



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

Engaging the Bible with Dr. Michael Bird

Season 2, Episode 3 Transcript

[00:00:00] Intro: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast, we help churches make disciples and now here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:15] Darryl Dash: Most Christians would agree that the Bible is important, but statistics show that many Christians aren't reading the Bible. And when we do read the Bible, we often suffer with misconceptions and half truths that lead us to very strange views of the Bible. We can even lose confidence in the Bible because we're not prepared to understand it on its own terms.

Dr. Michael Bird wants to help. He's written a book called *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew about the Bible*. He covers topics like how the Bible was put together, what inspiration means, how the Bible is true. Why literal interpretation is not always the best interpretation and more. And it's not only an informative book but it's a fun one with Dr. Bird's well-known sense of humor. Dr. Bird is a lecturer in theology at Ridley College in Melbourne and he's also a visiting research professor at Houston Baptist University. He's an Anglican priest married to Naomi and has four Children. And in his leisure time I'm not sure he has much of it, but in his leisure time, he enjoys jogging, musical theater, red wine and reading. I didn't ask you, should I be calling you Dr. Bird or Michael throughout the podcast?

[00:01:32] Dr. Michael Bird: You can just call me Mike, anything but Mick.

[00:01:36] Darryl Dash: All right, that sounds good. Mike welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:40] Dr. Michael Bird: Thanks for having me, Darryl.

[00:01:42] Darryl Dash: What made you want to write a book about what we should know about the Bible?

[00:01:47] Dr. Michael Bird: Well, it's kind of like having to deal with the same questions over and over. Seeing people complain about the same things, mischaracterized the same things. Having some sort of non-Christians or skeptics keep pushing the same kind of weird conspiracy theories on social media. I thought well, it'll be good to nut out some of these as a bit of preventive pastoral care to help Christians getting confused, misguided or dumbstruck by some of the more difficult questions that they can come up with on their own about the Bible. And if people know roughly these seven things, they're more likely to have greater confidence in the Bible and to be less flustered when they come across something that sounds a little bit weird or they're not too sure how to explain it.

[00:02:38] Darryl Dash: So it's strange because we claim to be people of the Book and some of the things you cover in the Book should be fairly elementary and yet a lot of Christians just don't understand them. For instance, how the Bible was put together, you begin there. And a lot of Christians, maybe they read a novel, *The DaVinci Code* or something and they really don't know how to answer it and yet that should be fairly accessible information for every believer. So why do you think that we aren't prepared to know the very basic facts of the Bible?

[00:03:12] Dr. Michael Bird: I think it's because people can often regard the Bible as a kind of like a calendar of memorable quotes. Like you've got like a little calendar every day, there's a famous quote from Albert Einsteins or Madame Curie or Isaac Newton or Iggy Pop or whoever it is you're into. We just think it's like just a little sort of random tidbits of inspirational, and we can treat the Bible like that. We don't understand that this was written as instruction, as a type of wisdom, as a type of narrative or even a constitution for people over various centuries and was very meaningful in their context. And then these texts take on a whole life of their own in the way they're received and interpreted in subsequent communities. So people have no grasp of the historical centeredness and the historical effects of the text that they're reading. And it just gets treated as a kind of, you might call like Hallmark wisdom that you could just as well find on a greeting card or a birthday card of some form.

[00:04:23] Darryl Dash: Early on, I think in the preface you talk about the fact that if pastors taught the seven things that you cover in the book, if they preached about them in Sunday school classes and small groups taught them, we probably wouldn't have some of the problems in the church to do with the Bible today. And the thing that confuses me as pastors go to seminary, most of them anyway, they studied some of these topics and yet I think we're not doing a

great job teaching them. So why do you think that is? Because probably the problem does begin in the pulpit at least to a certain extent.

[00:04:56] Dr. Michael Bird: Yeah it depends, it depends on the pastor, depends on the church, depends on the seminary and it depends on your individual context.

You know, there are certain context, particularly in North America where the burning issue is do you believe in inerrancy or infallibility. As if that's the issue that divides the good guys from the bad guys. And if you're interpreting the Bible in light of that kind of in-house division, then you're going to line up all the ducks to make sure you align with one particular team or another. In other words, a lot of in-house tribal debates will affect the way people address these questions, so that's one factor I think that is going on.

In another sense, people are a little bit scared of the history because like I said, they want to treat the Bible either with its devotional wisdom or purely as a timeless resource of dogma and they're a little bit reluctant. A little bit reluctant to make it all historically centered because that means you actually need to know some history and that is just like way too hard.

I think the other thing is we often just want to use the Bible as a way to prop up our own church culture, our own congregation's way of doing business. We just see the Bible as a source book for that. Including things like God speaking to us, got addressing us with a message, but we then find sort of some tricks or easy cop outs to avoid risking some of the more difficult stuff. Like what do you do with the war techs in the Old Testament, about the way they fought ancient or eastern warfare. I mean, what do you do with that? Or we get into the cultural debates about creation or politics and health care and the idea is to domesticate the Bible to whatever political tribe you're part of. And that's whether you're conservative or progressive on those issues that can happen.

So I think that's some of the issues that you got to deal with and you can deal with them in a number of ways. One thing I teach at Ridley College is, you've got to be aware of your own social cultural and philosophical location. You know, if you're a white person growing up in Canada or a black woman living in Uganda, you're going to have a different culture around and that is going to shape the way you understand and look at the Bible. So you've got to have a little bit of self consciousness. You've also got to be aware of those who read the Bible before you, looking at the great tradition of the church, you've also got to have a certain degree of humility and understand there are different ways of viewing things. And the way you've done it in you and your church's Bible study for the last 60 odd years. Maybe, just maybe the post World War II consumerist, hyper-

individualistic religious culture that you live in is not normal or hasn't been around everywhere in the world. And in fact, you're the person who's got the odd view because you're somewhat new on the scene.

[00:07:55] Darryl Dash: Yeah, it's a very different mindset. We tend to have a lot of hubris when we approach Scripture and taking that humble mindset probably goes a long way.

Mike, I talked to a pastor one time, actually I think this was a professor, but it resembles a conversation I've had with a pastor and he was approaching retirement. He said there's all kinds of things as I read Scripture that I'm convinced about and yet it's not safe in my ministry to talk about them.

I think he was talking about Scripture, when you read it on its own terms, it doesn't always adhere to the lines that we've drawn for it to stay within. So he said when I'm retired, I can kind of follow those lines, and it struck me as being a very sad commentary on how we handle Scripture. We don't let it speak on its own terms.

And I understand because we do have theology around what Scripture is and how it works, so I understand how we got there. I thought your book did a good job of helping us to understand Scripture on its own terms. Although on the other hand, I think some people are going to push back because it violates maybe shibboleth or a denominational conviction around say infallibility or inerrancy and that kind of thing.

So talk to me about that, for somebody who's afraid of reading Scripture and allowing it to inform us about how to read Scripture, how do we push past that fear and let it speak for itself?

[00:09:21] Dr. Michael Bird: Yeah, well that can depend on your context and if you're dealing with things like job security.

Look on the one hand, if you belong to an institution that has a statement of faith and if you can't uphold that statement of faith, then maybe that institution is not the place where you need to be.

So there's that issue like that, you have to deal with, but on the general issue of wrestling with some of the difficult or the hard parts of the Bible.

Look, I mean honesty is always the best policy and there are some parts of the Bible that bothered me. There's some parts of the Bible I'm not sure how line up with that part. You know, you look at the Sermon on the Mount and love your

enemies, but then look at some things in the Old Testament, how do you sort those things out? But the good thing though, that is not a new question, people have been wrestling with that for a long time; keeping the faith and persevering. And you don't have to shutting people down or be condemning others because they raise those sorts of questions. Having a little bit of occasional skepticism, and a bit of down is actually the sign of an inquiring faith, a faith that wants to grow and engage and wrestle with God. It's not a sign of weakness and it's certainly not an attack. And we've got to be open to those sorts of questions of enquiring minds because they are also the best chances to grow and to be edified and come to a far more mature faith that's able to deal with the slings and arrows of human existence as you read the Bible.

But what we've got to do is say the Bible is not just kind of like a Rubik's cube to be solved with some of the historical, theological and ethical challenges that throws up for us. We also need to see it as a resource. It is something that contributes to the life of Christians and it even helps enhance the human condition. The Bible is a book of hope, it's a book of God's Love for the world. It's a book that tells us it's better to suffer violence than to do violence. That victims should be protected, that all human beings are in the image of God. And the Bible, irrespective of what people may think about it, pro and con, has had the biggest effect on Western civilization and it's the basis to be perfectly frank, for pretty much everything good in Western civilization. Whether it's our view of human rights, our view of freedom, respecting the rights of people, the equality of women, those sorts of things. Yeah, they're all rooted in a Christian interpretation of these sacred texts. So we can focus on that stuff as well, not just the depths of the difficult text, or the text of terror that sometimes called when you read the Bible. The Bible has had a positive impact, I think you ought to tell both sides of the story there.

[00:12:10] Darryl Dash: Your second last chapter covers what the Bible is meant to do and it's such an encouraging chapter. I think if anybody's struggling in their Bible reading, that would be a good chapter, not only to inform, but to encourage you on why it's worthwhile. I really appreciated that chapter.

Well, you talked about a lot in the book, you talk about how the Bible is put together and you talk about what inspiration means. You talk about what it means to say that the Bible is true and even our understandings of the kind of literature that it is. You talk about how history helps us understand Scripture, why the literal interpretation isn't always the best interpretation. As I mentioned, you talk about the goal of Bible reading and how to keep Jesus at the center of the Bible. The book has been out for not that long now, have you found that any of these topics have especially resonated with people since the book came out?

Or are there any topics that have especially rankled maybe people and got them worked up? Which topics do you sense really are challenging people?

[00:13:11] Dr. Michael Bird: Probably the one that raises the most eyebrows is the one about you take the Bible seriously not necessarily literally. That does raise a few eyebrows because people often get told that a literal hermeneutic is the best one, the only one, the exclusive one. And I've argued there are places where you need to read the Bible very literally. Like when it says Jesus and his disciples came to Capernaum it means Jesus and some other dudes he was traveling with came to a town called Capernaum, and nothing sort of allegorical symbolic about that. But then you read other parts of the Bible, whether it's the Book of Revelation, the song of songs, certain parts of Genesis. These cannot be sustained on a literal interpretation. I mean Paul at one point in Galatians says these things may be taken allegorically and the revelation of John we're told certain things need to be understood figuratively. So these are ways that the Bible itself helps us to interpret the Bible.

Now, that's not to create a kind of really license that people can just read the Bible in whatever way they want. I believe there are certain constraints about how we read the Bible, constraints by the shape of the canon in itself. Our crystal logical centeredness of the Bible, things like historical context as well, and certain ethical constraints that lead us to a responsible reading of the Bible. So that's probably the chapter where people I think get the most out of the book, because you point out that there is a certain degree of freedom and even artistic license. As long as you've got this sort of conical seat belt, you're being shaped by the wider form function and story of the entire Bible. You're somewhat free to be able to delve in and trying to make all sorts of connections within the Bible, behind the Bible, even with your own experience in front of the Bible.

[00:15:06] Darryl Dash: You really bring out, I think later in the book that we don't tend to interpret Scripture the way that the apostles interpret Scripture. Why do you think that is? I think I kind of know because it's so foreign to us, but help us walk through that. How do we learn from the apostles, how to interpret Scripture?

[00:15:24] Dr. Michael Bird: Yeah, I mean one of the questions I asked students, should we interpret the Old Testament the way the apostles did? And many students are like good grief no, that's just weird. But you know, they're allowed to be weird because they're apostles, they've just got like a hermeneutical immunity card, they can do what they like. And I say well, no, actually, the way they interpret the Bible should be a model for us. Because even the very conservative students who mired somewhere between a very literal reading

strategy and a modernist one, that's all about the historical, critical sense of just looking at the grammar and the history and the meaning of Greek and Hebrew words and even that is something of a constraint. If you read the apostles and the later Church fathers, they read particularly Old Testament with a great deal of creative energy and they believe that the whole canon points to Christ, it's unified in Christ. And therefore they have no misapprehensions about finding types, patterns and prophecies of Christ in the Old Testament. Or the way they make connections between the Old Testament, between the gospels and say the Book of Hebrews or something like that.

There's a great deal of having hermeneutical license, or maybe hermeneutical might not be the best word, but there is a great way of searching and questing after new types of coherences you can find when you read the Bible and particularly in light of your worshiping experience. If I've experienced God in this way, of Jesus as Lord, now let's go back and read Genesis or let's think about the book of Romans in light of our nice seeing faith and what does that sound and feel like. That I find is a far more richer reward than the kind of bland secular approaches to the Bible, which is usually just a bunch of source criticism or peculiar reader response criticism. It's also much better than the sort of bland and somewhat boring and banal, purely literary grammatical exegesis as well that often pop there.

[00:17:35] Darryl Dash: I've been reading the Bible for it's got to be close to 50 years now, I'm I started pretty early, I am 54 so probably close to 50 years. I've been a pastor for 30 years now, and I've been to seminary. I feel like a novice when it comes to Scripture, I feel like I'm just scratching the surface still and every time I go through the Bible, I feel like oh, I know this and yet there's depths that I haven't even begun to explore. So is this normal, and what encouragement would you give to somebody who feels like man, I just feel like even if unfamiliar with it, this is still foreign material to me and I've got so far to go?

[00:18:16] Dr. Michael Bird: Oh, that's actually a good experience. I'm more concerned with people who think yeah, I've got the Bible mastered. I tell students when they hand you that Master of Divinity, I hope you do not believe them because the rest of your life should be spent not mastering the Bible, but hopefully struggling to be mastered by it. Well at least the God who speaks in the Bible. So yeah, I think that's normal, I'm basically in a professional Bible mode, I spend my day even more so than most pastors.

You know, I spend my whole day trolling through various things related to Greek, Hebrew and historical context and the history of interpretation. I'm always finding brand new things. Just recently I discovered how Zechariah 6:12, in the

Greek translation, the Greek word ἀνατολή, dayspring was used as a Messianic title and it certainly appears that way in Luke's gospel in chapter 1 verse 78. Where Zechariah talks about the Anatoli, the day spring that's going to burst upon the world. And this is how a somewhat not very well known Messianic title for the messiah, both Judaism and in early Christianity. In fact I had a PhD student, former student of mine, David Winkles even written a book on this little word, on the dayspring and how that's understood and interpret amongst Jews and Christians.

So I mean, there's always stuff to learn along those lines or new challenges you have to face. I mean, what do we think about the Bible? What do we think of immigration in light of the Bible? You know, all sort of stuff like that. The next book I've got coming out is called *Religious Freedom in a Secular Age*. And what do we think about this thing called secularism? Is it a bad thing that's been imposed or is a good way of creating space for people of all faith and land, and how does the Bible speak into that? So there's always topics and questions we can learn from the Bible as we come in light of new experiences, new context and fresh questions.

[00:20:23] Darryl Dash: So I read Ray Ortlund say that in a lifetime it's a good goal to master maybe a book from the Hebrew scriptures and a book from the New Testament. And then kind of get to know the rest, but maybe we'll have all eternity to deal with the rest of it. So if Ray Ortlund can say that, maybe it provides hope for the rest of us.

[00:20:44] Dr. Michael Bird: I think that's a good idea. I think it's good of having a little like a passage of Scripture, that's something of a hobby horse. I've got one friend who is a pastor and he tries to read a couple of books a year on the Sermon on the Mount. So he's a little hobby horses on the Sermon on the Mount and every four or five years he'll do a sermon series or at least part of it on the Sermon on the Mount or if he's asked to preach somewhere that's kind of his go to thing. I've got another friend who loves Isaiah 40 to 55. In fact, I think come close to memorizing the whole thing, all these various sort of songs and narratives you get in there.

So I think it's good for anyone to have one part of Scripture that's something of a hobby horse. And over a life through your reading, preaching, teaching, studying, you can develop a certain extra expertise in that particular area. I think anyone in ministry having that little part of Scripture that you're really fascinated about and it's almost like a side hobby, I think is a good idea.

[00:21:46] Darryl Dash: I'm going to ask probably a very stupid question. You've written a whole book about how to read the bible. And the question I want to

ask you is if you're talking to somebody who is just starting to read the Bible, maybe they've never done it before. Somebody's handed them a leather-bound Bible and they don't know where to start. Obviously reading your book would be a good way to begin, but what if you're just meeting them over tea or something, what would you tell them on how to get started in reading the Bible?

[00:22:13] Dr. Michael Bird: There's a whole bunch of things, I mean you have to start off with which book to read. I probably wouldn't kick off just with Genesis one and read my whole way through. You know what I would probably do is start off with something like the Gospel of Mark, and then I'd go to the Gospel of John and then I'd probably want to get into Acts and then maybe work my way through the rest of the New Testament. Then in light of that, I'd probably go back and read the Pentateuch and probably some Psalms and develop a rhythm. So that's probably the order in which I think of what you read. Another thing I think does help is a good study Bible. You know, these things can become somewhat crutches and people rely on them, but if you get a good study Bible because you always have questions like where the heck is Capernaum. What's a Pharisee, who are the Assyrians? Questions like that. If you don't have a knowledge of the ancient region, the Greek and Roman world and let's be honest, who does? Apart from maybe watching some HBO movies about Rome in which case you think it's just violence in one big orgy. You know, if that's all you know about the ancient world and then you probably do need a few tips and helps.

So having a reading plan, having I think a good study Bible, I think would help as well. And then reading maybe like a simple introduction to the Bible, just kind of gives you a summary, kind of like each major book. So when you get into a new book, you kind of know what you're getting into, maybe something that's got like an authorship date setting, then maybe like a brief commentary on the whole thing, stuff like that will be very helpful.

[00:23:54] Darryl Dash: And how can pastors learn to help their people to read the Bible?

[00:24:00] Dr. Michael Bird: I mean you've got to find out what are the burning questions, and this is going to change all the time. Like a few years ago, the big question that the churches I was involved with were facing with issues about what do we think about same-sex marriage, that kind of thing. Then that kind of changed into how do we deal with this sort of violence. Then the next big thing was kind of like reading the Bible in light of the Me Too movement. Probably a big thing at the moment as well is the whole concept of gender and identity. So you've got to kind of go to find out what the people are, and then when you're reading the Bible, have those sorts of questions in the back of your mind.

The guy who I think does this remarkably well is Tim Keller, Tim Keller is very good at having a preaching style that is partly apologetic. By which I don't mean every sermon is seven reasons for the resurrection or the case for angels or something, he's not doing that. But when he's reading a passage or preaching, he's conscious of what are the issues that this is going to raise? How does this berate against things within our culture? So he kind of has a default setting of sort of a cultural apologetic embedded in his very preaching style. Which I think is very, very helpful and very edifying and very useful.

So at one level I would say to preachers be a bit more like Tim Keller and that is you've got to know what are the issues that your people are facing. From the people in high school to the people of nursing homes, what are the things they're wrestling with?

I mean if you want to go for another topical issue, I mean another thing at the moment is things like mask and hand dates, you know, that's one of the burning issues and what does it mean to read Scripture in light of the stuff. Now that doesn't give you the license to go off all these weird hobby horses and that kind of thing, but you can promote a responsible reading of the Bible. And you're modeling for people how to interpret, understand the Bible in light of these sort of big, cluster of questions that people are facing at any one time.

[00:26:13] Darryl Dash: That's great. Mike, I want to ask you a couple more personal questions. I like to ask every podcast guest these questions as we wrap up, what have you been learning recently?

[00:26:25] Dr. Michael Bird: What have I been learning? Well I've been studying about ancient ruler cults like the way the Romans had a propensity to worship the emperor as a type of God, comparing that with the worship of Jesus, so I've been reading a bit about that. Also in terms of Jewish rulers, even Jewish rulers like Herod the Great, there were benefactors of their people as well as kings. So they received a type of gratitude that was sort of thank God for Herod, he's so cool to us, that sort of thing. So I'm looking at that and comparing it with the way the early church spoke about Christ. The other thing I'm reading, I'm reading a biography of Ulysses S. Grant, which I'm very much enjoying and in the biography I'm reading, Grant is just beginning his campaign against General Lee in the Virginia campaign.

[00:27:15] Darryl Dash: Some good American history there. Yeah, that's good. And what's been encouraging you lately?

[00:27:21] Dr. Michael Bird: Oh, boy. Well to be honest, it's a fairly discouraging time in both the world and in Australia. I mean my city Melbourne is in its sixth lockdown and I've got no idea when it is going to end. Sydney is facing a kind of delta apocalypse, and I think they're about to start shooting Mad Max 4 soon or something like that. What's encouraging me is it's good seeing my students and my colleagues persevering. I have the benefit of being on study leave at the moment. But it's very encouraging just seeing my colleagues and students kind of just getting on with things, getting the job done and continuing the ministry and the work of Ridley College.

[00:28:01] Darryl Dash: It's good. I really appreciate your ministry. The most recent book you've written is *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew about the Bible*. It's a book that I wish I could put in everybody's hands, certainly in the church and pastors all the way down to the pew, and I'm really grateful for it. Grateful for your wider ministry as well. It seems like you're quite active in publishing and I have benefited from many of your work, so thank you. Where can people find out more you?

[00:28:26] Dr. Michael Bird: You can follow me at @MBird12 or you can also follow me at michaelfbird.substack.com where I kind of have like a few blog post or newsletter stuff that I send out three or four times a week.

[00:28:39] Darryl Dash: Mike, thank you so much for joining us today and thank you for this book.

[00:28:43] Dr. Michael Bird: Thank you Darryl for having me and thank you to your listeners for joining us.