



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

Surviving Religion 101 with Dr. Michael Kruger

Season 1, Episode 11 Transcript

[00:00:00] Announcer: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast. We provide clear, practical biblical resources for discipleship. Here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:20] Darryl: For many young adults, the college years are exciting ones, but they can also be a time of testing and questioning. Some students may be confronted with various challenges to Christianity and the Bible for the first time.

In a recent post, Dr. Mike Kruger writes:

It's one of the most common questions I get when I talk with Christians who are struggling with what they believe. They've stumbled across some problem in the Bible or some issue raised by critical scholars and they don't have an answer. Then they ask:

Why didn't my pastor tell me about that?

...this doesn't mean that most churches are intentionally hiding the difficult parts of the Bible ... But it does mean that many churches offer a rather light diet of Christian theology, teaching, and biblical instruction. And therefore the average church member—even after maybe twenty years—has only received a smattering of Christian teaching, most of which does not seriously probe the challenging aspects of the Christian faith.

That's why I was glad to see Dr. Kruger's book *Surviving Religion 101: Letters to a Christian Student on Keeping the Faith in College*. It's an important book written to his daughter, but also helpful for the rest of us to read — helpful not just for college students, but for anyone who is facing tough questions about the Christian faith, questions like the exclusivity of Christianity, Christian intolerance,

homosexuality, hell, the problem of evil science, miracles and the reliability of the Bible.

Dr. Michael Kruger is well qualified to write it. He's president and professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, and a leading scholar on the origins and development of the New Testament canon, as well as author of many books.

Mike, welcome to the podcast.

[00:02:07] Mike: Well, thank you, Darryl, I appreciate it. It's great to be with you.

[00:02:10] Darryl: So why do you think it is that so many young believers or maybe even older believers are unprepared to face tough questions about the faith?

[00:02:19] Mike: That's an interesting question my book raises. Obviously, my book is written in college students once they've already arrived at secular university. And so in one sense, by the time they read my book, their preparation is over whether it was a good preparation or not a good preparation.

And one of the things I explore my introduction is, how did we get here where we have so many evangelical college students sent off that maybe sort of lose their way very quickly? What does that say about the state of the church, the state of the average youth group? And I don't answer the question fully in the book, but I do acknowledge the problem, which I think anybody who's watching what's happening can see which is that at some level we can all agree we're not doing an adequate job preparing our young folks headed off to college.

There are probably a lot of reasons for that. One might have to do with the state of the evangelical church as a whole and what they're trying to accomplish and what they think people need. It could be various strains of traditions. I even give the story myself when I grew up, I grew up on a solid Christian home with parents who love Jesus, but I never had that kind of training. It wasn't some diabolical plot to keep it from me. I just think on for the average church, it's not on their mind. They're thinking about two things: making sure people really are converted and know Jesus, and then secondly helping them live like Christians. And they never get to the third thing which is helping them think like Christians. So there's a lot of loving God with your heart, but maybe not so much loving God with your mind. And I think the church has a long way to go in that third category.

[00:03:40] Darryl: You tell the story of going yourself to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and hearing Dr. Bart Ehrman, one of Christianity's loudest and most prolific critics, try to dismantle your faith. So how did you survive that experience? Because it sounds like you weren't fully prepared for that onslaught.

[00:03:57] Mike: Not at all. In fact, you know, that's really the motivation for the book. The book is certainly motivated, as I say, by the fact that my own daughter is now in college at UNC. And so that was the tipping point for me in terms of getting it written. But the book's idea really began years ago when I was in the same situation as an undergrad.

And yeah, it was hard. If anybody knows Ehrman's works, he's a very compelling scholar, he's very thoughtful and persuasive. As a 19-year-old freshman, I was sitting there in a class with very few answers to his questions, and I also saw the sort of damage it did on those fellow students around me. A lot of people responded in a variety of ways, but some people gave up the faith entirely, some try to make a hybrid out of Ehrman's views and historic views, and some just pretended it wasn't happening. Thankfully, the Lord brought me through that largely because I decided, look, this, this can't be the first time people have brought these questions up, and certainly there's got to be another side of the argument. So I spent my time trying to find that other side of the argument, and I realized that these questions have been dealt with and have been answered. It just took some investigating to get there.

[00:05:02] Darryl: Out of all the issues in the book that you cover, do you find that there is one issue that you see as being particularly challenging for younger people today?

[00:05:10] Mike: As you noted, I cover a lot of questions. I have 15 chapters in the book plus an epilogue. Each one deals with an individual question and a variety of some questions underneath it. So on one level, I feel like I've covered a lot of ground. Then on another level, I feel like I hardly even scratched the surface because there's so much to be said and so many more questions to answer.

But the one that stood out to me the most is the issue of what are the chances that we're right and everybody else is wrong kind of question. The average college student gets to the university, and they realize, "Wait a second. Why is that it seems like virtually every one of my professors with a few exceptions and virtually every one of my classmates with a few exceptions find that my way of thinking about the world is really rather crazy? And on top of that, it's, it's also some of the smartest people in the world with some of the most advanced

degrees. I think I'm crazy. So what's the statistical chance that all of them are wrong?"

And then I'm right now. If you think about it for a moment, that's, that's kind of hard question. And for the average college students, sometimes they just can't get past that. They just can't come to grips with that. And they end up saying, well, maybe I'm not right and then it just leads them down different paths.

But what I try to do in the chapter that addresses that question is help people realize that that people don't form their beliefs just on the facts, that it's not just evidence in a bare neutral way that determines what we believe, but we believe things for all kinds of reasons usually determined by our prior worldview. In other words, professors at secular colleges aren't neutral. They already have a grid through which they're interpreting reality. As soon as you get down that path, suddenly the numbers game doesn't work anymore. And you realize it really doesn't matter that statistically more people believe one thing and another if they don't form their beliefs based just simply on the data all alone. And I think that's a really helpful point most haven't thought through.

[00:06:55] Darryl: That kind touches on how we arrive at our views. In the book, you point out that a lot of us arrive and maybe we discover that it's not really a logical progression that causes us to examine our views, but it can be meeting people who believe very differently and realizing they're very nice people. And so it's not really a logical argument that causes us to reevaluate our views. It's almost a more intuitive emotional decision. So do you think that sometimes our thinking follows our feelings rather than the way around? Could that be why sometimes we here of some of the deconversion stories where people have chucked a faith without really even looking at the logic of it?

[00:07:38] Mike: I think so. And you mentioned one of the ones I raised in the book, which is that these Christian students will go off to a secular college, and they'll meet non-Christians, and they'll discover that they're very nice, wonderful people that seem to be quite happy. And they think to themselves, well hold on a second, that's that's not what I expected. I didn't expect to really enjoy, like, and have affection for these people, and that sort of rattles their world.

Now on one level you could say they're they're making a decision based on emotions there, and it's a subjective thing. But I would argue, though, that there's another thing going on, which is that they actually have a wrong belief about non-Christians that they didn't realize. Somewhere in their system, and who knows who taught them, there is the idea that if that only Christians are nice people, and that all non-Christians are mean people, and that all of them are scandalous sinners out to destroy you or something. And then when you

meet them and realize, actually, a lot of people are just kind of nice and friendly, it rattles your worldview. But what Christians just don't realize is they actually have a false view of the way that should work in the first place. We actually have a view in the Bible that explains why people who aren't Christians can be actually rather nice kind and sometimes even kinder than Christians. It's this understanding of common grace. So, yes, it's an emotional decision, but it's also a theological error at the same time, and those bound together can cause real havoc in someone's beliefs.

[00:08:59] Darryl: So I have some friends that have responded to the kind of thing you address in your book through very good initiatives like homeschooling, for instance, and classical Christian education. And then some, on the other hand, say that this leads to a Christian bubble where they're less prepared for the world of secularism. So, what advice would you give to parents about how to prepare their kids for this in the future?

[00:09:25] Mike: That's that's a real key part of how to solve this. It's what do we do going forward? So, as I said earlier, my book's written for people were already there, but parents can take heed and think, "Okay, well, I got young kids at home, what can I do between now and then?"

Now, obviously the home school versus public school versus private school debate's a big one. I won't try to enter into here. I will say though, that regardless of where you send your kid to school, or even whether you're home school, one of the ways to prepare them for college is to introduce them and expose them to non-Christian thinking in some sort of way that normally we don't do.

I do think there's a Christian bubble problem. I don't think it's just one part of Christendom, though. I think large, large swaths of evangelicals suffer from the same bubble problem. Even if you go to a private Christian school, it turns out all your friends are Christians or at least on the surface seemed to be, and you never get challenged either. So it's not just a home school issue, as some might claim.

And so Christian parents need to think hard about how to challenge, push their children to reckon with non-Christian thought. And one practical tip is simply this: I would encourage parents to do more than just teach your kids something. I would encourage Christian parents to ask your kids to articulate what they believe to someone who's not sympathetic. So in other words, it's one thing to believe something. It's another thing to know something, but it's an entirely different thing to try to explain or articulate something to an audience that's not sympathetic to you. That is hardly ever done to the average person who's

young. And I would suggest that if you started doing that, these students would go off to college having already been forced to do that, and they'll be much more well-prepared.

[00:11:03] Darryl: And could you give advice to pastors on how they can do a better job of preparing people to face the challenges of secularism and the challenges to the Christian faith?

[00:11:14] Mike: One of the things I think is missing in a lot of pastoral ministry, and maybe more to the point a lot of preaching, is what I might call the element of persuasion. Sometimes we preach in a way that we're telling people things, we're informing them of things, but we're not actually trying to persuade them that the thing we're saying is true. In other words, we're not making an argument.

Now. I think part of the reason we're doing that is maybe because we just assume our audience at church is with us, and we don't need to persuade them. They're already here. I beg to differ. I think even though you have an audience that seems to be committed Christians, I think they to struggle with doubts. They too sometimes wonder if what they believe is true. I think most pastors probably are overly optimistic about whether their congregations are actually with them. I think they'd be shocked to learn that in any given sermon, maybe half the congregation isn't even sure that what they just heard is what they believe.

So, I think what pastors need to do is pick up the art of persuasion, to make an argument, try to show that what you believe makes sense.

And I think the reason that they may not be thinking that way is that maybe the pastors themselves aren't really that engaged with non-Christian thinking, and they just assume everybody is in a little bubble and everyone agrees. But as soon as you do that for 20 years, you're going to crank out a lot of people who really aren't ready for the real world.

[00:12:27] Darryl: And you talk about the — I love this idea — you talk about the idea of churches not just presenting a prepackaged, cleaned up, carefully curated picture of the faith, but taking people behind the scenes and showing them where the sausage is made. And you write, "Sure, it may not be as clean and tidy. But you might just find that it produces more chefs and less consumers." Could you give us a picture of what that could actually look like?

[00:12:52] Mike: So I think you're quoting there from an article I read recently about "Why Didn't My Pastor Tell Me About That?" And part of the point of that

article was, are we in one sense withholding difficult parts of the faith or challenging parts of the faith in a way that makes Christianity seem neat and tidy without any problems? I think we need to sort of get away from that. I think we're doing people a service by doing that. We think we're protecting them spiritually. Actually, what we're doing is just making them vulnerable to someone who brings that up later. I'd rather they hear it in the church from their pastor, and then they can hear the answer in the church and from their pastor rather than hearing it in a secular university environment or something along these lines.

And so one practical way is, are we avoiding the hard passages of Scripture? Are we avoiding the hard doctrines of Scripture, the hard truths, or things that maybe aren't so simple and clean? I mean, there are some things are just hard about Christianity and complicated and not easy, and people need to be put in front of those things, and they need to be given answers. And if we don't do that, we are I think setting up people for a fall later on. We need to be honest about those things and address those things in a church context.

[00:14:00] Darryl: The irony is I don't think we've ever been better equipped to deal with some of these questions. So books like yours, and certainly a number of other books. Rebecca McLaughlin and others are writing a lot of really helpful books. So there's a lot that we can draw and to do that and really appreciate that.

And I think you even write about being conversant with maybe the top thinkers, so exposing people to a Bart Ehrman so they're not surprised when they meet him in the flesh because they're familiar with some arguments that he's made. And yet that might seem threatening to a lot of people, right? They don't want to expose people to it. Maybe they're afraid that there will be persuaded and convinced by his arguments.

[00:14:36] Mike: My analogy is that it's an inoculation. So when you think about an inoculation against a disease, at least historically, you give them a small bit of that disease, not the full thing, so that the body to build up an immune system to it, or maybe a dead version of the disease. So it builds up an immune system to it. And that's that's what churches and parents need to do. We've got to take the problem and introduce it into the bloodstream, so to speak, in small doses, so that people are prepared to battle it.

So we've seen this in these years, the parents who are hyper concerned about making sure their babies and their children never get diseases and illnesses and are sort of germaphobes is actually ending up making their kids sick or later. It's an ironic thing, because if you expose in the germs early, they actually develop a

really strong immune system and then don't get sick. And so there's a sense in which the church has taken on the same medical approach their spiritually, which is we think, "Oh, if I just become really that hyper vigilant mother who keeps germs away from my kids and all is going to go well," and we end up actually hurting them in the end.

[00:15:34] Darryl: Mike, there's this view that the critics of Christianity are offering a very neutral, rational critique of Christianity from a very unbiased place. And yet in the book, you point out that critics don't always offer both sides of the argument. They're actually presenting a form of religious indoctrination themselves, another set of absolutes. And yet they seem to appear that they're just neutral and detached. So why do you think that we're sometimes blind to the assumptions behind the attacks on Christianity?

[00:16:04] Mike: This is one of my things I bring up in the introduction of the book. It's a bit of a lament at the state of the average American university, and it's not just America, although I think America's got the lion's share of the problem, which is that universities no longer do what they were supposed to do. They're supposed to introduce you to a multiplicity of ideas, get everything on the table and have a reasoned discussion and argument about it. Now, just certain ideas are outlawed from the get go. And we know this that professors and schools are not interested in debates that are interested in discussions. They're interested in indoctrination. They're trying to make sure that everyone leaves with a particular view. That wasn't the way it used to be. And so it's really sad that we've gotten there now.

What's maybe even sadder than that people don't recognize that we've gotten there. It's one thing to get there. It's one thing for people to think that they're getting an education when they're really getting indoctrination. And that, I think is lamentable. I'd feel much better if the universities would just admit what they're doing, just say, "Yeah, we're just going to ban views, we're just going to become those sorts of Orwellian approaches where you just don't let certain views on the table. And then we're just going to admit that we're biased." But they don't. And so there's this illusion that you're getting neutral scientific white lab coat sort of conclusions.

And so my point in the book was just simply to help the students realize that you're not getting that. You're actually not getting both sides of the story. You're getting a very one-sided vision of things, and the only way you're going to get to the truth is if you get a chance to look at the whole thing from all the angles.

[00:17:30] Darryl: I'm going to ask you a more personal question. How did Emma react to being the recipient of these letters and seeing it become a book?

[00:17:39] Mike: Oh, she loved it. I mean, it was such a special thing. And of course, I've written the book for all three of my kids, but obviously at the beginning of each letter, I just had to use someone's name. And so in one sense, I got to use my other two kids' names, but since she's in college currently, she's my oldest then it made sense to use her name. And she really loves the book and been blessed by it. And you know, obviously all her friends are reading it too. And so it's been a special thing. I mean, as you can see, it's not just an academic book, it's a personal book. And, and I think it's that way for her too.

[00:18:10] Darryl: And you're an academic, you're involved with higher education. And yet it's clear that you can also write for a popular level audience, and you have a heart for the church. How have you found straddling those two worlds? My favorite kind of academic is one who's a lover of the church, and wants to serve the church. And yet sometimes those can become very two different things. The academic stream can become divorced from the church. So how have you navigated that tension? Because you seem to be doing it very well.

[00:18:38] Mike: Well, I'm encouraged that that's the thought out there. It's hard to do. It's not easy to keep a foot in each world. You feel like they're opposed to each other. But as I hope the book demonstrates, I think there's a place for Christian scholars to make sure they're writing for the church. Now, there's also a place, by the way, for Christian scholars to write or the academy. And I think that needs to be done too, and's most of what I've done until now is write more academic books. This is my first sort of lay level book proper.

But I've enjoyed it. It's neat to see the reception of it because it's such a bigger audience. I've had to laugh at how narrow my other books look now in retrospect, compared to the broader reach this book is having. And I'm thinking to myself, wow, maybe I need to write more level books going forward. Who knows? Either way, it's been a blessing to see it reach. So many people.

[00:19:23] Darryl: If I could ask you a couple more personal questions, what are you learning right now?

[00:19:27] Mike: Well, I'm always working on multiple projects at once. You know, too many irons in the fire, probably too many hooks in the water. But I'm working on a number, I'm trying to get back to some academic projects. So one of the things I've done work on in the past is early Christian manuscripts, in particular, early Christian codices. And another thing I'm working on right now is more study on what we call miniature codices in the early Christian movement, which are basically tiny small books, how those function to transmit Christian

teaching and other kinds of literature outside the New Testament. And, so I've been working on that for years. I'm trying to assemble a new volume on that going forward now. That is probably the sheer opposite of what I just did in the sense that it's very narrow, esoteric and more academically oriented. But again, I'm probably going to be in that flip-flop mode for quite a while,

[00:20:15] Darryl: Like a switch hitter in baseball. I love it. And what's encouraging you right now?

[00:20:21] Mike: Well, I think the church has some real challenges right now. And I don't want to take your question about encouragement to talk about discouraging things, but I guess it's a bit of both in the sense that I think the church is facing some serious challenges. And I hope the encouragement is that God's at work behind the scenes trying to deal with some of those.

You know, one of the things we're seeing right now happening in the SBC meeting in Nashville this week, and I think in other contexts, is just real concerns about abuse in the church, and the church not being the kind of community with the kind of ethics and character that it should be. And honestly, this has been concerning for me for a number of years as a seminary president. And not just what we typically would mean by abuse, sexual abuse, but also spiritual abuse, mistreatment of the flock by those who are supposed to care for it. I think that is a real concern across the board right now. My hope — and this is where I'm trying to be optimistic — I hope that we're seeing some good glimmers of goodness there with some awakening to this problem in the evangelical world, particularly the conservative end. For whatever reasons, this has not been something that we've been aware of like we should. And I think other groups have been more aware of it than us, and we need to recognize that and wake up. And, so I'm hoping there's an awakening coming on some of these issues and hopefully revival as a result.

[00:21:37] Darryl: Where can people find out more about you and your work?

[00:21:40] Mike: Well, the best place to start is probably just my own website. I have a blog called Canon Fodder, which is a pun. If someone's not up to speed on the word canon, but it's Canon with one n rather than two in the middle. So it's a pun. But Canon Fodder is my website, just michaeljkruger.com. And there you can learn more about my work, my writings, books, articles. I have hundreds and hundreds of blog posts over nearly a decade of writing, videos, resources, links, and beyond. So that's a good place to start.

In one sense, my desire to reach lay level people with the work I'm doing has really begun on my website. Even though this is one of my first books, the

website has been doing this for a while. I've tried to crank out resources for the church at a more accessible level. So a lot of that's there and you can find your way back to RTS that way as well, because obviously I'm at Reformed Theological Seminary, particularly the Charlotte campus. So that's a good place for people to start.

[00:22:34] Darryl: Well, in the book, you write about a macro shift in the broader evangelical world, moving beyond just patriotism and revivalism and recapturing the deep historical and intellectual roots of the Christian faith. Well, I pray that happens, and I'm grateful for your work and nudging is in that direction. I really pray that your book is going to be a blessing not only the college students, but will provide a vision for pastors and parents and people who are struggling with the issues surrounding the Christian faith and helping them to understand and reason more carefully. So, thank you for your work. I really appreciate it.

[00:23:08] Mike: Thanks so much, enjoyed our conversation.