

Episode 145 Theology on Tap

Sarah Stone

Hi, I'm Sarah Stone, Executive Director for Theology on Tap.

David Capes

Sarah Stone, welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast. Thanks for being here.

Sarah Stone

Thanks for having me. I'm excited.

David Capes

You have been here to the library a number of times.

Sarah Stone

Yes, I love it. It feels very homey. And in a good way, you feel warm in your soul when you're here. Yes, I love it.

David Capes

For those who don't know, Sarah Stone. Who is she?

Sarah Stone

She's amazing. I'm a single mom. I have a Presbyterian pastor dad. So I'm a PK, which I think is really cool. And grew up in a family of half believers, half atheists. I know, kind of crazy. And I actually did my Master's at a seminary, but to go into counseling. So I was going to be a therapist. And I got to take all the fun seminary classes, but not the terribly difficult Hebrew and Greek. So I got to do theology.

David Capes

Well, if you want to do Hebrew and Greek, you can do them here. You can do it right here.

Sarah Stone

So, I will keep that in mind. I got a real taste for and a love for theology. When I was there I was a therapist for a little bit and then moved down to Houston. And then life took a series of turns I wasn't expecting. But they've landed me in a job I really love now.

David Capes

What kind of therapy did you do?

Sarah Stone

Mostly marriage and family. I'm giggling because you know, I am divorced. And so it's a sort of irony. But I loved Marriage and Family therapy. Thinking about how men and women approach things differently and how systems work. I still love that.

David Capes

So do you find that particular people are more likely to talk? In other words, guys are more likely to talk than women? Are women more likely than guys? How does it typically go?

Sarah Stone

Well, I have more women in my circles just because I teach a women's Bible study and I do some women's events. I don't know if it's my personality, or just the kind of age we're living in, but people open up quickly with me.

David Capes

So rather than putting up a wall or needing four or five sessions to break through this wall?

Sarah Stone

Yes. Maybe because it's not therapy. Or maybe because there's an authenticity that they can sense. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, I don't tell people this, or I didn't plan on telling you this. And we're off to the races.

David Capes

It's reassuring though, isn't it? People today are needing more and more to talk through and about their lives. That's a great ministry just in and of itself. So you've been doing Theology on Tap for a while. But you've now gone all in to work on it. And you've got a board and you're doing some great events. So for those who don't know, what is Theology on Tap?

Sarah Stone

Well, our neat tagline is "inviting believers and the spiritually curious to explore big questions of life and faith". But Theology on Tap started in 2015. I've been doing young adult or single's ministry for about 12 years at a local church. And I was doing something called Theology on Tap. Lots of people use that phrase. That's not unique to us.

David Capes

The first time I heard it was in Chicago, a number of years ago,.

Sarah Stone

And there's a Catholic Theology on Tap. We get at least one Catholic at all of our events. And I say, stay. We're cool too, you know. I was doing a kind of a roundtable discussion. And I got a call from a Methodist pastor named Andy Cunningham. He was at Chapel Wood at the time. And he said, You're doing something called Theology on Tap. What's that about? What's that like? Who comes? And we were both lamenting the fact that some of these bigger mega churches in Houston can throw a barn dance and get 300 people without even trying. And we're over here celebrating double digits. So we thought if we put our groups together and maybe invited a couple other young adult groups, we could get a critical mass and have some real fun together.

People could network and enjoy interesting conversation, maybe even find love, which people have. So we started in 2015, with, I think, six churches, each bringing their young adult groups together and talking about some interesting topic over craft beer. And you know, we've learned through the years, what works and what doesn't, and I think our conversations are getting better and better.

But I also have noticed a shift in our audience. It's not just churchy people anymore. We have a pretty wide swath of people that are skeptical or maybe agnostic or maybe would call themselves Christians. But they've been really wounded by the church or feel like they can't trust the church, but they can come have a beer with us. It's more accessible. So it's kind of neat. We have of course, our theology nerds that like to come and text in funny things.

The secret sauce of Theology on Tap is that our leadership team is made up of pastors or professors from lots of different denominations. So when we do our big Q & A in the second half, they get to disagree and spar about things. It's a charitable disagreement. That's our high value. It's like the lost civil discourse that we are all wanting.

David Capes

We don't have that anymore.

Sarah Stone

Not much of it. But it's the greatest way to hear the best argument on either side of whatever the thing is. Say we're talking about baptism or end times or how does salvation work? You're going to hear the best of, say salvation,. The best Wesleyan and the best Calvinist ideas, and then you get to kind of pick for yourself. I think I really aligned with that. But we all agree that we want you to know and follow Jesus.

David Capes

I was telling someone about Theology on Tap, and they asked, is it Lutheran? Do you get that? Luther was famous for having beers and talking theology. But it's not modeled on Luther.

Sarah Stone

No, but we were friendly to the Lutherans. We started a podcast in 2020, where we were putting out content on a local radio station and through our podcast platforms, and my co producer is Evan McClanahan. He's a Lutheran pastor in Midtown. He's on our leadership team so we have a sliver of Lutheran, that voice in the leadership team. But we also have Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian and Presbyterian. I'm sure I forgot somebody, but we have all of them, at least Protestants.

David Capes

For a number of years, I would appear twice a year, at Theology on the Vine, which was done by a Catholic Church on the west side of town. They would give everybody a glass of wine, and they would give everybody some hors d'oeuvres. We would take a topic of theology, and discuss it. And I had a lot of fun doing that. It was really interesting. I had Diet Coke so everyone who's listening can settle down!

David Capes

But it was some really good conversation. And I think something happens when you sit down over a meal. So we have a meal as well, or in some cases, drinks or just coffee, to talk about these things in a way that's fresh, open, disarming.

Sarah Stone

Right, not everybody drinks. But just the fact that we offer beer, I think makes us feel accessible, right? There's a sort of convivial feeling about it like these are people that want to have a genuine conversation. I actually don't drink at the events because as the emcee, I have to stay sharp.

One time I was the guest speaker. The topic was violence in the Old Testament, and that's a big barrier for a lot of people, right? How could God be good if he allowed so much, or even dictated so much violence? So I was the guest speaker for that. But otherwise, I'm the emcee, which is really fun. Because I don't have to get blamed for any of the answers people don't like. And I get to lob the questions from the audience up to the panel and stop someone when they talk too long.

David Capes

So these are audience questions that come in. These are not questions that you prearranged ahead so they are ready with answers?

Sarah Stone

No, people text in their questions. And if I get a series of questions that are all similar, I make sure to ask those. And then everybody on the panel that wants to chime in can. And when they get past three and talk too long, I make them stop and we move on. Then if we really get some good conversation going, we'll carry that on into the podcast. We did one on hell. What are the different views? What really happens? What do we know? Who goes there? And Juan Carlos Martinez and Chris Date, were taking opposing positions, and they started to get into it. What about this person? What about that? Because people loved it. And so we had them on the podcast to keep the conversation going. And it was a lot of fun.

David Capes

So when you think about the last year what was the best topic? What has been the thing that has just really gripped people?

Sarah Stone

I know this is going to sound very strange, but I think one of the best ones we've done in the last year was about Satanism. We had a satanist from the Satanic Temple come in. In the first half of our events, we do a TED talk type presentation. Sometimes it's one person, sometimes it's a debate. So our lovely satanist came in. And we met with her ahead of time and laid out what they actually believe? What are the tenants? Which of course, most Satanists don't actually believe in Satan. They're not theistic. They just like the archetype of satan because he's mischievous and rebellious.

David Capes

And they've got that little spirit within them too.

Sarah Stone

Oh yes, they love to poke at things. And, then one of our folks got up and basically said, you know, kudos to our satanist friend for calling this what it is. Many of us live this way. But we don't call it that. And so he made the distinction between Satanism with a capital 'S' and satanism with a lowercase 's'. Using the lowercase 's' if you live for yourself, and you're the final arbiter of all truth in this world, it's kind of the same. It made for some great conversation. So that was a good one. People are gonna think we only talk about really crazy things, but the one we did on hell was also pretty good, I think.

David Capes

The question, does hell exist is a huge question that people have. Does hell exist? If it does, who goes there? And why did they go there? And what about the people that never get a chance to hear. There are all kinds of interesting questions, important questions, that are sometimes barrier questions, Now, I heard somebody say recently, that the fastest growing religion is no religion. The nones. Are you seeing that in your work?

Sarah Stone

Oh, yes. One of the things I was doing in my job alongside Theology on Tap, I'm calling Conversations. It's for all non Christians. It's an on-ramp. So mostly atheist, agnostic, we have a couple Hindu, we actually have a couple of satanists. They follow me, I guess. But yes I see that as a super quickly growing group. Some of them have been wounded by the church, or they know someone that was. Some of them just distrust the church. And they do come to Theology on Tap.

David Capes

Is it the idea of organized religion? Is that the villain here? Or is it that they don't believe that God exists at all?

Sarah Stone

I think 10 or so years ago, maybe it was that I don't know if God exists. I think now the question is shifting to maybe He exists, I don't know. But he's not a good guy. The idea that God could be good given all of the tragedy that we see, all the suffering in our own lives, all that anxiety, all of those things. I think that's the bigger question for most people

David Capes

Yes, I heard Neil deGrasse Tyson talk about that one time. I don't know really where he stands on this, but he was asking, if God is all powerful, he can't be all good. Because take a look at the tsunami. It was around 20 years ago now, in Indonesia. 250,000 people died. And then he talked about a similar event that hit Lisbon, Portugal many, many years ago. And it hit during church and people were wiped out in church. And so he said, if God exists, then I'm not really sure how God is good. Or else he can't do anything about it. He's either not good or not powerful. Those are just some of the characterizations of the discussion.

Sarah Stone

Yes I've asked those same questions myself. I think, you know that I've gone through some tragedy in my own life. We lost my brother a couple of years ago. And there's just been a lot of heartache and

hard things. So that is one of those areas where I can say I don't have all the answers about tsunamis. But I do know that in my experience, my faith has been the one thing that's kept a tiny thread, if sometimes very tiny, of peace throughout that kind of pain. So all I can do is tell my own story. But that's the beauty of Theology on Tap. You get to hear the stories of lots of different people, right?

David Capes

And sometimes those stories of people who've been injured are the most touching. They are different than the story of someone who's lived a perfect, privileged life and never had a significant loss. You know that my son died a few years ago. When you don't have those kinds of events, you can live in an ethereal place. But when you do go through that, something changes. And I don't always know exactly how to express it. I have faith, obviously, I still have faith. But I do question certain things. And that's okay. The Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, all these books are about that. I think that gives us permission to explore those really heart rending questions.

Sarah Stone

I think doubt is an essential part of our faith story, for sure.

David Capes

So if you don't doubt, you don't have faith?

Sarah Stone

I think you can have faith without doubt. But I think if you live long enough in this world, you're probably going to experience doubt. And some people will shut it away and say, no, no, no, no. Like la,la,la, put their head in the sand. With some of the disciples we see this doubt like Peter and Thomas.

David Capes

Really in many of them. So if people are interested in knowing more about Theology on Tap, how do they do that?

Sarah Stone

The easiest way would be to go to our website, which is houstontot.com. We also have the podcast, which you can find through houstontot.com or on any podcast platform. It's called Theology on Air.

David Capes

Is that a video podcast, or is that audio-video?

Sarah Stone

It's both. We put them out on YouTube and you can listen on all podcast platforms.

David Capes

Okay. So that's the best place to go. And there might be somebody out there that would say let's support this.

Sarah Stone

I would love it if someone would say that!

David Capes

The board would love it if someone would say that!

Sarah Stone

Yes, the executive director would like that. We just launched as a nonprofit a couple months ago, and we're trying to raise enough money to really grow, and support my role. And so houstontot.com/ give is where to go to find out about that. And we would love that. I was just telling you before we started that we're coming up with these donation incentive, like donor levels. And they all have different theologians. It's very cute. So that'll be up on the website soon. So be a Calvin or I don't know, if we decide on Aquinas. We're still figuring it out.

David Capes

So you're picking the big, big theologians! Not the minor theologians!

Sarah Stone

Yes! I think we're going to make Paul the top tier. If you give lots of money you're like Paul. You're a cheerful giver, you know. He's like the OG theologian.

David Capes

Alright, for those who don't know what OG stands for, what is it?

Sarah Stone

Original gangster, which is funny? Is that the first time you're hearing this?

David Capes

No, I know about it. But our audience may not know. I sometimes ask questions so that people who are listening will understand.

Sarah Stone

Yes I do that during Theology on Tap. But they're about words that normal, non theology nerds don't know. Like, when Paul Sloane keeps saying 'telos'. I say what does that mean?

David Capes

Yes!. So Paul is the OG! Well, this is a great work and I commend you for it. It's an important way of reaching a lot of people who are unreachable through traditional means of evangelism or apologetics, or anything like that. Sometimes it's important just sitting and listening to their stories, and loving on people. A lot of people come back to the faith, not by rational argument, but by a really dear friend who took time to love them and care for them. And not judge them, as they're going through this difficult time of life. So thank you for what what you're doing.

Sarah Stone

Oh, that's great. I will say one more thing. If anyone comes to Theology on Tap, we've just started doing some follow up conversations where it's a little bit more intimate, with fewer people. You can ask any question you have about this kind of thing. So come to the big events. If you like it, come to one of the follow ups and we can talk about some of the things that we've been chatting about here today.

David Capes

And you'll answer all your questions.

Sarah Stone

Oh, well, I will kick it over to my Methodist, Lutheran and Baptist brothers and sisters to do the hard lifting.

David Capes

Let them do the hard work of it all! Sarah, thanks for being with us today, on the Stone Chapel Podcast.

Sarah Stone

Appreciate it. Thanks for having me.

A nugget of Wisdom from Sarah Stone

You know, I think if we want to reach people who are walking away from faith, or distrust the church, we've got to go to those third spaces where they are. That's what Jesus did. And I think it's what he wants us to do.