



# GOSPEL *for* LIFE

## Discipleship In Our Time with Trevin Wax

### Season 1, Episode 1 Transcript

[00:00:00] Announcer: Welcome to the Gospel for life podcast. We help churches make disciples. And now here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:21] Darryl: Welcome to the Gospel for Life Podcast, a podcast all about helping churches make disciples. This is our first episode, and I can't think of a better guest than Trevin Wax. Trevin is senior vice president for theology and communications at LifeWay Christian Resources. He blogs at The Gospel Coalition, and he's written a number of really helpful books, including *Eschatological Discipleship: Leading Christians to Understand Their Historical and Cultural Context* and, most recently, *Rethink Your Self: The Power of Looking Up Before Looking In*. My general rule is that if Trevin writes it, I read it and I couldn't be more thrilled to have him as our first guest. So, Trevin, welcome.

[00:01:01] Trevin: Great to be here with you, Darryl, for that, that kind of word of introduction.

[00:01:06] Darryl: And did I get your title right at Lifeway?

[00:01:09] Trevin: That's right.

[00:01:10] Darryl: Okay, excellent. Well, many Trevin, I've really appreciated your writing ministry, and I think I've met you once in person. But you're one of the guys I just appreciate following and reading. And I wanted to begin by asking you about your book *Eschatological Discipleship*. It's more academic than many of your works. I've noticed you have the skill of writing for both academic audiences and also for the popular level. Could you explain how you decided to write that book?

[00:01:38] Trevin: Well, it's actually a book that's related to another book that I wrote a few years ago called *This Is Our Time* when I was doing Ph.D. work at Southeastern Seminary in North Carolina for several years, I knew that I wanted the bulk of my research and my writing, my dissertation to focus on this, its idea of eschatological discipleship, the worldview question, what time is it and why it matters for the Christian

life. And so I worked on that. I gave a good year basically to that project and working through the dissertation and getting all of that done. And then immediately after writing that for school, I knew I wanted to translate it down, so to speak, so that the concepts from that book would be accessible to the ordinary Christian, the Christian who's going to church and reading their Bible and wanted to follow Jesus in this world that we're living in but may not be as academically minded. So I wrote *This Is Our Time*, a sort of taking all of those profound and rich and academic concepts that I learned I was able to write. *This Is Our Time* really more for just anyone in church that would benefit from those concepts without necessarily using some of the academic language and jargon that I have in *Eschatological Discipleship*. But it was after *This Is Our Time* came out that there was. There were questions about going deeper into some of those concepts, and so I decided, well, I guess I could take some of that work that I had done and dust it off and present an academic version as well. And so that was what became *Eschatological Discipleship*. It became a revision of work that I had done over the course of a year so that I might be able to share that with an audience who would be interested in going deeper into some of those concepts.

[00:03:36] Darryl: Although it's more academic, it's certainly accessible, so if anybody is interested in reading it, I would encourage them to do so.

Trevin, I want to ask you more about the concept of "What time is it?" Probably your last three books are centered to differing degrees around that. I think you wrote at one point, "What does obedience and faithfulness look like in this particular time?" I'm not used to hearing that as a key discipleship question. So could you unpack it? Why is that an important question that we should be asking?

[00:04:07] Trevin: Well, the big worldview questions that that frame up our understanding of discipleship that often considered are the big questions like, "Who are we as human beings? Where have we come from?" which is a question about our history about being created in God's image. The question of "What time is it?" That question is one in which it oriented orients us immediately to the gospel, the past, what Christ has done for us in the past, on the cross. But it also oriented to the future. Where is history going? What is the future of the world?

A lot of debates and a lot of the discussions that happened in society today have an implicit calendar associated with them. For example, it may be the Enlightenment calendar that we are in a world in which we have shed the silly, superstitious religious beliefs of the past, and now we know we have. We have science to thank for the progress that's being made. And so now we look to the future, and we are moving in toward this new kind of progress and a new kind of enlightenment. These are calendars or ways of viewing history, ways of viewing, the way the world is going that are, are not always stated explicitly but our underlying a lot of the world use of beautiful in our society.

And so when we asked the question, "What time is it?" we're asking the question, "What calendar are we living by? What is the implicit understanding of history that is

underneath our actions that helps to guide the actions that we take in the present and asking what time is?" It also means that we may need wisdom. We've got to have wisdom to know what this faithfulness looks like at this moment because we don't as Christians simply repeat the things that were done in the past by our forefathers and mothers in the faith. But neither, duly, simply look to the Bible as a rule book that gives you the correct answer. The correct action in every circumstance the Bible is a book that orients us to the future, tells us what history is so that we find our places in the grand narrative of Scripture. And it's within that relying on the Holy Spirit that we then are to discern what is the best course of action in any given situation. And so that is why I think the question what time is that is very important. It's not because ethics change from culture to culture, but because the right and wisest course of action does not always a "thou shalt do this or that." I shall not do that from the Lord many times the raw, wisest, the best course of action is one that is received through prayer and the cultivation of wisdom and discernment. And that worldview question thrusts that responsibility onto us.

[00:07:22] Darryl: Do you think that the reason we don't ask that question many times or maybe we assume it is maybe we're not steeped in church history enough and aware of the cultural movements that are shaping us? Do you think it's that, or why do you think that we tend to neglect that question, "What time is it?"

[00:07:41] Trevin: Well, I think we tend to think of Christianity often as timeless. Sometimes I'll hear people say that you know the truths of Scripture are timeless, the gospel is timeless. And there is a sense in which that is true that the gospel is not beholden to one era of history. It has implications expanding throughout history, of course. So I understand what people mean when they say that the gospel is timeless.

But discipleship is always timely, because the life of discipleship means we must work out what it means to follow Jesus in the particular time and setting that we've been placed in, and that is what discipleship looks like. There's no such thing as timeless discipleship, because the very nature of discipleship is that you are following Jesus in a particular culture. What it looks like for you to follow Jesus in that culture will have broad similarities with Christians throughout the ages and with Christians all over the world. And yet there will be some distinctive based on the current moment that you find yourself in or the current culture that you are a part of.

And so I think the reason we don't ask the question what time is it is because we have a vision of Christianity and the gospel that we see is transcending time, which again is true. But it's not the whole truth about what it looks like to follow Jesus. We've got to reclaim the sense of us being not only doing kind of incarnational ministries we like to talk about where we are embodied, and we are seeking to represent Jesus and whatever situation that we find ourselves in. We also need to think of ourselves as in time — that we are not simply representing Jesus in a particular situation, but also in a particular time.

And I think the reason that we haven't paid as much attention to time is because some of those other calendars, ways of looking at history, have often been smuggled into the Christian life without us knowing it and without some attention given to the subject, I'm afraid we may look more like the world and resemble the history of resemble views of history that friends and other people might have. And we might think otherwise.

[00:10:12] Darryl: You know, some of the topics that you cover in *This Is Our Time* would have been really issues that wouldn't have even registered fifty years ago or certainly further back. So, yeah, if anybody's interested, *This Is Our Time* is really a good way of unpacking some of those issues and speaking to our particular cultural context.

Trevin, I want to switch a little bit and ask you about the end of your book *Eschatological Discipleship*. I really appreciated the whole book. And near the end, though, I really appreciated the practical application to three different approaches to discipleship within the church. The one that really hit me through some of your blogs and through the book as well is what you call the general habits approach, which is you know, usually we tell our people if you want to grow, read the Bible, pray and attend church, which are all good things we want people to be doing. But in the book and in your blogging you critique this approach or maybe evaluate that approach and outline some of what it gets right, but also some of what this approach misses. So would you be willing to unpack that a little bit? What's wrong, or what could be added to the general habits approach?

[00:11:24] Trevin: Yes. So one of the things I enjoyed most about writing about these different conceptions of discipleship, you know, one that's more evangelistically focused, one that's more focused on habits and spiritually disciplines, and then sort of a gospel centered approach, is that I wasn't actually taking a position on which one of these approaches is right and the others being wrong. It was more of a question of How would this worldview question of what time is it? You know what I called throughout the book as eschatological discipleship? How would that strengthen these understandings of discipleship?

And when it comes to the one you're talking about, the general habits approach, there's a lot to commend to this understanding of developing personal piety that comes through spiritual disciplines and the formation of good and wise Christian habits that helped mold us into the kind of people that God has created us to be.

The reason why I do think that that understanding of discipleship needs a dose of eschatological discipleship, or the worldview questions of "What time is it?" is because you can be personally pious and still complicit with all sorts of injustice. We've seen this happen throughout history multiple times people who said their prayers and who were engaged in reading Scripture or going to church. And yet we're advocating for slavery, for example, in the South before the Civil War. Or you think about the pious Lutherans during the rise of the Nazis, who just sort of went along and didn't want to rock the vote at all. But we're not willing to really step out or oppose some of the

rampant nationalism that took place in the 1930s. These were people that were involved in some at some level within certain spiritual disciplines.

So the reason why I think that you would question, “What time is it?” or the reason why I think that this can help in this. This understanding of discipleship is by making our habits more specifically subversive of dominant trends that would be happening in our moment or in our time.

So one of the things I've been recommending, and this isn't in the book, is something I've done further reflection on in the years since I wrote this book, is that we need not simply general habits such as read your Bible, pray go to church, those are good insofar as they go. We need subversive spins on those habits. Or we need additional subversive habits.

An example, you know, it may be that you think, well, I'm going to read my Bible every day. So some point in the day when I have time, I'll just get on my app and I'll read a couple of verses and frame it and put it on my Bible app or whatever. That's of course, better than nothing. But what would it look like for you to deliberately subvert something else with that habit? So what is, for example, the habit of Scripture before phone — that you go to God's Word before you look at your phone in the morning? Now that's the first place you go. Now I don't want to put a sort of a legalistic requirement on anyone or say that this is a biblical way to do things. But it's an example of deciding I am going to do something that reinforces this understanding that Scripture is the foundation of my life, that Scripture is what is going to guide my reflection on my life and things like that.

Another example or an example that I used in a blog post was a pastor who every Sunday decided not to park in the pastor's spot near the office but instead parked on the other complete other side of the parking lot in order to give the best parking spots to his to the people in the church. And as he would what make that trek across the parking lot every we he did that specifically in order to remind himself I am a servant of by people. I am a servant of this people. Now listen. There's nothing wrong with the pastor parking close to the church there's no it's not wrong or right here. This is a question, though, for me is an example of a subversive spiritual discipline. It's a habit that was formed with the deliberate intent to subvert a self centered view of ministry that can easily crop up in any minister's heart.

So when I talk about the difference between general and subversive spiritual habits, I'm not dogging general habits. I'm simply saying, what additional edge do we need by asking that world the question of what time is it? What are the particular temptations and challenges I'm going to face the as a Christian today? What can I do to assess my own habits and efforts that spirit for spiritual formation? What can I do to reinforce a God-centered view of reality to reinforce the gospel of grace in my life to reinforce my dependence on the Spirit? Those are the questions that I think go a lot farther than simply saying, just do the things that are just general to all Christians. We've got to specify and again go back to the time that the timeliness of what it is that we're doing.

What do I need in this particular time in this particular culture in order to be faithful to Jesus?

[00:16:58] Darryl: You know, I was reading your subversive habits posts and really tracking and a little bit nervous because I just written a book on habits — at least part of the book was on habits — and then reading you talking about the general habits approach. And I remember when the blog post came out on subversive habits and was so profoundly obvious. And I just appreciated so much your approach. I remember reading that and just going man, that makes so much sense. Anyone who wants to find that I think you just go to Google and look up subversive habits and your name. It's certainly worth reading.

Trevin, I want to switch a little bit to talk about your latest book *Rethink Your Self*. And it almost seems to be that you've taken your doctoral research and written two books, *This is Our Time* and *Rethink Your Self* that at a popular level applies what you were researching. What were you hoping to do with the book *Rethink Your Self*?

[00:17:55] Trevin: Yes. So I mentioned you know, *Eschatological Discipleship* is sort of the foundation from an academic standpoint for sort of a fountain for *This Is Our Time*. It sort of came out of that. There's one chapter in *This Is Our Time*, though, that I told people as they were reading the book, I would say this particular chapter, it's called the North Pole in the pursuit of happiness. That's the most important chapter in that book. I believe which is, which is this chapter about expressive individual is the understanding of life that that says the purpose of life is to look inside yourself to find out who you are and then to look around and express yourself to the world. I did a chapter because I think that's one of the key things that we have to recognize his Christians if we're going to be faithful in this time.

So that's where that started in my idea after I finished *This Is Our Time*. I felt very strongly that the next book needed to be a whole length treatment of just what I had spoken about in that chapter, and that's really where we think yourself began. It began as a series of blog posts that I wrote about this. It actually started as I'm going to do this series of blog post for church leaders. And then once I helped them understand expressive individualism — what it is, how to spot it, how to recognize it in your own congregation, how to preach the gospel in a way that resonates but also counters some of the aspects of that understanding of life.

My thought was to write a book that would unpack those concepts further and what happened instead was, as I started to write, I realized, No, I really believe the Lord is leading me to write a book that's even more accessible than blog posts because it's really where I'm not even going to use words like expressive individualism, but I'm going to write it in such a way and to describe it in such a way that anyone can understand can follow along, and that this would be the kind of book that a pastor would want to give to someone in their congregation or even someone who's not in the congregation but has some sort of interest in Christianity without assuming any biblical knowledge whatsoever. How would I be able to present the gospel in a way that is

compelling to someone who has probably adopted this understanding of life without even realizing they've done so?

And that's really what framed up the book is. I wanted to write it for people who would want to look deeply at their life and to think about their life in light of eternal ultimate realities and to rethink the way that they've been looking at life and to bring a biblical lens to this question in a way that would not be immediately threatening or off-putting, but would present the biblical view in a way that shows why the Scripture, a way of seeing life, is so much more compelling and satisfying than what is offered to us by the world. And so that was the that was how the book came about, and my hope with it has been as much evangelistic as it has been discipleship-focused because my hope is that pastors will find it to be a useful tool in conversations they have with church members or with people far from God.

[00:21:11] Darryl: It's such a timely book. When I was reading it, I was realizing how easy it is, even as pastors, to begin to preach as if the assumptions of expressive individual are true. Have you heard of much evangelistic fruit from the book yet?

[00:21:27] Trevin: So the very first review that I came across was actually by someone who is not a Christian. That has been my favorite. That's been my favorite conversation. Actually, that I've had since then has been with someone who was interested in the book and intrigued by it and being able to have some interaction with that person. So the book is only came out a couple of months ago, So it's one of those things that I hope is going to be the useful for pastors and church leaders in congregations, especially when it's congregations start meeting again. It's one of those things that I hope will be bearing fruit for many years, and I'm I'm still waiting to hear the story of the first person that has come to faith, at least in part because of being led through this book. I know several situations where it's been used evangelistically, but I haven't heard about a conversion story yet, But that's my that's my prayer in my ultimate hope for it.

[00:22:20] Darryl: Yeah, I'll be praying for that as well. I can envision this being a book that churches could use within their small groups. It's a fairly short, very accessible book and speaks to a lot of what I hear from people. I'm in downtown Toronto, and basically the whole culture is this whole "look within yourself to find meaning and fulfillment." So I think your book does such a good job of talking to that.

Trevin. If I could put you on the hotspot here, I want you to speak to a local church pastor who is trying to create a discipleship pathway within the church and just looking for how do I do this. I have a heart for discipling people. I want to see people changed and transformed in the image of Christ. And there's so much information out there about discipleship, so many good resources. What counsel would you give that pastor he's trying to figure out how to lead their church in being disciplined?

[00:23:14] Trevin: Well, the good news, I would say, is that there I would my counsel would be. Don't feel like you need to start this from scratch and do this to yourself.

There are tremendous, tremendous number of resource is out there, as well as different plans for discipleship that you can see from different churches, different pastors in different areas following different methods or pathways. Now, of course, a good pastors wants to contextualize other people's discipleship resources or programs or plans to the setting that they find themselves in. It's not a one size fits all kind of approach, but my recommendation would be to take a good look at what other churches are doing, to take a good look what's out there, and you begin to put this together in a way that makes sense for their own context.

I would also say that a lot of times our focus is on tools and resource is, and a lot of our conversation has been about that, and I mean, of course I'm passionate about that. I work, you know I've at LifeWay. I've been instrumental with The Gospel Project, which is a curriculum that is trying to show how the Scriptures point to Christ. We've just been discussing *Rethink Your Self* as a discipleship and an evangelistic tool. So as excited and as enthusiastic as I am about tools, I will say that there's no resource that is silver bullet to making discipleship happen, because resource is and tools are actually only effective, really in the hands of people, people who follow Christ himself and model that.

So I would simply say you're thinking about discipleship. You've got to think about what it looks like for the Christian life to be modeled in a way that's compelling to other people. That's the question that I think often do is missing. We think that, you know, as long as I preach well, as long as I assign the right Bible study, as long as I trained the right teacher or I do the right devotional plan or whatever, that's that's sort of my job is done, a discipler, and I want to say no, it's actually more than that. Discipleship is caught as much as it is taught. There is certainly a teaching element to it, but there also is a modeling and an invitation model to it.

And so the question that we have pastors have to wrestle with is how is that sort of passing on the faith taking place in our congregation? How are we making that available? That's not something that just the pastor you can do. That's what we have to have older mentoring the younger, those who are more mature in Christ mentoring those who are just starting out.

So my encouragement in the past would be, yes, look to resource. Is that going to fit? The particular context that you're in certainly make use of some of the many, many good tools that are available to you. But don't miss the modeling and the imitation aspect of the Christian life, because that's vital for seeing disciples who are formed in Jesus image.

[00:26:12] Darryl: You know, everyone I talked to, including myself, I really think that's it. I mean, I'm the product of hearing really good preaching, but then seeing people take an interest in me and model that up close where I could see how the gospel was being worked out in their lives. So that's so helpful.

I want to wrap up by asking you to questions. You're our first guest. So you're the guinea pig here. But I want to, God willing, ask all of our guests to questions just to wrap up. And the first question is this. What are you learning right now?

[00:26:41] Trevin: Wow. Well, I mean, that's a question that immediately makes me think about the books that I'm been most recently reading. And I actually have had some book recommendations come to me recently.

And so I've got a big stack of books on evangelicalism, the history of evangelicalism and even fundamentalism and the North American context. So I'm reading on those. I just finished reading *America's God* by Mark Noll, which gives a lot of just helpful historical context of understanding how intertwined evangelical religion and the founding of the United States was. And also how this democratization of Christianity during the 1800s, how much evangelicalism influenced America, but then also how much America influenced evangelicalism. So that's been that's been a fascinating study and just many things to ponder there.

But I'm also I'm reading right now a book called *To Flourish or Destruct* by Christian Smith He's a sociologist. It's a personal theory of human goods, motivations, failure and evil. And this is a definitely an academic read, but one that has been giving me a lot of food for thought as to what it means to be a human person. Christian Smith is a Christian. He's writing, though, to other sociologists, so he's writing sort of from a secular vantage point. But he's making a case for a more robustly biblical understanding of human personhood than what you're going to find in many reductionist theories that are out there. And I'm I of the opinion that one of the big battlegrounds for us in our generation are going to be over anthropology. What does it mean to be human? You see this in the gender debates. You see this in debates over end of life, beginning of life questions. You see this in some of the most fundamental worldview divisions that we have in our culture and society. And so I'm trying to brush up a bit on what it means to be made in the image of God. What does it mean for us to be human persons who stand individually before God, and yet who also connected to the community that we are born into, or the community of faith that we become a part of what we when we become Christian?

[00:29:05] Darryl: That's so good. You know, this is going to be a dangerous question for me to ask, because I think I would be buying a lot of books talking to people like you. That's really good, though. Final question for you. What's encouraging you right now?

[00:29:18] Trevin: You know, I think one of the things that is most encouraging to me is that there's a lot of resilience among Bible-believing Christians, no matter what situations that are being faced. And this year has certainly brought a share of suffering and sorrow and quite a few challenges. Many that were challenges that even a year ago we would not have expected we would be on the idea to rise. And yet there is an endurance and a sense of perseverance and resilience that I'm seeing in, uh, in many believers, that is inspiring. I do know that there will be long-lasting effects from this

pandemic, and I don't think we need to shy away from those. I think we need to recognize that those effects are going to be with us long term and that we will have indeed most likely lost people who were perhaps not the most faithful attenders, but were at least on the periphery of our churches, our communities to face at the same time. The core is there as the core is still strong in the core is still working to connect. And that has been one of the encouraging things to see over this last year, a year of revelation in many ways giving us a glimpse of what reality looks like. And I'm encouraged when I see faithful people of God doing what the faithful people of God had been called to do even when the circumstances have been so challenging, is what we faced in the past year.

[00:30:56] Darryl: Yeah, I think we're all agreed. We can't wait till this is over and that we trust that God is at work and definitely praise God for their resilience. I see around me.

So Trevin, it has been so good to talk to you. Thank you for being generous with your time. Very grateful for your ministry. How can people follow you?

[00:31:13] Trevin: They can find me on The Gospel Coalition website is where my column is. If you just go to [trevinwax.com](http://trevinwax.com), it will take you to my regular column there. You can also find me on online at on Twitter or on Facebook, where I'm constantly tweeting or putting things on Facebook that will hopefully be helpful to people.

[00:31:39] Darryl: We're very grateful for your ministry. You have another book coming out shortly, right?

[00:31:43] Trevin: I do. It's ah, it's a little book that will come alongside those who attend The Gospel Coalition National Conference this year called *The Multi-Directional Leader*. And it's a little book about how we as church leaders can respond wisely to challenges that come from different angles, the challenges that come from every side, and I hope it's a book that will encourage the weary pastor who may feel like they are constantly being criticized from people from different perspectives, but give them some courage and consistency in the task that God has called them to.

[00:32:16] Darryl: We're very grateful for you, Trevin, and your gifts and for sharing them with us and through your writing ministry and for being here today. So thank you.

[00:32:25] Trevin: Thank you so much. Darryl.