Beyond Ferguson: Biblical Racial Reconciliation

Part 1 of 2: Biblical Racial Reconciliation
with
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Dr. Bock
Welcome to the table where we discuss issues of God and culture. I'm Darrell Bock, Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendrick Center here at Dallas Theological Seminary. My guest today is a good, good friend and I'm just really pleased to have him in here with me; Tony Evans. Tony, thanks for being a part of our show today and we're glad to have you help us talk about a really race relations and our faith. And we've been through quite a recent spate of activity here in the last several months. We've had the incidents at Ferguson, we've had the tension over deaths in New York. We just recently, more recently come through the OU experience with boys in the SAE fraternity, boys from Dallas even. So it's been quite a few weeks.

And our goal in this podcast is not to adjudicate those individual incidents but to talk about the nerve that these events have struck both in our society at large and in the questions that it raises for the church and the way it ministers in this kind of a context of people. So we've asked you to come in and help us out so really appreciate you being here.

Dr. Evans
I'm honored to be with you. It's a honor to call you a friend and we thank God for all your meaning to the faith these days because your voice is strategic and so I'm delighted to be with you.

Dr. Bock
Well thanks Tony. Well let's start off by asking the question this way, why do you think these series of incidents have touched a nerve and what is it that – it's racial so we've gotta say it this way, what is it that oftentimes Whites or Caucasians are slow to get about life in America for an African-American?

Dr. Evans
Because for so many Anglos in particular, their experience is different. And they do not come to this issue with the same historical realities and even baggage that this issue brings to the table. Then they don't – they see the act or the event but not the historical backlog that has, that this event erupts. This volcano is there and it's the lava is in there.

Dr. Bock
So you're kind of simmering and then all of a sudden you get something that causes it to go off.
Dr. Evans

Then all of a sudden there's a match that lights it up. And so what you see is a reaction that goes beyond the event. But when people see the event and if that's all you see and that's all you react to, I can actually understand that reaction to that event. And I may even agree with your reaction to the event but because I understand underneath it, the volcanic lava that has been simmering there, of poverty, of not equitable opportunity, of breakdown and some of that to be quite honest, are faults within the community itself. But even those faults unfortunately are viewed through the prism of injustice, inequality and lack of equitable opportunity. I've experienced that myself.

For example when I first got into radio I was told by stations across the country that it would be offensive to have a Black speaker on our radio station, would offend too many of our listeners. Well of course hearing that, then of course that creates a certain sensitivity and this was in the '80s I was hearing this. So we're not even talking about Jim Crowe, we're talking about the '80s. So that creates a suspect in your mind. Sometimes you're conscious of it, sometimes you're not but it is there. You know I was the fourth African-American to attend Dallas Seminary. A number of years before I came I would not have been able to.

Dr. Bock

That's exactly right, yeah.

Dr. Evans

So people will often ask me, "Well why aren't there more African-Americans who have been trained in theological centers and theological training?" Well you couldn't go. You were barred out. And so those create sensitivities. So when a match lights, it links now to this fuse that erupts into something bigger than the event itself.

Dr. Bock

Interesting. So let's probe that a little bit. I guess we're going to get down in the lava and get warm.

Dr. Evans

Why not.
Dr. Bock

What is it about the African-American experience in particular that is so different? I mean I hear, I'll tell you what I hear. Maybe this is a better way to go with the question. I hear things like you know we hear the word sometimes profiling, you know where if you're an African-American driving through a certain part of town you're more likely to get stopped, that kind of thing. Whereas if you're just another White person driving through town that's less likely to happen, that kind of – there's an inherent suspicion that comes with, in certain segments of our population that come with being Black and you not only see that, you feel that. You experience that in ways that Anglos generally speaking do not experience. Fair enough? Is that a –

Dr. Evans

Fair enough. I've experienced it personally. I've been pulled over and I've been asked, "Why are you in this neighborhood?" And so the question mark was there merely because of the color of my skin. And so when you experience that you experience one pro group looking at profiling as you know, you are a certain color and your color does a certain amount of crimes and that's why we're profiling you. But we look at it often as no, I haven't committed any crime and it is only because of my color.

And so you again, approaching it from a different perspective. And so when the, when it becomes a statewide issue of profiling the African-American community and other minorities are seeing it as I have done nothing for you to relate to me that way other than color. Therefore racism. And so it gets written off that way and then you try to go through all the gyrations to try to bring calm to that legitimate frustration.

Dr. Bock

Okay. So our society, rightly, wrongly, creates certain stereotypes and expectations that drive some of these reactions that we have both pro and con. And we actually set ourselves up to in some ways ratchet up the tension because of the expectations that we have for one another that aren't necessarily – in one sense they're not earned. They're not earned by the individual, but they're there. And sometimes when we talk about these kinds of areas and we talk about institutional racism or structural racism or those kinds of things and people say, "That category doesn't exist. You know that's not real." But you say that to the African-American community and they'll go, "No, there's something to pay attention to there." Help me be more sensitive.
Dr. Evans

Well when we talk about structures we're talking about systems that have been formally or informally set in place to either cancel or limit opportunities for non-Whites. And in particular African-Americans since they are – the brunt of this tends to go in that direction given the history of our nation. I talked about it on the school side. You can see it in Christianity. I mean 11:00 on Sunday morning still the most segregated hour and I was at, you know when I was in seminary we went to a Bible church, a very well known famous Bible church and the deacons there let us know that this was not a place for us to come. And the subject on the marquee that particular Sunday was on love. I just found that real interesting.

But it can be found in work. It can be found in how you gerrymander districts and who you want to live there and who you don't want to live there. And so you make it so maybe you can legally keep a group out but you make it so uncomfortable or impossible for them to come in that it becomes a structural system to bar you out. Now I've got to be fair, a lot has changed over the years and opportunity, there's a middle class Black community now but, and unfortunately, even within the Black community you will have structure set in place to bar out those who you don't feel fit now your new opportunity and lifestyle. And so you have a classism that becomes the child of racism.

So the dynamic can go – and that's what makes it so confusing and convoluted. And so you get the people complaining about Al Sharpton on one hand but you've got this group that's very loyal to him because they haven't made it out yet. And so they see the approach of the '60s as still a relevant strategy for changing things while you now have this middle class group that doesn't do that as a legitimate approach 'cause they're not in that situation anymore. And so they don't need a Selma because they're not in a Selma situation but there's a group that still feels they still need a Selma to get out of their situation. So it's a very convoluted situation that really only the church can solve.
Dr. Bock
Now we'll come to the solution here in a second. We wanna help people kinda understand the nature of the problem, particularly understand the nature and have at least some, I would say, empathy for the reaction of some as to why some of this takes place. Let me ask you this, if you were to say to people who are not African-American, how they should think about these kinds of issues as they approach them and as they hear about them, what advice would you give us?

Dr. Evans
Well first of all I look at everything through the four levels, four spheres of God's kingdom, the individual, the family, the church and the broader society. So first of all personally, personally I think you can't improve on Martin Luther King's statement that you've got to begin judging people by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. So begin to relate to people not by an external that you see but by the quality or lack thereof you see or don't see. Because when you make that decision it affects your eyesight. You're looking for something different.

We've been taught to look for the external and make judgments based on that but if we can retrain that and then if we can gather our families together and help our children to begin looking at things that way, and when we see things that may be, that may have been taught to be viewed as stereotypic of a particular group of people, condemn the action and not the group that that person is associated with out of which those actions came. So it becomes a retraining and reiorentation. The pulpits have got to do that too, to reorient people to look at for a different thing. Because what you look at tends to – what you look for tends to be what you see. And we've gotten so used to through the media, through history, through bad experiences to see things one way and that can go you know away with the races that we look for that, expect that and react to that. So it's a change of perspective.

I remember a story of the, a boy who lost his contact lenses and he was looking for 30 minutes on the floor and he couldn't find it and finally his mother, he told his mother. His mother got down there and 30 seconds found the contact lenses. And he said, "How could you find the contact lenses so fast?" And she said, "Because we weren't looking for the same thing. You were looking for contact lenses, I was looking for $150.00." You know it all depends on what you look for because that would depend on what you see and how quick you see it.
**Dr. Bock**

You know you've just reminded me in the search for a story that goes back to my seminary days that illustrates I think the nature of the problem. And that is where I used to play, believe this or not, I used to play intermural basketball and a little point guard.

**Dr. Evans**

Jewish too.

**Dr. Bock**

Yeah what a deal.

**Dr. Evans**

You had God on your side.

**Dr. Bock**

That's exactly right. So we're playing basketball and we went out to a very well known Bible church in, near Garland, Reinhardt. We were playing in the gym and we had developed some relationships with some people located near the seminary, some African-Americans who we sometimes would take to go play pickup ball with us out at Reinhardt. And so this group of guys had all gone out. This was, I think it was my fourth year in seminary and so we're talking '70s now. And we got to playing and as we were leaving someone was missing something as we were leaving. And they had, they didn't realize they had misplaced it. They thought it was gone. They thought someone had taken it. Now guess what the first thought was in that group?

**Dr. Evans**

I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure.

**Dr. Bock**

They thought the guys we brought had been, were responsible. And indirectly were suggesting this and we were going, "No, no." and we stayed around and eventually he found what he had misplaced et cetera, and he realized it was all a mistake. But that's the instinctive reaction that you deal with. I don't feel that as a – on my end as a White person I don't go there. I'm not in that place; I don't feel that. But I apologized to those guys on the way back because you know they were put in a position that made them very uncomfortable as a result of this and what you were getting is almost an instinctive reaction to the way the culture has taught some of us to react and we have to almost fight against it to overcome it.
Well you do have to fight against it because you are – and a lot of times swimming upstream against background history, what your mother and daddy taught you, what your experiences have been, if you had negative experiences with a minority and you're Anglo, that's gonna color that. You know so and we also have to understand there's a real reality here and that is African-Americans have to function in a White world. You know, your work is going to typically be in that world and you have to, you don't have a choice. You have to do business in that world.

So but the Anglo world rarely has to function in an African-American context. It does it because it chooses to. African-Americans do it because you have to. And that dynamic colors a lot because Anglos are much less acquainted with my world. I'm much more acquainted with their world because I have to be. And therefore that colors the perspective and that colors who the power brokers are because you know, for my ministries to survive I have to be heavily dependent in our national ministry on stations that I don't own and have limited influence in, and for people I need to engage them in a way that doesn't so offend them that they're not willing to support me even though I'm African-American because that is the world in which we live. So you always as an African-American dancing a little bit.

You're negotiating with a majority culture.

You're negotiating with a major – now for other African-Americans who are offended by that and some are offended by that and I get often called an Uncle Tom. Well you know the question is do I want to stay where you want me to be or do I want to stay where God has called me to be? And to do that you do have to negotiate without compromising truth or principle.

Yeah you know it's interesting. Most or many Anglos I think who live in our culture don't understand what it is to be in a minority culture. I will say there are pockets where this can happen. And that is if you – as my children did. My children went – we chose to put our children in public school. They were a minority at Hillcrest High School here in Dallas. I mean they were, there were like 170 languages, there was only a 12 percent, I think it was 12 percent Anglo population in the school.
Everyone else was either from Latin America or they were African-American or they were from another foreign country. It was a real mix. And my kids got the experience. I actually thought it was a terrific experience for them of what it was like to be in a minority, what it was like for everyone around you to be different. My equivalent of that experience was when we moved to Germany.

We moved to Germany I didn't have the language, or at least not very well. I mean I could order food and do some, but didn't really have the language. I would go to a PTA meeting where our kids were in schools in the German schools and be struggling to get the language. I knew what it was like to be Hispanic in an American PTA meeting and not really know English. You know I experienced what that's like.

And there is a negotiating is also a word but there's also a coping that you have to go through. There's adjustments about here you have all these thoughts in your head and what you're thinking but you're not able to express it and connect with people in the midst of it, that kind of thing. And you realize you're on a different page and you're coming from a different place and all that goes into – there's a frustration with not being able to really show who you are in the midst of some of this.

*Dr. Evans* Absolutely. You have to adapt. People have to adapt all the time to different scenarios. The difference is that because African-Americans have to be in the White world and therefore have to adapt, and Whites don't have to be in the Black world and therefore don't have to adapt, the adaption is not equal.

*Dr. Bock* That's right.

*Dr. Evans* It's not an equitable adaption because it's not the same situation. And so that's just a reality. Now you can fight about it but that's the way it is. And since that's the way it is we need to learn spiritual truth that enables us to do that and not fight against that reality. That becomes a growth opportunity for both sides.
Dr. Bock

Exactly okay. Well we've kinda, you know I really wanted to lay the table out to start off with and try to communicate through this how African-American experience – and really if you – I could make the analogy. Although they're also slightly different dynamics for Hispanics who are here that they have a similar kind of – they've got a similar kinda dance that they've got to work through in order to do it. It's just hard when you're, when if I can say it this way, when the culture has been controlled by, for the most part by your race, it's hard to understand what it's like to not be in that box, to not be from that place and to function in that reality.

Okay, so we've kind of set that up. Let's talk a little bit about some of the actual logistical ministry that you've been doing because you've been very involved with the community at Ferguson. Why don't you tell us a little bit about that history and how you got involved and what you've been doing.

Dr. Evans

Well I wrote a book called, Oneness Embraced, which confronts the race issue from a biblical standpoint. And when this issue, and we've been working with churches cross-racially, cross-culturally across the nation to try to bring unity and harmony to various communities.

Dr. Bock

You've really been doing this from the very beginning right?

Dr. Evans

Yeah, yeah quite a long time. And so when this book came out Oneness Embraced and this issue in Ferguson came out, the church's pastor called me and asked me would I come and lead them in a plan for unification in this community that was now affecting the whole nation. And so I went there and on Sunday night I gave an address, a biblical case for unity through the church to affect the community. And then on Monday morning I gave a strategy. My theme was we need more than a protest, we need a plan.

And so we gave a three-point plan that we take across the nation. One is to call a solemn assembly of the churches. A solemn assembly in scripture was a sacred gathering where everything was falling apart and God needed to be reinvited into the midst of the chaos that his people were experiencing. And my view from II Chronicles 15:3-6 where it says, "In those days there was no true God, no teaching priest, no law. Citizen rose up against citizen. Nation rose up against nation. City rose up against city."
And then it says, "For God troubled them with every kind of distress." So if God is your problem only God is your solution. So we say we've got to reinvite God back into this context. And secondly, we've got to demonstrate not only the unity of the invitation of God, but a unity of servicing the community. And our big way of training churches to do that is through the adoption of public schools.

So we say let's adopt every public school in Ferguson and let's let a White church and a Black church adopt the same school so that we have unity through service, not through seminars. This won't come through another meeting. This will come as we get to know each other. So when you're in a war you don't care about the color, class or culture of the man fighting next to you as long as he's shooting in the same direction you are. We're in a war to save our families, to save our communities so let's shoot together and get to know each other as we serve somebody else.

So there's unity of service but you're blanketing the whole city if you're covering every public school. And then that leads to point number three. Because you've in unity called God back together, called God back in terms of his presence in the community, because you're serving together for the well being of the community, now you speak with a common voice to the community because you've earned that right through God, through service and now through the oneness of your voice. And so that gives a very simple way that they can blanket the community. So when they invited me to do that and they got excited that this was a plan, not just a meeting. And so it looks like they're going to adopt that and we'll provide all the training and resources they need to do that as we're trying to do across the country as well.

**Dr. Bock**

So what you're working to do is actually to build some relationships and actually demonstrate some effort at reconciliation and working for the common good and mutual service, loving your neighbor and those kinds of things.

**Dr. Evans**

Absolutely, absolutely.

**Dr. Bock**

That show the people's commitment to one another and your hope is that in those mixed relationships that emerge that if I can say it this way, color sheds, it sheds its skin and you get to know the person.
Absolutely. I was with Billy Graham a number of years ago at his home and he was very saddened about this fact. He said, "I'm very sad that Black and White churches will come together for my crusade, for the event but then they won't speak to each other again after the event is over because there was nothing that engaged them beyond the event. Evangelism was the goal. What I'm saying, when Jesus said in Luke Chapter 4, "I've come to bring good news to the poor," that he's not just talking about spiritual poverty, he's talking about the realities of life.

So why don't we work together to help the group that the Bible speaks of so much, the disenfranchised, the poor, the locked out, the left out. Why don't we get together and help that group? Now you're bringing together the expertise of the minority community because they typically live among and work among that group, but you're also bringing a resource base, both human resources, economic resources of people who will go across the sea but not necessarily across the street, and you're uniting them toward a group that God wants to touch anyway.

So when you do that you're affecting the common good about events, something everybody's concerned about. You're recognizing the presence and expertise of a group who's there anyway, works among them. You're bringing something to the table helping them to do an even stronger job and now we're impacting lives that need to be impacted in a social way. We're affecting the scope of the Gospel and not just the message of the Gospel.

Yeah and I think that sometimes people don't appreciate that one of the key goals that everything that God does through Jesus Christ is to actually affect reconciliation.

Absolutely.

And we tend to think of that reconciliation in personal terms. So we think about my being reconciled to the living God but actually that reconciliation is designed to extend into the relationships that I have with other people. And there are two passages, we might as well bring a little bit of the Bible into the conversation.

Why not. That would make us consistent.
Dr. Bock

There are two passages that really leap out at me, maybe three if I think about this.

Dr. Evans

Keep going.

Dr. Bock

Once we start, but that really do this in a powerful way. I think about the introduction of the ministry of John the Baptist in Luke in which the statement is made, you know he's going to turn Israel back to their God. But then in the next verse it says, "And he's gonna turn the fathers back to the children and he's gonna turn the righteous to the lawbreakers." And so there's this picture of a dual level of reconciliation.

And then when you come to his actual ministry in Luke 3 and you're in a passage that's unique to Luke, you don't have it in the other gospels about John the Baptist ministry and they get asked, you know John makes the exhortation, "Make fruit worthy of repentance." And we lose this word connection in the English because the verb in Greek is the Greek very poieo but make fruit worth of repentance and then they ask, "What shall we do," in English but it's the same verb in Greek. What should we do? What should we make if you want to keep it that way.

And in the three replies that John gives, none of them have to do with how the person is relating to God. All three of them have to do with how the person is relating to their neighbor. And normally when we think about the word repentance we think about our relationship to God but in this passage repentance is translated in terms of how you're interacting with someone else. And in the midst of thinking about that I thought you know, that's actually the way the Ten Commandments are structured. The Ten Commandments are structured and one table is about how to relate to God and the next table is about how I'm relating to others.

Dr. Evans

That's right.
And boil that down, you bring that down to the great commandment – all right we're on a roll now. And so you love God with all your heart, mind and soul, you love your neighbor as yourself. And what that all is telling us is that God is about the business of reconciliation. You go to Ephesians 2:11-22, another famous Jew and Gentile passage. The whole point of Jesus' death is to bring us into one new man and to take Jew and Gentile and make them able – two groups that racially hated one another. They tried to wipe, you know Gentiles tried to wipe the Jews out. And now Christianity says you’re going to love that guy. You're going to love that guy who tried to wipe you out. And in Christ there's a basis around which you can rally and come together and be one people.

Well absolutely, absolutely. Another story, let me just add another story on here, and that's the one I love, John 4, Samaritan woman.

Yeah absolutely.

Because Jesus meets her on common ground. He meets her at Jacob's well. He didn't go to Sychar. He meets her at Jacob's well and she notices that he's a Jew. She says, "How is it that you being a Jew as me a Samaritan for a drink? Don't you know what we do in this neighborhood?"

Yeah she didn't even mention the other issue, male and female.

Right, right, right. Oh that's another program.

Okay.

But what caught my attention is that she noticed while he was visibly Jewish, he wasn't acting like any other Jew she had ever met. He was acting un-Jewish. So Jesus didn't change what his father made him, he just didn't let what he was made in his humanity interfere with what he could be doing.

He crossed the line and she was shocked.
And that's what needs to happen. We need to shock some folk. When the story ends he has trained his disciples. He said, "Don't say four months and then comes the harvest. These Samaritan men are coming right now so let's get to work right now." So he trained his men and then the story ends with it says, "And he spent two days with the Samaritan men." Now we start out with him not even going to the city. In one conversation he's hanging out on the weekend.

So what that means is when we decide to become radical Christians we can change the social temperature. But what a lot of Christians want to do is carve out this piece called my soul, not deal with my humanity, save my soul for glory and have to wait till we get to heaven for you to interact with my person. Jesus was willing to start by drinking out of her cup, which opened up the door for the Gospel which led a whole town of males to himself.

Okay, so obviously reconciliation is a major value. It's one of the ways actually that I think the church has an opportunity to demonstrate something that obviously the world struggles with. I mean if there's a lesson of Ferguson it is that people struggle in the midst of diversity to overcome their race and their background. It's not something that happens very naturally. And you can go from city to city, I mean you know Dallas has its history and its stories; Ferguson has its history and its stories. New York City has its history and its stories. And you watch people naturally wrestle with this area. And when reconciliation actually happens it is so counter-cultural almost automatically that it stands out.

Absolutely and that is why the Church isn't standing out because it isn't in a broad way reconciling as the Bible would view it. And so we are dismissed and that is unfortunate since our claim is we have the answer.