

Episode 160 Why the Gospel?

with Matthew Bates

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Matthew Bates

Hello, this is Matthew Bates. I'm Professor of Theology at Quincy University in Quincy, Illinois. I have seven children and married to the lovely Sarah. And that keeps me busy. When I'm not busy chasing them around, I also write books, mainly on the gospel and salvation, and other things pertinent to the New Testament. It's great to be with you on the podcast, David.

David Capes

Dr. Matthew Bates, great to see you. Thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Matthew Bates

It's wonderful. And yes, excited for the conversation.

David Capes

You've been on before. And we'll link to that in our show notes. We talked about your book, a couple of years ago now, *Gospel Allegiance*. And you've changed some of the language that people use when thinking about language of faith. So that'll no doubt come into our conversation today. But today, we'll be talking about your new book entitled, *Why the Gospel: Living the Good News of King Jesus with Purpose*. It's published by Eerdmans. It's a great book. Congratulations.

Matthew Bates

Hey, thanks. I wanted to try a change up as I've written on the gospel in a variety of different ways. But I felt like there was some more work that needed to be done.

David Capes

Well, you know, I have never really thought about the question, the way you put it in the book. There's been a lot of books of late about what is the gospel? What is not the gospel? How do we articulate the gospel, those kinds of things? And they're not just books about evangelism. They're serious theological books, too. But they do have an evangelistic payoff at some level. But you turn it around and say, Well, why the gospel? Tell us a little bit about that question, Dr. Bates.

Matthew Bates

Yes, and it's not that the question, what is the gospel doesn't matter. I have been deeply invested in the conversation along with Scot McKnight, N.T. Wright, and other more popular level people like Greg Gilbert who have written books themed around what is the gospel? That question does matter. Let's not downplay it. But I think that we're increasingly seeing some clarity around that. And I think that there

are more and more people who are on board with articulating a 'king first' kind of understanding of the gospel. And so Jesus is the Christ might be our most pithy articulation of the gospel in the New Testament. And then the benefits of the gospel as we respond to it, become ours, the benefits of salvation and many other benefits, too.

But I felt that the reframing in the church was happening slowly around the King Jesus Gospel. And that's partly because I think that people think that it's all about just identifying the gospel correctly. And once we get that, then we are good to go in our evangelism. When there hasn't been enough attention paid to the question of why did God give the gospel in the first place? What was his purpose in giving the gospel? The more I pondered how my work and other's work on King Jesus Gospel was being received, it helped me to realize some of the enthusiasm around all that is real and good and true. And I think that there's a lot of good energy there. But on the other hand, even when churches embrace that language or that paradigm, they're still struggling to articulate that in a holistic way that drives the church's mission and evangelism. It's maybe because there's wrong answers presupposed to why God gave the gospel. There not necessarily wrong answers, but maybe really incomplete answers and slightly wrongheaded answers. So trying to work on the reframing of the purpose of the gospel.

David Capes

Sometimes people maybe ask, well, why the gospel? Well, because we were sinners, and we needed a Savior. And that's true. But it's not complete, as you said, not the full story, the full gospel, if you will.

Matthew Bates

That's right. And I think that answer tends to short circuit God's restorative purposes, would be the clearest way to articulate it. Briefly, if we're saying that the purposes of the Gospel is that God is righteous, and we're sinners, and we need to have our sin problem taken care of. So we can have this reunion with God and heaven, and we can be in his presence again, because He's righteous, we need to be righteous too. If we believe that's the be-all and end-all of the gospel, then it misses that deepest purpose of the gospel.

Which is to get rid of the sin problem, not just in and of itself a solution, but because God actually wants us to distribute his glory. That's the the clearest answer that Scripture gives us. The reason sin is a problem is not just because sin is a problem. It's because sin actually prevents us from doing what God intended for us to do. And so it's not just that we need to have the burden of guilt taken away, we need to actually be restored, so that we can serve the purposes for which God made us in the first place. So when we don't see that, I think then our mission in the church gets confused. We start thinking, we just need to save souls for heaven. Instead of thinking God is interested in the quality of life, the quality of person. That David Capes is, that Matthew Bates is, that every single one of us is. He's interested in our quality of life. And so it helps us to see that God wants to restore that quality of life. For each of us.

David Capes

One of the things you talked about earlier, and you mentioned is the idea of glory, because I don't think we talk about it in those same terms very often. And, to me, the idea of glory comes off in the book of Genesis with the idea of creation and what human beings are made to do in the beginning, and being

his image and likeness. Unpack a little bit what you're thinking about glory and the Gospel for us as we think through this together.

Matthew Bates

Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:4 calls the gospel, the gospel of the glory of the Christ, the image of God. That's the language he uses, the gospel of the glory of the Christ, the image of God. And so whenever we're thinking about this term glory, I think often in the church, there's a kind of a loose association with heaven. It's like praise language on the one hand, and like heavenly language on the other. It's like when someone says, glory, hallelujah. Or if people say, I want to be in glory with God, all the splendor that attends God. I want to be present there and in the bright lights and in paradise, or whatever might be associated with it. But we sometimes are slower to make the connections to fame and reputation, that the word 'doxa' would intend. It's not just about, bright lights or heavenly splendor, but it's actually about reputation.

And the idea is that God's reputation has been slandered and is slandered in the world, partly because humans are failing to distribute God's glory to all creation. And in so doing, are also failing to glorify God, and to give him appropriate honor. So we're dishonored and God is dishonored, and it's all interconnected. And so the idea is that we want to restore honor, but the honor is, on the one hand, God's honor. But it's also ours. And that's maybe the part that we get confused about. Some of the slogans of the Reformation, "the glory to God alone", makes it seem like glory is something that is not appropriate to the human condition. But that's actually not what the Bible teaches us.

God creates us, as you mentioned with a certain human dignity in his image, in order to bear his glory, and in order to honor him. And to distribute that honor through creation, as Psalm 8 would teach us, for example. So trying to work on that language of glory. And then this connects intimately to the gospel. Because Paul, in Romans says that we exchanged the glory of God for images that are worthless and bankrupt. And then he goes on in the most famous statement about sin, to say 'that all have sinned', and then Paul says something very specific 'and are lacking the glory of God'. And we tend to read that like, All have sinned and are lacking the glory of God.

While lacking the glory of God must mean the equivalent thing to not meeting his righteous standard. That's actually not Paul's point. The point is that we are lacking the glory of God in the sense that we're not distributing it to creation. And that's why in Romans 8 creation is suffering, and it's needing to have the glory restored, so that the sons of God and daughters of God can distribute it to creation. So we see in Romans 8 it's all deeply connected to Paul's theology, and to sin and to the gospel in ways that I think the church has been slow to see. So trying to help the church more precisely articulate the why of the gospel, in terms of glory.

David Capes

And when it comes to our task, and the task of those who have been reconciled or given the ministry of reconciliation, going back to the language used, who had been glorified by God, are now given a ministry of glory. And I like the way you say it, to distribute that glory throughout the earth. To take the honor that God has bestowed upon his people and scatter that around bringing honor to other human beings made in the likeness the image of God.

Matthew Bates

Yes, that's a good way to put it. Just like justification has actually a past, present, and future dimension when we're talking about salvation. So also when you pay careful attention to Paul's glory language, it's the same. There's a past, present and future dimension of glory. And so there's a sense in which the people of God are presently glorified already. And that's again a confusion, right? People want to say one day but right now I'm justified. I'm in the process of being sanctified, and then eventually I'll be glorified. That's actually a misunderstanding of that text.

That doesn't really have to do with the progress of the individual towards some sort of heavenly glory. It actually has to do more with the position of the community, as being those who are justified, sanctified, glorified, already having all those things. It's kind of all that's based on the famous golden chain in Romans 8. But if we look elsewhere at Paul's glory language, there's a past, present and future. So you're right, we're given a ministry of reconciliation, because right now we are being restored in our glory right now. And it will also connect with future glory as we gaze upon King Jesus and come to be conformed to His image.

David Capes

One of the things that struck me about this book is this seems to be a very personal book for you. I mean, you tell some personal stories.

Matthew Bates

Yes, I tell a few. On the one hand, I tell some stories for illustrative purposes, but also it is deeply personal for my own life. I open the book, or at least chapter one with a story of myself as a younger man, being in seminary, when I was 25. And this was in Vancouver, British Columbia, my wife and I were just married. And, you know, as part of that, I was trying to figure out my future career. And I felt a clear calling from God that I was to be a teacher in some capacity with regard to Scripture. I didn't know that would be a professional career, but I felt that this was the ministry God had given me right now.

After finishing my master's degree, I didn't immediately apply to PhD programs. We needed to financially recover. And we're waiting a year and I had this job as a forester. It was something that, paid the bills and would have worked well, it didn't take any of my mental energy, I could have been studying, teaching, preparing for a lifetime administering the church or just using my gifts more fully. But instead, I was afraid that I wouldn't get into a Ph. D program, or that I wouldn't be able to serve as a Bible teacher in any real way.

And so I needed a real career. I tried to do this computer programming thing for a couple of years, and it wasn't the best results. And the reality was, I think I knew better at the time. It was an example in a small way, where I was trying to take sovereignty over my own life. So even though I had a clear calling from God, I felt that I knew better than God. I needed a real career, and I needed to take charge of that, instead of just trusting that the forestry was provisioned enough for the meanwhile. That I needed to focus my energy on teaching and training and Bible, and that God would make something of it professionally or not. But we're good and provided for in the future. But I've wasted a ton of my intellectual time and capital, trying to be a professional computer programmer for half a year. Little more

than that, probably, and it went nowhere. I learned through that something about the King Jesus Gospel. That it's about him being king first in my life, and that the benefits of salvation that we have in the Lord, flow through that channel. And we can't abstract it away from Jesus's kingship. And I think that's something that we tend to do, just focus on Jesus as our Savior. But we abstract that away from his messianic office and the way in which the channel of salvation flows through his kingly capacity, as he's now installed as the great king and high priest at the Father's right hand. We don't do serious enough business with that horizon of the gospel of his enthronement.

David Capes

I love the way that you say in the book, Jesus Christ is a claim, not a name. Something to that effect. It's a very pithy way of saying that. In other words, it's a confession of faith. It's a confession of faith you are not just Jesus Christ, first name, last name. It is that Jesus is God's anointed, He is God's Messiah.

Matthew Bates

Yes, yes. And I think that's a big problem in terms of just our everyday theology. We're singing a hymn or pop song in church, and we're praising the Lord. We just slip into Christ language. We sing in Christ alone, or whatever it might be, right? And we don't deal with the royal dimension of that. We just think that Christ and Jesus are equivalent terms. But that's problematic. On the one hand, there's truth to it in the sense that Jesus is the Christ. It does refer to him, but on the other hand we lose something important about the Messianic office that's being presented in the New Testament. So whenever we're reading the phrase "in Christ", this or that we need to read "in the king," that it's "in the king," we have all these things of salvation and moves through his kingship, not apart from it. And I think that as we don't do business with that, well, or our theology just tends to get sloppy and imprecise.

David Capes

And I think that's one of the things that Paul does very carefully. He doesn't use these Christological titles willy nilly, anything goes pattern. He has certain ways that he uses the title, Christ, or the title, Lord or Messiah. One of the things that I really liked about the book, is you talk about how we do evangelism backwards. We get things turned around so how should we be doing evangelism then? Rather than convincing people that they are sinners and that Christ is died for their sins. How should we be doing evangelism? The book is all about that to some degree. So don't give away the book but just give us a sense of what you mean by that.

Matthew Bates

I mean it in two ways that we can gospel backwards. We typically start with a claim. That is, the typical claim would be that God is righteous, you're a sinner, you need a savior, believe and go to heaven. Or something like that. But instead, we need to start with a different claim, we need to start with the claim Jesus is the King, and in light of his kingship, then he's won salvation already. And we have the opportunity to give loyalty to him and then participate in the benefits of his salvation. So we need to reverse the order of proclamation. Instead of starting out by saying, you're a sinner and you're in need of a Savior we need to say, Jesus is the King, and he's provided salvation. Here's your opportunity to link into that. Here's how you can join into his saving benefits.

It's a little more detailed than that. I give some more guidance on that in the book, but that would be the gist of one way in which we need to gospel backwards. The other way I think we need to gospel backwards is by beginning with truth, beauty, goodness, beginning with restoration. And one of the key things that we have missed has been the sense that people feel that they're just a number or that they're just a quantity that needs to be saved. It's just that it's a one size fits all solution. Okay, you're a sinner just like everybody else, you need to be saved just like everybody else. And so you should believe this fact that everybody else needs to believe, so that you can go to heaven along with everybody else. That's sort of it. So it's a one size fits all that doesn't deal with our unique problems, our unique sense, our unique potentials.

And I think instead, whenever we lead with truth, beauty, and goodness, we can help people see that God is in the business of restoring all things. And so we might use a moment of someone's experience with true friendship you experienced. There was something whole there, right? That was beautiful and true. And why don't the rest of our relationships look that way. Why are they fractured? And so we begin with the beautiful, and then we move to our fracture. Wouldn't it be amazing to discover that God is in the process of restoring all things, and that he wants to restore our broken relationships, and he wants to restore each of us in our own specific, weird brokenness. That my problem might not be the same as your problem, and that God actually has a solution for my specific problems that will heal me in these specific areas of life. And also that David Capes has potentials that I don't have. God might be wanting to use you qualitatively, and want to restore you to your fullest human potential. So he can use you and your unique gifts. And we don't tend to see those things are connected to the gospel very well. We don't connect. And we might talk about those things in the church under the rubric of spiritual gifts, but we don't see them as part of God's restorative aims with regard to the Gospel itself. So I think when we led forward with truth, beauty, and goodness, it heightens people's awareness of their own sense of beauty, their own sense of brokenness. When we lead forth with our own stories or our own brokenness, and how God's beginning to heal the brokenness, then people are invited to see their brokenness in light of ours. And their hope for healing in light of our healing. They can then maybe make a decision to give their loyalty over to King Jesus, because of the hope that they now have for restoration in light of a better vision of something whole.

David Capes

This is terrific. I wish we had a little more time because I have questions about this chapter that you did, good news for the 'Nones'. And by that you don't mean the women wearing habits. The growing group of people who don't affiliated at all with Christianity, Judaism, Islam or any other religion. And they ask the question why should I be a Christian to begin with? So we'll let people think about that as they go out and buy the book. It's a great book. It's entitled *Why the Gospel? Living the Good News of King Jesus with Purpose*. It's by Matthew Bates. Dr. Bates, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Matthew Bates

Thanks, David, and thanks to The Stone Chapel podcast.

A Nugget of Wisdom from Matthew Bates

Well as a scholar and fan of the apostle Paul, I draw my wisdom from him. Paul reminds us, that we are to live a Christ-shaped life. I think a lot about the language in Galatians 2:20. I've been crucified with the King and I no longer live but the King lives within me". And the life I live, Paul says actually in the flesh, I live by faith. And I think that's a good reminder and a word of wisdom that I've been living in light of trying to remember that it's actually like my faith is an embodied thing. It's not something that's disconnected from my 'sarx', from my body. But it's something that is to be embodied as we think about our overall engagement with the Christian life. So trying to live a life of allegiance to King Jesus.