

# Episode 175 The Christian Mind Project with Christian Askeland

*This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.*

## **Christian Askeland**

Hi, my name is Christian Askeland. I'm a senior researcher at Museum of the Bible. And I also am Director of Education for Inspire, which is an evangelical outreach that reaches out to next generations. And basically, to anyone who wants to be inspired by the Bible and get excited about reading the Bible.

## **David Capes**

Christian, good to see you. Welcome back to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

## **Christian Askeland**

Thanks for having me back. I'm excited to be back especially to talk about what we're talking about today.

## **David Capes**

I know I'm excited about it as well. You were with us before, and we'll put a link in our show notes to that episode. And in that podcast, you tell us a little bit about yourself. So hopefully, folks will go back and check that out to learn more about you and the Museum of the Bible and the work that you're doing there. But today, we're going to be talking about the Christian Mind Project, which is something that I think is just an exciting initiative that started a couple of years ago. What's the problem that you're trying to address here with the Christian Mind Project?

## **Christian Askeland**

I think we've seen over the last few years, but it's become really crystal clear, especially since the events on October 7 with antisemitism that culture has shifted. We would have presumed basic Christian ideas in say the 80s and the 90s, and even people who weren't from the Judeo-Christian tradition, would have still presumed certain things in terms of justice, sexuality, etc. . These things now have fundamentally changed. And we see that there's a new mindset at work. Some people would even say, a new religion, and there's something that's Neo-Marxist about it.

People use the term "scientism" to talk about the use of science, which is more like a religion. So, appealing to truth. And then a lot of times the science that's used in these kinds of arguments is not very good science. And it tends to be three to four years out as the ideology changes. The science has to change to fit the ideology. But it's a deconstruction, trying to find evils in the structure that are oppressing people, and then to dismantle those things. We're looking at this happening in the culture. And the question I think I'm passionate about is how we reverse that and bring back Christian truth to this. Because I think there isn't just Christian truth, it's just truth. But I think ultimately, truth is brought to

us by Jesus who redeems us, makes us in His image. And it helps us to do the same thing to our society. To help our society be what it's always meant to be.

### **David Capes**

There clearly is a need. And we saw recently with all of the antisemitism on college campuses that erupted and the college presidents testifying before the House committee that was looking into it. There was a lot of fallout from that. We saw all of that. And I think many people feel the same need or similar need. What is the Christian Mind Project?

### **Christian Askeland**

I'm going to read a short line to you and then I'll talk about publications.

*Through a national network of collaborative collaborators, the Christian Mind Project engages college freshmen with evangelical passion and academic promise, recruiting and equipping them for careers in the humanities and social sciences.*

It's James Davison Hunter. And we've actually talked about that in private before. He's written a book in 2010, called *To Change the World*. It's a great read, and it builds on things that are before him. He is a sociologist at University of Virginia, he coined the word "culture war" back in the 1990s, to talk about popular cultural fights that don't produce anything. In other words, there's dialogue, there's conflict, but there's no progress that comes out of it. It's just people profiling, caricaturing themselves, and then caricaturing the other side, maybe. But then ultimately becoming the caricature of the other side. He writes about this.

But part of the argument in his book is that culture, as we think about it today, the culture we have today was formed by small groups of cultural elites decades ago. Especially cultural elites that are working together, sharing resources. They have a common mindset. And they do it typically within the media, especially; we'll call it journalism, Hollywood. Namely, popular media. And then the third one is universities. Our goal is to look at the universities and to create what would be a relatively small group, maybe over 100 years, 20 people who might have a role like Joseph, Daniel, or Esther. They would be present in these moments where they might be the only evangelical in the room. But like Daniel, they would be in the eyes of Nebuchadnezzar. And their voice would have significance.

### **David Capes**

So, in a sense, trying to discover those people, and then help them to flourish in an academic setting where there's hostility toward people of faith.

### **Christian Askeland**

Yes. And our secret sauce is we're looking at launching this project, but it's going to be a network, and not a new campus ministry. It's just what you said. It's recruitment. It's finding the right group of people nationally who are specifically interested in the social sciences and humanities. The national pool was never going to be more than 50 people a year in a country of 330 plus million people and maybe about 13 million of those people enrolled in a four-year degree program. We're looking for a very small group of people to bring together. Some people call this the "Harvard Effect" where the thing that makes

Harvard great isn't really anything about Harvard. It's the students that it's able to convince to come there. Because they think Harvard's the best thing, when really what the best thing is, is them. You get those students together, who, from the very beginning, potentially have this common passion. You might need to recruit them. You may need to suggest: hey, you've got these gifts, how are we going to use them? Are you going to the mission field, or are you called to the leadership in the church, or to a preaching ministry? Or maybe the Lord would be calling you to career in social sciences and humanities?

### **David Capes**

So why those two particular areas? Why not science, and math and engineering and those kinds of things, why those two areas,

### **Christian Askeland**

You could address this in a kind of subjective way, which would be fair, and you could say these areas are important, because even though you might not cure cancer, you do address the basic issues of life. You ask, how do we get here through history? What does it mean that we're here. Philosophy may be one of the exceptions where there are some Christians in philosophy. In these areas you talk about politics, you talk about things like race, and gender, obviously huge issues. And the people who are in these departments, especially within whatever realm they live in, in their local area. But also in their area of expertise. They're the prominent voices for telling people how they should think. They're setting the track for where Hollywood and journalism are going to be going in five to ten years.

### **David Capes**

So key people for our culture. So how did you get involved in this project? A fellow who knows the Coptic language and New Testament manuscripts, like yourself: how did you get started in this particular frame of reference?

### **Christian Askeland**

My own academic journey started when I went to the University of Florida because I had a National Merit scholarship. And that was just the natural place to go because of the money that was coming in. My mom had finished college as a non-traditional student a little later in life. So, in some sense, I was the first generation college student and went to the University of Florida, and thought I could maybe sort out some of the questions that I had, just having had a conversion to Christianity. Some of the intellectual questions I had about my faith, and what I encountered in the religion department was really upsetting. And we'd just come out of a time in our history with the Jesus Seminar. And, religious studies scholars were voting with marbles to figure out which words [in the Gospels] Jesus said. My hypothesis was none of these people could read the languages, none of them knew that the ancient culture was relevant to these documents.

I shifted over to classics. But one thing was, when I got to my senior year, I didn't even know what a master's degree was. In my mind, if somebody said that you have a PhD, I couldn't have described that. I didn't understand the structures. I had no idea what it would look like to apply to a graduate program. So even though I maybe was the top student in my program, I certainly wasn't equipped to apply. I didn't know what was on the table at that point. I actually did do a master's degree at the

University of Florida. I was what one of my professors called “inbred.” One who stayed at the same university for the master's degree. But there's this path. And then the natural way to proceed being an evangelical, was to seminary and then ended up in Britain for a master's degree in Scotland and a PhD in Cambridge. And I did a postdoc in Germany. I'm very grateful for my education. I think in God's providence that's what I needed to have.

But that education didn't at all suit me to coming back and getting a job in North America and in the kind of school that I actually went to as an undergraduate. The other thing is in 2014, when I started with the Museum of the Bible, I was overseeing something called the Scholars Initiative, which was primarily working with undergraduates at Christian colleges. And we had several great success stories there. The program created research opportunities for undergraduate students. But it did raise questions. I started looking at things and thinking, how do you do this? How do you get your best bang for the buck? In terms of donor spend, how are we actually seeing our students.

We don't necessarily want them to become conservative just for the sake of being as conservative as possible. But we do want them to be rigorously Orthodox and actually to be living out their faith. We want students who come in to share the gospel more, rather than less. We want them to be remade in the image of Christ more than they otherwise would. So there's actually a tendency, as people walk the intellectual path to meet liberalism halfway. Which in itself, there's no good in that especially if we think truth is in Jesus. Then the thing that needs to be reformed, is not traditional orthodoxy, it's the world. So thinking through that constantly and reading sociological studies and saying, what would be the money-ball way to pull this off?

### **David Capes**

Is the Christian Mind Project your idea, then?

### **Christian Askeland**

I would like to say that I've stolen a lot of great ideas from other sociologists. One of them is a fellow that we'll talk about a little later, George Yancey. He has given me the basic numerical argument for under-representation, as I've continued to read his things in terms of the way that sometimes academics have thought and are proceeding to think. Some of them are people who aren't necessarily looking at things from an evangelical lens, but are asking why are there not conservatives? Because this is what a lot of the literature is dealing with. And even looking at why does it matter? How does it affect things, but one of the key pieces that's influenced me as someone that so far as I understand is a secular scholar from California, who essentially looked at the data and said, this is not discrimination that's happening at the hiring point. In other words, social conservatives, religious conservatives, they're not being discriminated, when the job is posted. This is something that's fully in play first year of graduate school, that we do not have social conservatives. We do not have religious conservatives in the first year of graduate school. That it's already happened by then.

### **David Capes**

The idea then, is to get them earlier in their education. You describe this as a network. Who were some of the partners, who were some of the people you're working with?

### **Christian Askeland**

Well, for this to work, the main partners are the people who are down in the dirt on a day-to-day basis. It's the local churches that are next to a college campus and see it as a key part of their ministry to minister to that college campus. They probably have professors; they probably have a college minister. It may just be that they work closely with this other big group, the campus ministries. My wife and I have actually started two InterVarsity chapters, one at the University of Florida for graduate students, and one at Lake Forest College in Illinois. We have a special affinity for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Cru is the largest in the US and maybe now the largest International college ministry. Christian Union has one of the most important presences in the Ivy League schools. Ratio Christi is focused on apologetics and philosophy and is expanding quickly right now. Navigators. Chi Alpha is pentecostal, and has a really strong presence also at Ivy League schools, and is probably one of our most racially diverse, and internationally diverse college ministries. It's on college campuses.

### **David Capes**

There are a lot of groups then that you could bring together to help focus and bring this together. In terms of the Christian Mind Project, does anybody do anything like this exactly. Ahead of you, before you, or beside you? Because it takes more than one, right?

### **Christian Askeland**

There is a book that gets mentioned whenever you talk about something that inspires evangelical because of our project is evangelical. Of course, we're ecumenical in terms of whom we work, but at our core, we have a conservative, Protestant approach to things. And there's one book that almost everybody knows, by Mark Noll entitled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, in which he argues that the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there's not much of an evangelical mind. His basic argument, I think, comes back even from the 80s, as far as Mark is making it, but the book is written in the 90s. And out of that, comes something called the Pew Scholars. So, this is one of the earliest aggressive moves towards getting evangelicals, looking at this evangelical mind problem, and preparing them for careers in higher education and their success stories from that.

There really are a lot of groups working and the most recent large-scale endeavor is Veritas Scholars, which is a wonderful program. I went to their national meeting this last June [2023], and it was a very impactful program. Actually, they do not work mostly with students. They're starting with faculty early in their careers and then moving back into graduate students. These are early career scholars who have gotten jobs and they're supporting them, mentoring them, creating networks to help them flourish. And there's other programs too. You see Cru has a roundtable program. InterVarsity has a graduate network. Berry scholars is a wonderful program which identify students and helps them study. They tend to study work in Oxford. They're doing graduate degrees there to firm them up, help them think through issues of faith. And also, then point them to further graduate studies. I'm sure there's many more that I've got on my list that I'm not thinking of. But yes, we're certainly not the only dog in town.

### **David Capes**

In April of 2024, we're going to have a gathering at Lanier Theological Library that we want people to know about. It's going to be happening in April with George Yancey and the Christian Mind Project and

FEHE, (Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education) and some of these other organizations that you've talked about.

**Christian Askeland**

A portion will be open to the public. And if you are listening to this, I hope you'll be able to come. A keynote lecture by George Yancey will be on Saturday night. And his title is *Anti-Christian Bigotry in the Academy and How to Fight It*. He'll go after the question. And George has written a great deal on the subject. I just have two of his books. One of them is *So Many Christians, So Few Lions*, in which if I remember right, he's going through data that's come in from other surveys. And it's surprising how all of these thousands of people are surveyed. And this phrase, "So Many Christians, So Few Lions" comes back in different variant forms. Many times.

**David Capes**

I've seen that on T shirts.

**Christian Askeland**

I haven't actually seen a T-shirt, but I didn't realize people actually say this. Now in some of his earlier writing, he talks about how phrases like "Bible thumper" really is a kind of equivalent to some other phrases that would get you automatically canceled. If you use these phrases against a racial minority, say in Arabic. He uses examples for Arab minorities and African American minorities. And he talks about things that would get you just automatically fired at a university. But you could say something like "Bible thumper", and these kinds of things.

**David Capes**

It's a derogatory term, right?

**Christian Askeland**

But this phrase Christians and lions would be like if somebody said, so many Jews, not enough ovens or something like that? Obviously, you just wouldn't say that?! But you do have this popular phrase that suggests it would be better if all the Christians would be gone? So he looks at the language of hostility. He has another book called *Compromising Scholarship*. It's a bit earlier than that, where he actually does the demographic numbers. And he asked people how likely are you to discriminate against somebody just because they're a Christian? Or would you even favor them and the numbers he comes back with are really fascinating because in certain [academic] departments, they actually like Christians a little bit. But when you go through the social sciences and humanities, even the conservative departments have a double standard against Christians. In other words, they'll take a social conservative.

**David Capes**

The lecture is the public event. Privately though, we're going to be gathering a number of the kind of student leaders you've been describing and the kind of professors and, people who are influential, and people who are part of foundations that might have an interest in this as well. There will be more information about that sent as an invitation. But the big public event is going to be with George Yancey in April of 2024. We're going to invite people to check out our website. Make sure you're alert to that. It

is a problem. It seems like everywhere in the country right now and probably around the world, as well.  
Christian Askeland thank you for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

**Christian Askeland**

Thanks, the pleasure's all mine. Take care.