

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 388

Evangelical Theology

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Episode Summary

Dr. Michael F. Bird is a well-known New Testament scholar and theologian from Brisbane, Australia. After serving in the military as a paratrooper, he completed his PhD at the University of Queensland. Dr. Bird is currently the Academic Dean and Lecturer in Theology at Ridley College in Australia. In 2013, Dr. Bird has written or edited many books in the areas of New Testament and Christian theology, several of them aimed specifically for lay Christians. Among these are *How God Became Jesus* (a response to Bart Ehrman's *How Jesus Became God*), *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostles' Creed*, and *Jesus the Eternal Son: Answering Adoptionist Christology*. In today's episode we chat with Dr. Bird about two of his books: *Evangelical Theology* and *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew About the Bible*.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 388: Evangelical Theology with Dr. Michael Bird. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! What's going on?

MH: Well, not a whole lot, other than to say I've been looking forward to this particular episode. Like I said before, I think people are going to enjoy it. I think they're going to enjoy Mike Bird.

TS: Yeah. And he's got a couple books, is that right, that y'all are going to be discussing today?

MH: Yeah, he's got a bunch of books. But we're going to focus attention on his systematic theology, which is called *Evangelical Theology*. But along the way, he did a... Well, he's done all sorts of things. He's done at least one with N. T. Wright—New Testament studies, New Testament intro. He's a theologian and a New Testament scholar. He did a real short book that's good on Adoptionist Christology. So we could've gone almost anywhere for this, but we're going to try to focus on his theology and then his latest short book for lay people on things that he wishes every Christian knew about the Bible.

TS: Awesome.

MH: Well, we're thrilled to have Dr. Michael Bird from Australia on the podcast. And I think as we are wont to do, customarily we ask our guests to introduce themselves. So Mike, please just let the audience know who you are. Give them a little bit of the history of your credentials, where you went to school, what you teach, all that sort of thing. And then I'd also like you to give us your testimony. Because you have an interesting story. So thanks for being on the podcast.

MB: Oh, thank you Michael, for having me. Well, yeah, I'm Mike Bird. I'm the Academic Dean in Lecturing Theology at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia, a wonderful place where the Vegemite is always fresh and the kangaroo roams free. [MH laughs] I studied at Mount Union College, which is a Baptist seminary in Brisbane. I did my honors degree and my PhD at the University of Queensland where my doctoral thesis was on the historical Jesus and the Gentiles. I taught for a number of years in Scotland at the Highland Theological College, then at the Brisbane School of Theology. And for the last eight years, I've been at Ridley College, which is an Anglican college. And in addition to being an academic, I'm also an Anglican priest.

Concerning my testimony (how I got into biblical studies and into the Christian faith), I grew up in a non-Christian home, a somewhat secular, working class, suburban household in Brisbane. I wasn't particularly religious in any way and had no predisposition for anything. I was maybe a little bit antagonistic towards religion. I then joined the army when I was 17. I started out as a paratrooper and then military intelligence operator. But it was in the army I got invited to church. And I'd never been to church before and I was kind of bored, so I thought I would go along. And I just assumed churches were filled with moralizing geriatrics that were worried that somewhere, somehow, somebody was smiling. I mean, everything I knew about Christianity I'd learned from Ned Flanders, growing up. [MH laughs]

MH: Wonderful source there. [laughter]

MB: Yeah, a wonderful source of Christian formation. I went along. Everything I thought about Christians was broken down. These people were not moralizing geriatrics. They were very nice people, kind people. They were different people. And they were shaped by a different story. They were shaped by their faith. And eventually I heard the Good News of Jesus, his death and resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life, of being a new creation. And in 1994, I just prayed to receive Christ. And the world has been a different place ever since. And from then on, I ended up getting married to a wonderful young

lady called Naomi. And yeah, so I'm now an Anglican priest and a Christian biblical scholar.

MH: I'm curious; had you ever heard the gospel presented before the army experience there?

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MB: You hear snippets. Like I remember as a kid, if I got up really early, you'd get kind of like some of the American telly-evangelists would be on Australian TV between about 5:00 and 7:00am. So you could get some sort of weird... Sometimes it was, like, weird End Times stuff. [MH laughs] Sometimes you'd get... Yeah, I mean, there was one guy, every week he was talking about the four beasts in Daniel 7. Every week it was the same thing. He always finished off with the four beasts. Instead of having an altar call, he had this little summary of the four beasts, which I didn't quite understand.

MH: [laughs] Did his shirt change? Maybe you were just, like, getting reruns the whole time.

MB: [laughs] Maybe, maybe. [MH laughs] And then... Yeah, you get the odd, like, Christian TV in Australia. I mean, I did do a little bit of religious education in primary school. But I didn't get the full story until I actually went along to a church.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: If anything, you just get the distortions. What I got mostly was all of the negative things about Christianity but without actually knowing any Christians—so the sort of stereotypical tropes you get in culture, that all these Christians are nothing but moralizing God-botherers. They've got all their various pathologies and insecurities, and their religion is just trying to compensate for that.

MH: Right, right. I was going to say, just like everybody else or nobody else. [laughs] You know, your Wikipedia page says that you were an atheist. Now we know that Wikipedia is a profound, always-on-target source of information. So object or not to that characterization.

MB: Ah, yeah, that would be a good story of what I was. I didn't believe in God. I wrote some atheistic poetry for a while. So yeah, that's where I was a long time ago.

MH: So what we've learned now is, just like the broken clock is right twice a day, so Wikipedia is correct on that. You know, I poke fun at Wikipedia a lot because years ago, somebody actually sent me a link. There was this long entry on me. Like, I didn't even know it was there. This was, like 10 years ago. And I went up and read it and was basically appalled. And then when I tried to correct... I went

in and edited it, and then I got a nasty email that they weren't going to accept my edits. And it's like, "Well, it's me." "Well, you're biased." It's like, "Well, pardon me. I'm an expert on me." [laughter] You know? "I'm really a good source on..." So it was just ridiculous. But anyway...

MB: Yeah, I mean, some people have maliciously tinkered with my Wikipedia page, which I didn't start. But some people who don't like me have added scurrilous details, which are not true.

MH: Well, then you've arrived. You know? [laughs]

MB: Yeah. I mean, I've been called many things. Probably the worst thing I've ever been called is "British." [MH laughs] Because Americans can't tell the difference between a British and an Australian accent. And there was one particular scholar I met and I said to him, "So whereabouts in Mexico are you from?" [MH laughs] He goes, "I'm not Mexican; I'm American." I said, "Ah, well. I'm sorry. I just can't tell the difference in your accents."

MH: Right, yeah. Boy... Yeah. Well, we won't probe that any further. Um, the other thing I wanted to say is, I didn't know you were in the army. So you're, like, the Bear Grylls of biblical scholars? Is that... I mean, paratrooper?

MB: Yeah. This is the problem I have with my students. You know the way people see you and the way you see yourself.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: You know, I kind of see myself as a cross between Leon Morris (a famous Australian biblical scholar) and Jason Bourne. [MH laughs] You know? That's how I see myself. Jason Bourne and Leon Morris. Whereas my students tend to see me more like a cross between Austin Powers and Jerry Lewis. [MH laughs]

MH: There you go. [laughs]

MB: And yeah, I said, "No, I really was an infantry sol-, a paratrooper." And he went, "You? You?" You know, I mean, I'm not... For those of you who want to know, I'm not six feet tall. I'm kind of built like a slightly buffed up jockey, would probably be the best way to describe my... Built like a jockey who's hit the gym pretty hard. But yeah, that's about it. [laughter]

MH: Ah, that's pretty good. Well, we should get into your books. You know, this is why we wanted you here. This audience know... But we always have new people come into the audience, or are just sort of dipping their toes into this. They've heard about this crazy podcast and the crazy hosts and whatnot. We look for people—scholars—who are doing something intentional for the believing Church.

10:00

And you certainly fit that. So what I want to do with our time is talk about sort of... I mean, you've written so many books. I mean, we could've landed anywhere here. But I often get asked about theology books (systematic theology)—which ones do I recommend. And it's nice to have a systematic theology (yours is *Evangelical Theology*) that's actually written by someone who works in the text. You're a New Testament scholar. So I naturally gravitate toward things like that because I'm a text guy on the Old Testament Semitics side. And I never looked at that as an end in and of itself. You know, most of the dissertations at the University of Wisconsin (Madison where I went), I would never read. They're just too boring. So I always viewed it as an end to doing biblical theology—giving systematicians better data to work with. And you're sort of a mix of that. So that's my predilection here. Again, my audience knows this. And so I want to ask you about your theological work (that's the academic one). And then we're going to get into something that's a little more popular and more recent that you've written. But I guess my first question, for both myself and the audience, is, "Why an evangelical theology? And why the title?" Because those two things sort of go hand in hand. And early in the book, you actually write about this. You get into what "evangelical" means, and why you wrote this theology book this particular way. So can you jump into that and sort of explain where you were coming from, both in the titling and the approach?

MB: Well, first of all, on the titling, I actually believe in the evangel, which is the gospel—you know, the good news of Jesus: his death and resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, new life. So I believe in the evangel. And the evangelical movement historically and globally is about being renewal to the Church by the recovery of the gospel and reinvigorating the Church in the mission of the gospel. So I believe the word "evangelical," historically and in its global sense, is a good word. Part of the problem is that in certain parts of the world, the word "evangelical" has become more of a political term for a particular demographic with a certain degree of religiosity, but it is more known for its political proclivities.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: Okay? When I say "evangelical," I'm not talking about a particular wing of the Republican party, or someone who's white and vaguely Protestant. Okay? I'm talking about the historical Protestant faith and the sort of merging together of Puritanism and pietism that became this cross-denominational big tent through which Christians of all stripes cooperated together in social projects ranging from the abolition of slavery to the getting rid of debtors' prisons to the creation of missionary societies and the setting up of interdenominational seminaries and university ministries. I mean, that's what I mean by "evangelical." And I believe it is a good word. And why some people... I know they're tempted to abandon it or to attack it. And my view is, you can pry it from my cold, dead hands. [MH laughs] Because I believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And as long as that gospel is good news, I'm going to keep the gospel (the evangel) as something I want to

use to describe myself, although I do understand that in certain contexts you need to add a little bit of an asterisk and then explain what you mean by the word “evangelical.” So that’s why I kept the title.

On the book itself, I’ve always had a long-abiding interest in systematics. You know, how does biblical study interface with systematic theology? I’ve always been interested in that. And I think a good biblical scholar should be interested in that.

MH: Mm hmm. Yep.

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MB: And as I began to teach this, I thought, “What textbook will I use?” And there’s a number of very good ones around which I think have some exceptional qualities and good values. But I could not find something that I would say, “Well, this is a bona fide evangelical theology.” There are a number of good systematic books written by evangelical scholars. Some of them never get around to defining what the evangel (the gospel) is. And if being evangelical were a crime, the evidence to convict them would be rather minimalist in some senses. [MH laughs] And I began to think, “What am I actually looking for, then? What am I after?” And it was no longer the book I wanted to *look for*, it then became the book I wanted to *write*. And I wanted to write a book that made the gospel the center boundary and integrating point for all of Christian thought. So everything we think about, whether that’s eschatology (the End Times), ecclesiology (the doctrine of the Church), or what we think about pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit)—to think about them initially through the lens of the gospel. How does the gospel provide an entrée into that topic, and how does the gospel unite together all the various sub-areas of theology? And so that’s what I began to do. I began to write that. And for me, the prolegomena (the first thing you do in theology) is to set out the gospel; then you do your doctrine of God and talk about the God of the gospel; and then I do something a little bit weird. I make eschatology (last things) the second area you cover in theology. And I do that because I believe all of theology should be defined by being in the “now and the not yet,” that sort of “now and not yet,” whether it’s...

MH: Yeah, that’s actually a really good... I really think that’s a good move. You introduce very early “already, but not yet” because it just ripples into so many other things.

MB: Exactly. Whether it’s justification, sanctification... I mean, you could talk about all sorts of... Everything is permeated by the “now and the not yet.” And when I said I’m putting eschatology second, people said, “Dude, you’d be a touch cray-cray.” And I said, “Yeah, well, I’m crazy *like a fox*.” Because you know, I explained it, and they go, “Oh, actually that does make a lot of sense to do that.” So I want that dynamic of the kingdom of God, God is becoming king, Christ as king, and Christ will one day receive all the glory when every knee bows before

him, and he hands the kingdom over to the Father. I want that perspective to cast a shadow over everything we do in theology and in ethics and in mission and ministry.

MH: Yeah, and for those of you out there listening who will go look up the book on Amazon and look at the Table of Contents, you're going to see that right away. And for somebody like me who has looked at theology books as well, that is quite different. Usually the eschatology (End Times, so to speak) goes at the end. That's just sort of tradition now. But there it is. [laughs] You know? I'm looking at the Table of Contents right now. There it is. And again, I like it. We do a lot of "already, but not yet" sort of thinking on this podcast and in my book, *Unseen Realm*, it's a big theme. So yeah, I like the approach just right out of the gate. I think it's smart to do. And I like the way you put it: "cast a shadow over everything else." Because it does. What can you say? It just does. So I'm surprised that it's escaped attention so frequently up to yours.

MB: Yeah, I mean, the only guy who's done something similar is Amos Yong, a scholar, I believe, at Fuller Seminary, who's also got his own book called *Global Theology*. He's the only other guy I've come across, I believe, who (independently of me) put eschatology in the second slot, after the doctrine of God.

MH: Hmm. So now in the early pages, when you talk about why you've written the book, you also make this comment. You said you wanted to strike a balance between biblical exposition and engagement with contemporary theological debates. Why did you view either that as a void to fill or a different trajectory? What were you thinking there?

MB: I think theology has always got to be interested in a type of normativity. You know? So how should we live and what should we believe? I mean, it's one thing to exegete Isaiah or Habakkuk or Daniel or Luke or 1 Thessalonians. But then you have to ask the question, "Well, so what? What would happen initially if we got Isaiah, Luke, and Paul to talk about the meaning of salvation? If they had to come up with a joint statement on the meaning of salvation, what would they say?" And then if you had to apply it to what it means to *our* world—to a Covid world, to a world with climate change, to a world with religious pluralism, to a world where people think salvation is largely about economic deprivation or getting a better education... What does the Christian view of salvation mean in that kind of world?

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: So that's what I want to entertain. And there's also going to be a number of burgeoning questions that are going to be around, topics like human identity, what do we believe of questions about personal identity. So what are the big

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issues that are presenting themselves at the moment, and how does a Christian worldview, biblically informed, speak towards them?

MH: Mm hmm. You note early on that you see some disturbing trends in the evangelical churches of the West, and so you're using your theology to expose those things and discuss those things. Can you give us a couple examples of what you see happening?

MB: I think one of the biggest problems is not being able to distinguish what is Christian from what is cultural.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: And we often conflate the two. We think, "What I regard as Christian must be Christian for everyone." Now look, I don't want to offend any of your listeners. But as a Christian who's lived in the United Kingdom and Australia, Christians here believe in gun control and universal healthcare. The idea of giving free healthcare to everyone or a certain minimal type of healthcare to everyone and having a taxation based around it, the Christians just treat this kind of stuff... Maybe everyone should *not* own an AR-15 because of the things that might happen, again, is kind of treated as self-evident everywhere I go. But in the American context, that is not necessarily so. Now again, that is because of a unique history and a unique geographical location. So look, I recognize the contingencies. But the idea of the right to bear arms and form militias is not part of what Christians believe in other parts of the world, if you get what I mean. So yeah, being able to differentiate between what is Christian and what is cultural. I think a lot of people around the world can often struggle with that.

MH: I mean, that makes sense. Those are actually good examples, too. Because when you grow up in a place with a tradition in a culture and you grow up in church simultaneously, it's hard not to conflate those two areas of life. So I mean, you don't even think about it, but you just... That's just how you grow up. You know?

MB: Exactly.

MH: And so you're not alerted to it until somebody asks the question. "Is this a Christian thing that derives from the Bible? So on and so forth. Or is it something else?" These two things operate in parallel. But unless you think about the fact that they are in parallel and not completely the same things, you never really think about it until you're provoked to think about it.

MB: Yeah. And meeting Christians from different parts of the world can really challenge you. I mean, I know a number of very conservative American evangelicals who have had their views of healthcare changed by living in the

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United Kingdom or Europe. And like they were taught that it was all socialized medicine, some sort of horrible Soviet Union idea where there's not enough vaccines for everyone and not everyone can get the treatment. And some of these people who, them or their family members have gotten really sick and have received top care and have been in absolute fear of the bill that they were going to get at the end of it, only to learn that there was no bill. And then find out that pretty much every Western nation from Norway to New Zealand has universal healthcare except for one of the wealthiest nations on earth. So yeah, just learning from Christians from a different perspective can help people. And you know, I learn things from America, too. I love America, the land of Billy Graham and Chick-fil-A. [MH laughs] America has so much to offer the world. So that can be a mutual conversation. But if you meet Christians from different backgrounds, different parts of the world, that challenges you to think, "Okay, what is actually Christian and enduring and stable? And what is kind of maybe contingent or perhaps even quirky in my own context?"

MH: You've written a lot of, not only just books, but you do a lot online. And I'm going to pick out just one thing here. You have a shorter book on Adoptionist Christology. And there are also things I've read by you online about the atonement—that we shouldn't get rid of penal substitution, but that doesn't mean we don't look at the atonement these other ways. I mean, I'm a "big tent" atonement person. You know, the only thing that really offends me is when people like the other approaches to the atonement for the express purpose of getting rid of the substitutionary element. That seems to be cheating a little bit. So I've liked the way you've approached it, that all these things have something to contribute. We don't need to focus on just one, and so on and so forth. In your *Systematic Theology*, how much of that discussion (either the Adoptionist Christology or the atonement stuff) do you have in the book specifically trying to be practical with the way these things are sort of trending within the evangelical community? Do you do stuff like that in the book? Sort of just getting... maybe not naming names and all that sort of thing, but saying, "There's a trend toward this direction or that direction, and maybe we need to pull back a little bit and try to be a little more comprehensive in the way we looked at things, or not go down this road, but stick to this road." Do you try to steer the reader in those ways, or are you just sort of laying everything out as though all the positions were equal? Because different theologians do this differently. They take their own approach to how they handle these sorts of things and disagreements and trends. So how did you approach... Maybe those aren't good examples. Maybe you have a better example. But how do you approach things like that?

MB: Yeah, I try to touch upon some of the more recent debates and issues that are presenting, like the atonement is one. Some people want to know what is the "one ring to rule them all." [MH laughs] "What is the one view of the atonement that is the truest of true? And why is the answer 'penal substitution'?" And okay, look, I believe in substitutionary atonement. I see it very clearly in Paul's letters,

in Hebrews, and I could take you through all those texts. But I also see a lot of other aspects of the atonement. The atonement is also a source of healing. It's also a source of cleansing. We can talk about redemption. We can also talk about the victory of Christ over the powers, which is a very big thing, I think, in the New Testament and certainly the Church Fathers. And I'll never forget reading some Athanasius (he's one of the fourth century Church Fathers who was very big on the debates of Jesus being fully divine). And he's writing about the incarnation and he mentions the atonement, and he just kind of like moves between substitutionary atonement and Christ's victory. And he does it so seamlessly. He doesn't seem to be worried that he might be making one sound a little bit more important than the other. [MH laughs] He just talks about both because they're both equally true and relevant. Christ died for us, in our place. And Christ's death brings us the victory. We don't have to choose between them. They're both true. They're both there. But some people want to say, "Yeah, but substitutionary atonement, that's got to be slightly more true or slightly more important, don't you think?" And that's where I say, "Well, no. You're kind of like creating a little system here to create a hierarchy of atonement themes, which the Bible itself doesn't give. It tells us that Christ died *for* us, but the Church Fathers and the medieval theologians *never* tried to find absolute consensus on the meaning of the "for" that Christ died "for" us. They were very content to simply describe the various benefits and the various types of things that Christ's death achieves for us.

MH: Yeah, and they certainly wouldn't have been offended by it. Nowadays there's a certain subset within the Church. I don't know that I want to use the word "evangelical." Like, how would I know? I'm not omniscient. But people who are just simply offended by the idea of penal substitution. And so it becomes a mission to get rid of that.

30:00 **MB:** Ah, yeah. And you get people saying, like, "No one believed in penal substitution until Anselm in the 12th century," which is a load of nonsense. For a start, what Anselm believed I don't think was actually substitutionary atonement. That's one problem. But again, I know enough church history from things like the *Epistle to Diognetus* through to Athanasius to say that anyone who's going to deny substitutionary atonement simply hasn't bothered to read the history of the early Church and their discussions, their statements, their sermons about the atonement. So there are these kind of offhand dismissals of things. But they simply betray, sadly, either the ignorance or the prejudice of the persons making those statements.

MH: Now the *Evangelical Theology* book is pretty lengthy (800 or so pages). But regardless of that (this audience isn't going to be put off by that), who did you imagine your audience to be? Is it anybody who's interested in evangelical theology, Christian theology? Is it undergrad classes? Seminary classes? I mean, who's the target audience?

MB: Well, I'm hoping this'll be of interest primarily to first year college and seminary students. So people who are beginning their degree or their program in theological study. That said, plenty of people have read the book who haven't been to seminary and aren't going to seminary. And they say, "Look, I know the Bible. I've got a pretty good grasp of Isaiah. I've got a pretty good grasp of Luke. What I want to know is, how do you put the whole thing together?" And that's where a book like mine is (I think) a bit of a help. It's saying, "Okay, this is how we take the biblical materials and this is how we bring it all together and then, in light of the Gospels, lay out what the Christian doctrines are, what holds them together, and how we should live them out."

MH: Mm hmm. Yeah. Basically you're using the focus on the gospel to sort of be the thread that runs through each thing, so that readers can do that. They can see how one thing relates to the other because they have this common touchpoint. I mean, that's the sense I get.

MB: Yep.

MH: Which, again, why didn't anybody else do this? [laughs] Anyway, it's one of these things when you look back on it, "Well, it's kind of obvious to approach it this way," but...

MB: Yeah, that's what I thought!

MH: Yeah. But you know, sometimes the most obvious things are the things that get overlooked. I want to ask you before we transition to the other book... Because this is the sort of stuff... This work itself is something that I imagine either becomes a pool for shorter things (like the book we're going to talk about next, in a moment) that you can sort of distill things out of and then more for the lay community and whatnot. But before we get there, it's very evident even in this academic one, you're sensitive to the problem (not just for the first-year seminary student who comes to your class, and the skull-full-of-mush kind of thing, and, "We're going to help you, first year seminary student"), but you're sensitive to just a general theological illiteracy or apathy. I mean, in your epilogue, for instance, you get into "urgent tasks for evangelical theology in the 21st century." And the things that you list here are not just problems for first year seminary students. Number 1 you have here: "Recapturing a gospel-centered faith." Number 2, which... This is great. I don't mind saying it. Number 2: "Restoring an apocalyptic worldview." We've got to talk a little bit about that. And then I think the third one you have here is: "Rethinking an evangelical ecclesiology." These are things that apply to every Christian. So unpack those a little bit. Because if you list them like you do, and you're training future pastors, it's going to be with an eye toward, "These are problems in the general church, and so if we train a generation of pastors to address these things, it's going to help." So what are these problems? Why these things in the epilogue? Can you unpack those a little bit?

MB: Yeah. Well, I think the renewal of the Church will not happen by backing the correct horse of the political apocalypse.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: I don't think we need to simply find the right political leader, whether that's of the progressive side or the conservative side and put all our eggs in that basket and go for a strong man or a strong party as the someone who will defend us against, I don't know, Islam, secularism, whatever it is.

MH: Do you think it's fair to say that the Church has sort of hitched its wagon to the State?

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MB: I think that's true. Whether you're Episcopalian or Southern Baptist, there are certain people who are trying to find their mission purpose within a more statist political project. Now whether that means you are simply going to be the religious chaplains to the progressive side of politics or the religious chaplains to a conservative side of politics, people are identifying their religion as simply a cog in a larger political wheel. And that, quite frankly, is borderline idolatry. And again, this problem transcends political divides. People on both sides are trying to invest political leaders with quasi-messianic and soteriological significance. In other words, these leaders can end up becoming like messianic saviors of a slightly lesser variety.

MH: Mm hmm. Or the Church surrenders its responsibilities to state programs.

MB: Exactly. Exactly. So that's one of the big temptations. And it's easy, because it means you get a short circuit to temporal power. It's a kind of... It's kind of like, "Skip six moves ahead." "We can have all our enemies bow down before us if we will but bow down before this one political leader who will vanquish the constituencies we don't like." That is a dangerous temptation. That is a dangerous temptation. That is like Jesus in the wilderness. "I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you will but bow down before me." And we've got to resist that. And that's why we need to remember that our primary resource for our mission is not an arrangement with the political powers that be, because they come and go. And one day you'll have a very friendly pharaoh, and then the next day you'll have a pharaoh who did not know Joseph. So don't put your trust in political men and women. We look to the Lord of the Church and his gospel, which is good news that he is Lord and Caesar is not. And the president is not. And the prime minister is not. And he is the ultimate Lord of all creation. So that's what we've got to do. We've got to look internally to our own language, our own creeds, our own confession, our own worship, our own experience of the risen Lord as the motivation and the driving point for our mission in the world, not to see our mission as simply one cog in a slightly larger political project.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: That's one thing I think we've got to do. And that is true, I think, in all parts of the world, not just in America. That's true in the United Kingdom. That's true in Kenya. It's true in South Africa. It's true in Hong Kong. Okay? The second thing we need to do is recapture an apocalyptic worldview. And the danger is, we always want to find ways to make ourselves feel very comfortable where we are.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: To have something of an over-realized view, or as if somehow we can manufacture the kingdom by our own efforts and resources and designs. Now let me be very clear: I don't want a retreatist view. "Let's all just go out to the Nevada desert, set up a Christian hippie commune. We'll watch VeggieTales in the mornings, a bit of Joel Osteen before lunch, have lunch, take a nap, say the Lord's Prayer 20 times, have a couple of baptisms, and then binge on some [MH laughs] favorite 1980s movies in the evening. And then we'll just wait for God to wipe out everyone else." No, we don't want to be retreatist. But we need to keep in mind the struggle we have against the powers, the principalities, and the powers of darkness of this current evil age. And to know that while we build *for* the kingdom (I'm using N.T. Wright's language here)... We build *for* the kingdom, but we can never truly manufacture it ourselves. And that's going to help us resist the idea that the kingdom—the millennium—is just one election cycle away. Or it's just one purge away. Or if we just raise enough money to build our brand new \$10 million church, then God will do a radical thing here. We're always going to be in the "not yet." We're always going to be in the fight, in the struggle. Or as Paul says in Acts, "Through many trials and struggles we must enter the kingdom of God." And it's the struggle in entering that I think we have to remember. So we've got to keep that "not yet" in mind. Because I think we can invest too much now, particularly in political arrangements or having too much confidence in the meaning of our own ministries. Our job is to preach Jesus and be forgotten. Okay? Immortality does not come from your platforms or your programs or your books or your podcasts or your vodcasts or wherever it is. Immortality—eternal life—comes from God and from no other. Preach Jesus and be forgotten. That is what we do.

40:00

MH: Yeah, it's amazing, the utopian impulse that... I mean, I talk a little bit about it in my book, *Unseen Realm*, but mostly more often here on the podcast. It just takes many forms. This notion that we can reverse the fragmentation that came from Babel, we can reverse depravity, [laughs] we can go back to Eden, all without God. All without the gospel. [laughs] Just... It's just the levers of power that we think... And it's really bad when the Church sort of looks at it and goes, "Oh, yeah. Okay. We *can* use that." You know? That's when it really gets sinister. But there's just this impulse... And I just like the way you put it—restoring the

apocalyptic. In other words, something that disabuses us of this notion. I think that *is* important.

MB: Yeah. And you could argue that Marxism was largely a somewhat parasitic adaptation of Christianity that adopted an over-realized eschatology and a low view of their own depravity. And they kind of... They took some Christian ethics, shorn of their own metaphysical commitments about God and a heavenly world. And they then applied it in a kind of fanatical, authoritarian sense, unconscious of their own capacity for evil. So you could argue that Marxism is where certain aspects of Christian ethics have been take up and borrowed, but then prosecuted in a very malevolent direction.

MH: Mm hmm. Well, I think just the few things we've been able to talk about here, just these trajectories or bents, that speaking to my audience here... These run through the book. I mean, Mike is very serious about orienting each component part (each topic, each subject or area) of systematic theology in the ways that you just heard him talk about—the Christian mission, the gospel itself, the work of Christ, so on and so forth. So again, I really recommend this theology. And I know it's 800 pages. It's not... Maybe some of you will. I mean, this audience, it might happen where, "We're going to take two years in small group and go through this thing." I can see that happening. But even if it's just a reference work, this is a really... It's different. It's well written. It's well laid out. It's conceived very well in terms of how doctrine is presented. I think you get a lot out of it. So this was the major reason I wanted to have Mike on. Again, we could've landed anywhere with any number of books. So please, avail yourself of this. This is what we do here on the podcast. We want the work of scholars that are going to be beneficial to anybody who cares, you don't have to have a degree, this is one of those.

So let's talk a little bit about this shorter book, for just the average person in the pew. Okay? It's called *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew about the Bible*. [laughs] So what are the seven things? If you either have a book or the list in front of you, I'll let you go through the seven things. If you don't, I can read them here, because I'm looking at them on the screen.

MB: I don't know if I can pull off the seven things. Because in my head they actually changed from day to day [MH laughs], depending on what questions I had that morning in class.

MH: Okay, go ahead. I'll let you do it.

MB: The main ones are... Let me explain where these questions come from. These are either what I would call "repeated anxieties" that students have, like, "Well, I mean, the Bible is true, but in what *sense* is it true?" Is it true, like, in a *science* way? Because I have a masters in Geology, and dude, I've got to tell you

something. The world is not 6,000 years old.” You know, you get those sort of anxieties. And then you get some of the antagonisms, where someone says, “Well, obviously you don’t know that the Dead Sea Scrolls have disproved the Bible.” [MH laughs] Yeah, exactly. I’ve heard that! And I said...

MH: Trust me. I’ve been in the fringe community for 20 years, just trying to do apologetics to the fringe. Yeah. [laughs]

45:00

MB: Yeah. And so you’ve got what I call the anxieties, where it’s like, “What do we do with those texts like, ‘Kill all the Canaanites. Kill all the Jebusites.’” That kind of thing. So I’m mainly writing this out of some of the anxieties that people have. And some of the antagonisms that you get. So that’s why I deal with questions like, “Okay, where did the Bible come from?” And you tend to end up with kind of like two views: one is that the Bible just kind of mysteriously floated down from heaven, bound in leather.

MH: Right, “it’s a channeled book.” [laughs]

MB: Yeah, just delivered to your Lifeway store or through Amazon, with a trumpet of angels, written in ye olde English with the words of Jesus in red. Or you get something like the conspiracy theory, like the Bible was invented by Constantine in the fourth century. And then other people go, “I just have no absolute idea at all where the Bible... There was Jesus, and now we have a Bible. And that’s all I know. I’ve got no idea where it goes.” So I try to explain how the canon was put together—a little bit on the Jewish canon, what we call the Hebrew Bible. Try to explain things like, “What is the Septuagint? What is the Greek translation of the Bible? What was the Vulgate,” which is the Latin version of the Bible. “What is the Apocrypha? What are all those books that seem to be in the Catholic Bible but don’t seem to be in my ESV or my NIV Bible?” And then I talk a little bit about, “Where did the English Bible come from as well?” So I kind of talk about some basic questions about where the Bible comes from. I talk about some of the tricky “I” words, like inerrancy or inspiration. Now inerrancy is really a debate about, “In what sense is the Bible true? Or in what sense is the Bible not untrue?” And there I try to argue that you can argue for any definition that you like, but you’ve got to make sure that you understand the phenomenon of the text. You can’t have a definition of inerrancy that doesn’t recognize...

MH: That doesn’t conform to what you run into.

MB: Yeah. Because otherwise you’re just setting yourself up for a fall. And I also point out that in the American context, inerrancy takes on a significance in America that it has nowhere else. Nowhere else in the world are people making inerrancy the only doctrine you have to believe to be a member of an organization. No one in the world is doing that except for people in America. And that’s out of a different response to the crisis of modernity. You know, even the

rise of modernity and science and the critique of a religion of revelation. One response (that of the Princetonians, like B.B. Warfield and Charles Hodge)... They wanted to fortify orthodoxy around their doctrine of Scripture, and so they kind of put all of their eggs into the basket of inerrancy, whereas someone like Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian of the 20th century, wanted to fortify orthodoxy around his Christology—his doctrine of Christ. Okay? So they're different ideas. And I say, "Look, everyone believes the Bible is true in what it affirms. But don't set yourself up for a fall. I mean, that's the important thing. Don't define it in such a way that you're going to create problems." And then also I talk about, "What is inspiration?" And then I add, "Look, the biggest issue today is not whether you believe in inerrancy or infallibility. The biggest issue today in the wider culture in the mainline Church is whether the Bible should be authoritative at all.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: "Does it have any role in regulating or speaking over human life?" And I will never forget reading some absolutely hilarious tweets from a certain seminary I think in New York City. And it was funny, because they were saying things like, "Thanks to critical theory, we now know the Bible is a white, heteronormative hate crime [MH laughs]. But we can distinguish the bits that are from God from the bits that are from patriarchal, neo-Nazi white men, thanks to the use of critical theory." So you can divide the Bible up into the bits that are from God and the bits that are from white males, so to speak. And I'm reading this and going, "Wow. This is..." It's kind of like, "When the time had fully come, God sent us 25-year-old vegans [MH laughs] who had done 20 minutes of seminary education, who can now tell us which bits of the Bible are actually from God and which bits are not." Wow! 2000 years and we've been living in absolute darkness [MH laughs] and abject ignorance. But now, thanks to the revelation of critical theory, or whatever they think it is, we can now surgically take out the good bits of the Bible. And what is more, the good bits of the Bible seem to align very closely with the progressive side of politics. So, I mean, what an amazing coincidence! The bits that come from God...

50:00

MH: Leading us out of the cave.

MB: Yeah. The bits of the Bible that come from God completely agree with the current progressive political ideology. Until it changes in another ten years, and then who knows where we'll be. [MH laughs] So I mean... But that goes to show the issue is not, "Do you believe in inerrancy? Or hard inerrancy? Or soft inerrancy?" Is the Bible in any sense authoritative or normative? That is the debate going on in the wider culture. This sort of little in-house Inerrancy A, versus Inerrancy B—that's happening in a phone booth compared to what's happening in the wider culture.

MH: Mm hmm.

MB: So given some of the complexities that the Bible throws up to us, like real challenging things like some of the things it says about women, or what happens in war. Given all that stuff, how do we talk about the Bible as being authoritative? So that's another one of the things I want to look at. I want to look at, "How do we read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture?" Because you can get really cheesy, what I call "Jesus-ification" going on, where you find Jesus literally everywhere. And I think that can be detrimental, like you read the story of David and Bathsheba, and you think, "Yes, David had his values. But Jesus is the new David, and he's going to be a much better David." That's in a sense true. But when I read David and Bathsheba, the other thing I want to point out is, "Don't commit adultery. Don't commit rape. Don't use power over others. Don't murder." I mean, there is a genuine ethical reading of the Bible as well, not just a Christological aspect.

MH: Right.

MB: That said, I do want to preserve the Christological aspect. Because you know, the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus explained the things in Scripture concerning himself and beginning with the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. He spoke about all the things concerning himself. So I want to maintain a Christological or a Jesus-centered reading of Scripture, but I don't want to...

MH: Right. Without saying, "Everything's just about Jesus, so I don't really actually need to study this weird Old Testament text. It's all about Jesus. So let's talk about Jesus now." You know?

MB: Yeah, exactly.

MH: It's really had a disastrous effect. It's three quarters of your Bible. It's the Bible of the early Church. You know? [laughs] The original Church – this was their Bible. You know?

MB: Exactly. And the other thing I do, I ask my students, "If you had to preach the gospel from the Old Testament, how would you do it?" And they just kind of look at me completely stunned. And I say, "Okay, what are the major Psalms that the apostles used when they preached Jesus?" And it's like, "Um. Psalm 23?" Because it's often the only psalm they know.

MH: Right.

MB: And then I take them through things like Psalm 110: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" And Psalm 2: "You are my son. Today I have begotten thee." You know? And Psalm 118: "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. The LORD

has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” I take them through all those texts and show you can preach the Christian gospel from the Old Testament, in particular the Psalms. The Psalm book was the main diet of apostolic preaching. And yeah, that’s a whole revelation about the fact that you can use the Old Testament evangelically, but not ridiculously, if you get what I mean.

MH: Mm hmm. Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, this is something... Where I used to work, at Logos, I was banned from company forums three times. [laughs] And the worst blow-up we had was when I posted something on one of our blogs that, “All the Bible is not about Jesus.” And this was my complaint. Like, “Okay, this section on menstrual laws, or how we dispose of human waste, that’s really about Jesus?” You know? And it’s the most obvious thing in the world. I wasn’t even getting into the theological meat. I was just using these trite examples. And that just sort of blew up. And I had to be banned again. But that’s where a lot of people are. If I’m cranky I say it’s just downright laziness and that we just don’t want to study the Old Testament.

MB: Yeah.

55:00

MH: But to be a little more positive (not a whole lot, but a little more positive), it’s that we’ve sort of trained a generation to think this way. And there is a good way to do Christo-centric thinking out of the Old Testament. Because hey, the New Testament writers actually repurpose the Old Testament. But then there’s this really awful way that we sort of use as an excuse to just go off and do the sermon we do every week. You know? It’s really terrible.

MB: Yep. Yep. I agree, I agree. So in this book, *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew About the Bible*, I’m dealing stuff like that. I’m also adding statements or chapters on things like: the goal of reading Scripture is things like knowledge, love, faith, and hope—to grow in those kind of things. So I’m hoping this will alleviate some of the anxieties that people have about reading the Bible, kind of also cure some of the misconceptions. And also leave people to have greater confidence and greater faith in the Bible and inspire them to engage in a more responsible use of the Bible.

MH: Yeah. Well, again, more... This is what we need. I mean, it’s just that simple. This is the kind of thing we need. And we can sit here as scholars and lament and complain and gripe about the theological illiteracy, and in some cases the theological apathy, in the Church. But if you don’t use your skill set (that by the Lord’s providence you have) to produce this stuff, then you really don’t have any right to complain too loudly about it.

One last question. Since you have written a lot of things, do you have a feel for which book you’ve produced that you think readers most appreciated? Or that just sort of got an unexpected response? Like it really mattered to people more

than you thought it would? Is there one or two books that you've produced like that that really just seemed to hit home for a lot of people?

MB: Yeah, I'd probably pick three books. One, I think... *Evangelical Theology* has had, I think, a really good reception. A number of colleges and seminaries have taken it on. But I love people saying, "Yeah, of course, why not have a gospel-centered theology textbook?" I think of myself as, like, the guy who said, "Hey, let's put wheels on a suitcase." [MH laughs] Because you'd think it'd just be self-evident, but it took a while.

MH: Right.

MB: It's like, "Yeah! Not just two; let's put four wheels on the suitcase." So I think having a systematic theology that makes the gospel very central and kind of gravitates to the Lord of the gospel, I think that's had a warm reception. I also wrote a little book (actually more like a pamphlet) explaining how I changed my views on women in ministry. And that's called *Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives, and Bobby Haircuts*. [MH laughs] And it's a parody of a 1960s tract.

MH: What was the name of the original tract?

MB: It was by John R. Rice. And it was called *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers*.

MH: Okay.

MB: Which... John Rice was rallying against the sort of women who were modeling themselves (even their hairstyles) after Jackie Kennedy.

MH: Ah. Yep.

MB: So he was, like, all these new Jackie Kennedy women with a bob haircut, he was dead-set against that. So I wrote a parody of that. I get, like, an email about that book about once every few weeks. [MH laughs] People who say 1) Love the title. 2) Thanks for explaining how you changed your view. And like, I used to be, when it comes to being very conservative, I was slightly to the right of John Piper when it came to issues about women in ministry. So yes, I've changed my view, largely from reading Romans 16. That had a big impact on me. So that's one book that gets a lot of feedback and a lot of thank yous and positive reviews. But I have to say, the book that I think's had the biggest impact and connected the most people is the book I coauthored with N.T. Wright called *The New Testament in Its World*. And working with Tom Wright, it's like being asked to sing a duet with Beyonce. [MH laughs] You're working with one of the greatest, and...

MH: Have you used that analogy with him being present? Would he know who Beyonce is?

MB: He may not. He may not. [MH laughs] I did at one time try to describe Tom as the Lady Gaga of biblical studies. [MH laughs]

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MH: I'm sure he appreciated that.

MB: But some people said, "Well, if Tom knows what that means, he may not like it." [laughter] So I've changed Lady Gaga to Beyonce. But you're dealing with one of the best scholars who makes very good contributions at the highest academic level, but also writes very well at a popular level. So working with him...

MH: Yes, he's very intentional.

MB: He is. He's very good. So working with Tom and doing this book, which is largely taking his lifetime work and translating it into the genre of a New Testament introduction, that has done very well. People have really liked it. I mean, it's a big book. It's a massive book. But it's very pictorial, very graphic. We made some good videos to go along with it. And yeah, I've been really encouraged by the feedback that that book has gotten. And that's also been picked up by a number of seminaries and colleges.

MH: That's good. Even if it's... I don't know how many pages it is. But even if it's 1000 pages, that's a significant distillation of his output. So you're doing pretty well to even try that.

MB: Yep. Yeah. I don't think I'm going to match him anytime soon. But it's good just to be one of the backup singers for a while.

MH: [laughs] Right. Well, I'm sure that the audience has enjoyed this and found it interesting and entertaining. And again, most of all, though, they get another glimpse—more access—into material. Again, this is what we try to do here. We try to take Scripture seriously, interpreting it in its own world, its own cognitive environment, its own context. And it's nice to have somebody who does that in the New Testament side and then uses that endeavor to actually produce theological material. So I'm glad we could have you on. I'm glad it worked out. I know that the time zone thing was a little bit weird, so that took some effort. But thank you for being on the podcast. And maybe this November I'll run into you. Or if I run into N.T. Wright, I will give him the Beyonce line and tell him who said it. [laughs] And maybe explain it to him. That would be fun. Alright, well thank you again for being with us.

MB: Thank you very much for having me. And thank you to all your listeners for following us along!

TS: Hey, Mike, can you remind us? He's got so many books. Which one would you recommend to our audience? Or can you kind of steer us in a direction of his work?

MH: Yeah, the new book, of course, is *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew About the Bible*. And obviously our emphasis in this episode was *Evangelical Theology*. And that is the title. Let me just get the full title here. *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*. It's a theology textbook. And some of his other stuff, he has a very small book critiquing Adoptionist Christology. That one is called *Jesus the Eternal Son: Answering Adoptionist Christology*. Again, for those in the audience, this is the idea that Jesus wasn't preexistent deity, but he was just a guy that God adopted to be the Son of God and the messiah. God just picked him. So there's that book I think is important. And he also... A lot of people in the audience are going to be familiar with Bart Ehrman. Ehrman popularizes, essentially, his agnosticism or atheism (whatever bucket you'd put Bart Ehrman in). Ehrman has a book, *How Jesus Became God*, disputing this notion that the New Testament is reliable in terms of the deity of Jesus, that that was a later development in Church history. Well, Mike Bird has a response to that called *How God Became Jesus*. Okay? So I think that's an important book, too. So again, he's written a number of books that are accessible to people in this audience, anybody who really has a strong interest in biblical studies. So those are the ones I would recommend most.

TS: With that, I think we're done. Alright, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.