

# Episode 162 Christians Coping with Pluralism.

*This conversation was edited for clarity and space.*

## **Darrell Bock**

I'm Darrell Bock, Senior Research Professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center, that's also at the seminary.

## **David Capes**

Dr. Darrell Bock, welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

## **Darrell Bock**

It's a pleasure to be here. And it's a pleasure to be contemplating a lecture this evening in the chapel.

I'm coming, I'm lecturing, and then I'm leaving as quickly as possible so that you deal with the damage.

## **David Capes**

Please, stick around for one more day. For those who don't know Darrell Bock, who is Darrell Bock?

## **Darrell Bock**

I'm a Texan who was born in Canada. I've been married for almost 48 years. I have three children and five grandchildren. And I've been at Dallas Seminary for 42 years and have done a touch of writing on the Gospels, Jesus and cultural engagement.

## **David Capes**

A touch of writing, that's a bit of an understatement. That sounds like a British understatement. We have about 40 books here at the library or close to that with your name on it, either as author or co-author. So that's a lot more than a touch.

## **Darrell Bock**

Well, it's the calling that I've had, to be writing and with a little bit every day, you can get there.

## **David Capes**

Yes, you advised me one time that 500 words a day is all you need.

## **Darrell Bock**

Exactly right!

## **David Capes**

And you get a book a year, which is great. I just can't find time the time to do the 500 words. But anyway, that's another program. The title of the lecture is called *Coping with Pluralism*. And a few years ago, you began turning your attention to what's happening today in culture and trying to engage our culture in a more meaningful way. Because as most of us see, these days, things seem to be headed in the wrong direction.

What I'd like to do is take a few minutes to summarize the lecture tonight so that people who can't see it will understand what we're doing. And then we hope they'll go see the lecture that you'll be doing. This podcast will be 20 minutes, but the lecture will be more like an hour, which will include a Q & A afterwards. So, tell us a little bit about where are you heading tonight? First of all, what's the problem that you're trying to deal with?

**Darrell Bock**

The problem is that at least in America, our culture has shifted to a radical degree in my lifetime. I like to use a metaphor to picture it. We've gone from being the home team, where the values and things that we're used to are assumed in the culture and for the most part, if not totally adopted, at least respected. To a situation where we are now the visiting team. Only we're not just the visiting team who comes in and plays as an opponent every now and then. Now we're seen as the rivals.

**David Capes**

They throw food and they throw bottles at us in the outfield.

**Darrell Bock**

Exactly! We're the bad guys. So that is a total switch from what we have been used to. Now it's actually more like the way Jesus said life in the church was going to be. We've come out of an exceptional period into a more normal period, which means there are Christians living around the world who have been living with this reality. In some cases, all their Christian existence. They have much to teach us. The flip side of it is we have to figure out how to cope with that and we have developed a coping strategy in the way we've gone about the cultural war that I think is not sufficiently biblically rooted. And as a result, it's something that is not advancing the work of the church and benefiting people. It has actually done damage to the church and has also done damage to our society by the way we've gone about it.

The lecture tonight is an attempt to say, one, we don't have a theology of cultural engagement, and we need one. And two, if you look at the skeleton of what that would look like, it critiques the way we have conducted ourselves on the one hand and gives us a direction for how we ought to conduct ourselves on the other. I'm looking at six passages from the Bible in the time that I have. I lay out an outline of which the most important thing beyond how we live out our Christian life, is the tone with which we engage those who are opposed to us. It matters quite a lot.

**David Capes**

We used the term earlier, and I know it's been around for a while, "culture war". That's a little bit different than saying, hey, we're on opposing teams, and we're playing a game. That's different because now you've ratcheted everything up.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah, it's an ultimate battle.

**David Capes**

Right. And there are winners and losers in ballgames. But they're also winners and losers in war. And you don't want it to be that way.

**Darrell Bock**

No. The hard part is, that we were given an assignment before we got to the culture war. And the assignment was to go into the world and make disciples. The people who are outside the church are not the enemy. They're the goal. And so that changes the game, because my intent is not to crush somebody. My intent is to gain someone. And that makes a difference.

**David Capes**

Is this a way of doing evangelism then in some way?

**Darrell Bock**

Well, it's connected to mission. I think we haven't thought about how the way we engage in public space is tied to mission. Because we're dealing with an overhang of the fundamentalist, modernist controversy. I won't get a chance to talk about this tonight. But it's in the background. And that is we took something that was seen as connected. And everybody pulled it apart. Liberals did it in one way, conservatives did it in another way. And we pulled them apart.

And now the way in which we engage in public space becomes a lens that is seen primarily ideologically, rather than seeing theologically and that becomes a problem. The way this worked was, Christianity was seen as a holistic religion, it was supposed to be about every public space in one way or another.

**David Capes**

And through all of life, cradle to grave.

**Darrell Bock**

Exactly right. Through all of life and in every space. And you know that because, for example, we had state churches, which prove the point of the intent. Or we pursued ethical things like the abolition movement, which was obviously in public space, as well. So, they're examples of this in the 19th century, with the fundamentalist, modernist controversy. Liberals came along and said, we like the ethics of Christianity, but we don't necessarily buy the theological story that's underneath it. And they pulled the content of the gospel out away from the ethics by which they wanted to live. We've made subsequent moves since then. But that's what was happening in the 19th century. Conservatives looked at that, and they went, oh, man, that's a problem. And in their defense of the Bible, in the gospel, they said, we're putting all our chips on the gospel side of this conversation. And this space over here is a liberal space.

**David Capes**

Talking about the ethics?

**Darrell Bock**

Yes, ethics and the social gospel and that kind of thing. And we pulled it apart. What happened is, each side pulled it apart. The liberal said, we liked the ethics side, the conservatives said, well, we want to keep the gospel as the central point. And they flipped the liberal model. This is what we care about theology and the gospel as opposed to a social gospel of caring for your neighbor. And so it got pulled apart.

Now anyone who tries to bring it back together, has got this ideological lens over that linkage that makes pulling it back together hard. But underneath it, I say, what God has joined together, let no man put asunder. We need to figure out how we connect the ethical engagement or public space to our mission. And that's part of what I'm going to try and do tonight is to show that this actually is a very missional way to think about public space.

**David Capes**

Have you been surprised with how quickly things have unraveled as you said, in your lifetime?

**Darrell Bock**

The answer's yes. And no. I went to Europe in the 1970s, because I saw what was going on in Europe. And I was thinking to myself, I really need to move and spend some time living in a culture in which Christianity is becoming less central.

**David Capes**

And this was when you went to Scotland. And later you went to Germany.

**Darrell Bock**

Later, I went to Germany and did the same thing. And then I spend virtually every summer, globally in different parts of the world. I was in India, Greece, Israel, and in the Philippines. And I do this on purpose, because I'm trying to get a sense of how Christians are coping with the different structures that they live in, and particularly when they're operating as a cultural minority. So that's part of what we do. I went to Europe because I thought Europe is 15 to 20 years ahead of us, but it's the direction we're going.

We're eventually going to get there. And so, we better be prepared. And what's happened now is that distance is probably shrunk. It's not 20 years anymore. And in some cases, we lead those conversations as opposed to being behind on them. And so how is the church going to cope with its loss of status? And then this thought hit me in the midst of working with this, and that is I thought about the first century church. They had no cultural power, no social power, no political power. All they had was spiritual power.

**David Capes**

They seem to have done pretty well.

**Darrell Bock**

That's exactly right. So, what can we learn from how they went about it? Those are the motivations I have. And I see all this as a natural extension of the work I was doing in the Gospels and the things I was doing with Jesus. Because to me, in the end, in the Bible if you don't apply what's being talked about theologically, you have not done your theology. You've been engaged in a shadow theology.

**David Capes**

Application is the ethical side. How does this work out in life?

**Darrell Bock**

We've historically, short shrifted the relational, ethical side of the faith. You heard me last night, talk to the audience and say, we've got the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed, these are wonderful creeds. They're wonderful doctrinal statements. But there's not one word about ethics in either of them. And how to live.

**David Capes**

That's interesting because the Nicene Creed at least, was crafted about the time that Christians were entering into more public space in the culture.

**Darrell Bock**

Exactly right. And again, the content base is important. But if the content base doesn't translate into how we live, then we haven't lived out what Jesus is talking about. To me, all this is a natural extension of thinking through what it means to be a Christian in the world? What does it mean to go into the world and make disciples? What does it mean to be engaging with someone. And my assignment is to take someone who's opposed to what it is that I believe and actually invite them into a different way of life. With the intent and hope that they might respond. Of course, part of the job is the work of the Holy Spirit. The beauty of this is my only calling is to be faithful to that message. And to deliver it both in word and deed in such a way that it is seen and not just heard.

I like the section in Hamilton, where Aaron Burr meets Alexander Hamilton, and he has the little song. "Talk less, smile more." And I adopt that and say the church needs to talk less and show more. If you listen to the testimony of people who come to the Lord, who did not grow up in a Christian home, somewhere in that testimony is a section that goes like this. I met this person who was a Christian. They lived differently than I did. And they made me curious. And then the story/testimony goes on. And I've not heard of too many testimonies from people who didn't grow up in the church that didn't have that section in it somewhere.

And the question becomes how it works, to go out and deal with the person who's opposed to me in such a way that I treat them as an enemy I need to crush. The first passage we'll look at tonight will be Ephesians 6:12 says, our battle is not, not, not, not, (that's emphatic) against flesh and blood. It's against spiritual forces of darkness. It's a spiritual battle. It requires spiritual resources. And that's what is described in Ephesians 6. He's just gone through three chapters calling on the church to live in a certain distinctive way. That is the armor he's asking them to put on. So, we're going to talk about that

tonight. And then we'll put five other passages around it to deal with tone. And hopefully, we'll get people interested not in crushing the person they're in a discussion with but trying to invite them into a different way of life.

**David Capes**

What happens when you meet a person and they already have made up their minds about Christians? You know, Christians are this, Christians are that. And they don't necessarily want to be persuaded.

**Darrell Bock**

My first response is to say, we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus spent the whole second half of his ministry with his disciples saying, I'm going to go the way of the cross. If you follow me, you're going to have to bear your cross. There's going to be pushback from the world. You can expect it. One of the passages we'll look at tonight is 1 Peter. It says three times, you're going to get punished for doing the right thing. I call it Bock's law! Every good deed will get punished. That's the way that you're supposed to see the world. But I'm supposed to relate to them in such a distinctive way that even though your back is turned to important things about life, I'm going to be with you and care for you. And love you and reach out to you in such a way that maybe one day you'll become interested.

**David Capes**

And that person may very well be a different color, may speak a different language, and have a different religion.

**Darrell Bock**

They may even be a relative in your own family. I mean, it runs the gamut. And then another point that will be made tonight is, when we do this, when we engage with people whose backs are turned to God, and invite them into this new life, we are replicating what God did with us when He saved us. Our backs were turned to God. And he tapped us on the shoulder and brought us to himself. We have the chance to replicate God's grace. By the way, when we do this, we're imitating God. That's coming right out of 1 Peter 3. Our goal is not to treat the other as the other. The goal is to take the person who's not in the space that we're in, invite them into the opportunity to have a different kind of life.

**David Capes**

And this is the alternative to culture war. It's the biblical, scriptural, theologically sound idea of how to engage culture.

**Darrell Bock**

Exactly right. And it requires a lot of listening and requires a lot of patience.

**David Capes**

What have you written on this topic?

**Darrell Bock**

Well, I did two books. The first book I wrote too early. The title, which was not mine, it was the publisher. It's the one time I gave in to a publisher about a title and now that I've done it once, I will

never do it again. And it's entitled *How Would Jesus Vote*, and I just thought it was a totally pretentious title. But the goal was to walk through the kinds of disputes that we have in public space, and to analyze them biblically and to show that each side is bringing something to the table of the discussion that needs to be taken seriously. And rather than choosing a side, by choosing the value that I chose to hold on to, and ignoring the value that the other side is bringing, we need to think about how to calibrate those values in relationship to each other.

That was the point of that book. And I did it with a myriad of issues, and then talked about the history of the formation of the United States, which one also has to understand in order to have that conversation here. And the way in which America is a combination of enlightenment values and Judeo-Christian ethics at its roots. And we've lost the Judeo-Christian ethics.

**David Capes**

We still keep the ethics in some way?

**Darrell Bock**

What's happened is, it's become cloudy. We have Judeo-Christian values that underlie a lot of what we do. But we also have a lot of relativism, that is producing static on that wing. And I make the point, it's hard to fly a plane by one wing, but ultimately, we're an enlightenment institution, which is why we have religious freedom. I tell people, if you're a citizen of the United States, your religion makes no difference to that designation. And what I mean by that is, you have the same rights as an American citizen, whether you are an atheist, an agnostic, a Buddhist, a Muslim, or whatever. So that's an enlightenment principle. And that's the way our public spaces formed, which should then inform how we walk into public space. Because everyone has a right to be there. And then how you conduct yourself in that public space. So that's a whole other podcast.

**David Capes**

We've got to continue this some way and somehow! Now you do a podcast. Tell us about the it.

**Darrell Bock**

I host the podcast along with several other people on the Hendricks Center team, called *The Table*. In *The Table* we discuss issues of God and culture, which is a nice way of saying we discuss anything and everything. Because culture is everything. We've done about 600 hours of stuff. We've done probable over 70 hours just on sexuality alone, thinking about it theologically. The web address is [voicedts.edu/tablepodcast](http://voicedts.edu/tablepodcast) and it will get you to the collection.

**David Capes**

Darrell Bock thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel.

**Darrell Bock**

My pleasure.

**A Nugget of Wisdom from Darrell Bock**

You know when we talk about cultural engagement, we think about the agendas that we bring. But I think the piece of wisdom comes from James 1:19-20. We should be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. For the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God. Unfortunately, in our world, the verse is usually handled the exact reverse. We are slow to listen, quick to speak and quick to anger. Because the anger of man allows me to vent and tell you what's wrong with the world. So, the piece of wisdom is, understand first. Assess later. Listen first, talk later. And invite people into the opportunity for a new life. Because one of the passages that's important on cultural engagement is 2 Corinthians 5 and it says, we plead with you to be reconciled to God. That tone matters.