

OpenTheo

S1E7 - The Dream Team

December 10, 2018



Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Did you know that Mike led a small group which was integral in Nabeel Qureshi's conversion? David Wood was a part of that group, too. Get the details on the Dream Team in this episode.

Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Michael O'Connor. Dr. O'Connor is the Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University. He is a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television interviews.

Mike is the President of Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) organization. My name is Kurt Jares, your host. On today's episode we are talking about the dream team.

Mike, those of us that are familiar in the apologetics world know of this dream team that you speak of, but tell us about this group that met frequently in your home. Well, that started, I don't remember what year it was, it was, I guess, around the year 2000. And I spoke at a church on the campus of Old Dominion University.

There is a pastor there named Mark Rion. So he invited me to come in and do some lectures at his church during the week on apologetics issues. And so I did that several times.

And then he came to me and he said that he had some students who were really interested in apologetics and Christian apologetics. And he wanted to know if I'd be interested in mentoring them. And I thought for a moment, you know, I was really busy.

I was, I spent a lot of time in research. I was in the middle of writing the book with, which was co-authored by Gary Habermas, the case for the Resurrection of Jesus. So I was pretty busy at that point with speaking in research and writing.

And so I said, well, let me think about it. I'll get back to you. And so I called Gary

Habermas and I said, I told him about it.

And he said, well, what do you think? And I said, I don't know. I don't think I want to do it. And he said, well, that's up to you.

But, you know, I would tend to think you should do it because you never know what could come out of that. If you've got some people, some college students are really serious about it. So I told Mark, I said, okay, let's do it.

So I reached out to these folks and they were like, yeah, let's do this. And so there were like, there was one guy, a college student who was a philosophy major. And then another guy, let's see, he brought his girlfriend.

And then there was another guy and he brought his girlfriend. I think they were history majors. There was an English prof there at Old Dominion University and her husband who was in the Navy.

And I don't know, just a couple more maybe. I don't remember who the original group was other than them. And we started meeting.

We said, well, we will meet the first and third Saturday of every month. And we'll get together at six. We'll eat a meal together.

And then we will go through chapter by chapter, William Lane Craig's book, "Reasonable Faith." And so we were to read the chapter beforehand and then discuss it when we got to our meeting. And so that went for a couple of months. And then the one guy asked if he could bring his friend, who was a Muslim.

And I said, well, if we do that, the goal of our group, you could say, it's just going to change everything in our group. It's not going to be just studying to become good Christian apologists. It's going to change what our group is all about.

So what do you guys think? And we discussed it and we all agreed that we would let the Muslim in. And then so it did change. And instead of going through reasonable faith, we started having discussions on the problem of evil and all these different kinds of discussions.

And then we'd watch debates together and we just became really good friends. And later on, that Muslim became a Christian and it was Nebileh Kureshi. And the guy that invited him was David Wood.

And another guy who later joined the group was a guy named Bruce Frazier. And he's over in New Zealand running an apologetics ministry over there now. So there was a guy in the group who was an agnostic named Zach.

He was considering Buddhism. He became a Christian. So it was a really cool group.

We just grew really close together. It was a lot of fun. You've considered this the dream team.

Let me ask you, what's the thought there behind that label? Was it because the conversations with these people just became so edifying and winsome to you? No, it was because back again, we're talking right around the turn of the millennium, somewhere around the year 2000. And the dream team had been that basketball team comprised of all-star basketball players in the NBA who went on to play in the Olympics and just crushed everyone that first year. And so it's like, okay, well, we want to become a dream team of Christian apologists.

And so that's just kind of what we called the group. And that's how it was formed. Of course, later on, it changed in what it was all about.

And we brought in non-believers. And so we still called a dream team, but yeah, that's how it came to have the name. Let me ask you about Nabil and his experience with your group.

So what were some of the sorts of questions that he came in asking? You talked about problem of evil and some others. What was he like? And what type of Muslim was he that he would consider coming into this Christian group to ask these questions? Well, he and David would. We're really good friends.

They were best friends at that time. And they had a really good relationship. They respected one another.

They could really just blast one another and say, "Hey, your argument's stink." And it was all in good taste. And they challenged one another constantly. So they had a really good, a unique friendship.

It was a really good, it was really unique. And Nabil came and he just continued all that within our group. So his objective when he came to our group was to convince us to become Muslims.

And of course, we wanted to convince him to become a Christian. And it's the same thing. The agnostics, the atheists would come and they wanted us to believe their view.

We wanted them to believe ours. But you know the thing was we all respected one another. We treated one another with love and respect.

And we all knew that the other person wanted us to embrace their view. But we knew that it was because they believed it was in our best interest. And again, we treated one another with respect, but our meetings did get spirited.

Because we had really strong convictions on these things. But they never got angry with

one another. No yelling or anything like that.

So I remember once Nabil got up and he said, "Well, he told us." He said, "I'd like it if can I get up next time we get together and give a presentation on why you all should become Muslims." And we said, "Sure." So we got up aboard in our house. We always met, we ended up meeting in my house after a while. And so I put up aboard with erasable markers and he drew some things out for us.

And we just clobbered him. And it was fun. But again, we always did it with respect and love.

And we knew that he loved us and respected us and wanted us to become Muslims. Yeah, remember that. He was certainly a committed Muslim.

But he would honestly and authentically entertain the arguments of the other person and comment on them. And we all have closed minds to some extent, but he would try to be open-minded and listen to us. So he was a joy to have in the group.

It was a lot of fun. And where in his journey was he? So he came in, he was a committed Muslim. But was it during this time that he really had the doubts enter into his mind or even more so did he become a Christian during the time that your group was meeting? He did.

So the way it ended up working out is David, because he was Nabil's best friend. That's when he really started to study Islam very seriously. And so he would bring all these objections to Islam and to Nabil.

And these things would carry over in emails between David and Nabil and myself. And so David would say, "Nabil, how could you follow this property? He had nine wives at one time. He had 13 altogether.

His favorite wife was Aisha with whom he consummated his marriage when she was nine years old. He would start to share all these kinds of things about Muhammad because he was reading about this in the original Islamic literature. Things like the Hadith, things like the Sirat Rasul-A'lah, which is our oldest extant biography of Muhammad.

So he'd be reading all this stuff and bringing this to Nabil. And Nabil would respond. And David was, he was pretty harsh on these things.

And I'd be saying, "Come on now, David, calm down a little bit." It was kind of this good cop, bad cop thing. It turned out to be. And I would present Nabil with the positive evidence for the truth of Christianity.

And David would be getting on him by saying how wrongheaded he was for being a Muslim. So we were going at it that way. Again, it was the good cop, bad cop kind of

thing.

That wasn't our strategy. It just kind of, that's our personalities. He's just kind of that way.

And I'm different in that sense. So we'd have these conversations and Nabil really sought truth. And he went over to the UK to talk to some of the Islamic leaders there and ask these questions.

And he wasn't satisfied with their answers. And so he visited some other Islamic leaders up in Canada. I think it was Toronto.

And he'd bring up some of the things that David was mentioning. And he wasn't satisfied with their answers. And then he ended up coming to my debate with Shabir Ali.

And he was hoping Shabir would win, but he walked out. I remember telling him that he thought I won by a significant margin. And so we talked about that some.

And he talks about that in his book, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*. And then I ended up moving down to the Atlanta area to take a job with the North American Mission Board back in the December of '04. But they kept the group, Bruce kept the group going at his house.

And so the conversations continued between David, Nabil and the group. And Nabil ended up becoming a Christian. So shortly thereafter, so it was pretty cool.

Yeah, that sounds great. So I didn't know this group kept on meeting even after you had left. It did.

And then David ended up leaving, moving to New York to get in a PhD program at Fordham program in philosophy. But they continued it. And then Nabil ended up moving away.

And Bruce continued it. And it went for a while until Bruce moved away. So it lasted for several years after I left.

You talk about having a meal, reading a chapter, and then you threw in whiteboards. What exactly did a typical evening look like for this group? Well, it morphed over time. But like, for example, what we did, we had anywhere from, let's say, eight to 14 people show up on a consistent basis.

And we'd start off, I'd download some articles on, let's say, the problem of evil. Maybe two or three articles that talk about why the problem of evil disproves God's existence and two or three articles that answer those arguments. And then I would email the group and I'd say, okay, you know, I'd say to half of them, you, you, you, you read these two articles on the other side.

And so that you can argue why God doesn't exist based on the problem of evil. And then the other half, I'd say, you read these addressing them. And so when we get together, we'd always usually chip in, I think it was six bucks.

And we had arrangement with a pizza joint down the street and they'd sell us pizzas at a discount because it was kind of ministry related. And so we'd chip in like six bucks each. We'd have chips and salsa and wings and pizza and sodas.

And we'd just hang out and just have fun talking to one another for maybe 30 to 45 minutes. And then we'd sit down and do the business, you know. So what I would do is I'd have the group, one group argue that God does not exist based on the problem of evil.

And as a group, they'd have 20 minutes to do that. And then the other group would respond with 20 minutes based on the arguments they read, the articles they read, and then they would have a discussion period. And then the next time we get together, I assigned the group members to read the opposite articles and they had to argue the opposite way.

And so by the time we were done with those two meetings, they knew how to argue for God's, or against God's existence based on the problem of evil pain and suffering and how to respond to it. And so they'd be familiar with all the different arguments and be able to converse pretty well with those arguments. So that was kind of fun.

But then the most enjoyable thing we ended up doing and doing the most would be we would sit down and we would watch a debate together. So after eating, we'd sit down and we'd put on a debate, let's say with Bill Craig, and we'd watch his 20 minute opening statement, we'd put it on pause, and then we would take 10 minutes and we'd discuss what Bill said. And what do you think about, what do you think was his strongest argument, what do you think was his weakest argument? And after that discussion, we'd put on the other view and listen to his opponent for his 20 minute opening statement, and then we'd pause it and we'd take about 10 minutes and we'd say, okay, what do you think about what that person said? And what was their strongest point, their weakest point? Do you think that that person addressed Bill's arguments? Well, who do you think's winning at this time? And then we'd put on the first rebuttal and then after that we'd stop and discuss that.

And we'd do that until we got through the whole debate. And sometimes we'd go to 11 o'clock to midnight and we just had so much fun together in the time which is fly by. And we're all just really interested in this stuff and just had a great time together.

That's what we ended up doing and spending the most time, assessing and discussing debates. That sounds like an awesome opportunity. It was fun.

And it's funny to see that I went on to engage in debates on a regular basis, and so does David, and and to Bill did as well. He engaged in several debates there for a while. So, yeah, we all really enjoyed it.

Was there anyone who came away from the group with doubts about the Christian worldview or questions about God's existence? Or was it all really the other direction? I think it was pretty much the other direction. Now, I remember there was this Jewish girl, and we enjoyed having her in the group for a while. And she stayed for a little bit and then she stopped coming.

And I don't know where she ended up or whether she changed her mind or what she thought after a while. Maybe your atheism became, I think she was an atheist. Maybe your atheism became stronger.

Maybe it became weaker. I don't know. But for the most part, the Christians remained strong.

I think we got stronger in our faith. And some of the non-believers became Christians. So it was pretty neat.

Tell me about David Wood. He was a part of this group. He's got a fascinating conversion story.

So where in his life did he enter? Did you meet up with him? Well, he was one of the charter members of our dream team group. In fact, when he brought his girlfriend, Marie, she was a non-believer at the time. And she later became a believer.

And now they're married and have four kids. Good marriage. David is the kind of guy that when he walks in the room, he commands the presence.

He's the alpha in the room and just has a very charismatic personality that people gravitate to. Back then, he could be quite abrasive and he turned some people off. There was one member of the dream team that stopped coming because that person was put off by David.

But David has mellowed a little bit over the years. And maybe he could watch his videos and you'd say, "Really? If he's mellowed now, what was he like then?" But he's a really good guy. He's a brilliant guy and made significant contributions in the group when we got together.

So he was a lot of fun. A really funny guy too. Has a really cool sense of humor.

Books, scriptures of different religions. And they use that to really take off their ministry careers. Nabil, David would of course.

For David, it would have been from all the reading that Nabil probably had him do. And

now David Wood's ministry is primarily chiefly, dominantly geared toward reaching Muslims. It was really a benefit for them.

Let me ask you, have you ever thought about restarting a dream team group like that down in Atlanta? Yeah, about a year after I got down here, a guy I was working with at the North American Mission Board. He said he'd be interested in being involved in a group like that. And I thought, and I'd say, "Okay, maybe we can do that again.

That would be really cool to get a group like that. But we just didn't get enough interest from others. And so it just never got off the ground.

Will we do it again? I don't know. Right now, I'm not really close to a college campus close enough as I was before. We're having the same kind of connections to start one.

Although I'd be open to doing it again, because it was a lot of fun. It really was. But, yep, we tried once and it just didn't work out.

Doesn't mean we won't do it again. But right now, I don't have any plans for that. It seems you're a little bit involved with and do a number of events at Kennesaw State University.

Is there a chance? I don't know how far away that is from where you currently live. That's about an hour. So not as close as being sort of right there.

Yeah. Yeah. And there's some good guys over there.

But, you know, they have a Rashi O'Christi group on campus there with Jonathan and Eric leading that group. And it's a good group. So they kind of have that going.

They're not meeting in a home. They're meeting on campus. But some of these Rashi O'Christi groups, they're strictly formed to talk about these kinds of things.

And they do it right there on campus. So Rashi O'Christi kind of does something similar. I'm guessing the dream team was just something that was very special for that time.

Maybe something like that will happen in the future. I think God just had some plans. You know what's really scary, Kurt, is what if Gary Habermas when I called him and I was inclined not to do it? What if he'd say, "Yeah, yeah, you're working on your research in your book.

You always have a chance for that in the future." What if that pastor had not asked me? What if I had not agreed to do it? It's like, "Wow, what a loss. That would have been." Yeah, that is something. It's great to hear more about the history of this group.

I know some people have been aware of, you know, a little bit, a small idea of what happened, but great to learn more about what exactly you did. And it really, I hope in a

healthy way, makes me jealous. It really does sound like a fun discipleship opportunity for those that are interested in the intellectual rigors of figuring out these issues.

Really a way for you to disciple people. What an awesome opportunity. Yeah, it was fun.

It's something that you just don't do by having discussions on Facebook. That's right. You got to do it in person.

Live it out in person. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can visit our website, RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection and the historical reliability of the Gospels. There you can see all sorts of different resources, like video lectures or debates or articles, even ebooks that you might be interested to check out.

If you like our program, will you consider becoming one of our supporters? Go to RisenJesus.com/donate. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast and follow us on Facebook and Twitter. This has been the RisenJesus podcast, a ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona.

[Music] [Silence]