

‘Geeking Out’ the Bible for the Next Generation

“This is going to be a very long conversation.”

The Bible Project’s latest podcast series starts with those words by Jon Collins, followed quickly by Dr. Tim Mackie’s wry chuckling. For the Bible Project to preemptively call something a long conversation is saying something indeed, seeing as previous series on the podcast have lasted six to 20 hours. Collins flips through the papers in his hands, sounding both amused and preemptively tired.

“When we did the God conversation—which turned into a 20-episode podcast—it was about 40 pages of notes,” Collins says. “And here, in my hand, are 41 pages of notes on the Sabbath.”

Mackie, the author of the short novel in Collins’ hands, chimes in excitedly: “I started reading and writing and collecting notes a couple of months ago. ... I’ve learned so much as I’ve been preparing for this conversation.”

“Our office whiteboards are just filled with your Beautiful Mind notes all over the place,” Collins says.

“Pretty much I’ve just been living and breathing, reading and rereading the Torah over and over again. I’ve just been noticing and collecting all these observations,” Mackie says, and then begins describing the significance of the number seven and its relation to Sabbath. But this theology chat between two friends is not a dry discussion held in the back room of a seminary, but rather the central focus of one of the most popular Christian podcasts and YouTube series on the planet.

The Bible Project, which debuted in May 2014, features Mackie and Collins, two friends passionate about presenting the Bible

as a unified story using beautiful art. Along with Mike McDonald—The Bible Project’s director of strategic relationships—they run the Bible Project as basically a small animation studio, entirely funded by patrons’ donations. Those donations give them the ability to share everything they produce free of charge.

They produce quite a lot. To date, the Bible Project has created 140 videos in English, with plans to continue releasing 18-20 new videos every year for the foreseeable future. More than 700 videos have been translated into 21 different languages, with localization teams on the ground worldwide. The Bible Project also has a podcast series, basically a behind-the-scenes peek at the conversations Mackie and Collins have while creating the videos’ content. (Mackie often acts as the scholar, breaking down complex Greek and Hebrew concepts, while Collins asks questions and organizes Mackie’s ideas in structures and metaphors a layman can digest.) The podcast gets more than 1 million downloads per month. This year, the organization will launch new projects, including seminary-level classes you can attend from home (at no cost) and partnerships with Cru, Compassion International, Young Life and Alpha USA. Mackie even has ideas for expanding into the virtual reality space.

No one involved in the Bible Project imagined it would grow so large. In a retrospective video posted Dec. 2, Mackie and Collins explain that the organization started with a simple idea.

“When we started the Bible Project five years ago, we actually didn’t have a grand vision of what it could become,” Mackie says. “We had an idea that the Bible’s hard to understand—at least for us and a lot of other people—so let’s make it easier to understand using cartoons we’ll put up on the internet.”

“Let’s make these really beautiful [and] explain the Bible really well so they are of a lot of value,” Collins says.

“But we want to give them away for free to everybody,” Mackie says.

“So that meant we thought it would just be a side gig, and we would use freelancers as money came in,” Collins says. “We’d make videos slowly. But we had no idea how supportive and enthusiastic [viewers] would be about this project.”

Meet the Team

The team’s passion to share the Word of God around the world stems from its leaders’ own life-changing encounters with the Bible. McDonald was raised Bahai but became a believer in Jesus Christ at 19 after a missionary to Turkey gave him a Bible.

“I read through Matthew that night,” McDonald says. “I didn’t have language for it at that point, but that was when I decided, ‘This is the guy that I’m going to follow.’ So for me, even my coming to faith was through the Scriptures. It wasn’t through somebody telling stories or going to church on Sunday or even hearing it through an evangelist. It was sitting down with the Gospel of Matthew, reading it cover to cover in four hours, and going, ‘Wow, Jesus is Lord. That is huge. I think this is obviously what’s going to shape and change my life.’”

Mackie grew up in Portland, Oregon, but always resented being taken to church by his parents. He was more interested in the free-spirited skateboarding lifestyle and saw the church as an embodiment of “the man” he was rebelling against. But that changed when he discovered a local ministry, SkateChurch, which sponsored and ran a local skate park. (The organization has been reaching Portland-area skateboarders for Christ for more than 30 years.) Every week, he’d come to skate and hear a short message about Jesus. Eventually the gospel worked its way into his heart, and by age 20, he was following Jesus. He started attending the nearby Multnomah Bible College.

"I had a couple friends [who] had all gone to SkateChurch," Mackie explained during a 2018 podcast with Preston Sprinkle. "We all became Christians around the same time, started following Jesus, and so we signed up for classes together. A number of us went overseas within a year. We went and spent a summer in the jungle with [Wycliffe] Bible Translators—you know, like super, super intense. I came back and was like, 'I want to follow Jesus. I want to do whatever.' So I signed up for Greek, naturally. ... I became a Bible nerd. I got hooked."

Mackie got his Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Jewish studies at the University of Wisconsin, only to realize he had little interest in becoming a university professor. He started teaching classes on biblical theology at Blackhawk Church in Middleton, Wisconsin. When he moved back to Portland, he got a job teaching part-time at Western Seminary and also served as teaching pastor at Door of Hope Church. He soon reconnected with Collins—a friend from his time at Multnomah—who had since started two digital communication companies that specialized in creating animated explainer videos for organizations like Google, P&G and Nike.

As Mackie explains it to Sprinkle, Collins was the first one to pitch the Bible Project: "[John] pitched the idea to me of, 'Hey, I make these videos. You're a Bible nerd. We're friends. Let's make some videos and see what happens.'" So it was really truly like just kind of a harebrained idea. We spent a year and a half—just [as] a side project—making the first two videos."

The rest is history. When the Bible Project began expanding and going global, Mackie and Collins reached out to McDonald—who attended church with Collins at Imago Dei Community. McDonald had run a nonprofit called Hear the Cry focused on international justice and compassion work for 10 years and, in his words, "was ready to hand that off ... and do the next season." He was excited to use his international experience to help the Bible Project go worldwide.

The Bible Project has moved twice—from a basement to the back office of a web development shop to its current base of operations, a shared office with Imago Dei Community. In 2016, Collins left his other businesses to work full-time on the Bible Project. Today McDonald describes the operation as a combination between a pastoral ministry and an animation studio.

“John ran two major, large studios here in Portland doing explainer videos,” McDonald says. “... He was able to bring [those systems] with him. Having a staff of 70-80 people at some of those agencies, he learned in the for-profit model how to run a business, and then was able to bring that over, which was very helpful when it comes to the animators and illustrators and everything else. And then Tim was a pastor and a teacher. So you’ve got this whole pastoral feel to the office as well.”

In the retrospective video, Collins says all of this growth has only been made possible by supporters: “We keep growing because we’re doing more than just making videos. We believe the Bible is brilliant, literary genius, and [using] visuals and animation, you can bring that to life in new ways.”

Theology in Action

The idea of the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus is important to the team at the Bible Project, because they fear so many people today lack basic biblical literacy.

“I think we are quickly reaching ... a post-Bible Christianity,” McDonald says. “We’ve got people who say, ‘I’m a Christian. I go to church on Sunday. But I don’t read my Bible, and I don’t need to read the Bible, because it’s an old, archaic book that doesn’t really meet me where I’m at right now.’ Whether people say that out loud, they’re thinking it. They’re feeling it. And [they demonstrate it] in how much they actually read the Bible.”

Even for Christians, the Bible can be difficult to parse and understand by oneself. In a video interview with Crossroads Church's Chuck Mingo, Collins says his experience in Bible college was disorienting: "The deeper I would go, the more confused I would get." One question would become five. Context would be missing. Mackie compares the experience of reading the Bible without proper context to "watching just the third movie of a trilogy—it would make no sense."

"It's an entire narrative from Genesis to Revelation," McDonald says. "Even though it's done by a ton of different authors, it's one big story, and we need to understand the context if we want to actually read, learn and dive in. ... To me, we can't understand Jesus unless we understand Genesis. We can't understand the New Jerusalem if we don't understand the original intent from the Garden [of Eden]. That's really important for daily life and what it means to be a community and to be the church."

A big part of the creative process for the Bible Project is finding out the best way to succinctly and clearly communicate complicated Hebrew teachings in a way that makes sense to viewers today.

"The Bible is meant to shape how I live and think and communicate the reality of God's presence and love to me," Mackie tells Mingo. "But the way ancient Jewish literature does those things is really different than how modern [literature] communicates. ... It's literally a cross-cultural experience to open the pages of the Bible. The point isn't to read the Bible to get an answer for my life today. The Bible actually is designed to not work that way most of the time. What it's designed to do is to invite you into a teaching or a story, and then get you to think about it for weeks and go back and reread it a year later."

The Bible Project has spread far beyond the English-speaking Western world, with views in almost every country on the

planet. The videos have been localized into over 20 languages—including Spanish, French, Hindi, Mandarin and many more—in a process that McDonald says goes beyond translation. After all, if the point of the original Bible Project videos was to explain ancient Hebrew concepts in a way that resonates with American viewers, then different tactics or metaphors or examples may be needed for other cultural contexts.

“We definitely call it localization, not translation, for a purpose,” McDonald says. “We really are localizing these videos—meaning that we’re working with language advisers and theology advisers from that area. ... If Tim’s talking about skateboarding in Portland, I mean, that might not make sense in some of these places. So we really rely pretty heavily on an incredible local team that we’re working very closely with. And then it goes off to a bunch of people to view and [proof]. It’s a big process for sure. It’s definitely not just kind of jumping on Google Translate and hoping we get it done. There’s usually an army of people in each of these countries that are working full-time on getting these videos done.”

But the secret ingredient of the Bible Project videos is pairing those deep theological ideas with beautiful art and clear designs that visually demonstrate the truths being taught.

“The first few videos we did were in the explainer video style with art,” McDonald says. “The feedback that we got was, ‘It’s beautiful. I feel like I’ve just learned more in five minutes than I learned in a year in seminary. I can understand it. I can retain it. I can remember it. I was attracted to it. I stayed focused while watching it.’”

Freely Given

McDonald says he is particularly passionate about the Bible Project’s localization work because he knows the need firsthand. He encountered the lack of proper biblical

resources frequently during his time working at Hear the Cry.

“We worked with a lot of pastors in those countries, and they were just so under-resourced—not just from a financial standpoint, but actually more from resourcing around the Bible,” McDonald says. “Many of these people would come to faith and just go plant a church the next year. They had what they had, and they used what they had, but to be able to provide free good resources that could actually equip the church globally was very important to me.”

McDonald says the Bible Project’s most popular secondary language is Spanish, though he notes the French videos too have a larger reach than many might expect. He says creating these videos provides resources for other ministries and organizations like Compassion International that work in Central and South American countries. It’s not about expanding the Bible Project’s reach; it’s about equipping staff and pastors and organizations with the tools they need to disciple the next generation.

To that end, the Bible Project makes a point of giving away all of its resources. There’s no special “premium” tier of extra goods or licensing fees on videos. The ministry doesn’t even enable advertisements on its YouTube videos. McDonald, Mackie and Collins all acknowledge in various interviews that they are blessed to have that ability to simply make resources for the kingdom, without having to worry about profitability, thanks to a generous donor network. The Bible Project is 100% crowdfunded, and McDonald estimates the average donation is about \$20 per month.

“I think most ministries would love to give their stuff away to more people so that more people could experience the gospel in Jesus and the generosity of the church,” McDonald says. “I think that would be the hope for most. It’s just hard to do. ... We are very thankful for the incredible crowd that’s been with us, whether it’s been for the whole five years or people who

are joining literally this week, who support and allow us to make more videos. It's only because of that generosity that has allowed us to give them away for free. And I hope that that continues, because that is our heart."

Even so, resources are not unlimited. McDonald says the Bible Project's hardest decisions often involve turning down new projects that would distract from their core mission or compromise the quality of their videos.

"We don't run too fast," McDonald says. "We realize we create our own deadlines. You know, if we hired 15 more animators, we could make twice as many videos. But the bottleneck is scriptwriting with John and Tim. Then all of a sudden, quality of life completely changes, and then we just might burn out in the next two or three years.

"So I feel like we've set a pretty good pace. ... Honestly, there are some times where [a donor] might say, 'I've got a check that I'd love to write to make more videos.' We just say, 'No, we don't want to do that. We don't [want to] be driven by that.' ... It's about knowing what we're saying yes to, so we can know what to say no to. Because there are a lot of really good ideas and ministry opportunities and thoughts that I think are really good things, but they would potentially take us off track from our mission."

In an era where content is king and media companies try to create as much output as possible, McDonald believes audiences have responded to the Bible Project's slower-paced release schedule of a few high-quality videos.

"I think part of the reason we've grown fast is that we started slow, in the sense that we don't rush the videos," McDonald says. "Could we make a video every single week? We could. But it takes us three to six months to make one of these videos. We have five teams that are each working on a different video, so that we can produce them every three

weeks, but they take three to six months to make. That level of dedication and quality, I think, is represented on why so many people watch them on YouTube and why the completion rate of the videos is way higher than most videos. People watch the entire video. They don't cut out at minute one or two."

In five years, God has already taken the Bible Project from creation to a massive platform—and the leadership team is hopeful for what God has in store for the next five. (They already have four years of projects mapped out.) If nothing else, they're excited for the chance to continue geeking out about the Bible and inviting others to do the same.

"We hear stories from people who are now encountering Jesus and reading the Bible and how much they're changing," Collins tells Mingo. "You just can kind of see this ripple effect—that's been going on for thousands of years—of this countercultural movement of people deciding they're going to live a different narrative."

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