

WYF_Ep93_BestOf_Pannell and Tisby

Rasool Berry: [00:00:00] Hey y'all, it's Rasool Berry. Thanks for joining me on this special *Best of Where Ya From?* episode. We went back and selected some of our favorite conversations to share with you, so that no matter when you started listening to *Where Ya From?*, you could check them out.

Today, I wanted to share our episode with Dr. William Pannell and Dr. Jemar Tisby from Season Three. Jemar had been on the show before, and when the opportunity arose to talk to him again with his mentor, we jumped at the chance. Interviewing Dr. Bill Pannell was a dream come true, not only because he was at the forefront of addressing the issue of racial justice within the evangelical tradition from the beginning, but because his knowledge and pastoral experience color his insights with profound wisdom. This was an intergenerational dialogue that was a real joy to experience.

October 11th, 2024, Dr. Pannell entered into the presence of the Savior he taught so many about at the age of 95. To honor his legacy, we knew we had to share his episode one more time. So thanks for listening and enjoy this *Best of Where Ya From?* with Dr. William Pannell and Dr. Jemar Tisby

Dr. William Pannell: The question that I faced after graduation, of course, was where now? What's next? Had no idea. There wasn't any room for me, any place at all for me in the denomination in which I was converted or nurtured. After all, that Bible school belonged to a denomination, and it saw itself as a missionary church.

They would go into all the world, all those colored people out there, there was no colored people in their own churches at home. They were not comfortable in a mixed world.

Daniel Ryan Day: This is *Where Ya From?*, a podcast for those who believe it's important to stop and listen before we speak. Join us as we ask another Christian thought leader, where are you from, [00:02:00] and discover how their life experiences and expertise, even if we may disagree with something they say, offer us an important perspective that's worth thinking about.

Rasool Berry: Hey y'all, this is Rasool Berry. Thank you for joining me again on *Where Ya From?*. Our conversation this week is with none other than Drs. William Pannell and Jemar Tisby. I felt so honored to bring these two dynamic leaders together and see how their stories parallel each other across generations.

From finding Christ in youth groups, to struggling to find their place in American evangelicalism, both Drs. Pannell and Tisby wrestled with what the gospel says about the racial injustice they experienced throughout their lives. A quick bio before we start. Dr. William Pannell is an author and professor emeritus of preaching at Fuller Seminary where he taught from 1974 until his retirement in 2014. Dr. Jemar Tisby, as friends of this [00:03:00] podcast already know, is an author of numerous bestselling books, as well as the president of *The Witness* and the cohost of the *Pass the Mic* podcast. You can find out more about both of them in the show notes or by visiting wherelyafrom.org. That's where y-a from. org. Now let's jump into our conversation with this dynamic duo as I start by asking Dr. Pannell, where are you from?

Dr. William Pannell: I'm from a little town in Southern Michigan called Sturgis. It's equidistant between Chicago and Detroit. It's about three miles north of the Indiana line. So I just barely made it into Michigan.

My mother was from Sturgis, born and raised there. My father was from Chicago. They met someplace, and stayed together long enough to produce two beautiful kids, me and my sister. Lovely people, then my parents divorced. So I never did quite know my father too well. But I stayed with my mother in Sturgis. Wonderful woman.

Rasool Berry: Okay, okay. Well, we [00:04:00] also have Dr. Jemar Tisby, someone who's not a stranger to the show.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: What up, what up, what up?

Rasool Berry: Those that weren't there the first time, why don't you tell the folks where you're from?

Dr. Jemar Tisby: Where I'm from, I am from north of Chicago. Grew up in the north suburb. So you got two black Midwesterners up in here.

Rasool Berry: One of the things that was really resonant with my story, and you know, the more I started to dig into my ancestry was seeing how my family was part of the great migration. Both my grandparents came up from Georgia, from South Carolina up to Philadelphia. And that shaped a lot of everything from the food that we ate to the culture that we had to just the overall context

I'm curious for you, Dr. Pannell, I know you've written about the great migration. Was there any kind of connection with that in terms of how your folks as a people ended up in Michigan?

Dr. William Pannell: My mother's side of the family came up from Virginia and Indiana. And, uh, my father, that tribe is really from the Virginias, the Jeters. So they came up through Ohio and then came into Michigan. Others came into Indiana and to Chicago.

Rasool Berry: How about you Jemar?

Dr. Jemar Tisby: Yeah. You know, one of my friends from Mississippi called Chicago, North Mississippi.

Dr. William Pannell: Hmm. Yeah. Sure.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: Cause if you black, you got connections there. Matter of fact, Emmett Till was born and raised in Chicago. But summer he was lynched, he was visiting relatives down in Mississippi, which was a common thing to do. Our family has connections in Mississippi and Louisiana, and, you know, we tend to think of the industrial cities of the Midwest and the Northeast as sort of the destination cities of the great migration.

But it was also cities out West. So, a lot of Black folks left the Southeast and came to places like California, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, those kind of places. So my family, we've gone West Coast as well as Midwest.

Rasool Berry: One of the things that I appreciated is that, is that you collaborated on a revision of a book [00:06:00] or a new edition. And in your foreword, you kind of gave a brief bio of Dr. Pannell's life and one of the things that it mentioned was that you, Dr. Pannell, became a Christian in your junior year in high school. I'd love to hear a little bit more about just your growing up. What was life like for you in Sturgis, Michigan?

Dr. William Pannell: Almost ideal. Just absolutely quite lovely. And my best friend was a youngster a few months older than me. He was white. And we formed a bond. It's an interesting story of two boys, black and white, growing up in this little town that was kind of segregated in a nice northern genteel sort of way.

And I was the oldest of eight children. My mother remarried. And to that marriage, there were, uh, six children, and I then became the oldest of eight. And, uh, Lord have mercy, we made it. Hallelujah. I got involved in the church largely because I started in Sunday school. There were a group of white friends, lived [00:07:00] across the street, invited my sister and I to come to Sunday school.

They called it the Gospel Hall at that time, actually, at Plymouth Brethren. And, uh, they taught us about Jesus, of course. And we learned little choruses, and we sang the song, we memorized verses. We were introduced to Jesus. When I was a junior in high school, though, after having dropped out of that Sunday school stuff, I was invited to a party at the residence of a local pastor.

His daughter was a member of my high school class. She invited me to come to this party. And I had no idea that Christians could laugh and dance and have fun. I had no clue that that was possible. The only people that I knew as Christians were older people whose arthritis wouldn't let them dance. Anyhow, I got hooked on that youth group, and that kind of coincided with what was going on in our family.

I was kind of a lost ball in high weeds, and finally my mother had to give up and take [00:08:00] refuge in a sanatorium. She had tuberculosis, and she eventually passed away. She never came home. By that time, I was a senior. But I'm just saying that, getting to that youth group, being embraced by that youth group, and I'm the only person of color in that youth group, we had a great time together. And then I was converted there in a revival meeting when I was a junior in high school.

Rasool Berry: You mentioned this unique friendship that you had with this white boy in your class, the connections that you had with his family. And yet it seemed to be in almost contrast, or in the context of what you've referred to as a genteel form of racial segregation. I'm curious about when did you become aware of that difference in terms of how you were experiencing life as a black kid with these close white friends, but also who were experiencing life differently?

Dr. William Pannell: Well, you experience it in subtle ways. I think it started for me watching my white friend, who a dear friend by the way, [00:09:00] a wonderful guy. I noticed that when we came out of the theater, he was always the Lone Ranger. And he always insisted on riding the white horse. So, I was the Indian, and my horse wasn't white, it was spotted, as you remember the story.

I can't speak for him, but I began to realize that something was going on. Nobody talked about it, but it was there. It was certainly there in the films that we enjoyed together. We spent an awful lot of time together. And of course, by the time you, you get to high school, and you begin to notice that girls are here to stay, and they're not your sisters. Oh my. And there aren't any black girls there. Oh my. And you're not unattractive. I might have been dumb, but I wasn't unattractive.

I scared a few parents half to death. They just thought that I was going to run off with their daughters. Oh, and to this day, I've yet to get my hair [00:10:00] cut in my hometown. Uh, little stuff, just little sorts of things that were intended to remind you that you had a certain place. You could help save the town's athletic reputation in two or three sports, but you were still one of them.

Rasool Berry: Hmm. Jemar, I'd love to hear a little bit more about your coming of age and coming of faith as well, like how that story connected with you.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: It parallels so much with what Dr. Pannell was saying. So again, where are you from? These two Midwest guys growing up black, and that is what comes across is this sort of polite ignorance, almost what they consider a benevolent silence.

So I also had an experience of coming to faith in youth group. A white evangelical youth group. And same experience, like this was a very welcoming, friendly community. Youth group for me was finally, okay, I have my group now. What was less apparent to me at that [00:11:00] time, what I was less conscious of, was the racial dynamic that I was in the group, but not of the group.

Cause I never completely felt that I was part of the group. It would show up in the ways that Dr. Pannell mentioned. First of all, the silence about issues at all. You would listen to the sermons or the Bible studies, and not think that racism was ever a problem. Because you never heard about it.

This is what folks got to understand when you ask like how black people end up in these spaces. They can be very friendly and welcoming. And I genuinely have still to this day, 20 plus years later, good, good friends that I met through that group. What is the issue is not the individuals, but the institutions. As we start looking at larger bodies of denominations and congregations and different traditions, that's where it really gets difficult to find your place and to make change.

Rasool Berry: [00:12:00] Gotcha. And speaking of institutions, where did you find yourself, Dr. Pannell, after you graduated high school?

Dr. William Pannell: I went to Bible school. And, uh, I had no clue why I was there. I told the pastor, why would I go to Bible school? I don't know anything about the Bible. And he, he suggested that might be a good reason to go, but I had no idea. I had no sense of direction,

But I soon found out that I was an odd man out. Not nearly because I was one of the only two black guys there, but because the young whites who were there came from a certain kind of evangelical culture which made them not only feel more at home, but also they owned the place in a way that I, I didn't feel I could.

I discovered the other day, I picked up the yearbook, and I was very much impressed with the yearbook. and what that staff put together. And they dedicated it to a broken world, not to a president or a vice president or a dean, but to a commitment to a broken world. [00:13:00] I was rather impressed with that. And I looked up to see who the guys were on that team and discovered that I was the editor.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Dr. William Pannell: I had forgotten, you know, how you, this ignorant kid, dropped off at the front door of this institution, a lost ball in high weeds. And four years later, I'm the editor of this and I'm saying, oh my goodness, how did that happen? What did it take? Well, I took a visit to the Dean's office to listen to him, remind me of who I was and to request that I not get too close to the girls.

Golly, Ned. I can't even think of one of them that I would have proposed to. I thought I was just merely being human and friendly. But girls are here to stay, and there were some attractive young ladies there. And I was not unattractive myself, to be honest with you.

Rasool Berry: I love how you keep putting that out there, by the way, like the confidence.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: He just speaks truth. He just speaks truth.

Dr. William Pannell: Well, I'm just saying, you know, us guys are not ugly. [00:14:00] We're attractive. And unfortunately for some of our white friends, that can be frustrating for them. They don't know whether to spit or whittle either. And the restrictions on my humanity inevitably becomes a restriction on theirs.

Rasool Berry: Could you expound on that? How a restriction on your humanity becomes a restriction on theirs?

Dr. William Pannell: Well, that's what racism is. Racism is a severe denigration and restriction upon someone's humanity. Without realizing that if you denigrate me as a white person, you also are admitting, without knowing it,

that you're not also yourself fully human as you could be. Because to be fully human is to be in relationships, is to be a partner with others in a common humanity. You cannot be a full human being in isolation.

Rasool Berry: Yeah, well put. Jemar, I'm curious about hearing how your own [00:15:00] connection from the youth group into your next stages of development and becoming fully human was supported, and in some ways maybe contention with the environment that you found yourself in.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: What was supported was my foundational instruction in the faith. So, the importance of reading the Bible, the importance of community, fellowship within Christianity, putting God first above all things. Those were foundational elements that my faith still rests upon today. When it came to my lived reality as a black man, it was beyond their range to address. I can imagine even some listeners listening now who are really thinking deeply about this talk that a school official felt compelled to have with a young black man about young white women, right?

Like, because that's so far out of their reality. And yet this is our lived [00:16:00] experience. So, so the work of translating that reality to my white brothers and sisters in the faith is not only exhausting, but you got to remember in this phase of my life, I'm a teenager. It's not like I'm an expert on these things.

So, I'm trying to figure out my own identity as a follower of Christ, as a black person, and all of these things, and as well trying to navigate this massive cultural, historical, social divide with the people who are supposed to be my spiritual brothers and sisters and closer, really, than blood relatives who aren't following Jesus.

So, it was mixed up. It was confusing, it was frustrating, and I couldn't name it. That was the hardest part. I couldn't really put my finger on what was happening to then be able to start to untangle it. So I just was in that mire for years.

Dr. William Pannell: Surely. I like what you're saying there. You couldn't name it. That was my experience. If I had told my white [00:17:00] friends at Bible school what I had experienced in the dean's office, they would have been upset. And they would be somewhat unbelieving. I had a good career in Bible school. I got fairly sophisticated. But I was still, uh, probably the best basketball player on campus.

I, I really was a personality and some of this stuff, if some of my classmates were to hear, uh, this conversation, they would not quite understand this. They

wouldn't believe it really. Cause I hadn't made it and, uh, so far that kind of took it for granted. I grew up and, uh, they helped me grow up.

That environment helped me grow up spiritually, intellectually, biblically, and all of that. And yet, keeping in mind, whatever experience we go through, the Holy Spirit understands it all. He's been there before. Ours is not all that unique in history, for crying out loud. It's our story, and it's the only one we have, but God's been working on this for a long time.

Rasool Berry: I mean, that's really apparent just in hearing your story. One of the things I want to pull out is you [00:18:00] mentioned that you really excelled in biblical studies. I'm really curious about what you were learning about the Scripture and about being what it means to be human. How did that influence or shape or help you interpret how you were being treated?

Dr. William Pannell: Oh, that's a very short walk. I got no help at all. I didn't get any help at all, and neither did my white friends. They didn't need that kind of help, because they were already first class. They owned the place. Their calling was simply to figure out how to go into all the world. And make sure that all the colored folks were saved.

They called 'em missionaries. And bless their hearts, they that that was really hot stuff. And it was terribly important. It was my roommate and I and, and later on, uh, I remember a young man drifted up from Jamaica. They were, every once in a while, somebody of color would show up on campus.

In that era of [00:19:00] theological study, the emphasis clearly was on the deity of Jesus, not His humanity. Not His humanity. But we're being saved from the liberals who didn't really believe that Jesus was divine. And so we spend our time defending His deity, ignoring the fact that his feet were planted firmly in the earth. If that were true, if Jesus were truly human and probably colored, amen. How could you not be with a birth in the Middle East? Well, good night. The implications of that are enormous. We never got to that.

Rasool Berry: I'm curious, Jemar, as you hear that story, and I know you found yourself also in religious instruction. I'm curious to hear how that framework of anthropology and theology kind of intersected with your ability to understand your own experience.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: Well, I love the way Dr. Pannell put it. There was no anthropology in our theology. And again, this is not out of [00:20:00] malice. It's more out of silence. It simply wasn't addressed. And especially at that young age when you're first learning the faith, if it's not addressed as central to what it

means to be a Christian and understanding of the image of God and understanding of God's eternal plan for a church that includes all nations and tribes and tongues, then you're not going to think it's important.

You're going to think it's an add on, if not a distraction from the gospel. So, it wasn't there, and again, I wasn't very sophisticated in my understanding of theology or the Bible, but I do remember sort of looking on my own and kind of latching on to anything that I thought would address something like racism. Would address something like the need for belonging in various groups.

So that was sort of on my own, but it was, [00:21:00] you know, following breadcrumbs of footnotes and sermons and a book here and there in the midst of everything else that I'm doing, trying to grow up as a high school college student, young 20 something.

So it was the lack, and it was the silence that was so difficult to manage. And then if it was addressed, it was addressed in this saccharine, very easy racism, bad, thank God we're past that, all the ground is level at the cross. We're all the same. You know, no real acknowledgement of the history and the brutality of racism in this nation, nor its present effects, which there still are.

Rasool Berry: So, what happens next, Dr. Pannell, after your fourth year, you're the editor in chief at the Bible School. What happens when you finish your schooling there?

Dr. William Pannell: Well, that's a good question. Uh, that is an important question. And the answer to that goes [00:22:00] back to one of your earlier questions about the impact of institutionalism on one's humanity. The question that I faced after graduation, of course, was where now? What's next? I had no idea. There wasn't any room for me, any place at all for me in the denomination in which I was converted or nurtured. After all, that Bible school belonged to a denomination, and it saw itself as a missionary church.

They would go into all the world, all those colored people out there, there was no colored people in their own churches at home. They were not comfortable in a mixed world. And they were certainly not comfortable, for that reason, when those worlds became more and more urban. It's the urbanization process that drove the white community further and further away from the very people they sent their missionaries to reach, their ancestors.

So I took the first thing that came along. My classmate says, Pannell, what are you going to do? I said, I'm going [00:23:00] home, I guess. He said, go with me. I'm going to go out and preach at a revival meeting in Dodge City. And so

you come, you lead the singing, I'll do the preaching. And so that's exactly what I did.

And that's how about 23 or 24 years of evangelistic work began. And those early years were in largely, almost exclusively white congregations. Small towns, churches, wonderful stuff. Good, great people. My own transition took place when the Lord led me to Detroit. And that's, that was the beginning of a whole 'nother world.

Rasool Berry: Before you go there, I just want to circle back because you said something that, you know, just kind of stopped me in my tracks. You said that there was no space for you. So I'm just trying to imagine you as a 21, 22 year old, having just finished your Bible school studies. How did you know, or when did you know that there was no space for you in this environment that it seemed to nurture you so much?

Dr. William Pannell: Well, for [00:24:00] one thing, nobody approached me about anything. I was a very talented guy. If I had been an executive in that institution, I would have made sure that a guy with that kind of talent was not lost in the supporting denomination. Several years later, I had a conversation with a man who was the head of the denomination.

And I told him that I had found a place that I felt the Lord was leading me. He was very happy that I had found that. And one of the reasons he was, of course, is because he knew there wasn't any place for me in that denomination. I was a lost ball in high weeds.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: I just find so many resonances with these stories. So in terms of the opportunities, I had a similar but different problem. Because of the trailblazing of folks like Dr. Pannell, I did have opportunities as a black man in white institutional spaces. I had a place as long as I stayed in my place. That's how it felt to me. For instance, I was [00:25:00] a banner waving, reformed black person back in seminary.

I mean, what is now known as *The Witness* began as the Reformed African American Network. I literally was recruiting, going to different conferences and trying to get people to come. I worked in the admissions office. I was literally an ambassador for this thing. So if there's anyone you would want to find a place for, it's somebody like that. Because it looks good for this historically white tradition to have a person of color out there, you know, essentially singing its praise and say, come on in the water's fine.

And as long as I was doing that. It was great. I had platform. I had opportunities, speaking opportunities, writing opportunities, all of that within these circles. And for a while, it seemed like, okay, this is great. But then a couple of things happened. So they killed Trayvon Martin in 2012. Then they killed Mike [00:26:00] Brown in 2014. *Black Lives Matter* roars to the forefront as the next wave of black freedom struggle. Whatever you think of, it brought these conversations about race roaring back to the forefront. And even white Christians had to address it. And it was in that mix that I started to see just how far, or how not far, many white Christians were willing to go, specifically on these racial issues.

And that highlighted to me that there's a way we can talk about race in these circles. There's a way we can say that we're all equal, and essentially the MLK quote that people love to quote throw around out of context, that be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. Like, there are so many folks who would just love to skip beyond the messy part of truth telling, confession, and repentance around racism, and just get to the reconciliation part. [00:27:00] That part, if you emphasize that end point, and skip ahead, skip all those chapters in between, then you're okay. But if you really want to get down into the nitty gritty to move beyond this peace, which is the absence of tension, and move to the peace which is the presence of justice, that's when it got sticky. And that's when I felt the pressure to conform or move on.

Rasool Berry: When we come back, we'll hear how an invitation to Detroit transformed Dr. Pannell's understanding of what the gospel has to say about racial justice, and set the stage for what Jemar does today. That's coming up next on *Where You're From?*.

Now let's get back into our conversation with Drs. William Pannell and Jemar Tisby.

Okay, [00:28:00] so I'm going to rewind and kind of do this the other way. Because you mentioned Dr. Pannell that your time in Detroit was a turning point. Tell us a little bit about that.

Dr. William Pannell: Well, I, I was in Ohio. And I was preaching in a congregation, probably at the annual revival meeting. I think they were Evangelical United Brethren that merged with Methodism and formed the United Methodist Church. While I was there, I learned that a pastor, one of the few, if not the only black guys who spoke on WMBI Moody radio, was preaching at a church nearby where I was. And I've always wanted to meet this guy.

The pastor of this church was a dear friend of mine. So I call him and just invited myself to lunch. And we had lunch together and I met this man from Detroit, his name is Berlin Martin Nottage, BM Nottage. And he invited me to Detroit to meet the Christians. And so I said okay. So I drove my little [00:29:00] '52 Chevy up to Detroit, and was introduced to a small group of believers for dinner at a lovely time.

I had no clue that that connection would change my life. And I met a woman at that dinner table that night who was just another woman, just another young lady as far as I was concerned. And I was just a dipstick kid as far as she was concerned. Had no idea we'd get married and live together for 66 years. What a woman. She passed away recently, but wow, what a woman. But that was the beginning. Detroit was a movement from mid-America. Small town. rural, mid America, white, all of that good stuff. To an urban world, Detroit, oh my. And then beyond that, to other cities.

Rasool Berry: Wow. And you mentioned the timeframe, fifties and then into the sixties. And this was another parallel that I [00:30:00] was hearing as Jemar shared about his own growth as a person, as a theologian, kind of happening in the context of this racial awakening. I'm curious about how you being in Detroit in the sixties with all that's happening in the country formed you.

Dr. William Pannell: Well, that took some doing. Formation does not occur overnight. And you're not always aware that you're being formed or reformed, really. What happened to me theologically, biblically, was my connection with this man, Nottage. And eventually, he gave me the key to his house, and I lived with him and his wife, Leah, and we got really close.

I drove him around, he was older, I was his chauffeur. And wherever we were, we had the Apostle Paul for breakfast, dinner, and supper almost. Ephesians, Colossians, that's where I got exposed to the genius of God in bringing [00:31:00] diverse peoples together in one body called a church. Radical stuff. Radical, radical stuff.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, I was working with, uh, young people and I got married in 1955 to this young lady and we settled in Detroit. But Detroit was changing in ways that we didn't even know. When power brokers decide to change things, they don't always tell people. They build freeways, and those freeways are usually maneuvered through poor neighborhoods, people who have no power. We watched Detroit begin to change. That were those freeways which made it possible for white folks to continue to run this place. And not live there anymore. In other words, Detroit became gradually a black city.

The best thing that ever happened to Detroit when we were there, as far as race relations, I think, was, uh, when the Detroit Tigers won the World Series. And you have [00:32:00] these black guys out in left field. It was an integrated team. It proclaimed that we could all get along together. Chrysler couldn't do that. General Motors couldn't do that. Nobody else could do that. Neither Protestant, Catholics, or Jews could promote that thing effectively. That's got to tell you something about the dynamics of a city.

Rasool Berry: You know, it's almost as if I'm hearing two different types of theological training that's happening in two very different places. One, this sense of robust experiences that you get at the youth group or in Bible school, or even with this incredible mentor, uh, BM Nottage. But then this other teaching about humanity and its possibilities and its limitations that you're getting in the city.

Jemar, I'm curious about if that resonates with your own journey and kind of what you've experienced over the last 10 or so years.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: So, my awakening certainly came in waves, but one of the big ones was when I became a teacher in the Mississippi Delta on the Arkansas side, in one of the poorest [00:33:00] counties in the nation.

So you can think of all of the issues that come with poverty, from single parent homes, over incarceration, food deserts, lack of health care, under education, underfunded education, all of that. Walked into my classroom on two feet every day, and it was in interacting with my students, their families, and the community that I began asking questions of my faith.

What does my faith have to say about justice? And in these white evangelical circles that I was in, again, the silence. It's not that there wasn't charity, and it's not that there wasn't mercy ministries, but there was relatively little talk about justice or injustice. And how whole systems had been intentionally set up to advantage some people and disadvantage others.

And now I was seeing that, not in an abstract sense, but living the reality of the effects of that in a [00:34:00] community that was racked, racked. A generational poverty. The Delta is cotton country. And so you can rewind the clock that goes all the way back to slavery, sharecropping, convict leasing, mechanization of farming, where all these sharecroppers lost their jobs, no new industries coming in.

The industry's they're shutting down as of basically the 1970s, so the biggest employers still are health care and the school system, just because that's where a

lot of people are. Both of which are under resource. And I'm sitting there as a follower of Jesus saying, well, if I'm supposed to love my neighbor, then what does that look like in this context? And where do I get the tools to understand this theologically and take action?

And I was just finding a dearth of resources in the tradition that I had learned the faith in. And so that sets me on a journey that eventually ends up with me as getting a PhD in history, and writing about this stuff, and [00:35:00] becoming an advocate for racial justice not as a distraction from the gospel, but as integral to it. As integral to what it means to love our neighbor and trying to take seriously Jesus's words to care for the poor and the orphan and the widow in real time in real context.

Rasool Berry: You quote in your book, *How to Fight Racism*, this is Dr. Jemar Tisby. “Love is the fiery heart beating at the center of the urgent call for justice in our world. Without love, there could be no justice.” So break that down for us. How did you get there? Even how did you get to see that connection? Between that anthropology that was missing in our theology and to making a statement like that?

Dr. Jemar Tisby: You know, brother Rasool I think we make it too complicated sometimes. When Jesus was asked what's the greatest commandment, He kept this simple. Jesus said love God love your neighbor as yourself. [00:36:00] And to me, as Dr. Pannell said, the Holy Spirit sets this whole thing up. I didn't know it at the time, but even though I became a Christian a white evangelical context, the context of my community was extremely racially and ethnically diverse. My school was 50 percent Latino.

The signs downtown were in Spanish. I had friends who were Filipino, Puerto Rican, Honduran, Mexican, black, white. And what that did on a subconscious level was teach me diversity is good. When I heard my friend speaking Spanish or Tagalog, whatever it might be, I was like, man, I wish I had a second language.

It wasn't a fear of the other. It was an appreciation of the other. And then the way God set this whole thing up is to where I've had many diverse experiences. So then I went to undergrad at Notre Dame where black Americans were about 3 percent of the undergrad student body. I was the only black person on my floor surrounded by these white Catholics.

That was a [00:37:00] brand new experience for me. Then I go to a place like the Delta. Which even as a black person, it's a culture shock. Absolute culture shock. So I've been blessed with all of these different experiences with different kinds of people that have, I think, given me an appreciation for the beauty of

diversity, the tension that's often there, but the worthwhileness of the struggle of trying to stay together and not homogenize or assimilate in the process.

So where love is the beating heart of justice, I always say we have to have a priestly proximity to people, particularly suffering people, because that breeds empathy, and empathy births love. One of the things I quote in the book, *How to Fight Racism*, Cornel West, justice is what love looks like in public.

The problem of much of White Christian practice is so individualistic. It's so focused on personal piety without a sophisticated theological, practical [00:38:00] analysis of justice, and what it takes to right the wrongs that are present in whole systems. Many deny that systems can be flawed in that way. So, one of the things that I try to do is say, listen, social justice, quote unquote, however you want to turn it, is nothing to be frightened of.

It's nothing that's contra to the gospel. In fact, it's a clear explication of the gospel in action. And if you want to think of it this way, if it helps you to think of it this way, because you've been discipled differently, justice is what love looks like in public.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. So good. And Dr. Pannell, I'm curious, you mentioned in your book that you work with Dr. Tom Skinner in the 1960s. And I think it'd be important to share with people who he is, and what was the significance of Dr. Skinner and his ministry in your life and the lives of others.

Dr. William Pannell: I had met Skinner in Detroit. The, uh, [00:39:00] churches of which I was a part decided to have a small version of a city-wide event in Detroit. Black churches and so forth. And we invited Skinner to be the speaker. I didn't see him again until a year or two later. Skinner, I think, was invited to the city of Newark. He'd invited me to join his organization, and I agreed to do so. That was our first series together. And it was a kind of a typical evangelistic event.

I led the singing and handled the platform. Skinner did the preaching. I thought it was an important thing. We got there a year or so after Newark had been terribly impacted by rioting. The place was still smoking.

Rasool Berry: For those who may not be aware of some of the dynamics that came with the 60s, especially in 1968, kind of walk us through that. Cause for most people looking at something like destruction in people's own community, that's quite a mystery why someone would [00:40:00] set on fire buildings or their own neighborhood. Jemar, you want to take a crack at that?

Dr. Jemar Tisby: Yeah, it's, it's, it's a critical point. The historical milieu at that point is you're getting a sense in many sectors of the black community that the Civil Rights Movement isn't bringing about the kind of change they hoped for.

So we've had the Montgomery Bus Boycott, we've had the March to Selma, Birmingham, we've had '64 Civil Rights Act, '65 Voting Rights Act. We think like that's the goal. And that's going to really shift things. But in the inner city, which formed particularly due to the great migration and the forced concentration of black people in certain communities that were underinvested, you're getting issues like, for instance, one of MLK's later campaigns is in Chicago. And basically, you've got rat infested apartments, you have absentee landlords that are charging exorbitant prices, you've got all [00:41:00] kinds of exploitation going on. Underemployment, undereducation, you name it. And the civil rights movement, it doesn't appear is changing the conditions there. So then you get a lot of uprisings.

Dr. William Pannell: And they were almost always triggered by an encounter with the police. Which a black community kind of viewed as a foreign presence, a police force to be sure, and parts of which we were grateful for, we needed all kinds of protection and so forth. But an army of occupation.

So you take the riot in the fifties that shook the city of Los Angeles. Later on, the Rodney King, go across the country. You get *The Kerner Report*. *The Kerner Report* documented these problems. There wasn't a black person in the world who read that thing would almost say ho hum. Our white friends couldn't understand how that could be. They couldn't believe there was that kind of an America. We're living in different Americas. I remember [00:42:00] one time there was a wonderful layman who pulled together a group of Christians, tapped the shoulder of some influential pastors, and invited Skinner and myself to do an evangelistic event in Chicago.

And we were inexperienced and dumb enough to say yes. But you were in a city, an urban center, that even Martin King couldn't crack. Chicago's a different ballgame. That's a different world. That's a different city. And we were there as green as grass, dumber than I'll get out. We had no idea what we were getting into.

This goes back to your original question about Skinner and myself. Somewhere in the process, when I first met Skinner, and by the time we got to Chicago and beyond, it became clearer and clearer to Skinner that a typical revivalistic Billy Graham style sermon didn't cut the mustard. We touched bases with some of these young people who were in colleges, some of the black colleges. [00:43:00] And Skinner, of course, ended up making history at that celebrated event at Urbana.

Rasool Berry: And just to be clear, you helped Dr. Tom Skinner develop a more fully orbbed gospel understanding and presentation that he then became really known for throughout evangelical spaces.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: I was just going to jump in because he won't talk about it himself. But yes, I really view Dr. Pannell as the sort of theological rocket fuel that helped Skinner in particular, but black evangelicals more broadly, make the connection between the Jesus they followed, the justice that Jesus compels us to live out, and the actual social problems and issues that real people, particularly black people were facing, in the 1960s and 70s.

So, you know, Skinner was an eloquent speaker, and an incredibly charismatic figure from what I [00:44:00] understand. But a lot of his thinking was shaped by Dr. Pannell's ability to connect theology with pressing and urgent issues of justice in his day. And that's a tradition that I think we should all pay attention to and try to emulate.

Rasool Berry: Got it. So I just asked Jordan how LeBron influenced his game. The opposite. But I do want to get to Fuller. How did you get to Fuller and what have been some of the things that you learned about the fullness of the Gospel that caused you to speak into these social issues the way that you have?

Dr. William Pannell: Hmm. Oh, that's a splendidly, uh, complicated story.

As to how I got to Fuller, uh, I'm not always sure. I, I grew up, as did Jemar, when a lot of these white institutions, Bible institutes and colleges, seminaries wanted one of us. And I mean one of us. On the board, maybe on the [00:45:00] faculty, we were scarce as hen's teeth. At one point, I said, Skinner, you take that part of the society, which is east of Chicago, east of Pittsburgh, maybe.

I'll take the part that goes from Pittsburgh to L. A. And we kind of divide our talents. Because they're going to invite you to be this or that. And they did. Same thing was beginning to happen to me. I had invitations to do this. I became a lecturer at Trinity Divinity. And I'd get on a plane from Detroit, where we lived, and fly over there and do my courses.

I began to realize, though, uh, I'd been with Skinner while I'd been doing this evangelistic stuff. I traveled a lot. I was kind of tired, I think. And I began to realize, after having lectured at different schools, that I might really like, uh, to settle down. Fuller had already invited me to serve on the board.

And so, uh, I had been a member of the board of trustees. And I enjoyed it immensely, and I began to realize, as a member of the board, that if I were ever

going to a [00:46:00] seminary, after having visited several of them, Fuller was the most congenial one for me. And fortunately, I was married to a woman that was visionary as she was conservative, and she knew I needed to change. She was willing to make it possible for me to come to California.

Rasool Berry: So, let me flip this, Jemar, and let me ask you, since you clearly have sat under Dr. Pannell and his teaching. What's some of the rocket fuel that you talk about in terms of his theological perspective, that has been really helpful in understanding how the Imago Dei, how this aspect of our humanity ties into who we are and why we should care about issues that affect all of humanity.

Dr. Jemar Tisby: First of all, Dr Pannell's life is a testimony. And he has a lived theology that we can learn from. One of the things that amazes me is through all that he's seen, particularly from the [00:47:00] 1960s on up to today, that would compel him to write books like *My Friend the Enemy* and *The Coming Race Wars*, through all of what he's seen in terms of racism in the United States and racism from other Christians, he has maintained fellowship with all kinds of people.

So he walks the talk. He has somehow had the patience, the resilience, the love to remain in authentic community with people who he had every earthly reason to walk away from. So I think what's most instructive is here is a saint who is keeping the faith and running the race. And I just think you can't underestimate that. You cannot, um, get that simply from reading a book or thinking your way into it. You have to see it lived out. And he's done that for [00:48:00] literally decades. So we have so much to learn from him. I come out here literally just to talk to him, just to hear about his life.

And here's the thing, God has granted us the grace to have folks like that here and there in our own lives. So I would encourage listeners, talk to the old saints. Talk to the folks who have lived a little. Talk to the folks who have been through some things that seem really unbelievable and like they would just about break your spirit. And yet they're not only still here, but they still love the Lord and they still love people. That's the most important thing I learned from Dr. Pannell.

Dr. William Pannell: Jemar is a wonderful man and uh, I'm glad he's out here in and out. And, and he, along with others, I just hope somehow or other, I would love to see a group of young men and women of his generation get together. I'd love to see that happen. Wow would that be a gathering?

Rasool Berry: That's great. Well, I'll get y'all out here on this. I'm curious from both of your perspectives, how do you see [00:49:00] what each of your contributions are or have been complementing each other?

Dr. William Pannell: I would really like at some other time in your schedule to have one of the sisters with us. Because you can begin to understand the whole of this without the voice of God through our sisters. But the trick is, believe me now, the trick is to do your thing, to have integrity and to let it go, to let it go. Cast your bread upon the waters. I have no interest in starting a company, being anything at all.

I have no clue about anything. What I've got, God gave me, and I just pass it on. Praise the Lord. And then go work on my golf a little. I don't know if that sounds simplistic, and it is in a way. But along the way, you meet people like Jemar. There are not a lot of them. We gotta find ways to manufacture that, so that there are [00:50:00] more.

Rasool Berry: Amen. Jemar, how about you?

Dr. Jemar Tisby: We talk a lot about diversity in terms of racial, ethnic, cultural diversity. But there's also a generational diversity that we need to talk about as well. We have a lot to learn as people who are in many ways, still growing up. I don't care what generation you are. We're always still growing up.

And there are people who have walked similar paths and have some wisdom to share with us. And I thank God that I stumbled upon Dr. Pannell in my historical research. And that was, that was initially what brought us together is, my work as a historian. But then I also get to, in some ways, interact with living history in Dr. Pannell and these folks who, who have some experience with life and with God.

So again, it's an encouragement. I'll bet there's somebody on your listeners' mind who they can think of, like, I would really like to sit down [00:51:00] and talk with them. I say do it. Pick up the phone. Visit the house. Just do it. Because there's so much to learn. And what started out more as an academic, scholarly endeavor, I say with pride that Dr. Pannell is my mentor. And I don't know if he agreed to that, but that's how I see him. And I've learned so much from him.

We've talked about everything from race to justice, to faith, to family. And there's not a lot of people I can open up to about those things who will really understand. And I see our journeys as being very similar, but different. And he's able to shape me in ways that I think are really helpful. Iron sharpens iron. So

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one person sharpens another. That's the way God has said, this is a gut. We're a family and we've got elders in the faith that we need to learn from.

Rasool Berry: What a privilege to learn from the wisdom and experience of Dr. Pannell, and to see how his work is being carried on by Dr. Jemar Tisby. I hope you connect with an elder in the faith. [00:52:00] And take the time to drink deeply from the well of their experience.

This is *Where You're From?*. I'm Rasool Berry. And remember, it's not just about where you're at. It's also about where you're from. This show was produced by Daniel Ryan Day, Ryan Clevenger, Mary Jo Clark, and Jade Gustafson. And was engineered by Gabrielle Bowerd and Kevin Burgess. I also want to thank Caleb and Keno for their help in supporting and promoting where you're from. Thanks y'all.

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