



Interview with Kristopher Bate, Director of Thinking Faith for Intermission Magazine

First things first, tell us who you are, and what you do.

My name is Kristopher Bate, and I am Director of Thinking Faith Ministries. Our key aims are to equip believers with a firm foundation of the faith we profess, defend the Gospel in the public square, and engage in the area of the arts. In a nutshell we help people to understand what Christians believe about Jesus, why we believe what we believe about Jesus, why it makes sense to believe what we believe, and why they should also consider believing in Jesus.

What prompted you to start Thinking Faith Ministries?

I became a follower of Jesus at age 25. I had no church background so when I came into the church I had lots of questions that I wasn't finding answers for in the church. I found that concerning and set about finding the answers I was looking for and sharing them with others. As well as this the church is an entire culture of its own with a language, rituals, and behaviours that I didn't understand so I set about trying to make sense of what I encountered. I was also doing a degree in Theology at that time and was being exposed to a range of views that I needed to address as a part of the course. This forced me to engage with these views and formulate a reasonable response. Apparently (I had no idea at the time) what I was doing was called apologetics. This has remained a passion for me and I believe apologetics should undergird our discipleship. Thinking Faith exists to serve these aims.

Why is basic training in apologetics important for kiwi Christians in today's society?

Apologetics is a double edged sword. On one hand it enables us to defend our faith against the criticisms and challenges we encounter in the culture, as well as hopefully raising pointed questions for the culture, forcing them to consider the validity of their own presuppositions. However, on the other hand, apologetics forces the believer to come face to face with a comprehensive Christian worldview, which in turn should challenge believers to live out more consistently what it is that our faith teaches. Apologetics is a defence of faith and a challenge to the world, but it should also be a call to radical discipleship, reformation, and revival. I believe that the more we as believers understand the foundations of our faith and see how strong those foundations are, the more willing and able we will be to entrust our lives to those foundations knowing that they truly can bare the weight of our lives. Discipleship undergirded by apologetics should breed, stronger, more passionate, more resilient and committed followers of Jesus.

The arts are a big part of your ministry, why is their role so important in communicating a thinking faith?

The culture we live in is image saturated. For the first time since Babel the world is speaking one language and it is visual not verbal. We are constantly bombarded with images through the arts and the media and these images convey and communicate ideas. This means that the arts significantly shapes the way our culture thinks. If we are going to reach the people of our culture we must engage in the arenas where their worldviews are being formed. The arts also give us an opportunity to look at the Christian faith in a new, fresh way, helping both believers and everyone else to see the teaching of Christ as if for the first time. We can do this with the arts because good art can slip around the objections a written or verbal argument might raise, taking the idea straight to the heart where it can take root and continue to sprout thoughts and ideas long after the viewing is over. The challenge is to free people from the tyranny of the same old thing by presenting Christian ideas in a new way without losing touch with the historical orthodox faith we have received from our forebears.

What are the big issues/ideas/philosophies facing kiwi Christians, and how should we be engaging with them?

Gosh, this is a massive question, one that deserves an entire thesis rather than a few words in a brief interview. One of the major challenges we are facing in our time revolves around the very nature of truth. To give a brief outline of the issue, classical philosophy has always been grounded in what's known as antithetical, or either/or logic, which is a system of logic believing that whatever is true must also correspond to reality.

Christian faith is grounded in either/or logic and makes no sense apart from it, because at the most basic level either God exists or He does not, either God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth or He did not, either Jesus died for our sins or He did not, either He rose from the dead or He did not, He is either reigning in heaven with all power and authority or He is not, and He will either return to judge the living and the dead or He will not. Also, the claims of Christian faith are built upon an appeal to what actually happened in space time history and describe the nature of reality as it truly is.

The either/or system of logic starts from the premise that there is such a thing as truth, truth which is absolute and, while not knowable exhaustively, that truth can be known to a high degree of certainty. When you think in terms of either/or logic very clear categories emerge. Either something corresponds to reality and is therefore true or it does not and is therefore false. So you get true/false, right/wrong categories which when extended out into the area of ethics and morality lead to absolutes in these areas also.

However, the culture we now live in is no longer grounded in either/or logic but in the both/and. In the both/and it's not either this or that, it's both this and that. My idea isn't true and yours false, both ideas are true to each of us; all ideas are equally valid. In the both/and system there is no such thing as absolute truth, there are simply many truths, everyone has their own personal truth.

All this underpins what I believe to be the most challenging question facing all Christians in the western world, how do we share the Gospel, which claims to be absolutely true, in a culture that doesn't believe in truth as a category. I think all of the biggest challenges we face today stem from this central issue and that plays out in the form of external challenges as well as internal challenges.

In terms of the external challenges, the very foundational claims of the Christian faith cut so completely against the grain of culture that what we believe at its core is an affront to the people of the culture. This usually comes in the form of being labelled (demonised) as being intolerant, arrogant, controlling, and oppressive.

Our response to this challenge must be two pronged if it is to be faithful to the call of Christ. Firstly I would point to the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5;

"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ"

Paul is talking about a spiritual warfare that is raging, a war in which we have been given divine weapons to destroy strongholds. What are these spiritual strongholds; arguments and lofty opinions raised against the knowledge of God. The spiritual battle is a battle for the mind, and we have been commanded to take every thought captive for Christ. This means that we need to engage in the intellectual debate using the spiritual weapon granted to us, a sanctified mind. We must study, think, and reason through what we believe and why, then engage with the ideas of the world.

So many see this as unspiritual but the reality is that many people use intellectual argument as the barricade around the heart that prevents us from getting to the real reason they are rejecting Christ. Our job is to clear away some of these barricades exposing the gates of the heart that the King of Glory might ride in.

The second response comes from 1 Peter 3:15;

"But first set apart Christ in your hearts, and always be prepared to give an answer to anyone that asks you for the reason for the hope that you have, but do so with gentleness and respect"

Unless we live out consistently what we preach we will always be branded as hypocrites. There is no greater insult to God than to have His children known by the name of hypocrite rather than by the name of His Son. We must live for Christ as faithful witnesses; this is the strongest most compelling apologetic we can give.

In terms of the internal challenges, the question of how we communicate the Gospel in the current cultural climate has led some to conclude that we should make the faith more palatable to the culture. This usually takes the form of watering down or removing completely the exclusive claims of Christ and glossing over the severity of the issue of the truth. Often this comes under the guise of being missional or making Christianity relevant to the culture, after all, the culture is more tolerant than ever before, shouldn't we also be more tolerant if we are going to reach them with Christ? I don't believe we need to make Christianity relevant to the culture, it is already relevant, we just need to demonstrate how it is relevant.

To face the internal challenges of our day I would look to Jude 1:3-4;

"Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."

Jude points to false teachers who have entered into the Church and who are leading others astray. We must also contend for the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints. Come to understand what it is we believe and why to ensure that we are not tossed to and fro on the winds of doctrines devised by those who would deconstruct and reconstruct the Gospel according to their own desires. There are many popular teachers and institutions whose teachings are compelling and appealing but are not grounded in Christian truth. Unless we know therefore and understand what the Bible teaches we can expect to be swept away on the wave of the popular.