

“Race, Discipleship, and the White Church”: A Conversation with David Swanson (part 1)

[Please note that the first few minutes of the session were not recorded due to technical difficulties. The opening question: “Tell us a bit about yourself and how you came to write a book on race and discipleship for the white church.”]

David Swanson: My wife and I have been married for over 20 years and we have two sons who may or may not come bursting through the door at any moment. Fingers crossed. We'll see what happens there. Elliot is 11 and Winston is six. We live in Hyde Park on the south side of Chicago. We planted a church 10 years ago just a little north of us in a neighborhood called Bronzeville. And so that's the majority of what I get to spend my time on is with the church community. I'm a missionary kid, grew up in Venezuela for nine years, in Ecuador for another two years. And my dad was a missionary pilot. And then we moved back to Southern California when I was in high school.

And I think in some ways those years overseas and kind of a cross-cultural setting probably for me in some ways that I certainly wasn't aware of at the time to make me a little bit more predisposed to thinking about the church as a very diverse people from around the world. But then also the years in Southern California, again, I think in ways I wasn't aware of at the time, were significant for me. These were the years of the Rodney King beating and the O.J. Simpson trial. These were the years in California where immigration was a really contentious topic, legislation being passed and banned, the children of undocumented immigrants from attending public schools and so on. And so I think in some ways that was sort of my introduction to to race in America coming back from South America.

David Swanson (cont): And my wife and I moved from North Carolina up to a weekend for me to go to graduate school about 20 years ago and started to get to know the city through some friends who were from the South Side and started to understand some of the dynamics related to race and segregation that have shaped Chicago. And then when I came on staff at a multiracial church on the north side of the city, that was really kind of a deep dive, more theologically, biblically into thinking about the witness of the

church and what it means to be salt and light in a country and in a city, in a society that has been intentionally segregated for ever, that has kind of made racial injustice sort of part and parcel of what it means to experience American life.

David Swanson (cont): And then we planted the church on the south side in a majority African-American neighborhood. One of the tremendous gifts of that for me was relationships with pastors and neighbors and other leaders in our community who also have really helped me think biblically and theologically about what it means to be a Christian, to be the church has given me access to ways of worshipping and thinking about Christian identity that I just had never experienced before. In my majority, white and even multiracial settings of the kind of testimony of the African-American church in our community has significantly shaped me.

So I think all of that is sort of background to maybe four or five years ago, starting to really notice that the different ways that people in my community and our church were experiencing a lot of the kind of political discourse, rhetoric and policies that were being proposed or passed and then how our friends in majority white Christian settings were experiencing those exact same moments often just felt like completely two completely different realities. And as I would bring this up with white Christian friends, I was often met with a kind of disinterest in the kind of lived experiences of people of color and Christians of color in particular. And that that was a little concerning to me. And it made me curious about what what discipleship is at work in our in our white churches. And why is it that for the most part, that discipleship does not seem to be leading white Christians into deeper solidarity with the rest of the body of Christ? Why is it that our discipleship seems to be leaving undisturbed the kind of racial status quo that is so common in our culture? How is it that that is also OK within our churches such that in my experience, the majority of white Christians don't even you don't necessarily even have a desire for something different with the kind of lived experiential solidarity that we find in the New Testament? And particularly so that was sort of the question. And that's what I brought to Ethan over lunch one day. And he said, yeah, there might be something there, there might be something there worth exploring. And so I'm grateful to him and to others who sort of helped kind of point this project in the direction we ended up going.

Amanda Rosengren: Yeah, thank you. What has the reaction been like? I know your book came out in the midst of a pandemic and in the midst of all this. What has the reaction been like across the board? I'm sure there's lots of different reactions.

David Swanson: There's been lots of different reactions. That's true. I honestly thought that it would be a pretty small pool of people who would be interested in the conversation. There were particular pastors I had in mind as I was writing a friend of mine pastors a great church in Princeton, Illinois, which is about two hours west of Chicago here. And it's a majority white setting and a small a very, very small city in a vibrant cultural setting. And lots of good conversations with his friends over the years about what is what, if any, role does his church play when it comes to racial reconciliation. And so I believe that he was open to it and is curious about that. So I thought that would be the person who would be interested in this book and hope. And I think he has and others like him. But I think you're right that the kind of moment that we have found ourselves in has made. I don't know if people are just more open or a little bit more tender to some conversations that we might have been closed off to before. And so I've been pleasantly surprised by the folks who have been genuinely interested in wanting to to have a conversation that I think we we just haven't seen ourselves having a role in in the past. So that's the shift that I feel like I'm watching happen right now iswhite Christians coming to to say that, in fact, we do have a important role to play when it comes to reconciliation and racial justice. And for many years, that was not my experience.

I would have people come and say, I love that you're doing this racial reconciliation thing with your church. That's really cool. But my church is mostly white or my town is mostly white. And so there's not really anything that we can do. There's no real role for us to play. And that's what I think is beginning to shift. And that's what's very encouraging to me is I think the Holy Spirit is opening up our eyes to say that the reconciliation of the church is all of our responsibility and there's none of us who doesn't have a way to contribute to that. And so I'm hoping for more and more of that.

Amanda Rosengren: Yeah, that's one of the things I appreciate so much about your book is the framework of it, I think I've realized that I, in the settings I've been part of, racial reconciliation has always been sort of this elective or this track or something that you don't engage in until you have people of color in your church.

Amanda Rosengren (cont): And we, as I think I've told you, we're a majority white church. We have a few folks of color, but I've really appreciated the framework of solidarity, which we're going to get to. So that certainly resonates with me, what you shared. And before we go much further, as I said we're a majority white church, but not all of us are white. Not all of us are white on this call. We are talking more about whiteness today. But I wondered, what would you like to say to the people of color who are on this call or who watch the recording later?

David Swanson: Yeah, I really appreciate that question a lot. And it's it's something that I feel very deeply because my my church is about a third white, third Asian-American, a third African-American. And so I was writing from a place where I was really wanting to honor our community. I didn't want to be tone deaf in any way, which was a very real possibility. And so there were people in our congregation gracious enough to kind of read the book as I was writing it and kind of provide their feedback so I could say a couple of things. One, when we're talking about white ness, racial whiteness or cultural whiteness, we're talking about something that is felt and experienced not only by white people as as the majority culture in this country. Racial whiteness is something that is felt by and influences all of us. And and generally, people of color know this more than white people do. And so I think any time we're talking about something like this, we are talking about something that can't simply be limited to those of us who are white.

But then secondly, I think for people of color who kind of willfully participate in majority white congregations or ministry spaces, there is a kind of particular experience that is often felt by those those women and men. And one of my hopes in writing this book was that it could be a resource where that person could recommend it to their friends or community members and say, listen, I don't always have to be the person who's telling you everything about race. You know, there's some there's some reading that you can do. There's some digging in that you can do as well. And maybe that provides that a kind of more stable platform to have further conversations or to be able to build more intentional relationships and community on.

So often those of us who are white kind of assume that we can come to friends of color with sort of all of our questions or all of our dilemmas or all of our sort of emotional turmoil. And you know that that that's a pretty heavy burden to continue to kind of place

on somebody out. Now, thankfully, there are there are some women and men is that I want to be that person for you. And that's great. But but I'm hopeful that that this can be a helpful resource for for those kinds of folks as well to recommend.

Amanda Rosengren: That's great. Thank you. Yeah. Thank you very much. So why talk about being white and why is it hard to talk about? For some of us, this is review, for some of this this might be brand new. I know I did a little teaching as part of our original series on whiteness. And it was hard to say. It was hard to say, "we're going to talk about about whiteness." I felt like it was almost like a dirty word. So why do you feel it's important to talk about it? And what would you like to share with us about that.

David Swanson: Yeah, and I'm going to maybe try to make a quick connection to your previous question as well. I have learned more about whiteness from people of color than any white person, from friends, colleagues, authors, people who have had to understand whiteness because they have lived on the other side of its benefit and privileges. And so they have had to be aware of it in ways that I just simply haven't had to. And so I do think that's another significant role that people of color play in these congregations, particularly when they choose to be desired. So your question is why, right? Like, why do we have this conversation? And for me, I'm asking that as a Christian, I'm asking why, as Christians would we would we talk about racial whiteness? And it's a long answer. And so, Amanda, you just going to have to cut me off here at some point.

I think to start with, it's because race is not a God given reality. Race is not something that we find in scriptures simply because people didn't think in terms of race when the scriptures were written. You know, race historically is a relatively recent construction, a relatively recent way of categorizing the world.

And the real kind of heartbreaking thing as we study that that trajectory of race being constructed is how how deeply involved Christians were in that process and how deeply involved the kind of heretical Christian theology was in that process of first detaching Jesus from his Jewish particularities, then kind of downplaying the election of Israel to kind of recenter a European identity and and and sort of framework for viewing the world tied then to a kind of colonial expansion project that is often, you know, goes part and parcel with the missionary work.

David Swanson (cont): And so as Christian people, I think it's just important that we are able to, with some level of specificity, able to articulate that story and to say that as Christian people, we have had a, a significant role in the construction of race as we know it today.

And that's a kind of hard thing to have to admit. But it's also always going to be a half truth if we don't include that element of the story. And so I do think as a Christian, I have a particular responsibility to understand this as we pursue a kind of alternative to the racial status quo, that that's one a historical reason, too. I do think we find very clearly articulated in the New Testament an assumption that Christians are going to be reconciled across cultural lines of hostility and division and that this is something we're working really hard for. This is something worth arguing about. This is something we're fighting for. This is something worth calling out your leaders publicly for, as Paul does with Peter.

There's there's this assumption that what was accomplished on the cross was was so comprehensive that we simply cannot live up to the passage you read this morning. We cannot live according to the patterns of this world any longer. And yet, when it comes to race, I do think most of us who are white and Christian have conformed to the patterns of this world. We we have not seen the racial status quo as being something that opposes the kingdom of God. And so we basically kind of draw that right in with us to our communion and to our fellowship.

And we are content to know that there are other Christians out there, that there may be a part of our denomination as part of our fellowship in some way. And we will have particular moments where we'll celebrate to tell those stories. But in terms of a lived reality, of a kind of experience or fellowship, I actually just don't even think we want it. I don't think it's something that would keep us awake at night that we don't have. And I think this is really, really problematic.

David Swanson (cont): I'll end with this when Paul writes to the church in Corinth about the Lord's Supper, about Holy Communion, and he he basically says you're bringing with you the socioeconomic stratifications that are common and normal to everyone else around your Breena's with you to the table. Those of you who have

wealth are full to overflowing and a little bit tipsy when you come to the table. And then there are others in your communion who are literally hungry because they don't have enough to eat. And you're bringing all of this to the table.

David Swanson: And you're not disturbing any of that. You're not interrupting any of it. And I think from my vantage point, I think how horrible and clearly that's I'm a part of a much more egalitarian society that at least we try to cover those things up. Right. We wouldn't flaunt them in that way. And yet for them, it was this is just how things are. This is the way things work. I have to imagine that the apostle Paul would say very similar things to us today about how we bring the assumptions of the racial status quo with us to the table and about how we haven't really expected the gospel to interrupt racism and racial injustice in our own experience of segregation. We've not expected the gospel to interrupt any of that. And so we bring that with us to the table in a way that I just I don't know if it can actually resonate with what we find in the scriptures. So, again, for those of us who are white and Christian, I think these are these are some of the reasons why we want to be able to talk with a little bit more courage about whiteness and about the way that it has impacted us.

Amanda Rosengren: Yeah, thank you, that's really helpful. So there's a history here, especially for us as Christians, that we need to reckon with. There's our present reality of things that we bring with us that we don't question, that we haven't changed. I wonder, why is that? We all of us, I think all of us on this call, every Christian I would talk to would say, yes, you know, racial reconciliation is in God's heart, and yet it doesn't happen. Or and there are still these big, big gaps in terms of understanding and practice. What are some of the cultural tools that you're learning for those of us who are white, bring in that, maybe keep that from happening that we don't question, that we need to question.

David Swanson: Yeah, and I've had that experience that you mentioned earlier of even having a hard time and vocalizing some of this. Right. Like like even saying I'm white or we need to talk about whiteness. We just that's not that's not language that we're familiar with.

David Swanson (cont): For many of us, it feels foreign to us. And I think if we existed in spaces that have seen colorblindness as the goal, then it's even harder because we think, are we supposed to talk about these sort of particularities related to race?

So there's all sorts of reasons why this is challenging. But, yeah, you mentioned these these tools. And in the book, I, I borrow heavily from the work of Michael Emerson and Christian Smith. And some of you will be familiar with their book, *Divided by Faith*. And I think they're coming out with an updated edition this year. And I had the chance as I was working on this project to talk with with Dr. Emerson and just try to kind of make sure that I was really grappling with what they identified there. And they say that there are three tools. They call them socio-religious tools in the white Christian toolbox that make this work really difficult. And so maybe I can just talk about them real briefly here. The first is individualism. The second is relationalism and the third is anti-structuralism. So individualism is this is this understanding of the world that sees, for the most part, everything in terms of of a kind of autonomous individuality. And so we we struggle to think in terms of structures or societies or systems. And so any any appeal to addressing racial injustice or racism is going to have a very individual effect. And so you might hear somebody say the you know, the answer to racism is the gospel. And generally what that person means is the answer to racism is individual salvation.

And I'm 100 percent in for individual salvation. But that that that view sort of betrays this this highly individualistic assumption that we don't really need to bother with how societies operate or how systems impact people.

Because really the the thing that's going to fix this is going to be individual people are saying it betrays a particular kind of theology. It also, I think, obscures our history in which there were lots of saved people who, for example, owned slaves or saved people who participated in the Jim Crow South or, you know, on and on you could go. Relationalism is the idea that that the the core issue when it comes to racial injustice is that individual relationships have been fractured, that we're not we're not we're not friends, that we're not with one another. And so the Promise Keepers movement worked really hard on this one where where they would bring pastors of color, men of color together with white men.

David Swanson (cont): And they would address this and they would they work really hard to kind of bridge these relational gaps. And again, relationships are super important, however, not necessarily the underlying causes of racial injustice. And so a slight tangent here, but one of the things that multiracial churches like mine have to really be careful about is that white people have been formed in this kind of relational tool, will see a diverse room and think, oh, we've really made a lot of progress or they will have a few friends of color and they'll think, OK, we've really made a lot of progress because I have these relationships. Of course, those same people of color can still be impacted by the underlying causes of racial injustice. You can have a white friend as a person of color and still get very much be impacted by a racialized society. And so as as white Christians, as we lean really hard just to do that relational tool, we can avoid addressing some of the underlying causes of injustice. And then the final tool is anti-structuralism. And this is the kind of allergy to thinking in terms of structures and and systems. Because of that individualistic and relational tendency, white Christians are often really skittish when it comes to any kind of language that has to do with society. And so some of you all may have had this experience where if you mention justice, people are OK. You mentioned social justice. People start to get really nervous because they can. Now, you're you may be you're you're letting people off the hook or your you're not valuing individual responsibility or so on and so forth. And so that instinct as well can make it really difficult for for white Christians to actually address what is a social problem. It's not simply an individual problem. It's a problem that has infected entire system, societies and structures.

And so we need to have an imagination for that. So that was a really long answer. And I hope I'm getting at the question.

Amanda Rosengren: Oh, absolutely. I know Emerson and Smith. That was one of those books that I read early on in my journey. And that's so helpful. And I think it's very true. I think even in how we define racism, a lot of times I'm talking with folks [and I hear] "It's a matter of the heart. It's about breaking down hate." And there is that. But it's not just that. And when we focus on just that, we miss actually the bigger picture of the kind of material differences and the history of that. So I very much appreciate that sense of these are our cultural tools and our limitations. And it can be, I know I find it so hard to kind of think out of the box because it's so ingrained in me.

David Swanson: And I think it's important to say that they're not none of those tools are inherently bad in and of themselves. They're just not adequate, they're just not enough. It's not that we need to completely remove all those tools, we just need more tools in the toolbox. Right. And so, yeah, it's it's important that we we kind of expand our capacity and not think of like we just need to throw all of these things away.

Amanda Rosengren: Yeah, that's helpful. I want to ask one more question before we kind of take some time in break out groups, and that's this: in your book I was so struck by your idea that segregation is something that has really disciplined us. And I hadn't thought about that. I think of segregation as the sixties [etc.]. And so I wonder if you could share a little bit with us about why you talk about segregation and how it has formed us.

David Swanson: Yeah, I think you're right. I do think that most of us, we just don't even use that word anymore. And when we hear it, it is sort of we picture the sort of black and white photo of something that happened a long time ago and yet kind of strictly from our public schools are more segregated today than at any point since the early 1980s, where we're kind of going backwards and in many of these in many of these ways.

Seventy five percent of those of us who are white have absolutely no friends of color in our in our relational networks. So segregation is a very real thing. It's not appropriate in 2020 America to defend segregation.

Our language is going to be very about reconciliation, about integration. And yet the lived experiences for many of us who are white actually is one in which segregation is kind of the norm. And so I think to your point earlier about race and the way and racism and the difference between thinking about racism as sort of an individual motive or an individual action or particular language to thinking about it as something that actually is a little bit bigger, that has infected our society as a whole. This, for me, is why it's important to think about segregation. Eddie Glaude is a professor at Princeton and he and his book, *Democracy in Black*. He writes about racial habits and he says that that given the kind of racialized nature of our society, we can kind of move through the world in our segregated bubbles and be habituated by this racialized culture. And so, again, it's not necessarily that that I have these sort of deep seated racist beliefs that that need to be confessed, that that might be the case. And when we are aware of those things,

obviously we want to confess that we want to be forgiven and healed in those areas. But but the segregated nature of our society itself is forming us, is confirming biases, is projecting narratives about who ought to be in a position of power and who's going to be in more of a service position about who's who's more criminal and who's who's more of an upstanding citizen and so on.

David Swanson (cont): And so, again, for me, thinking about segregation, less about the relational piece, though, that's that's there. And that's a really, really important but but more wanting to acknowledge that this is segregated, racialized world, that we exist and does something to us. It impacts our imagination. It impacts our assumptions. We're not immune to it. And I certainly want those of us who are Christians to begin to recognize that we do that in other areas. We're aware in other areas of how our society is misinforming us now, informing us. I want us to do that when it comes to race as well, so that when the people of God gather the way that we kind of work and sing and experience the liturgy, the way that we're doing our life together, the way that we're preaching, that all of these things are intentionally counteracting that now forming power of our of our segregated society.

Amanda Rosengren: Yeah, I appreciate that. I think we don't often as Christians -- well, maybe we should, maybe we do — think about our imaginations and our desires as the things out of which we act and the things that are really important for our faith.

I was struck recently — one of my not so guilty pleasures is fiction, especially right now fantasy. And I remember having this experience recently reading a book by a Nigerian American woman where I realized, oh, these characters are black! My imagination did not go there first. And, you know, it doesn't sound maybe like that big a deal. But my imagination has been formed to see white folks at the center of every story.

David Swanson: Yeah, it's just a great little window. Right. Like those moments are really helpful for us because they're we sort of realize what our defaults are. And it's not to say that that our defaults are inherently wrong, but that they are not inherently neutral either. They're not inherently objective.

And that's, I think, the sort of reflection that a community can start to do together. And that's where there's some really creative possibilities, I think.

Amanda Rosengren: Yeah. Thank you. That's really helpful. I'm going to take I'm going to send us into breakout groups for a few minutes. And I rather than giving you a big, long length, I'm sure there's lots of things we could talk about. I want us to focus on two things. One, just what are your thoughts and feelings and reactions to this? Where are you at? Check in with that and to what are your questions or your pushbacks? I want to want us to use this to kind of clarify where are we at before we move forward together? I'm trying to decide, David, whether I should put you in a breakout group or not. Let's see here.

Amanda Rosengren: And I know I'm going to take a minute here to just kind of scan David, if you're OK with it, you can turn your video off if you need to to duck out or take a break. We're going to have maybe more than 10 minutes in these groups and then come back together. And if you're not, anyway, you'll get some kind of cues about when it's time to come back from groups. So, again, check in on you're kind of just what are you experiencing in this good, the bad, the ugly, and then what are your questions so that you can bring those back to the group. All right. We're going to take 10 minutes. If you don't know each other in your groups, introduce each other in a few minutes.