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S1E5 - Reflections on Debating

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Mike is one of the few Christian apologists who debates non-Christians. Why does he do it, how does he prepare, and what are his goals in debating? Be sure to subscribe to catch every episode of the podcast.

Transcript

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[MUSIC PLAYING] Hello, and welcome to the written thesis podcast with Dr. Mike Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University. And he is a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs.

Mike is the president of Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. My name is Kurt Jirris, your host. On today's episode, we're talking about Mike's reflections on debating.

Mike, how are you doing today? Oh, good, Kurt. Good. So you are one of the few members of Christian apologists who, of course, not just give public talks, but you engage in public debates as well.

So what got you interested in debating? Well, I remember it was in the 1990s. I don't remember exactly when it was maybe 1998, somewhere around there. I had heard about some debates of William Lane Craig.

And so I asked for those for Christmas. So my wife got me-- it may have been the only Christmas presents I got that year. We broke.

But-- Only Nurge asks for debates for Christmas. Well, she got me-- there were two audio cassette tapes of Bill Craig debating Frank Zindler and two audio cassette tapes of him debating John Dominic Crosson. Will the real Jesus please stand up? Was the title of the second one.

And I just remembered listening to those and just thinking, wow, that's so cool. And I learned so much. And I don't even know how many times I listened to each of those debates.

Maybe 50 times. I don't know. There's a lot.

And I just was thinking, that must be so much fun to do something like that. I never thought I'd be able to do it. Bill had two earned PhDs or two earned academic doctorates.

At that point, I didn't even have my master's degree. And I thought, I'll never be able to do that. And I had no training and debate.

I just thought it was so cool. And I was just studying apologetics more. I kept studying New Testament stuff more and more.

And then I remember that-- I think Gary Habermas, he got invited to debate Dan Barker, of the Freedom from Religion Foundation. At the University of Wisconsin in Madison and Gary at that point didn't like to debate. And so he said to me, hey Mike, I know that you're interested in debate.

And I don't want to do this. Would this be something you'd be interested in doing? And I

said, I don't know. I mean, I'd love to debate, but I don't want to get crushed.

And he said, well, Barker is an experienced debater. So he'll be a handful for you. But you probably know more about the subject of the resurrection than he.

So it'd be a good first debate for you. So I accepted it. And that's how I got involved.

Nice. So when you debated Barker, or perhaps later on, had you given thought to how much value there is and perhaps trying to change the mind of your opponent? Do you think-- do you go in thinking that you hope you change the mind of your debate opponent? Or do you go in just thinking, you know, you're not going to change anything and what they believe? Oh, I never go in thinking that I'm going to change my opponent's mind, especially there on stage, because it's his or her reputation as at stake. There's a lot of public pressure there.

You're trying to prove your point. So I don't expect that I'm going to. Of course, it'd be nice to think that maybe some of the things I say my opponent will reflect on later on and maybe reconsider their position.

But I don't expect that. My target audience would be those who are-- I want to-- it's the seekers who are there, who maybe aren't necessarily committed to either position. They're wanting to gain information to make a decision for themselves.

Those are the people I'm primarily interested in. And that may be 40% of the audience. Maybe 20% of the audience are Christians there.

And they're going to think the Christian one, no matter what. Some of them will. And then there are atheists or non-believers there who are going to think, no matter what, that their person won the debate.

And so what I want to do also for the 20% who are Christians is I want to encourage them in their faith. I want them to see that there's a strong foundation for their beliefs. It's not just a blind faith.

And then for those who are the non-believers, who are strong on the other side, I hope I can put some doubt in their minds by considering some of the things that I'm saying. To make them a little more open-minded to the Christian view, that's fantastic. But it's mainly the 40% of the people who are not committed who are seekers that I'm trying to reach at a debate.

So yeah, you don't go in thinking you're going to change your debate opponent's mind, at least not there on the debate stage. And it's mainly for those in the audience. Now, tell us who are some of the people that you've debated throughout your career? Well, after Dan Barker, let's see, the next year I debated Shabir Ali, leading Muslim debater, Richard Carrier, prominent atheist scholar.

Let's see, Stephen Patterson of the Jesus Seminar, Bart Erman several times, Elaine Pagels at Princeton, Dale Martin at Yale, who has since retired. Yousafismel over in South Africa, Abu Pinar over in South Africa, Saki Spongenberg and Hansi Vomorans in South Africa. Ali Ati at the University of California and Davis.

Matthew-- I'm trying to think of his last name, but he's a philosophy professor at Sacramento State University. Larry Shapiro, who's a philosophy professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Fun guy to be around, I like Larry.

We've had a good time together. Let's see, trying to think of the guy I debated earlier this year at Arizona, University of Arizona, and Tucson, Courtney Friesen. And he's a good guy.

We had a good time together. Most of the people I've debated, we've just had a good time together. And with most of them, we just got along-- almost all of them, we got along really well.

Now, usually-- correct me if I'm mistaken, but at least from what I've seen typically from academic debaters, they usually like go out to eat beforehand or the night before something like that. Yeah, I like to do that. I like to do that with the person I'm debating just so we get to know each other a little bit.

He can see that I'm not an idiot. I can see he's not an idiot. And we can see we're just real down to earth people.

And it makes, I think, for a better debate. It helps reminds people that the other person's a human too. Yeah.

And it causes us to treat each other a little more collegially during the debate. And I think that's the way it should be. Yeah, that's great.

So what are some of the topics that you've debated? Most of them have been on Jesus' resurrection. Did Jesus rise from the dead? I've debated barter and twerk now on the historical reliability of the gospels. Let's see, Courtney Friesen earlier this year, we debated on-- what was it? Our is Christianity verifiable and does it matter? That was kind of fun.

And a week from now, John Dominic Crossen and I are going to be in a public dialogue and we'll be discussing the question, what can be known about Jesus and how can we know it? And we'll be covering issues such as, can historians investigate miracle claims? What did Jesus think about him? Did Jesus think he was God? Do the gospels contain eyewitness testimony? Did Jesus rise from the dead? So those-- oh, let's see. Dale Martin and I discussed the topic. Did Jesus think he was divine? That was one of the top.

We also discussed the resurrection. Shabir Ali and I discussed about was Jesus divine or

prophet or both. And we discussed the resurrection.

So yeah, there have been a number of topics. A guy named Steve Yoffment. Yoffment down here at the University of Georgia and Athens, UGA, we debated the question, does God exist? Or I forgot how the question was posited, but it had to do with the existence of God.

So those are some of the topics. Very nice. So what do you do to prepare for a debate? Well, I try to read everything that person has written on the subject.

So I will-- like, for example, cross in. I already did a bunch of work years ago on what he believes, how he argues. So I'm just reviewing my notes on that.

Typically, I prepare less now than I did when I got started. When I got started, wow, I was putting in like 70 hours a week for several months before a debate that went down by the time I debated barter. I mean, it was about 50 hours a week for several months.

And now, I don't know how much it is now maybe 10, 15 hours a week for a month or so. You just get to know the information a little bit better and feel more comfortable, more prepared, because it all kind of accumulates the experience and the knowledge over time. Sure.

Your opening arguments might be the same, if not identical, in different debates that might be asking the same question. So yeah, there wouldn't be as much material to-- new material to prepare for. Yeah, so I will read everything that person has written on the subject or watch some videos online of what they've said.

I will discuss-- or I will do my opening statement. So let's say an opening statement's going to be 20 minutes long. I figured that my rate of speaking words per minute is about 140.

It might be a little faster than that. But I figure around 140 words per minute. And so you take that, you multiply that by 20, and that number comes up, and you say, OK, well, that's my opening statement.

That's the number of words that I have to come up with. And a lot of times, that's a matter of what do I delete? And you just keep deleting and deleting. And I keep practicing and rehearsing my opening statement.

I may go over it 50 times, 100 times, before I actually give it in a debate, depending on that debate. In debate, managing the clock is important. So if you're doing rebuttals and secondary bottles and closing statements, then you have to look at your time there.

A lot of times, your first rebuttal is going to be, say, 12 minutes, a secondary bottle, eight minutes. So again, you're looking at word count. You're anticipating what your

opponent is going to say in terms of your opponent's arguments and the rebuttals.

And the only way you know this is through reading their stuff. What they've written and settled in the subject. And so you formulate your answers.

And then you think, well, if I'm going to have to give five major answers, and I only have 12 minutes, and I'm going to say some opening comment and a closing comment, I may only have two minutes to address each of these. And maybe some of them will take less than two minutes. Maybe some will take more.

But I'm going to have to average maybe two minutes each. So that's the kind of stuff that you work on, time management, so that as best as possible, you can cover all the points within the allotted time. That seems like a very good skill to have to come up with two minutes of a reply on the fly.

You really have to know your material and know that you can get so many sentences in two minutes on that subject before going to the next party. That's true. And that's why you want to do it so that it's not exactly on the fly.

You already pretty much know how you're going to answer things. Nice. So are you nervous for the moment before a debate? Yeah, I'm always a little bit nervous, whether it's debating or just going up to give a lecture at a conference or a church.

I'm always a little bit nervous. And I think that's healthy. I think every public speaker is a little bit nervous prior to something like that.

It's usually the case, though, that as soon as I start speaking, that my nervousness goes away, and I'm just really enjoying myself up there. I remember my first debate was Shabir Ali. And this was my second debate, but my first of three was Shabir.

It was in Virginia Beach. It was in, I think, April of 2004. Maybe it was March of 2004.

And I can remember the afternoon of that debate. It was going to be that evening. And that afternoon, I remember walking around in my house, and I was so nervous, my chest hurt.

But as soon as the debate started, all the nervousness went away, and I was just having a blast. So you wake up the morning of a debate, and you think, hey, I'm going to debate someone tonight. What goes through your head when you wake up? Yeah, well, it's kind of like it's game day.

I mean, these are big events. It's one-on-one. And you know that there are going to be a lot of people there.

You know that it's going to be video recorded, and posted online, and thousands of people are going to be watching it over the years to come. I had a debate with Matt Dilla

Honey last year. And I forgot, at last I looked at that, it had, I don't know, over 160,000 views on my YouTube channel, and nearly 100,000 on his.

And that was like 18, 19 months ago. And my one with Bart Erman a little bit earlier this year, I think that's got over 100,000 views, or right at about 100,000 views on my YouTube channel alone. So you know a lot of people are going to watch it.

And so yeah, it's like this is the big thing. This is the heavyweight championship fight. This is the Super Bowl.

You just feel kind of excited. You feel nervous. Did I prepare enough? And usually I never feel like I've prepared enough.

It's like I'm close, but I'm always thinking, boy, I wish I just had one more week. So that's what's kind of going through my head. But I try not to spend a whole lot of time preparing for the debate because you go over your answers.

I go over my answer so often in my opening statements so often that the mind can just get cluttered. So I want to go in a little bit fresh. So I'm not doing a whole lot of review of the day of the debate.

I may not do any. Hmm. That's interesting.

I tend to be the procrastinator and debates are something you could not procrastinate on. No, no, you cannot procrastinate on a debate. Yeah, that's right.

Of all the debates you've done, which one has been your favorite? Oh, I'd have to say that's probably my 2011 debate with Yusuf Ismail in South Africa when we debated on what was Jesus' first century fate. And it was a very spirited debate. Yusuf is a really good orator.

He's the best Muslim debater they have over in South Africa. And so we had a very spirited debate. But I really liked the way I just followed my strategy in that.

And I felt like I answered all of his objections and continued to press the legitimacy of the arguments I had. So if there was a debate that I said it was like a picture perfect debate in terms of strategy and following that strategy as well as its entertainment value, I'd say it's that debate with Yusuf Ismail. Probably my second favorite debate would be the one I had earlier this year with Bart Erman on the historical reliability of the Gospels.

That was a fun debate. In fact, Jonathan Mann, the Rashi O'Christie director who put it on, said he thought it was the best debate he's ever seen. And I just really liked the way it went.

It wasn't a picture perfect debate. And I think content-wise, the written debate that Erman and I had the prior year or two years before that, I think it was a better debate in

terms of the content. But this was just a fun debate, I think, to watch and one to participate in a beautiful auditorium.

And the videography on it, the film crew just did a great job of recording it. Very nice. Now let's consider the other side of the spectrum.

So you just told me some of your favorite debates. Are there any debates with which you were not pleased? Yeah, I'd have to say that would be a debate I had back in-- I don't remember what year it was, maybe 2012, somewhere around there with atheist philosophy professor Greg Cavan. And I guess I just got frustrated during the debate.

It really hasn't happened before I got frustrated in the debate. But it's kind of like, well, you don't understand what I'm saying, he would say. And I'm thinking, no, I understand.

I just think it's a lousy argument. And I guess I just got frustrated. And when it came to, well, do you have anything else to say, Mike, in your closing statement, it's like, nope, I've said everything I needed to.

And this just isn't going anywhere. So afterward, I asked some folks, they came up, people would normally do, and just say, hey, I enjoyed the debate or something, and just to talk to you. And I said, hey, let me ask you a question.

And I remember a group of Christians. I don't know, maybe three or four Christians came up. And one guy who was an agnostic, he came up as well.

And so all of us were talking together. And I said, you know what? I just don't think this was a really good debate. And I feel like I didn't do well.

Like I just was frustrated, got a little upset, and maybe showed it. And they said, yeah, yeah, we could tell you were frustrated. But actually, we felt-- we were really glad about that because we were feeling the same way.

And the agnostics said the same thing. And I said, so who do you think won the debate? And all of them included in the agnostics said, oh, you clearly won. And then later on, I got an email from a woman who said she brought her atheist son along.

And even though I didn't convince him, he thought that I won the debate. So she was thanking me. Anyway, I felt good hearing that kind of feedback.

But that's the one I am least pleased with. I just didn't like the way that debate went. And I think Greg's a good guy, Greg Kevin.

I think he's a good guy. A couple months after that debate, we got together for lunch. I was back out in California.

And we got together for lunch and just had a-- just as friends and had a good time

together and talked about the debate a little bit. And I would consider him to be a warm acquaintance. It's just I got a little frustrated in the debate.

So I didn't care for it. Any suggestions to those listeners who might have an interest in doing debates at some point in their life? Well, sure. Debates aren't for everyone.

So if a person doesn't want to do debates, like if they're interested in Christian apologetics, they're interested in defending the Christian faith with others, but they don't want to engage in debates because they're just too intimidated by it, that's not a problem. They shouldn't feel bad about that. I would just say we all have different personalities.

We all have different giftings. My gifting isn't theirs. Their gifting isn't mine.

And it takes a temperament, a special personality, a certain kind of personality, I should say, to enjoy debate. So if they don't want to debate, that's perfectly fine. For those who do, you have to be willing to pay the price.

And that means a lot of work. It means spending a lot of time in research. And so if you're working a full-time job, you're going to need months to prepare, depending on who you're taking on.

If you're taking on a big name-- so for example, let's just say you haven't gone to grad school and you want to debate on the resurrection with Barterman. And you have no formal training in the stuff. I'd say, please don't do that.

You need a lot of time to educate yourself. Know your topic really well. Just don't get into this because you think it's going to be fun.

There's a lot on the line with this. If you do poorly, you may shake the faith of Christians. You may encourage skeptics in their non-belief.

So you've got to spend the time studying. And that means a lot of time and a lot of work for preparation. If you're willing to do that, then we need good debaters out there.

Learn how to do public speaking. There's what's called the score conference. By put on by Ken Davis, you can go online, score.

I think it's score. or scoreconference.tv. But just type in score conference, do a search, and it will come up. That's a public speaking bootcamp.

And it's extraordinary. It's expensive. But it's worth every dime if you're going to be out there doing public speaking.

And it will help you with debate as well. So that's what I would encourage you. Be willing to spend the time-- if you're not willing to spend the time, don't get involved in debates.

But it's a lot of fun. And we need good debaters out there. That's a good warning, good advice as well.

Mike, thank you for sharing your reflections on debates. If you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, please visit RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the gospels. You can check out free resources like ebooks, watch videos such as debates or lectures, or simply read some articles.

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