

# TSCP 272 Bombs, Books, Building Back with Christopher Hays

*This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.*

## **Christoper Hays**

My name is Christopher Hays, and I am the president of Scholar Leaders.

## **David Capes**

Dr. Christopher Hays, Christopher, good to see you. Welcome back to the *Stone Chapel Podcast*. You were here a while back, and we're going to put a link to that episode in our show notes, talking about Scholar Leaders, because you had just become the president of Scholar Leaders.

## **Christoper Hays**

My pleasure David. It was pretty early in my tenure when we spoke about it.

## **David Capes**

A lot has happened with the Ukraine and Russian war, and you've been very much involved in that. We're going to hear some things about that, and some stories about people. But let's start with Scholar Leaders first. For those who didn't hear the first podcast. Tell us a little bit about what Scholar Leaders is, what the mission is.

## **Christoper Hays**

In more technical terms, we'd say that we exist to cultivate theological leaders from the majority world. Think Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, for lifetimes of impact in the church and on society. That's the glossy brochure version of it. In layman's terms, man, we really want to be the very best friend that a majority world Christian leader could possibly have, so that they can have all the impact that they think God has called them to have in the church in the world.

Now we do that in a bunch of different ways. We generally start a relationship with a promising Christian theological leader with a doctoral scholarship. But then we try to find ways to track with people over the course of their career, and that might look a lot of different ways. Sometimes it would be about us working with a seminary president on their institutional strategy and financial sustainability. Sometimes it's helping provide the things that their institution needs to thrive. For example, we have a program called Theological Book Network, where we send bespoke library collections around the world. And sometimes it means working with these sorts of leaders to go after the big, hairy problems that are too complicated for anyone's school or scholar to go after on their own. Yet those are problems that are of existential importance to the church and that require the unique gifting of a theological leader.

So we have a lot of different things that we do together, but it's all driven by this conviction that the theological leader has a unique role to play in the body of Christ. One because you have this amazing capacity for multiplying impact. Like we all understand that the gospel is going to be most effectively spread across cultures by people from that culture and with a theological leader from the majority world. They train people within their own cultural context to be pastors and evangelists. But beyond that, these are the sorts of people who are uniquely capable of solving the kinds of problems and challenges in the majority world that a Western theologian like you or me wouldn't know how to go after.

And then the third reason that they are so exciting to us and feel so missionally important to us is because when you build capacity in a global theological leader, what you ultimately end up doing is releasing this cascade of local human and financial resources in that context that will continue to overflow far beyond the initial investment that scholar leaders might make with a scholarship in that place. So that's our jam. We exist to be the best friend of the global theological leader.

### **David Capes**

I like that way of describing it. How long has it been around?

### **Christopher Hays**

Scholar Leaders was founded in 1983 inspired by John Stott's vision, but for 30 years it was really just a mom and pop scholarship organization. It's only really been in the last 12 years, a little bit more, that we've been doing this more complicated work of tracking with people after their PhD.

### **David Capes**

You're talking about longevity. You're in it not just for the sprint. You're in it for the marathon. You describe several things that you guys are involved in, and one of the places that you've been involved has been in the Ukraine. Tell us a little bit about what you've seen there for leaders who are in that part of the world.

### **Christopher Hays**

Day one of my job was the day the Russian tanks went across the border on February 24, 2022. This is a place where our staff was actually on the ground. This is a place that we had scholarships with a number of really exceptional leaders. Many of whom were at the heads of seminaries that were responding to the war. This is a place where my colleagues, Evan Hunter and Taras Dyatlik, were working with Eastern European seminary presidents on their financial sustainability and missional strategy when the war started.

So we had a very fast come to Jesus moment, asking, what's it look like for us to be faithful to the people that we've been investing in over the years, in Ukraine that we love, who are suddenly having their campuses invaded and their homes are suddenly the sites of genocide. What's it look like for us to be their friend? And we said, well, it probably means that we asked them what they want to do. So we did. And that set off this extraordinary container of missional actions that they led and we supported that enabled them to have the sort of gospel impact in their context that I don't think any of us had dreamed would be possible in a place where evangelicals were only 2% of the population.

**David Capes**

It seems like one impulse might be just to get out.

**Christopher Hays**

Oh yes! We might have said, this isn't what we do. We're a scholarship organization. Come back to us when the war is over and we'll see what happens. That would have been the mission aligned thing to do. We don't want mission drift, right? But we felt like, no, we're going to be partner driven. We're going to we're going to trust them. We're going to follow their lead.

So the first thing they asked us to do was to help fund refugee work. And sure enough, we said yes, and they did this incredible ministry of going to the front lines and pulling people out in little cars, two to three people at a time. And those numbers mounted up into the thousands of people who got out. Then they would bring them back to their seminary campuses. They would give them sometimes short, sometimes long-term housing. They ended up providing food assistance to like, 400,000 people just in the first year of the war. They passed out Bibles. They shared the gospel.

It was this amazing ministry that they very quickly then parlayed into asking the next question about, what's it mean to train ministers to respond to this new situation of the war? So they began to rebuild their own seminary campuses because a number of their campuses had been destroyed or damaged. I think of Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary just outside of Bucha. Their campus got hit by six missiles before the war started. They had 250-300 students on campus. Today, they have 600 students on campus because they have so effectively rallied, rebuilt the campus, changed their programs and welcome new people in because they know that Ukraine is in an amount of deep spiritual need, and this is a chance for the gospel to go forward.

Because of the faithful work that they did in responding to people's needs as refugees, the pastors that they train now have a unique credibility that they didn't have before the war. So it's been a really important learning opportunity for us about the merit of allowing the theological leaders in our fellowship to tell us what it looks like to support them in their callings. And it's worked.

**David Capes**

You didn't say to them, why don't you guys get out and we'll just come back later. You just said, what's the thing you need now? And how can we come along and help you? That's an amazing response. I mean, it's the right response given what has happened, and when you see the positive growth that has happened. What's been the disposition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to these kinds of works.

**Christopher Hays**

There are two Orthodox Churches currently in Ukraine. In 2019 there was a shift that happened in the Orthodox Church, which had previously been under the Russian Orthodox Church, what's called the Moscow Patriarchate, and a new Orthodox Church was made autocephalous. It means that they had their own primate, their own head. So that Orthodox Church of Ukraine has rapidly become the dominant form of Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine. There is now a very small minority of Orthodox churches that remain under the Moscow Patriarchate. Those churches that are now autocephalous have had a number of priests who have done really impressive work staying behind to pastor people.

Much like a number of Protestant pastors have done, and there has been a warming that's happened between the Orthodox and the Protestants. Because of their experiences of being faithful in this war, whereas Protestants, before the war started, were so small that they were seen as a sect.

**David Capes**

But now it sounds like they're viewed as real partners because of their work in preserving Ukraine.

**Christopher Hays**

I think that's right.

**David Capes**

There's a story that you began telling me over lunch about this library that was destroyed. In what city is this located?

**Christopher Hays**

Yew. This is the story of Tavriski Christian Institute in the city of Kherson. And for those who have followed the maps of Ukraine, Kherson is on the southern tip of the country. It was right across that river that the Russians came on the first day of the war for the invasion. So Tavriski Christian Institute had a beautiful campus on that river, which today is the front lines between the Russian trenches and the Ukrainian forces.

The second day of the war, their campus was overrun by the Russians and my friend, Valentin Sini, who is a scholar leader, one of the people that we supported for his doctorate, with whom we had worked on his executive strategy and financial sustainability. Valentin led his campus community across the country to the west, to a place called Ivano-Frankivsk. While he was on the road, he was already working with Taras Dyatlik and a number of our other seminary president friends in Ukraine to begin to put into place this refugee work that I've just referred to beforehand,

When he got to Ivano-Frankivsk with his busted up seminary vans, the first thing that he did was to buy another van and to start running humanitarian aid back and forth between Kherson and the West. Over the course of the ensuing months, a couple things happened. The Russians occupied his campus. They turned his dormitories into barracks. They defiled his office. They ended up using his campus as a crematorium. Then when the Ukrainians came and retook control of the campus, they destroyed the library. They burned all the books, because those are Western propaganda. It was one of the best theological evangelical libraries in Ukraine. And they planted land mines in the campus before retreating.

**David Capes**

Land mines. Lovely.

**Christopher Hays**

So they cannot go back, even today. It's on the river. It's in the line of sight for Russian snipers and artillery.

**Daivid Capes**

Would they shoot a seminary student?

**Christoper Hays**

Absolutely! Thereafter, when it became clear that they could not go back to Kherson, they moved their seminary community to Kiev. They found a building that was rented to them that they are now in the process of purchasing. And they began to ask, what does it look like to restart residential theological education. Because if you're going to do training for pastors in a country where, literally, the majority of the population is traumatized, you need to be a healing community. And that's just going to be much better if you do it in person than online.

So what's the first thing you have to have if you're going to resume residential education? What's the thing you've got to have before anything else? I mean, you can use anything as a desk. You can sit anywhere. You can do courses. You can do classes on the floor or under a tree or whatever. But you've got to have books. We jump forward to February of 2024, I'm sitting with Evan Hunter in Valentine's new office in Kiev, and we have, just a week beforehand, inked the deal for us to acquire a theological book network. And Valentin shares with us that they have this need for this library. In fact, if they don't have books, they are going to lose their accreditation with the government. And there is a library available at Lincoln Christian University in Illinois.

**David Capes**

That's right. I remember reading about that.

**Christoper Hays**

It is an amazing opportunity. They were willing to give their books away. But how do you get books from Springfield, Illinois to a war zone? And we said, well, we've got a guy!

**David Capes**

I know a guy!.

**Christoper Hays**

We do! We got the team of theological book network up and running. Scott Watson heads down to Springfield, Illinois. He leads a team there to pack up all the books to ship, to get them up to Grand Rapids so that we can package everything for shipping. We put some of our best postgraduate collections from our own warehouse into it, and our guy, Rollin Timmerman, who has been running logistics for TBN for 19 years all over the world. He is able to by hook and crook and all sorts of extraordinary imaginations involving trucks and ships and cranes. He is ultimately able to get this amazing collection, over 20,000 books into Kiev. I was there in August for the ribbon cutting ceremony, and they have a library again.

**David Capes**

They have a library. How beautiful. It's a pretty cool thing. So what are they doing for residences at this point? Do they have that sorted out?

### **Christoper Hays**

They have a building for lodging there, so students are living on the campus together, where they're having courses. They've got to cook on campus, and they're rebuilding lives and retraining people for ministry.

### **David Capes**

Doing theology in wartime. That's something that's near and dear to your heart.

### **Christoper Hays**

Well, yes, it is. You were kind enough to have me on this podcast before, as we talked about the book that I did *8 Million Exiles*, responding to the crisis of forced displacement and civil war in Colombia. That meant that when Valentin was sharing with me about his desire to do a theology around wartime issues in Ukraine, and he asked me to join him, I was delighted to do so. So Valentine and I, along with Evelyn Reynolds, who's one of SL vice presidents, have just finished drafting a book called *Theology in Wartime: Ukrainian Dilemmas*, all about the sorts of issues that are forced upon Christian leaders by the experience of war.

And Valentin has also published a wonderful memoir his first year in the war. The book is called *Serving God Under Siege*. It's just come out, published by Eerdmans, and if you want to hear about it, we have an episode on our podcast. Our podcast is called *Faith on the Road*. It's a Scholar Leaders podcast with majority world theological leaders so you can hear Valentine and I chat about serving God under siege and the faith on the road podcast.

### **David Capes**

I can't wait to hear it. That's super. We have an essay at the Lanier Theological Library, the handwritten essay by CS Lewis entitled *Learning in Wartime*. He gave this address at the college where he was teaching to a bunch of young men, mainly who were there when the Second World War broke out. It's an amazing address. We have the original, which is fantastic. It's now on loan to the Museum of the Bible because they're doing a big C S Lewis exhibit. The essay is in the book called *The Weight of Glory*. And people wonder, why are we doing this in wartime? Why don't we just take up arms and fight the Russians? And why is it important to do theological education in the middle of a war? How did you answer that?

### **Christoper Hays**

Well, the way that Lewis answers it, if I remember correctly, in that essay, is he says, because someday the war will be over. And that is certainly a true thing to say and a good reason to do theology in wartime. but it's only part of the answer. You do theology in wartime because the church needs to be the church during wartime. The church needs to answer questions now about whether or not you flee or you remain. They need to answer questions now about how to build a home in a new place. They need to ask their questions now about whether or not you fight back. Can a Christian kill? They need to answer questions now about faith and doubt and death and resurrection.

The Church has to be the church during wartime. Tertullian famously said the blood of the martyrs is seed. It's the seed of the church. The idea is that the suffering faithfully of Christians is what ultimately

helps the church to grow, and that has often proven itself to be true, but you have to suffer faithfully, and so theology in wartime has to be done to help the church to be the church in the midst of its greatest darkness.

**David Capes**

When will that book be published?

**Christopher Hays**

Well, I'm hoping to have a conversation with the publisher about it at SBL in a couple of weeks.

**David Capes**

Hopefully it will be published next year sometime. I am hopeful for that.