

Engage360 | Episode 41: Gospel-Guided Race Relations

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Hello everyone, this is Don Payne with Engage360. I wanted to give everybody a brief intro to this week's podcast before we actually get in to that interview. The interview you're about to hear was recorded on May 21 before the tragic death of George Floyd this past week. We feel that the interview you're about to hear is still very relevant to that travesty, but we still want to air that incident and acknowledge that what happened in Minneapolis affects all of us. We want to extend our concern and prayers to George Floyd's family and our grief as an institution over these events that are ripping our nation apart.
- Ahmaud Arbery. What is your very first reaction when you hear that name? All I have to do is say that name and almost anyone who is in the least bit aware of recent events will instantly have some type of internal reaction. And we all have a lot to learn by paying attention to our reactions. We have a lot more to learn about the redemptive power of the Gospel in light of our reactions and also a lot to learn about our reactions in light of the gospel. So let's talk about that. I'm glad to be joined today by our friend Brandon Washington, who is Pastor of preaching and vision at the Embassy Church in Denver. And also we're very glad to say is a member of our board of trustees here at Denver Seminary. Brandon, welcome back to the podcast. You've been here before.
- Brandon Washington: I have. Thanks for having me again.
- Dr. Don Payne: We're also glad to have our president, Dr. Mark Young with us. Mark, welcome back.
- Dr. Mark Young: Thanks Don. And let me say just how proud we are that Brandon is a graduate with at least two degrees at Denver Seminary. We're thinking maybe two or more sounds good, Brandon. Some along the way?
- Brandon Washington: You might want to consult my wife on that, I think she's good at where we are now.
- Dr. Don Payne: So yeah, surprisingly settle. Huh? So on February 23 in Glenn County, Georgia, Ahmaud Arbery was tragically shot and killed and then on May 7th, the father and son responsible for his death were arrested. Now both the shooting and the arrest have re-ignited tensions that continue to polarize and paralyze this nation. It's polarizing in part because Ahmaud Arbery where he was black and the two men responsible for his death are white. It's paralyzing, partly because the circumstances of the shooting have already bogged down the legal proceedings with lots of complex legal nuances. Now, we're not going to pretend today that we can resolve those issues or change the world that allows

this type of travesty to happen. But the redemptive power of the gospel obligates us to drill into this wrenching tragedy more deeply and perhaps drill into it from a different angle than we find in our easy default reactions and in the narratives we get through our media outlets. But I want to ask Brandon and Mark to weigh in on this. Why do we need to talk about this?

Brandon Washington: Well, I'll take that. The language of late, it's an, I don't know who coined these terms, but the language of late regarding the season that we would like to think we're in in America is post racial. And that the idea behind it is we have reached a season that is beyond the civil rights movement and presumably the benefits of that effort are now fully realized. And because of that, we no longer have to talk about those matters. And then I will point out that people of color listen to that language and those who are not overtly offended, find it funny that that's the language being used. And then there's this moment where we have a couple consecutive Presidents. We have some at that campaign season and two Presidents particularly that reveal that how untrue that is because them holding office has resulted in an evident ethnic rift within the country. And some people are making the mistake of saying that those two Presidents are the causes of that rift. But I would contend that the rift was already there and the election of those two Presidents brought to light that that rift was there. And I think that because of that, when moments like what occurred in Georgia come up, when those images are made, real people speak to that matter from the opposite sides of the chasm that divides us. And it only lends itself to that chasm becoming wider. And my inclination, especially as a pastor and preacher of the gospel is whenever I see brokenness, especially within among human beings, is to confront the thing that's highlighting or causing that brokenness. And so if the conversation around the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery is creating, is causing the chasm to widen, then it's irresponsible for us to not take a moment to address it in a pursuit toward healing, restoration, and recovery.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. I want to echo what you said and riff on that idea of healing. You know, if we had a symptom of a serious disease that became a part of our experience, our lives, we would do whatever it took to diagnose what's causing that symptom. So we would dive deeply into our medical condition, paying whatever money we could, access whatever tests were available in order to diagnose the root, this type of murder, this type of event is a tragedy to the inst degree and it is a symptom of something that is recurrent, something that is malignant, something that works in our society and only occasionally rises to the surface. As a white person, it seems to me that I want to live in ignorance of the root issue. I want to assume that what's happened in the past is now all behind us, behind us because that allows me not to then look deeply into my own attitudes and my own behaviors and my own heart because it's too painful to step into those spaces. So I think there's just this natural reaction that on the white side of the equation, a lot of folks just want to say that's an isolated event. Those two guys who did that, they did that. It's an individual thing and then that allows me not to deal with it as it really is, as systemic, as social, as also personal.

Dr. Don Payne: Right. It seems like it's especially important to talk about this, for those of us whose ethnicity does not locate us on the negative side of a social power differential. Or who simply don't see these tragedies or we don't have to see these tragedies with the same eyes as those whose routine experience is on the negative side of a power differential.

Dr. Mark Young: No question. Let me share a brief story about this event and how I connected to it. Just behind our home where we live in a totally white suburb, some new homes were being built about four or five years ago, and so my wife and I would walk into the construction area, walk into those homes being built to see the floor plan and the layout, the materials that were being used, and never once as we walked into those homes did we think to ourselves there's a chance that someone is going to chase us with guns out of these homes under construction. That's the privilege of being white and living in a white neighborhood. When I saw what happened to Ahmaud Arbery, my wife and I immediately connected to the fact that we had just done that a few years ago and never once would have crossed our minds that something like what happened to him, would happen to us.

Dr. Don Payne: Nor, most likely would there even have been questions raised about why you were there?

Dr. Mark Young: Correct. Because we belonged in that setting. Right. And that is I think for many of us who are white, that is the essence of white privilege in that we don't ever have to wonder whether our whiteness is going to be a disadvantage or even a threat or a danger to us.

Brandon Washington: I have, you know, I've had two conversations in the past week regarding the fact that he went into the home that was under construction. And I asked the two gentlemen whom I had the conversation if they'd ever done that before, and it turned out that they had, and the thing that troubled me was, they were able to still justify what occurred in Georgia by saying nothing happened to us. It never even crossed our minds that something would happen to us. But if something were to happen, during that tour, if, if someone were to approach us with firearms, we would have brought that upon ourselves. So, an additional complication I'm having here is not only is there a, there's two different worlds or two different parallel experiences that are occurring under one cultural one national umbrella. And that if I go and make it through that home, I'm taking significant precautions to be sure that I'm not going to appear a threat to someone. I too have done that. But we had almost written policies in place when I had friends that were buying houses who were buying houses in Texas. We would visit subdivisions that were filled with newly erected homes. The studs were up and we would go tour these houses so they could get ideas of what they were going to be doing in the homes that they were building. And we had a policy that we would not go in a group of less than six because there was a concern that if it was just one or two of us. Then we will be considered either a burglar or a team of burglars, but it's easier for you to explain what you're doing when there's a half dozen of you. It's just not likely to have those people

going to burglarize a vacant under construction, a home that's under construction. And I explained that scenario was my experience to the two men who told me that they can still justify what occurred in, in Georgia. And I said we have to put rules in place, to appear as safe and comfortable as you appear naturally. And the fact that that doesn't even cross your mind speaks to how we have very different lenses on the same predicament. The same scenario, the same experience. You're taking things for granted, denying privilege, but taking things for granted that I have to adjust to, so I can appear as safe as you.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. We're trying to work our way down towards some of the core of this, particularly the core, the core where the gospel needs to speak to it. Okay. Let's talk a little bit about the narratives, the default narratives that tend to follow this type of travesty and how those narratives affect both individual and societal capacities for reconciliation or for moving forward. What are those narratives and how are they functioning in our land?

Dr. Mark Young: Well, I think one of the, one of the ways that many white folks would view their basic posture in society is through the lens of individual responsibility, right? So the narrative flows out of my responsibility to act in certain ways and to react in certain ways. The second narrative I think is very dominant is an a-historicity in my personal identity and in my own way of behaving. Meaning, I want to assume that what I'm doing right now and the effects or consequences of that behavior are solely dependent upon my personal responsibility in that context right now. That I don't drag with me or carry with me into an event an entire history that frames that event. I'm blind to that history. What I like to say is we are shaped by a history that we do not know in ways that we cannot detect. Right? So when I step what I imagine the narrative of what happened with Ahmaud Arbery, I see that video. I think a lot of folks in the white community view that through, well, he made the wrong decisions. He shouldn't have gone in that house, he shouldn't have run, he shouldn't have tried to resist all those individual responsibility.

Dr. Don Payne: So it's his fault, done and done. Right.

Dr. Mark Young: Exactly. And that of course is in from my view now that of course is of I don't want to say that's a deficient way to view the present with that ahistorical lens and that only that singular, individual responsibility lens.

Brandon Washington: Yeah, I can't add much to that. You, you, you're in my wheelhouse now. That is my, that was a, that has been a soap box of mine for a few years and that we treat every moment as independent of all similar moments. And we also treat every moment as though it has nothing to do with any of the proceeding moments. The things that occurred that may have given rise to the moment that results in someone's death. That first came to mind me. I never thought about it in those terms until the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson. And my consistent refrained when that occurred was what circumstances exist in Ferguson between the community there and the police department that gave rise. What successes gave rise to what occurred on the street. And the thing that troubled

me was an investigation was done by the department of justice and they issued two reports on the same day after their investigation. One of the reports exonerated the police officer who shot Michael Brown. And I received seven phone calls bringing that to my attention. But no one read the other report. And the other report was how there had been a history of systemic racism and conflict between the police department and the community. And to a notable degree, the police department was funding their budget by writing nitpicky tickets in the community, which created a history of rift between the community and the police department. And you have to keep in mind, Ferguson is not New York City, it's not Denver. So they are routinely experiencing these moments with the same individuals. And I wanted to discuss how much that informed the conflict between a police officer and an 18 year old boy on the street. None of the seven people who called me to let me know that the police officer was exonerated, had read the second report, the second report resulted in the chief of police losing his job and there being fines placed upon the institution. But no one read the second report. And it's because we don't value the history that served as the runway to the catastrophic moment.

Dr. Don Payne: And that history is context, isn't it?

Brandon Washington: Absolutely. Absolutely. But one of the things that whenever I write a paper and, or a, I'm addressing an outline for a book now and the second chapter in the book is the historical cultural context. So I can set up the, the arena in which I'm going to visit the thesis, the big point throughout the rest of the work because you cannot understand the discussion without knowing how you got to the need for the discussion. And the thing is we don't like that history. The past is legitimately, it's actually a painful one. So the goal was to get past it as quickly as possible. And I did not realize the extent to which that was true until people would give me pushback on bringing up history. One of our teammates here at the church, his name was Derek Kelsey, and he was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. He's a proud graduate of the University of Alabama. Don't bring up football. We're not going to do even, he will pin you in a corner until you all things roll tide. And his mother was among the teenagers who were a part of the protest in Birmingham that resulted in the fire hoses and the dogs and the incarcerations. They were being released in waves from the church and they would get arrested. That was all part of a plan because they knew the videos, the cameras were going to be there and they wanted the world to see what, how people are being treated there. And in honor of her, after I found out she was there, in honor of her, I posted a photo of the events of that day and I'll never forget this for as long as I live. I posted on September 12th, 2016 and the backlash was why are you bringing up old things? It's time for us to heal and move on. And I found that fascinating because the same people who were saying that to me posted graphics on a previous day in honor of those who died on September 11th and they were saying things that said, posting things that said, never forget. And I realized in that moment that when you are the victim, you never want it to go away. But when you are the victimizer, you want it for it to go away as quickly as possible. And in this moment, bringing up matters of ethnic rift, dominant cultures, whether they realize it or not, are functioning in

the role of the victimizer and they'll make that clear by how quickly they want to forget the past and evaluate every moment independent of what preceded it.

Dr. Mark Young:

I think that is a brilliant observation. Thank you for making it. And then let's frame it a little bit with Ahmaud Arbery. You're a black man in the South and you have armed men, not police officers chasing you. Tell me that doesn't somehow connect with black history of a region with where lynching was prominent, vigilante justice, white armed men chasing a black man. To me, that brings up all kinds of connections to that region and to this horrific, tragic part of our history that as a white person, I would just soon never talk about it again. And yet that's what we had vigilante justice. These were not police officers. These were civilians who thought they should execute justice at a level and a severity that we would hope our law enforcement would not engage in. That's the part of that history of lynching in the South.

Dr. Don Payne:

And that's one of the dangers, the egregious dangers of lifting these tragedies out of context and treating them as you said, Mark, historically, because many, of course I've not done exhaustive research. I've not looked at every editorial on this. But those I have looked at consistently treat this in a microscopic way, analyzing details, adjudicating what happened on one side or the other based on various dissected details of the video, of the reports, rather than taking into account any historical context, any historical background. So curious, and in one respect, so American, right? Because as a country, we do not have the long political history that many other countries have. And for both good and ill, this has been a nation whose national character has been forged by being futuristic, future thinking, forward thinking. And many advantages have come out of that technologically and in many other ways. We're a forward thinking people, but the price tag that come along with that is that we not only tend not to have any sense of the past or context, but we have a very selective memory only, only when it can serve us well.

Brandon Washington:

In addition to the discussion regarding being functioning in an ahistorical manner. I believe that even when we referenced history, it's our preference to either highlight the great things of our past. And I have no problem with that actually. You know, you should, you should live a life that recognizes Ebony's of your history and accomplishments of your past. But the struggle I have is you want everything to be, we want everything to be of that sort. So we will to some degree, revise history in a manner that results in heroes and, and celebrate it moments of history. So, in states like Georgia and then the part of the world where Dr. Young is from, it's not uncommon for you to see statues of men who are not heroes for me. They're not heroes. They're lauded, but they're not heroes. For me they're terrorists. If they had their way, had they been successful, I would not be able to sit here and have this conversation with you. I have a friend who pastored a church in Atlanta and he walked me through all of the States in the Southeast part of the country who have used their state flag as an homage to the Confederacy. That flying the Confederate flag is growing more and more taboo. So there's a, a subtle homage to that flag, Georgia being one of them, Arkansas, another that there's an homage to that flag. And so he's, he

was telling me on a daily basis when I go about life and business in my city, I have these constant Memorial, these reminders to a history that is in fact painful for me. And he says, among the pains he's experiencing is those who do not have the same ethnic and cultural history has, are either unaware of the pain it's causing or they don't care that it's causing that heartache among those who suffered under that covering.

Dr. Don Payne: Brandon, you have in a previous conversation raised the question of what do people see if, if they view the video of Ahmaud Arbery, which is, is bracing and chilling. But if they view the video, what do we see? Why don't you speak a bit more about that? Rehearse that for us.

Brandon Washington: Yes, I have an eight year old son and my son is just like me in, in many ways. My wife reminds me of that day, like, and she will do that by pointing out the moments where he's cantankerous and opinionated and unfiltered when being vocal. And I will correct him for that. And she'll say, well, you know, you know, he comes by that honestly, he got that from his father. And we sat the other day and had a conversation after my wife watched the video, which she is rarely able to bring herself to do. And she said to me, she, I see Ellis, I see my son in this video. And we had a conversation about what the biblical imperative to love your neighbor as yourself means. And we call that the imperative, the empathy imperative. Where you don't just see someone die, but you see someone whom you've loved. You put yourself in the shoes of the victim or the victim's family and it makes the video much more personal. It makes the video a much more real thing for you. The conversation we ended up having after watching that video is when do we sit our son down and have the talk with him regarding what to do if he's ever in a scenario of that sort. I'm about to tell my son that he should not do what thousands of people do every year and that is tour a home that is under construction. I want to tell him that he lives in a world where there are people who can do that without concerns and he is not one of them. That makes the video personal for me. I think that when you're not able to identify with the victim, it's something that happened over there. It's something that's distinct. Or you're not the shooter in the video and you would never be that shooter. And because of that, you completely dismiss the significance of what happened there. And I'm going to allow for the reality, allow for the legitimacy of not identifying with the shooter, but doesn't a biblical imperative to love your neighbor as yourself, compel us to identify with the victim and those lenses will help us see the video differently.

Dr. Don Payne: Well you've raised a couple of things I'd love for us to chase. One is your mention of people who, and I think this is many of us who may experience outrage at this, may experience sorrow over this happening, may even be quite vocal and denouncing racism, and other social ills. But at the end of the day, we'll think it's a problem for other people or a problem for other parts of the country and they'll sort of existentially distance themselves from it. That could never be me. That would never be me. That's not any of the people I know. That's another world what's going on when we do that.

Brandon Washington: Sympathetic pain has an expiration date. So it's possible for you to see something and have it have ever sympathetic pain to what's there. But if you don't actually identify with the person in the video, then that pain will have an end. And the urgency to confront what caused that confrontation that resulted in a death, that urgency is not there. I had to visit this in last Sunday's message, I did wait a week or two before visiting it, but it became such a heated discussion in our community that I had to address it. It will be pastorally irresponsible to not do so. And one of the things that we had to address is what the implications of the Gospel are on what we're watching. And I always to prep to understand what I'm about to enter into. I always preview what the message would be leaking it on social media. And I was surprised by how many of my friends who said it's inappropriate for me to create a link between the Gospel and justice. In fact, they were bringing me theological.

Dr. Don Payne: They said inappropriate?

Brandon Washington: Inappropriate. They were, in fact, they were bringing me theological arguments. They were creating the, the, the one I received the most was the two kingdoms doctrine. Some people were using the two kingdom doctrine without realizing that they were doing it. One student actually didn't know how to outline it. And his argument was that justice is an earthly kingdom matter. It's not an internal kingdom matter. And if you're preaching the Gospel, you should not be fixated on earthly kingdom issues or you should only try to address those issues under an earthly kingdom setting. And that's troubling to me because that's a truncation of the Gospel message where it's reductionism in that my argument and my genuine biblical belief is that Jesus' death is intended to make everything that has broken, whole. We fixate on the fact that his death gets us into an eternal bliss with God. But I would argue it also repairs marriages and schools in our neighborhood and conflict between us as human beings. This is a [inaudible] step or two. And it also brings justice to the place where injustice is the norm. Though the way I explained the discernment was where the Gospel is present. Justice is also. I'm accused of treating justice, social justice and the Gospel as one of the same. So the argument is social justice is not the Gospel. And that's not my, that's not what I'm saying. I'm not saying it is, I'm saying it's an inevitable byproduct of the Gospel. And we have reduced the Gospel in a manner that allows us to ignore justice as an imperative of the church.

Dr. Mark Young: I think it's very important for us to recognize that evangelicals have had this conversation now for about 140 years and interestingly enough, at the end of the 19th century and the post civil war era, that even those who are known as evangelicals, which were most Protestants at that time were heavily involved in social concerns. Heavily involved in the prohibition movement, for example, because of the havoc it wreaked in families and the family violence. Heavily involved in providing for the poor. But isn't it interesting that evangelicals at that time who were interested in those types of justice issues were not able to identify that although the Civil War had put to put an end to the legality of slavery, racism was still present. So somehow justice didn't extend into those basic issues of human dignity and human identity. They were simply issues,

behaviors that could be addressed outside of racial frameworks. Then we come back to the beginning of what you and I know is Neo evangelicalism and almost in every regard, the reaction of evangelicals in the early 20th century was to pull out of justice language and justice engagement and go to just proclamation. And a lot of that to be quite frank, was wrapped up in apocalypticism or the world was getting worse and worse. It was going to get burned up. So let's just get people saved.

Dr. Don Payne: We can't do anything about it. So yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Mark Young: When evangelicalism begins again or Neo evangelicalism with Carl FH Henry, one of the primary drivers was the recognition that the Gospel demands engagement in the major social issues of our world. Justice being the primary one. So then you go forward a few years and all of a sudden in the sixties with the civil rights movement, when race becomes another one of those issues, it's in the face of the nation. Those same evangelicals, many of them who were calling for justice are muted. Somehow the evangelical concept of justice has not included racial injustice as a critical concern that we're willing to dive into.

Dr. Don Payne: It gets very selective, doesn't it?

Dr. Mark Young: It is very selective.

Dr. Don Payne: There are a couple of things that this conversation is, is dredging up that I'd like for us to pursue. One going back, Brandon, to what you were mentioning about the Gospel and the implications of the gospel. Both of you were touching on this. I want to suggest and have you react or respond to this suggestion that for all people incidents such as what we're talking about today with Ahmaud Arbery incidents such as this function diagnostically on our capacity to receive or understand the Gospel, they reflect on our Gospel capacities. Now, here's what I mean by that, and I'm going to draw some language from the late Pastor theologian Robert Capon, who loved to say that the gospel was for the last, the least, the last, and the little. And if we, you know, we can certainly anchor that in the beatitudes, you know, blessed are the poor, Jesus words. And then there's this thread line. It seems to me, this thread line through the scriptures that the Gospel is good news for those who recognize their weakness, their vulnerability, their impoverishment, their lack of power. Those become the occasions, the settings for which the Gospel is recognizable as good news and which it's genuinely redemptive. I mean, even the word redemption presupposes that there is something that holds us captive from which we need to be redeemed. And for a person whose life in at least in general terms is situated on the positive side of the ledger, the positive side of resource differentials of power differentials of vulnerability differentials. I wonder whether we could say that, that, that that person's capacity, which would be, you know, many in the white evangelical community. I suppose. Again, I know I'm generalizing, but many in the white evangelical community, I wonder whether that actually constricts our capacity for recognizing and responding to

the Gospel, as Gospel. So does our reaction to incidents like this reflect on our Gospel capacity?

Brandon Washington: Oh, I would, yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: I mean, I guess rhetorically, what are you going to say? Right. I want to hear your thoughts on that.

Brandon Washington: So here's how I try to illustrate that. The, I have a pear tree in the middle of my front yard and the, and I did not know it was a pear tree because it wasn't bearing fruit. It wasn't bearing any pears. I found out that it was a pear tree because the HOA without letting me know by the way, decided to send tree trimmers through the neighborhood to trim the trees in the neighborhood. Did not run that by me. I'm bitter about that. Yeah, I'm a little bitter. I come home and find men in my yard with power tools, and they decided to not trim the tree in my yard because they were not trimming fruit trees. And that's how I found out it was a fruit tree. And I said, I'm actually glad that it's not bearing any fruit because I don't want pears in the yard. I have concerns about that. And I'm very particular about what the grass looks like. And I said, but if it senses a pear tree, why is it not bearing any pears? And he said something I had never heard before. He said, it's a domesticated pear tree. So we have removed the capacity from that tree to bear fruit. And my question was, why would you, why would someone do that? And he said, didn't you just say that you don't want the pears in the yard. I said, I did. He says, people want the benefits of this tree. They want, they like its size and then the cast shade, but they don't want to deal with the inconvenience of the fruit that it bears. So we domesticated that fruit out of the tree. You have to realize that as a preacher, I'm always on the lookout for [inaudible]. I immediately ran to my car so I can get a notepad and write this down because I heard him discussing a tree and, but before processing my brain, before it came out, it was the domestication of the Gospel. We want the benefits of it, but we do not want the inconvenience of much of the Gospel's fruit. So we've domesticated much of that fruit bearing out of the Gospel. And we will do because of how taxing, and how much of a wound pursuing that fruit may be. Or we will domesticate it out because we actually enjoy the absence of that fruit. So to the point Dr. Young was making earlier regarding the generation, the post Civil War generation, they benefited from that separation. They benefited from an ongoing and renamed form of slavery in the Jim Crow and sharecropping eras. I'm reading the biography regarding Charles George Whitfield and George Whitfield had an orphanage in Georgia. Georgia was in the process of outlawing slavery and one of the great awakeners, one of the great evangelism voices of the era. Not only was he not an abolitionist, but he was an anti abolitionist and his justification report was, if you outlaw slavery, I will not be able to have an orphanage here to these parentless white children. And that excellent argument for season, won the day, it won the day. He was benefiting from the slavery, even though a fruit of the Gospel would outlaw slavery. So what did he do? He preached justification as the Gospel and he domesticated justice out of his Gospel message so he could get the benefit of that fruit's absence.

Dr. Don Payne: You know what that makes me wonder if my thesis is right, and this is recent for me, I was just noodling on this this morning while I took my walk and began to wonder about whether this really is a diagnostic for our Gospel capacity and if that is true, then it points to a grand irony that those who make the biggest deal about preserving the Gospel for the Gospel sake may in fact be those with the most constricted capacity and understand the fullness of the Gospel or to experience and receive the Gospel as genuinely good news because they're in positions where they, the concept of being the last, the least, the last, and the little is an abstraction.

Brandon Washington: Yes. Yeah. The Denver Seminary taught me that I need to pay attention to, to the person who's doing theology because their experience informs the manner in which they do theology. I learned that at this school. And so it's no accident that John Calvin is able to write the institutes and no, we have, we had no Anabaptist work of that sort that came to light because they were always on the run. But when you read something that's written by the Anabaptist, it's always fixed on ethics, behavior, the fruit, yeah, they address the indicatives of the Gospel and they followed it up with the imperatives of the Gospel. This is what the Gospel is and this is how you should live in light of it. Their fixation of that was motivated by the fact that they were persecuted. They had lenses to see the need because they were marginalized. That's one of the things I'm trying to bring to light here is the disagreement regarding the Gospel's implications is to some degree, to some part informed by the fact that you do not need the person opposing these fruits, they don't need them because they already possessed them. So you can remove those fruits from the Gospel message because you don't recognize them as a need.

Dr. Don Payne: So the Gospel becomes basically thin slashed, it hits at a very narrow, not unimportant, but a very narrow lane of human need.

Brandon Washington: Precisely.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. And I think that that's an interesting point because we are a revivalist movement. Evangelicalism in North America is essentially revivalism, somewhat institutionalized, however loosely. And in that Gospel proclamation and the revival setting, it's always an identification of certain sins that we need to repent of or be saved from. Those sins typically would have to do with things like sexuality or alcoholism or some other way that we are personally experienced personal brokenness where we know we're in need, we're not what we want to be. But I can't recall ever having heard an evangelist preach and call for repentance of the sin of racism. So we had people repenting for all kinds of personal sins, but I don't hear, or my research, I haven't found that any of the major evangelistic outreaches at least of the last 70 years have been focused on the set of racism. And I guarantee you it wasn't a part of the years before the last 70, was personal sin. And because we had absolved ourselves as white people of being personally racist, we weren't ever brought to a point of conviction about our participation in a racist system or a racist society or our unwillingness to call out the privilege that we were being. We were enjoying at

the expense of others. And so that was never a part of our revival in this Gospel proclamation as far as I know.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. My experience was the same.

Brandon Washington: Yeah. Back to the continent. In fact, not only is that, was that not a part of the message I think that we, we dismiss the, because of our fixation on the individual sense of a system, we'll recognize the sin of the individual without conceding that it got passed down generationally in a systematic manner. So I will listen to speakers address Martin Luther's anti-Semitic statements, and then we'll move forward and we'll recognize that stalwarts of the great awakenings. And then like Jonathan Edwards owned slaves and, we'll concede that in the moment. But we'll say, but they do all these other great things but for me looking at this, the thing that comes to mind is the reformation and the great awakenings are the two consistent points of history, to which we appeal. We refer to these two moments as the defining moments of evangelicalism and many of the voices, many of the writers from these eras were racist. And we think that that did not inform the manner in which they did theology. Then we're misleading ourselves. It's a willful self-delusion. So it gets passed down from generation to generation as the system gets passed onto the next generation. So, recognizing that the theologian was racist, that's only phase one of the processes. You're going to do this well, you're going to recover from this well, you have to recognize that their theology is informed by that same racism, that very idea of the two kingdoms doctrine. That was brought to my attention. That was in no small part that was codified by Martin Luther. And it was a, not only was it a racist mindset, but it was also a classist one. It resulted in the death of the peasants under the oppression of the princess. He knew precisely what that was, that was going to lead to. And now we're using it today to silence those who are applying the gospel to a pursuit of justice without even recognizing it's racist history and origin.

Dr. Don Payne: You use, and I'm glad you used the word recovery Brandon, because a while, you know, on one hand here on this podcast, we're not going to fix our world, but we do need to think about steps, meaningful, doable steps toward recovery that conversations like ours hopefully can generate or stimulate, the upstream work, that is so essential for creating the kind of society in which the Gospel is more plausible and the Gospel is more thoroughgoing in its impact. As we try to get a little traction on that, I want to go back to this point from earlier in our conversation about how for some people who may even find events like this egregious and they may denounce them and denounce the racism that's behind them, it still is a remote reality. It's an abstraction. It's somebody else I would never do, or they'll regionalize it to certain parts of the country and feel like they're immune, this is where maybe a little bit more history is, is pertinent to the conversation because Mark, you have posed the question in a previous conversation how do we account for something like this occurring in a part of the country or in parts of the country where evangelical forms of Christianity are the most prominent? The irony of that. And I've done some historical thinking and a little bit of probing on that and it's curious to me, and again, I want to get

you men's reactions to this. The history of racism in the South predates the history of evangelical Christianity in the South by far, by a long way. And George Marston, one of our religious historians of the current era points out that evangelical Christianity, and actually it was the fundamental, what we'd call fundamentalism from which it emerged, was forged in and was far stronger in the Northern States than it was in the Southern States. Until around world war one, when fundamentalism began to gain more widespread momentum in the South. But it was fueled in the South by anti-evolution sentiment. And that's why it took root in the South was that it was a way of fighting the, the specter of evolution. And so the Scopes trial was, you know, the big example of that, but Marston also points out that fundamentalist Christianity in the South took root because it became associated with the Southern way of life. And it was seen as a way of preserving that way of life. But in contrast, fundamentalism in the North was far more doctrinally driven in the longstanding battle against theological liberalism that was coming over from Germany. So racism really has a long history, both inside and outside what we now call the Bible Belt, but for somewhat different reasons and in different forms. In the Northern States racism never had quite the explicit institutionalized expression that it had in the South with slavery. It was driven more theologically and even exegetically. So the Christian communities that we would now label as evangelical in the Northern States were in many, not all, but in many instances driving racism from a more biblical and theological standpoint by the way they read the Bible. In the South, on the other hand, it was driven on the whole more culturally. So it's not that these travesties can't happen anywhere, but perhaps they stand out more when evangelical commitments, evangelical expressions are more widely associated with the culture itself. Now that's kind of a long winded, circuitous way of saying, of trying to suggest nobody's immune.

Dr. Mark Young:

I think that's exactly right. Nobody's immune. I do think there are a couple points you've made that I want to make sure we highlight. In my opinion, in my long tenure in theological education, both in Europe and in the United States, I've yet to encounter a truly honest reckoning of the fact that we tend to interpret and apply the Bible today in exactly the same way that it was interpreted and applied to justify race-based slavery. In other words, our hermeneutical process, and particularly the process of moving from the way we understand the text, the way we live under its authority, is fundamentally the same. And if now we have the hubris to look back and say, well, those people were blinded by their cultural context, by the preservation of a way of life, by the battles they were fighting doctrinally, and they read the Bible that way, and we think we don't read the Bible that way. That we aren't also blinded by the ways of life and the ways of thinking and the ways of valuing that we want to preserve. Then we are sadly naive. There are other issues that we're confronting on a certainly a regular basis where we revert to the very same mistakes that were made in justifying race-based slavery biblically. Saying that it's okay. Not only okay, but that the Bible actually talks about slavery in a way that we should obey and justify those systems. We do the exact same thing. So until we have an honest conversation about how the hermeneutics that justified race-based slavery are still in play in much of the church today, particularly the church that

is enjoying privilege and majority and power, then we're not going to make any progress, in my opinion, in the white community. I think for the question you began this talking about what can we do? What are the ways that particularly those of us in the majority community can respond? How can we begin to address the root issues here?

Dr. Don Payne: Steps toward recovery.

Dr. Mark Young: Right. And one of the things that has to be is our willingness to begin to think hermeneutically and theologically at the impetus of those who think very differently from us. So, for example, I will never recover from reading *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. That that book turned me inside out in ways that no conversation had ever, ever challenged me in the way I think, in the way I value. So I think there has to be an intentionality on the part of those of us particularly who drive theological education to make sure that younger theologians who are being formed and developed are hearing voices that come from different places than where they are comfortable living, particularly in questions of justice and race. Second thing I would say is we choose to live segregated lives. Let's just say it. We choose to live segregated lives. We choose to live those lives because they're more comfortable for us. We feel like we know the patterns and the implicit cultural expectations. We can live there without feeling as if we're constantly breaking morals and rules. We're comfortable in segregated lives, until we intentionally move into settings where we have multiracial relationships, where we're listening on a regular basis, where we're sensing and seeing similar things. We're not going to take those steps forward as a community and beginning to understand the presence of racism that is permeating every dimension of life. And then I think the third thing I would say, and by the way, this is very personal for me, you have to be willing then to put into words and onto paper, I would say, your own perception of how you have been involved in benefiting from racism and perpetrating or at least implicitly perpetrating being complicit in racism, lay it out and then have the courage to talk about it before others. That was one of the most difficult things that I've ever experienced and continue to experience. But I don't think if I had just left it at the level of reading books and listening to other friends talk, particularly friends from the black community that it would have been a foundation for real change in what I think and what I valued,

Brandon Washington: Anything I say is going to be a rephrasing or a supplementation of everything Dr. Young just said. So I want to highlight the one thing you said that is very important to me. I think that many people believe that segregation is the result of racism, but I would contend that in many regards, racism is the result of segregation. So early on because it's a person whom you do not know, you come to presumptions about them or you may hear stereotypes, and adopt those beliefs as your own. But I believe that being removed from someone allows you to come to conclusions about them without having met them, without having heard who they are directly from them. And that's perpetuating the problem. I think that the agenda of wholeness for us, the Gospel agenda requires a deliberate integrating of our communities generationally, ethnically.

The discussions regarding gender have to be mindful of how much you benefit from hearing from and engaging people who are from the camp that you are assessing from afar. I have a, I believe I mentioned more than just ethnicity is I deliberately took Greek with [inaudible] because I want to study new Testament matters from the perspective of a woman. And that helped me see things in the new Testament that I may have missed because I don't have her lenses. So she brings those lenses to the conversation and I could only become acquainted with those lenses once I get to know her. One of my soap boxes is I believe that experiences inform our knowledge and then our knowledge informs our theory of ethics or, and for the sake of this conversation, our theory of justice. But if you haven't had these experiences, then you cannot see the matters of justice in the same way as those who are crying out for it. And I do tell people it's okay to not have all experiences. It's impossible that you cannot have all experiences. But even though you haven't had my experiences, you can't have me and you have me, then my experience have become yours and you will adopt my lenses. So when you look at a video of a man being killed in the middle of the street, you don't see a stranger. You see men who look like me being killed in the middle of the street. People whom you know names will come to mind for you when you see that. In the absence of an integrated body who are fixed, that is who is fixed on the Gospel, you will not have that opportunity.

Dr. Don Payne: And so much of how we read scripture, so much of how we think about the Gospel is a matter of what we see and what we don't see. And that at the very least, to acknowledge that there are things we don't see is a huge step forward. Simply to realize that there are things I don't see. Help me see them.

Dr. Mark Young: Brandon, let me ask a question if I could, what is it that the black community, community of believers, particularly, what do they need to hear from white people? What do they need to experience from brothers and sisters who are white? In order for us, even within the framework of our common faith and our shared values become more that unified Body of Christ, that Jesus encourages us toward.

Brandon Washington: Yeah, that's a very good question. I think that even before there being a moment of them fulfilling the need of hearing something from you, I think right now the biggest hurdle, the biggest obstacle is the black community feels unheard. So when they will point something out as a display of injustice, it's either momentarily recognized or it's dismissed. And that's a bigger problem than not hearing from someone. When you feel like you're yelling into a void that will create frustration that will only lend itself to the widen of chasm. If you look at the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery and there was an absolute travesty, a tragic moment that occurred in the middle of the street where a young man who is entering into the promised life, loses his life. But frankly, the injustice was perpetuated after that happened. So, black people are looking at the pass the book scenario that occurred with each district attorney recusing themselves, but feeling free to make decisions alongside that recusal that undermine any investigation. So the first District Attorney decides to recuse herself, and I want to say this for the record, I affirmed that decision because of her existing

relationship with one of the parties involved, but she very carefully saw to it that no one was arrested. And when you allow the people who are involved freedom for two and a half months, they can strategically figure out what is our story's going to be that can discuss that. Whereas everyone, I know I grew up in a neighborhood where I learned this very quickly. If ever we were arrested, the first thing that would happen is we would all be separated and have to answer questions in a small vacuous room and they will compare our stories instead of letting us go free to get together and reconcile our stories. That first decision undermined the investigation. Then the second District Attorney decides to recuse himself, but he also, issued a statement saying that what occurred was justifiable homicide and perfectly legal, which has completely tainted the jury pool. And then it gets passed onto the third one and then the third one is of the deciding to charge with a crime passing on to the grand jury. It does not become an issue of a charge until the GBI gets involved. And black people look at that and say, the next time you tell us that there was no systemic injustice, take note of what happened after he was shot, and the people who are responsible for being the purveyors. The representatives of justice, very carefully drug their feet or decided to do nothing to make a definitive decision on whether or not something was going to happen here. You can point that out and yell it into a void long enough, that it will result in you deciding that this entire conversation is a waste of my time. Before they hear from you, the legitimacy, the actually being heard. I mean I have, I will sit down with my children. I will say to them, there's a difference between listening to someone and actually hearing them. Let's not go through the motions of a word exchange. Are you hearing what I'm saying and the problem we have here is black people feel unheard. Having said that, having said that, once that moment occurs where the hearing has come, then they need to hear from you. I see what you see. Or at the very least I'm able to understand why you see it this way. And the reason that's necessary is when I say something, I am the large angry black man saying something. But when Doctors Young and Payne say it with me, it's a prophetic voice where the body of believers are saying something in opposition to obvious displays of injustice. They need to hear from you that you're going to stand with us when moments of injustice occur. The Civil Rights Movement did not get traction until white clergy join the Civil Rights Movement and speaking alongside the Ralph Abernathy's and Martin Luther Kings. They were, Martin Luther King was delivering eloquent speeches that were being ignored, but when his white counterparts, his white clerical counterparts joined him, then the message was heard.

Dr. Don Payne: Brandon, we need to bring this to a close. But I think it's fitting that you have the last word on that and that Dr. Young and I simply give our verbal underscore to that. And thank you for that.

Dr. Mark Young: Amen.

Dr. Don Payne: Gentlemen, thank you both for your time, your insights, Dr. Mark Young, Brandon Washington, a valuable conversation and I hope for all of us and all of our listeners, this will continue, prompt us to think more courageously and

broadly about the Gospel and the redemptive power of the Gospel. Because while that's an easy thing to say, what I, at least this conversation has reminded us of is that when the Gospel redeems us, it also messes with us. That the redemptive power of the Gospel is not merely a placating, not merely a comforting reality. It's a life-transforming reality. And sometimes that turns us inside out in order to redeem us. And for that we should thank God. We should clench our teeth and hold our chairs tightly, but thank God. Gentlemen, thank you and thanks to Christa Ebert, our editor and the rest of our production team and to everybody here at Denver Seminary. On behalf of everybody here at Denver Seminary, we want to thank you for spending time with us. We want to encourage you to communicate with us. You can email us at podcastatdenverseminary.edu and we will look forward to speaking with you again very soon. And may the Lord continue to work redemptively in your life as in ours, by messing with you, as the Lord messes with it. Take care.