



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: More God, Less Crime – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Byron Johnson

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh reminding you there are still two days left to take advantage of our \$300,000 May matching grant challenge. You can learn more about how to give a gift online when you go to drjamesdobson.org. As we look at the world around us, we see a lot of chaos and upheaval, and that's why having faith in Christ is so integral to navigating the sinful world we live in. Fortunately, we know that even though the world is going crazy with God, all things are possible.

On today's edition of Family Talk, Michele Bachmann, will be joined by a man who understands how clinging to faith and God is so important, especially when facing discrimination in his career in the education system. His name is Byron Johnson. And in spite of the discrimination he faced, he still followed the path God put in his heart and he is now leading the charge in researching the impact of faith-based programs amongst incarcerated people and their families. Work that is inspiring positive change in communities that deeply need support. Here now is Michele Bachmann to further introduce today's guest, Byron Johnson here on Family Talk.

Michele Bachmann: Well, welcome friends. My name is Michele Bachmann. I am so pleased that you have joined us today on Family Talk because we have a wonderful, positive, inspirational guest with us today. His name is Dr. Byron Johnson. Byron Johnson is a powerful speaker. He's a powerful academic and researcher, and he's a man that you are going to enjoy knowing more about. He's actually been a longtime friend of this ministry, but also of Dr. James Dobson himself.

As many of you know, Dr. James Dobson has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. He has a very distinguished academic record himself. And also in terms of his clinical practice when he was serving at the USC School of Medicine, Dr. Dobson had the opportunity to be able to engage with Dr. Byron Johnson on some of the research and materials that he was going through. But first of all, I'd like to have you know a little bit more about our guest, Dr. Byron Johnson. You're

going to love hearing about the work that he's dedicated his life to. We have seen higher education and academia in a fairly pitiful state. People have been dismayed as they've seen all of the chaos and the rioting that's occurred in college campuses in the spring of 2024. And here we are now talking to an individual who's dedicated decades of his life to study, to research as an academic. Help me welcome now Dr. Byron Johnson. Byron, thank you so much for joining the show today.

Byron Johnson: It's a pleasure to be on with you, Michele. I remember meeting you a couple of months ago in Virginia Beach, so it's a delight to be on your show today.

Michele Bachmann: Well, it was a great day because at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia we're a biblical worldview university with undergrad and graduate school programs, and we were so honored to bring you in as the featured guest speaker for the day for our faculty retreat. And there you absolutely lit up the auditorium with what you spoke about with your research. But one story that you didn't tell all of us when you came to Regent University, and that was a story about your trek through academia. You experienced discrimination when you began your academic career back in about 1980. You began like Dr. Dobson did with a career in psychology. That's the avenue you were intending to go through. You went through undergrad and then you were in your graduate program and then you got a job as a parole officer and what happened when you were a parole officer?

Byron Johnson: Yeah, that was just a very short job in between graduate classes. And it was really helpful because I thought the whole field of criminology is very interesting to me. And so I did make a career shift, an academic shift to study criminology and sociology in addition to psychology and pursued a Ph.D. in that field and then began an academic career. And this is now the mid-1980s, Michele. And so I think when people think about what's happening on college campuses and they really can't believe what they're seeing. How did this happen? How do we get here? And it didn't happen overnight. So I started working on my Ph.D. in 1980 and I finished in 84 and then began a career as a professor. And I knew as a professor, I really wanted to be able not only to be a good professor, but I also wanted to share my faith, which was very important in my life. Of course, that didn't do a lot for my reputation with my dean and my department chair.

Michele Bachmann: And so there was bias then at that time. And the interesting thing is that when you did your Ph.D. research, you were researching the impact of religion, of faith on various issues.

Byron Johnson: I was, and I remember having a conversation with my department chair who made it pretty clear that he didn't want me to study religion, he just wanted me to study criminology, but without studying the role that religion played in helping to let's say reform offenders or drug addicts or prisoners. And I remember saying, "Well, religion's an important topic." And he said, "But it won't count for tenure. If you do research and publish academic papers, it won't count for tenure." And eventually the university decided to let me go after my

fifth year. So right before I applied for tenure, they basically said, your services won't be needed.

Michele Bachmann: And this is really a death knell to an academic career. For people who are unfamiliar with higher education, this is how it works. If an academic wants to proceed and move up the ladder, they have to get tenure from a university. At the most conservative time in the modern era in the United States, you're blackballed because you were researching the impact of faith on criminology. So everything else was allowed to be studied, but not the area of faith on an outcome, on something as important on criminology.

Byron Johnson: They even said that to me. I remember talking to the provost after this all happened and I said, "You're the provost. You can easily overturn this decision. It's not a fair decision. I've published, I had my work in good journals, I brought in federal dollars for research." And so I said, "Why don't you just let me go up for tenure and then if I get turned down for tenure, I'll leave." And they didn't do that. And I remember saying to the provost, "If I were a Marxist, we wouldn't even be having this conversation." And he said, "You're right." He agreed with me. But the fact is I was an outspoken Christian and that was the problem. And then he told me, he said, "I feel like you should probably go get a job in a small little Christian college somewhere because if you don't change the way you live your life, you'll never have an academic career."

I had a mentor that told me, "Byron, just focus on the research. You put so much into ministry, which is a good thing, but prove yourself a scholar." And so I really did double down on the research and then what happened is God started blessing that research in unusual ways and then policymakers started to call. And I began to have a presence in Washington, D.C., and then I started getting funded for my work. And as you know in the academic world, if you are able to bring in external funding, that really changes a lot. And so my career essentially took off after being dismissed at Memphis, which is not a great academic institution. And so ever since then it's been a pretty meteoric rise in the academy even amidst all the discrimination that goes on against people of faith.

Michele Bachmann: Let's talk about that Byron. There's a reason I think why we don't see the studies, the reason why we don't see government grants going to fund areas of research on biblical issues. And I think this is an absolutely telling issue and this cries out for reform in America because shouldn't universities be about discovering truth rather than pushing an ideology of Marxism or totalitarianism? We should be about discovering truth wherever it comes from.

Byron Johnson: I was at the University of Pennsylvania before coming to Baylor University and the University of Pennsylvania is ranked very high academically.

Michele Bachmann: That's an Ivy league.

Byron Johnson: It's an Ivy league school. And when I was there, I really felt like there was not only discrimination, you could tell people didn't like a lot of the research that we produced. I had a number of people in key places saying to me, "Can you at least find that religion has some harmful effects every now and again because all the work seems to come out looking a certain way?" And it was like, well, I don't fudge the data. I'm just printing what the data are telling and,-

Michele Bachmann: The data was showing.

Byron Johnson: The data was showing the remarkable benefits of faith. And if your readers were just to go out and read academic research on religion and physical health, religion on mental health, there aren't just a few studies. There are tens of thousands of studies documenting the remarkable effect of being religious. And keep in mind these are publications and peer-reviewed articles. And so if you can imagine academics being a group of people that tend to be not very religious, they have to sign off on these papers even being published in the first place. And so what that means is if you do the research, you do it well, even though you are going to have reviewers say, "I don't like this piece, I don't think it should be published." I think if you do good work, eventually you can get it published even in journals that don't want that article to appear.

Michele Bachmann: Well, that gives hope. When you think of all the academics out there, how you were personally blackballed with your research, but the other academics as well who have a very difficult time getting their work published. Let's talk a little bit more about the data sets. You were involved in that research and others were as well. Was there anything more about the process, Byron that you wanted to say?

Byron Johnson: Well, just one thing that came to mind, Michele. I remember when I was leaving the University of Pennsylvania to go to Baylor and someone said to me almost as if they felt sorry for me, "So you're going to a Christian university. Isn't that going to be like putting a muzzle on your mouth where there won't be freedom of speech?" I go, "Don't you understand? I'm actually going to a place where there will be freedom of speech." Again, I think the everyday person maybe sitting in the pew doesn't have a good sense of all of that. But it is the case that if you want to find people that walk in lockstep, go to one of these prestigious universities where they don't all walk in lockstep, but you feel the pressure to walk in lockstep. And so if we are about diversity as we say we are, you'd want some diversity of thought instead of everybody kind of thinking exactly the same way.

Michele Bachmann: It's so true because they spelled diversity as the outward appearance, and that's what the Bible says, that man looks at the outward. God looks upon the heart. And so that is diversity, whether it's skin color or what country we come from, that's considered diversity when it actually, the diversity is the diversity of ideas, the diversity of what's in our heart. And not only is that not allowed in the mainstream media, that is not allowed in academia overall other than Christian colleges.

Byron Johnson: I think that there has been pushback in the last few months, Michele, because people have seen this played out on the nightly news and they're seeing such terrible things, such anti-Semitism and the loss of free speech on these campuses. And what's happened is a lot of donors have said, that's it. I will not continue to support my alma mater anymore.

Michele Bachmann: And that's exactly what they should do. The billionaires who said, we're no longer giving to Harvard, we're no longer giving to MIT, that's exactly what they should do. They've been slapped in the face time and time again from these universities. When research produces phony data or data that isn't accurate or just simply by censorship, we're the ones that are losing because a lot of these grants, correct me if I'm wrong, they're federal grants. They come from the federal government. And so the federal government should be funding truth, not advancing a particular Marxist ideology.

Byron Johnson: I think for me, I love to remain as positive as I possibly can. And so I think for some people they see the news and they become discouraged. I see this as an opportunity for us. I really do. Because when you look at the research, you dig down deep in the data, you find so many things there that are consistent with a Christian worldview and they do give us hope. And so there's so much out there now that shows that people of faith just do so much better on so many outcomes than people without faith or with little faith. They're happier. They have meaning, they have purpose, they have virtuous behaviors that they regularly live and play out in their lives. They're generous and they live longer.

And so there are all these things that come out when you look at the data and it's far beyond happiness. That's why I think it's important to look at other markers. There are plenty of people that maybe are not doing well financially, but they're doing well in other ways because they have this important foundational faith that guides them and gives them the meaning and purpose that seems to elude so many other people.

Michele Bachmann: And that's why it is so imperative that academics like yourself, do this research. What I'd like to do, Byron, is talk about some of the incredible work and findings that you have done and one study that seems to come out repeatedly over and over again, and that's the fact that fewer people are going to church and fewer people are turning to God or are being impacted by God. Could you please share with the Family Talk audience what you talked about to us at Regent? It was so inspiring Byron.

Byron Johnson: Yeah. I wish this were just a new story, but this has actually been going on for as long as America's been a country, people have thought and I think hoped that religion would go away, that we don't need it, that we've outgrown it and that it's obsolete, but it's just not true. And in many ways you can argue with good data that the world is more religious today than it has ever been in its history. That's not the narrative that we're told to believe. So we analyzed a bunch of data looking at this. I will admit that if you just look at one indicator, church

attendance appears to have been in decline for a number of years, but not a huge decline, a little decline.

But if you were to look at other indicators, you would see a different kind of a trend. Pray. How often do people pray? Do people say that religion is important in their lives? And a host of other questions related to prayer. Let's say, do you go to prayer meetings? Are you a part of a Bible study? That's something completely different than just attending a weekly religious service. So we looked at a bunch of different data from different sources, and we find that guess what, even when you interview atheists and ask them how often they pray, a significant number of them say they regularly pray. And so,-

Michele Bachmann: That's an interesting atheist, praying atheist. That's interesting.

Byron Johnson: Yeah. I would say that this is not a real atheist. And then you ask them other questions too about faith, and you would expect them to say, "I have no faith. I'm an atheist. There is no God. Why would I pray?" But that's not what they actually say. Now, if you ask them to self-identify, about 4% of Americans will say, I'm an atheist. And again, of that 4%, significant number of them actually pray. But that figure of 4% has held steady now for seven decades.

Michele Bachmann: For 70 years.

Byron Johnson: Yes. As long as we've been keeping data. But the narrative that you hear is that atheism is increasing dramatically.

Michele Bachmann: Yeah, That's what we hear.

Byron Johnson: It is absolutely not the case. And I've been at this, as you've said for a long, long time, but when we wrote this paper for this particular publication, we sent it to journals and the journals would not even send the paper out for review.

Michele Bachmann: And so what that means, an academic writes a paper, and they have to have other colleagues from other venues read it and then comment on it before it gets published.

Byron Johnson: These journals were saying, we're not even going to send it out for review. So it got what we call,-

Michele Bachmann: In other words, kill it. Just kill it.

Byron Johnson: Yes, kill it. We got a desk rejection, and I had not had a desk rejection until we wrote this particular paper. So we sent it to another journal, desk rejection, another journal, desk rejection. It took us two years to get this particular paper published. And so then once we got the paper published, we knew we were going to write an op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal*, and that's the one that you just read. And of course when you write for *The Wall Street Journal*, there's the

good chance that two to 4 million people will actually see that piece versus an academic article that not that many people will be able to read. So the narrative, as you might expect, looks a lot different on the ground than the one that so many want to portray. And that is that we don't need, God. Maybe we were at one time people that needed a God, but we don't anymore. And of course, the data suggests just the opposite, that people do quite well when they believe in God, they do much better than those that don't.

Michele Bachmann: Well, and one thing that was so interesting that you said is when these surveys are done, the questions that are asked are what's so important. And you had pointed out, and I wanted you to talk about that a little bit, about the denominations. It seems like a lot of these surveys that are so depressing saying that the bottom is falling out of faith in the United States, they're missing the main story about faith in the United States.

Byron Johnson: Yeah, I think for a lot of people, talk about poorly worded questions. If you don't word the question right, that really is a killer. And then if you don't ask the right questions or you don't ask them in the right order. So for example, if I ask you, which of these denominational homes would you call yours? So let's just say you're a Presbyterian, you go down and you find Presbyterian, and you could just check that box. And then down at the very bottom of this long, long list, there'll be don't know or no religion. And so a lot of people will put no religion. But what we do on our surveys, we ask additional question, if you attend religious services, where do you attend? Can you give us the name of a congregation? And we found a significant number of people who said, no religion actually gave us the name of a church that they attended and gave us their address.

The reason why they didn't check a particular denomination is that they didn't see a denomination on that list. And so some of them attend independent churches, churches that don't fit nicely into categories. And so here when we actually geocoded the addresses from these congregations, many of them were Latino churches, black churches, Pentecostal churches, non-denominational churches. And so these are the kinds of congregations that are overlooked often in these surveys that say,-

Michele Bachmann: They don't get counted.

Byron Johnson: That's right. They don't get counted. And so they get thrown into the category of no religion and no religion for a lot of people equals atheism. And so we would say not only are they not atheists, these people are actually quite religious and they're being miscategorized completely.

Michele Bachmann: And you concluded that in your article, Dr. Johnson, when you said that between 26% and 40% of the congregations weren't even counted, they were missed by most of these surveys.

Byron Johnson: Yeah.

Michele Bachmann: That's pretty shoddy work if you ask me on surveys.

Byron Johnson: Yeah, we're not talking one or 2%, so.

Michele Bachmann: No.

Byron Johnson: Depending on whose work you're looking at, you could say that there are maybe 280,000 congregations in the US. We think there's closer to a half a million congregations in the US. And if you think about congregations as repositories of goodwill or what some people call social capital, if you look at all the generosity of houses of worship, the funding that they provide for a host of ministries, many of them to the poor and needy in the neighborhood surrounding the congregations, it literally is billions of dollars of social service delivery that are being provided by these houses of worship that are being undercounted.

Michele Bachmann: I love what you wrote in your *Wall Street Journal* article. You wrote that, "Religion is constantly evolving, but it isn't in decline in the United States. More Americans attend and support more religious congregations than ever before," and you end with, "Religion is dying. Don't believe it." It was fantastic. Absolutely fantastic.

Byron Johnson: Thank you. Thank you.

Michele Bachmann: And that Wall Journal article was July 28th in 2022. One of the good news stories that gets suppressed that everybody needs to understand. There's a faith vibrancy in our nation, it's just that it doesn't get talked about. Let's take a break, Dr. Johnson, and we will come back. You actually are the top scholar in the United States on this entire topic of why faith matters when dealing with crime and how it could matter more. Don't go away. Stay with us. We want you to hear the follow up to this program and thanks so much Dr. Johnson.

Byron Johnson: You bet. My pleasure.

Roger Marsh: Well, if you've enjoyed today's program here on Family Talk, be sure to tune in again tomorrow and you'll hear more from Michele Bachmann and her guest, Byron Johnson. By the way, to learn more about Byron Johnson or his book called *More God, Less Crime*, simply visit us online at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And while you're there, consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Thanks to some special friends of our ministry, we currently have a \$300,000 matching grant available this month, but there are just a few dollars left in the match and only a few days left to make a donation, so please don't hesitate. Go online to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk for more information. I'm Roger Marsh and on behalf of Dr. James Dobson and everyone here at Family Talk, thank you so much for your prayers, thank you for your financial support and thanks for

listening to our program. Have a blessed day, and be sure to join us again tomorrow right here for another edition of Family Talk.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.