

# OpenTheo

## S1E8 - Advice for Future Apologetics (Season 1 Finale)

December 17, 2018



### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In the Season 1 Finale, Mike gives his advice to new apologists. Listen for helpful tips, perhaps most importantly having a spirit of humility.

Season 2 kicks off in February 2019, so stay tuned!

## Transcript

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

He is the President of "Risen Jesus 501(c)(3)", a nonprofit organization. My name is Kurt Cheris, your host. On today's episode, we're talking about advice for prospective apologists.

Mike, as you know, I've been working in the apologetics field for just a couple years now. There are probably some people in a situation like me where they have a blog going or they teach a Sunday school class at the church. I wanted to talk to you about your advice for folks like myself who are interested in pursuing a greater level of apologetics work.

You speak all over the world and you've got this really a blessed ministry with "Risen Jesus". How did your speaking and teaching ministry get started? Well, I found myself attracted to apologetics just simply because I was experiencing doubts of myself about the truth of the Christian faith and that caused me to get into it to dig and to dig for evidence. I read some books on debates.

I mentioned listening in a previous podcast, listening to debates. I found that debates were just a quick way, it's a synched way to hear some of the best arguments. I just liked it.

I found as I had some discussions with others that before I even started doing public speaking, just having discussions with others, it was kind of fun. They would say things that would challenge the Christian faith. I would respond with some of these answers and it's like, "Wow, these answers seem to satisfy some of these folks or cause them to think some." It wasn't just a matter of I heard an objection.

It's like, "Well, that rocked my faith. I heard an objection and I responded with an answer that to me sounded correct and reasonable and it's like, "Oh, yeah." My faith was bolstered. I enjoyed the conversations I was having with others.

Then I asked the director of education at my church. I went to a church that probably had about 700 on Sunday. I asked if I could teach a Sunday school class on evidence for Christianity and do apologetic stuff.

He arranged it and I ended up doing a 10-week thing. I had several people come and they were just really interested in it. It's like, "Hey, if you ever teach this stuff again or something like it, we want to know about it and attend it." I started to put their names on a list and their contact information and just built that list.

I guess words started to get around after I did that maybe two or three times at my church and then the director of education there told someone else at a different church about it and they had me come to their church and do something similar and then speak to their youth group. The word got around and I started to speak at more youth groups. Then I got to speak as a pulpit supply.

The pastor at a church that I spoke to their youth group was going to be out of town and so they asked if I'd fill it. It was a small church, maybe 200 people would show up on a Sunday. Then words started to get around and then I got invited to speak to a campus ministry and it just started to grow and I get more and more invitations to speak.

That's how it got started. You start off really, really slow and just seems like it's never going to get going and then all of a sudden it starts to get momentum after a couple of years and then really starts to go. It takes time to build that momentum.

I've been taking some notes during the course of our interviews here and a couple of things that I've gathered is that for those looking to get started in having a flourishing ministry, read a ton, watch some video lectures and debates. What other things can folks do to get started in apologetics ministry? Remember my wife read, again this is probably 20 years ago, she read a book, The Autobiography I think it was of Billy Graham and he said the way he got started was he accepted a speaking invitation no matter who it was from. Even though I may not have been excited about speaking to junior high or senior high students, I would speak to those groups and it gives you experience, it can help them, it gets your name around, it lets people know that you're a speaker on these types of issues.

Whatever invitations you get, accept those. You're not too good for something. Just accept those.

You have to speak wherever you can when you're getting started. I'd also say that once you get going, get some professional training in public speaking. Sure of my church, Michael Simone at Spring Branch Community Church, it's a church we went to later on, great church, we loved it.

I think they run about 1600 or 2000 on Sunday, something like that. He let me come in on a Sunday and he said, I want you to speak to our church. I think I did that for two Sundays because he was going to be on vacation.

He got back and invited me to lunch. He said, I appreciate you doing it, I got some feedback from the people. Would you like to hear it? Some of it was very negative.

One thing, they were using PowerPoint back then and I didn't know how to use PowerPoint. I barely even had a computer. It was like a 486 is what I had.

This was before the Pentium. It was just old and outdated and hard to have anything and I was mainly just using it to use. I think word perfect, I didn't even have Microsoft Word at that point.

A lot of them were already using PowerPoint. At one point, I had made this chart and I cut out pieces, pictures of stuff from a magazine and I glued them to the chart. I'm talking to a group at that point of probably 600 or more people, which was at that church at that point, and showing this big chart, holding that up and pointing to things.

I think about that now and it's like, "Oh, I'm so embarrassed to think about that. I'm serious." Anyway, he gave me some critical feedback and I appreciated it so much. A lot of people would not have had the courage to do that.

As I was growing as a public speaker, most people, church ministers who would bring me in, did not have the courage or the concern to sit me down and tell me some things in which I could improve. I can understand that. I might not have done it either had I been in their case, but my pastor did and I'm so grateful to him.

He said to me, I'll never forget, he said, "Mike, I think you're a B speaker. You could be an A speaker, but you need to learn public speaking. Can I make a suggestion?" Now, he had credibility in my mind because he's an excellent public speaker, Michael Simone at Spring Branch Community Church, excellent speaker.

He learned by going to what was called the Dynamic Communicators Workshop, put on by Ken Davis, which has been since renamed the Score Conference, which I mentioned in a previous podcast, S-C-O-R-R-E, the Score Conference. It's an excellent conference on public speaking. It goes for several days.

If you do it right, you won't have any free time. I mean, you can take some free time, but you won't learn as much as you could. If you do it right, there won't be any spare moment for you and you're going to be working your butt off the entire time, but you will come out having improved significantly in your public speaking skills after that time and be able to go on from there.

After I went to that, I put it off because I couldn't afford it at the time. Probably with traveling expenses and everything, it's a couple of thousand dollars, maybe \$2,000. I don't know what it is now.

The last time I went to it was a few years back, maybe eight, nine years ago. But it transformed my ministry overnight. Overnight helped me tremendously.

So I only wished that I had gone earlier. Even if I had to work a part-time job, stock and shelves in the midnight shift or the graveyard shift at a grocery store, it would have been worth it. I'd say if your ministry is growing, I would say read some books on public speaking.

And when you get to a point, when you are speaking to groups on average twice a month, then go to the score conference. Because if you go and you haven't really started speaking or you're only speaking on occasion, you're going to learn a lot, but then you're going to turn around and forget it because you don't have the opportunity to put it into practice. So by waiting until you're speaking about twice a month, at least twice a month, you will have the ability to put what you learn into practice.

And if you take it very seriously, and it's hard work, and it will take you hours of work to put together your messages a lot more than it would normally take, then if you're willing to put in that price, your ministry will grow. But that's something I would say professional training and public speaking will help you. Learn some interpersonal skills.

How to win friends and influence people. Or there's this book years ago that I got, it was recommended reading. And so I read it just a little book called "Skilled with People" by a guy named Les Giblin.

And it's not how to manipulate people, but it's just being how to be a good listener. I haven't read a book like that in years, probably 20 years. But boy, I learned so much reading those kinds of books and just learning how to deal with people.

You don't want to be an egomaniac. You want to care for people, you want to care for them genuinely, you want to become a good listener. And so those things are important.

You have to take a genuine interest in people. So those are some things. I was going to ask next, there are Christian apologists out there, even not necessarily apologists, but just Christian speakers who have all sorts of different personalities.

And of course, different personalities will come through in their different ways. But what should be the temperament of a Christian apologist? Well, I'd say the temperament of any Christian should be. And that is, you know, in the Sermon on the Mount says, "Blessed are the meek." Paul tells us, I'm sorry, Peter, 1 Peter 3:15 that we should defend the faith, be willing to give a reasonable answer, defend the faith to everyone who asks, and to do it with gentleness and respect.

And Paul tells us pretty much the same thing. Let our speech always be with grace, seasoned as it were with salt so that we can know how to respond to every person. So I don't think that arrogance is a Christian.

It's not a trait that a Christian should possess. All of us do to some extent because we're flawed. But we should try to be humble.

We should try to be winsome and loving, kind. When we're up there, that doesn't mean you shouldn't be confident. I mean, we should be confident.

If we've got the evidence, confidence is just something that naturally results, but pride and arrogance. And sometimes, you know, it's true that knowledge a lot of times leads to pride. And that's not good.

And you're going to turn people off when you do things like that. The discipleship seems to be very important here that as we learn more, we study more, that we do remain humble. And the way we can do that is, you know, in our continuing walk with Jesus.

That applies to everyone, whether no matter what ministry you're doing, and even if you're not involved in any Christian ministry, it applies to them as well. We're always to be growing in Christ because our sanctification, our holiness, the way we live is more important to God than what we do for Him. I'll never forget, in the Old Testament, it says, "To obey is better than sacrifice." So Jesus isn't looking just for people who will go out and serve Him.

He's looking for disciples. And that means primarily people who will be holy and work toward becoming someone who is conformed to the image of Christ. That is what God wants for us.

So, and again, it's not just for people in apologetics, it's for pastors as well. You can be a pastor of a mega church and just have people adoring you and be a fantastic public speaker. But if you're not growing in Christ, it's those sort of folks that with the pride they're given to greed and they'll fall into adultery and things like that on many occasions.

And they tend not to care about people. I'm not saying that it's of all, or even the majority of mega church pastors, but it can happen with pastors, even pastors of small churches. So it doesn't matter what ministry you're in, but it applies to all Christians.

And of course, it applies to those involved in the Christian apologetics ministry. And people in apologetics have to be extra careful to worry about pride. Yeah, for some people, there might be a fine line between confidence and coming across as arrogant when we at least put ourselves across as if we know what we're talking about.

Some people might think we're know it all and we think we're better than they are. So, that's really a challenge in specifically apologetics ministry. That's right.

We're not better than anyone else. I mean, I've got a PhD behind my name, but that doesn't make me better than anyone else. It just means I've paid a price for that kind of education.

It means that I know more in some areas than many people do. But I'd say my wife has a higher IQ than I do. And she knows some things.

She does taxes for clergy. And she'll know stuff in there. I'm not a better person because I have more knowledge in certain areas.

What matters is are we holy? And that's something we must never forget. We have to continue to develop our relationship with the Lord. You brought up 1 Peter 3 15.

And that's where one should always be prepared to give a defense. And how is everyone being prepared to give a defense or an answer? How is that different from say taking up the apologetics mantle itself? Well, the way I see it, making a defense doesn't necessarily even have to be apologetics in the strict sense of providing intellectual answers or intellectual reasons. It could be someone sharing their testimony on how the Lord has changed their life.

Certainly when Peter was writing that to the other Christians, the readership, he didn't expect all of them to engage in Christian apologetics. But I see gospel languages as kind of like love languages. And if you've read Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Love Languages*, it's a fantastic book that talks about how each of us has a different love language.

And some of the problems in marriage is that because we have different love languages, spouses do. The spouse typically loves the other spouse with their own love language, but that spouse might have a different love language. And so for years, they'll never hear from the other spouse that they love them.

The other spouse is trying to tell them that, but they're not connected with the same frequency there. And so once you learn your spouse's love language, you can love them how they want to be loved. And that makes a huge difference.

And sometimes that can work with the gospel language. There are different ways in which people receive truth. Mark Middleberg talked about it in his book, *Choosing Your*

Faith.

And then that has been updated into another book. I forgot what the title is, but it's got a bunch of arrows that are pointing to a single spot. That's what's on the cover.

But talks about different ways in which we receive truth. And some people don't care about evidence. I remember talking to a physician who worked in the emergency room, and she was an agnostic.

She was seeking. And we'd provide some rational answers. I figured, well, here's a physician.

They're going to want reasons. They want evidence. I took her to my church.

And it just didn't mean anything. She wanted a high church environment. She wanted to go in where they did liturgy.

And everything was formal and stained glass. And she received truth in that kind of environment. Well, that's not my environment in which I receive truth.

Some people care more about a testimony than they do evidence. For me, I don't care about your testimony. Everybody has a testimony.

Give me the facts. So each of us can have different gospel languages, truth languages. So the thing is, someone can respond to someone with some reasonable answers of why they're a Christian.

But it doesn't mean that they need to get in and practice apologetics and become proficient at it. Through the many years that you've been in the apologetics ministry work, what have been some things that you've learned through your experience? That's a good question. I'm a hard worker.

I work really hard. I study all the time. I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed.

So I have to make up where I lack, in raw intellect, I have to make it up with hard work. I don't think there's many people who outwork me. So in terms of the research and the time I put into things.

So I've learned over time that God has directed our ministry in different ways by bringing special people into our lives at different times who would help us in different ways. It's like the Lord just brought them into our lives and there was a connection for a period of time, sometimes for years, sometimes for a shorter period, sometimes it's been for 20 years now. And they contribute to our ministry in a specific sense.

And some people, they don't want to get out and debate atheists or lecture on college campuses or go overseas and talk to folks there. But they know it's really important and

they want to be a part of it. And one thing I've learned and have always held and I still hold it firmly today is that the ministry, it's God's ministry, it is teamwork.

I'm a player on the team and even though I'm on our team, I may be the most prominent player because I'm the one out speaking, debating, researching, writing. I'm really no more important than anyone else on our team because if we didn't have people praying for us, if we didn't have people who were giving financially, if we didn't have people who cared enough to serve on our board and help direct the ministry and keep me accountable, this ministry wouldn't happen. Without funding, it's a car that can't go anywhere because we don't have fuel.

So everybody contributes and everybody shares in the joy of what happens in the end. If there's one valuable thing to learn from your experience, that seems like a very important one. Yeah, wow.

And it's so true. And it's like, I serve at the pleasure of God. He doesn't need me.

He does not need me. And so he's not doing me, well, I'm not doing him a favor by serving him in this sense because I love what I do. I'm not doing a favor, him a favor.

He's doing me a favor by allowing me to do it. And I'm no better than the person who works a non ministry related job. It's just that God has called me to this and I'm just doing what I believe God has called me to do.

But I'm no better than anyone else. We all just play our particular role in the kingdom. If you could summarize in just a few short sound bites here advice you give to prospective apologists, what would be a few of those sound bites? Well, seek and pray.

Seek God's will. Pray fast about it. I mean, take this seriously.

Ask for his will. We didn't get started in this until late for me. I didn't go full time in Christian ministry until I was 39 years old.

I didn't get into my PhD program until I was a few months shy of my 42nd birthday. That's when I started my PhD research. So I'm a late comer to this.

I'm a late bloomer in this. But it didn't matter to God. It's like I was in the wilderness for like it's like Moses in the wilderness for all those years.

But God prepares you for it. And you keep in mind that it's God's ministry. And as my wife would say, has said on several occasions, it's like God has replenished with the locust eight.

And he can take your ministry. And like he did with ours, it just springboarded at a rocket pace when he feels you're ready for it. And when it's his timing, you can't rush it.



If you really believe it's God's ministry, you have to wait for his timing and is difficult and frustrating as that can be because you want to be out there doing it right now. You have to wait on him. So in the meantime, just prepare yourself.

It's like I said to my kids when they were growing up, you know, they're talking about who they want to marry, what kind of person they want to marry. And I said, well, the kind of person you want to marry, that's the kind of person you want to be because that's the kind of person that the person you marry is going to be attracted to. I remember reading in a book as a man thinketh that you will not attract what you want.

You will attract what you are. So if you're single out there and you're thinking you want to get married to a really sharp person someday, make yourself that sharp person that that person will be attracted to. And I'd say it's the same way in Christian apologetics.

You want to get involved someday. That may be now. That may be years from now.

The best thing you can do is while you are on deck, while you are waiting to come up to the plate and hit, engage in as much batting practice as you can, you know, read as much as you can, watch debates, just saturate yourself with knowledge. And when you, some of you will get to a point where you want to specialize in some areas like I did, like several of us do. It may be history, historical Jesus.

It may be scientific evidence for a creator. It may be more the ethics. It might be philosophy proper, things like that.

And if you're drawn to specific area, then spend a lot of time focusing on that area. If you're into general apologetics and just really get yourself familiarized with all the different things, learn, you know, read on public speaking and just grow as a person. And that's what I'd say the best thing you can do is.

Thanks, Mike, for sharing that advice to folks very much like myself, those that have been in doing apologetics ministry for a couple years or maybe thinking about getting involved. I'm sure many of us have taken much of what you said here to heart. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can visit our website [RisenJesus.com](http://RisenJesus.com). There you can find authentic answers to genuine questions to the resurrection of Jesus, the historical reliability of the gospels and even a few other friends as well.

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