside of it, they’ve not really thought it before. Well, do other churches do that shallow checklist thing better than we do?

So we’ve carved out the niche of, “It’s okay to ask hard questions. It’s okay to point to the weird and confusing.” And it’s actually been a relationship-builder for us. Because people who would normally point out things, like, “Ah, your Bible’s full of weird stuff,” we’ll talk, “Oh, you actually have thought about this.” It’s just part of that general apologetics stuff that I especially picked up when I was at Ole Miss campus dealing with some of the professors and things like that. Because there are hard questions, and younger people are getting asked the hard questions, or they’re seeing it on a blog. But a lot of times in churches, they don’t hear it. And I’ve tried to explain to them, we didn’t have this level of doubt before—this encountering lots of different worldviews. And so now we can’t just rest on the idea, “Everybody’s a Christian. Everybody’s got this figured out. Everybody’s going along.” There’s actually a bit of a battle that we have to engage in now (because we were lax for a while) so we can dig in.

50:00

MH: That’s actually a good... Either Sebastian or Caleb, if you had something to add there, let me know. Otherwise, something you said is I think a good segue into something I do want to ask. But do either of you want to chime in on that question, or should I go ahead?

SVW: I’m trying to think.

CB: You can go ahead on my end.

SVW: Yeah.

MH: Okay. Alright. We can always loop back to it, too. I always ask this of these conversation groups. So you've all had the experience of encountering the content. You spent some time with it. You develop your understanding of it and so on and so forth. And you make the jump into teaching it or putting it into your ministry in some way. What advice would you give to somebody who isn't sure they should do that? So you have a conversation with a fellow pastor, somebody who teaches a Sunday school class or a youth group. And maybe you've been talking to them, or they listen to the podcast, or something, where you have this conversation about, "Boy, I'd sure like to teach some of this stuff, but I don't think I should, or I don't know if I can." What would you say to them?

CB: I guess I'll go ahead and start there. Because from my perspective, I am just a lay person. I'm just a dude. I don't have... I'm not a pastor. I purposely don't take office in the church, because I'm real big on this crazy thing called "discipleship" that the Church really does a poor job of—with presenting this material, number one, before you're going to communicate it to, I guess, a broader audience within the church context, would be to... And what I did was, I'm having that conversation with someone safe and that I trust, and they're absorbing that kind of content together, I would... Ugh, it just makes me shudder to think of a pastor that would be in Mississippi that would be a lone person trying to present this to his church. And I think this, what we're doing here with these conversations, is developing these strategies. Like I said, we just scratched the surface. I've been highly encouraged by the way that youth absorb the content.

MH: Mm hmm.

CB: I think that's just very telling. And there is a lot of science behind it, when you know about narrative interpretation and the way that we learn. The actual human brain learns through stories. So developing the strategies is learning how to tell the story into the context of what our audience is. And that's not always going to be the same. But very much like the Bible, there's not a "check the box," catch-all way to present this to everybody. It's a little bit different. That's why we've got to have these conversations.

MH: Mm hmm. Anybody else? What advice would you give somebody that is just on the fence, and "Do I or don't I?"

SS: Make sure you ground it in the Trinity and who God is first. Because a lot of the questions that I would get, maybe not when I presented it in church, but when I've talked in small groups with people that are kind of younger and this stuff just kind of comes up. It's confusing if they don't know enough about the uniqueness of God, when they start hearing about these Divine Council things, that's when the Mormon idea can creep in, if you don't get it first.

MH: Yeah. And that is the thing that separates a biblical view from basically everything else.

SVW: Yeah, I would totally agree with that. And when I had the challenge early last year, I really felt that I maybe could have done a better job in explaining, “Hey, this is actually not changing anything about our statement of faith. But it just supports it and makes it even stronger.” Our view of Scripture and of who God really is actually only gets elevated knowing that God is the God of all gods, and that he’s the king of all kings. And if you don’t... If that’s not clear, they could start thinking all sorts of things, like heresy or liberalism or whatever.

MH: Sure.

55:00 **SVW:** And we’re far from that. But you know, you just have remember... The first time I heard some of this stuff, it triggered something. And it’s good that it triggered something. But you need to actually have somebody to coach you through it. And as a theologian myself, I have the framework to do it, but most people won’t. So you want to comfort them. You want to make sure that we care for them, and that they know they don’t have to be afraid of anything. So I agree.

MH: Anyone else. Any advice to a listener who is at the “do I or don’t I” phase?

JH: Sorry, just a humorous (at some level) comment on what has already been said is, just don’t use the term “polytheism.” [MH laughs] The very first time I ever got... So I talked earlier about how I got acquainted with the material, but really the very first time I heard it was when John Mark Comer was talking about it in a sermon back in 2013, I think, at his church up in Portland. And I watched it, and I was, like, “This guy has gone off the reservation. What on earth?” Because he used the term “polytheism,” and he was talking about this whole hierarchy of gods and stuff. And I for one, wasn’t ready for it yet, I don’t think.

MH: Mm hmm.

JH: But yeah, being very careful with the terms that you use, thinking those through. Language is so important. That’s all I would add.

CB: I just wanted to back up what he said, because actually one of the projects that I’m having to do right now, with writing the papers, is the language that we actually use, that’s what I want to early on introduce, is the way that we define certain words and ideas that are in the Bible, of “What is a divine being? And what is God? Who is God?” as we go through those attributes of how God is ontologically unique from every other being. And you’re just kind of reaffirming and giving that comfort for, either if they did know or they didn’t know, that what we believe about God (as you start introducing this other material) is not going to be compromised. But also, with the understanding of what *is* going to get compromised are the contaminants, of some things that actually aren’t biblical that we need to get rid of.

SS: I was just going to add, we're kind of... We seem to all be, "Hey, do this and teach it." If someone's on the fence, I would recommend that you just think about the benefit. And something we share here a lot with our members is the benefit of worshipping God with our minds and how much more, when we have that concrete anchor and we understand things better, it's easier to resist emotional pulls to do things if we have a more concrete understanding. And then I was also going to add, it's really helpful if you do this at a congregational level that you already have a plant in the audience. By that I mean, I would start with a small group or something first. The only reason I went straight to doing it on a Sunday morning from the pulpit was that there had already been a small group and that I had been doing hints beforehand. Because we all want them to ask us the questions that they have, but in reality, when people have questions, they're not always going to ask their pastor. They might ask their pewmate or whoever.

MH: Sure.

SS: So having a few other mature people first will help prevent confusion.

MH: Mm hmm. Yeah. This is good. I think it's going to be useful to our audience. I think it'll be encouraging. To me, that is the big takeaway with all of these, that I think people will be encouraged to tell more of their friends about the content or the podcast or the books or whatever. And then if they're in leadership or they have some responsibility, to talk about the content formally (like in a classroom or a small group atmosphere), I think this will encourage them to do that. So thanks for doing it.

SVW: Well, thanks for having us.

SS: Thanks, Mike.

CB: Yes, thank you.

JH: Thank you.

TS: Alright, Mike. Again, another great episode in the Conversation Series. This is the last one that we have planned so far, but I'm sure we'll do some others here and there. But for now, that pretty much does it.

MH: Yeah, I think these were good. Like I said, I think people who listen to these will be encouraged to talk about the content, whether that's informally (with friends), maybe hearing pastors talk about the content will embolden them. But also even for people who teach or who have some responsibility in church or youth group or whatever, I think it'll encourage them to take their people into the

content, too. So that's what we want. We want engagement with Scripture. I think it's always going to be a winning situation.

1:00:00

TS: Yeah, absolutely. Alright, we want to thank again Justin, Sam, Sebastian, and Caleb for coming on. And we want to thank everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.