

Let's Talk About Race like Believers, Not Babel-ers

Interview by Timothy Muehlhoff
18-23 minutes

About as often as people call for engaging in long-needed, long-avoided conversations on racial injustice, they lament the shape of the conversations actually taking place. The loudest, most unforgiving voices fill the arena, while others stay on the sidelines, either because they fear saying the wrong thing or because the whole problem seems too uncomfortable or intractable.

It doesn't have to be this way, says Isaac Adams, especially among those calling themselves brothers and sisters in Christ. In *Talking About Race: Gospel Hope for Hard Conversations*, Adams, a pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, offers biblical and pastoral guidance on speaking (and hearing) racial truth in love. Timothy Muehlhoff, a communication professor at Biola University and codirector of Biola's Winsome Conviction Project, spoke with Adams about the keys to Christ-exalting conversations on race.

In explaining your motivation to write the book, you state, "Originally, I set out to write a different book on giving biblical and practical guidance on where Christians could begin to combat racism." What changed?

As I was preparing the book proposal, I didn't know that the news of Ahmaud Arbery was going to break. It made me think, *How will we talk about his murder?* If we understood the smaller problem of dysfunctional communication across racial lines, we would understand the much bigger problem, the racial strife that has so long divided our churches, our communities, and our nation. The book is, in some sense, a theology of speech applied to the topic of race.

When I look at your title, *Talking About Race*, I can imagine a lot of people thinking, *I don't want to talk about race. This is going to go nowhere. We're just going to wind up being hurt and even more divided.* But in your preface, you write that understanding the communication breakdown across racial divides and the resulting damage is not only important but foundational for following Jesus. Why is that?

It's foundational because this is at the heart of what Christ has done. Christ died to make Jew and Gentile into one new man. Ephesians 2:11–22 couldn't be clearer. Yet Satan, from day one, has sought to undo that work as much as he can. He has a vested interest in showing our discipleship to be superficial and phony by encouraging us to hate one another, to divide against one another. What Jesus prays is striking: that "they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11). Why? "So that the world may believe that you have sent me" (v. 21). So there is an evangelistic witness at stake in our unity. If you care about evangelism, you need to care about racism.

I appreciate that you are not afraid to evoke spiritual battle. After all, it was the focus of roughly 20 percent of everything Jesus had to say.

There are real demonic forces at play. If we look at just the level of depravity shown in racial injustice over the years, I think it's actually the most logical explanation. I don't think we are accurately entertaining all the biblical data the Lord has given us if we leave out the spiritual realm. If we do, then we reduce the problem to people not liking other people, or merely flesh against flesh.

As a communication professor, I'm interested in your communication decisions. In the first half of your book, you give us six fictional characters discussing an imaginary police shooting of a 22-year-old Black man. With all the real-world examples you could invoke, why use this literary device instead?

No small part of Jesus' teaching ministry was parables, or stories. Stories allow you to capture the complexities and gray areas in life that go beyond our political beliefs or ideologies. People are more than their racial perspectives. Beyond every label, there's a whole person that's deeply complex.

Let's just focus on two of the characters. One is a man named Hunter, a white churchgoer who is best friends with Darius, a Black deacon at their church. While Hunter is concerned about the shooting, Darius is consumed with it and even finds it difficult to breathe when thinking about it. As a white person, I can recognize myself in Hunter, because a big part of my privilege is my getting to take a break from thinking about race whenever I wish.

One of the reasons the conversation is so difficult is because often, my white brothers and sisters can entertain it in an abstract way. We test ideas; we poke and prod them and compare them to things we know to be true, which is not always bad.

But when you're talking to a nonwhite person, there's a strong chance you're talking to someone who is not thinking in abstractions. Let me give a quick anecdote. When I told my mom I was going to pastor a church in Birmingham, Alabama, she recoiled in horror. "Oh, Isaac, I told the Lord I would never set foot in that city after what they did to those four little girls." To her, Birmingham is still "Bombingham" due to the tragic 1963 bomb blast at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. She is old enough to have been one of those girls.

To me, Birmingham is a pretty welcoming place. For my mother, it's not that. And I need to care for her well by looking not only to my own interests but also to hers.

In looking at the conversation between Hunter and Darius, you quote the writer Lance Morrow: "The most tragic impediment to an honest conversation about race in America is fear." Hunter is fearful he'll violate an unwritten law that states he must always be the student and Black people always the teachers. "He knew if he transgressed this unwritten law," you write, "everything he said would be used against him." To be honest, I feel that tension myself, that fear that I cannot enter the race conversation and offer opinions, observations, or even critiques because I'm part of the white majority.

I try to make clear in the book that this is a legitimate feeling on some level. I'm certainly not telling white people, "Sit down, shut up, and listen." Yet there are times when pursuing listening and understanding might serve you well. It's not because Black people are always right. Spoiler alert: We're not. We too have fallen short of the glory of God. Yet we can't ignore that Black voices have been marginalized for so long. Recognizing this kind of historical asymmetry should help shape the conversation and perhaps promote a desire to listen and understand.

Darius's fear is that if he wants to say anything about the shooting, "he [has] to say it perfectly—that is, he [has] to speak on Hunter's terms." He seems to reflect a common objection to civility as a set of conversational rules created by white-dominant culture to keep minority perspectives in check. It's kind of used as a silencing technique. In other words, "Let's not get overly emotional. Let's not get angry. Let's keep everything civil."

Notice, both Hunter and Darius have fears. Simply admitting those fears does something to the conversation. I understand what people might be saying when they describe civility as just a technique of the white-majority culture. But all I know is that this Bible in front of me says that "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone" (2 Tim. 2:24). There's no asterisk that narrows "everyone" to "everyone who happens to share my political sympathies" or "everyone who happens to be within my own ethnic group."

The fruit of the Spirit is not racially biased. All of God's people are to be loving, patient, kind, gentle, and faithful. I don't want to frame these things only in terms of power dynamics or cultural embeddedness because the Bible transcends culture. It transcends time. God wanted his people to be kind and gentle in the first century, and he wants the same thing in the 21st century. And I just can't get around that. That's why I emphasize, in the book, that the Word of God is the lamp to our feet, the light to our path. It's not that I don't think statistics and cultural analyses are helpful. But we need to remember that there's a higher authority.

Can you paint a picture of what it would look like if we lost what you just described? What would it look like if the Scriptures were no longer our North Star?

We don't have to imagine. In his mercy, God paints the picture for us time and time again in Scripture. In the end of Judges, "everyone did as they saw fit" (21:25). After the Tower of Babel, God essentially says, "You know what? You all don't want to talk to each other? Go ahead. And let me show you what it will look like." And of course it looks like confusion and constantly being at each other's throats.

But Christ offers an alternative. We no longer take each other by the throat. Rather, we take each other by the hand—or at least we should. And so I think Babel is a fantastic picture of what the race conversation so often feels like. It often feels like we're trying to build something together, and maybe even something good, but we are speaking past one another. We're speaking different languages, we're frustrated, and we're under God's condemnation. Which is why so many people say, "Yeah, I don't even want to talk about it."

What I love about your book is you don't leave us here. You step in as a pastor and offer advice to both Hunter and Darius. Let's start with Hunter. You suggest that it helps to understand how

any conversation about race isn't simply between two people and that we should "weigh history" before volunteering our thoughts. Can you elaborate?

I think white brothers and sisters can unwittingly—with no malicious intent—approach these conversations as though they were only occurring one to one, between me and my friend. In reality, many minorities are viewing them through a different framework. They're understanding this is not just a conversation between you and me but between our different communities. And they're asking how these communities have treated each other historically.

In the book, I talk about how when Darius sees the shooting, he's not just thinking of Malachi Brewster, this fictional character who was slain. He's thinking of Walter Scott, of Eric Gardner, of Ahmaud Arbery, of George Floyd. We're all carrying different weights when we come to this conversation. And if we're not careful, we can fumble those weights and drop them on our listeners' toes and actually do some damage, especially if we're ignoring the weight of history.

That's why I want to encourage the Hunters of the world to try to weigh out history and think, *If I was coming from this other perspective and my community had been treated like this, would I just play devil's advocate?* Well, no, you'd have a very different posture. For instance, white brothers and sisters may not mean to defend racism, but when they instantly critique Martin Luther King Jr., they seem to be more concerned about King than the racism he opposed.

Could what you say apply equally to a white person's critique of Black Lives Matter (for attacking the nuclear family) or critical race theory (for having Marxist roots)?

This reminds me of the words of two civil rights icons. C. Herbert Oliver lamented that the "world seems to be leading the way in the battle against the dogmas of racism," while Martin Luther King Jr. stated that too often the church has been "a tail light ... rather than a headlight." What they meant is that we are often just reacting to things rather than addressing them proactively. And so, when white brothers and sisters advance critiques of BLM or CRT, I might be the first one to say those are legitimate critiques. But here is the more pressing question: What are we going to do?

It's really easy to just say what you're against. If you're against CRT, great—but how are you then addressing racism or racial injustice? How are you loving your neighbor? It's a lot easier to burn down a house than to build one. That's why we so often opt for criticism.

You also mention that Hunter should lead with lament. Can you define lament and explain why it's important in conversations on race?

Lament is a complaint in hope to God. We are grieving the fallen reality of this world and bringing that to God in hope, saying, "Lord, this isn't right." How many times do we see these two words in Scripture: *How long?* Sometimes it's good to just sit in the pain. I think lament brings about gentleness and humanity in us, which in turn can produce civility. Lament can be wonderfully disarming and powerfully uniting.

Let's say I make an honest effort to do everything you recommend—to remember the communal dimension of racial conversations, to weigh the relevant history, and to begin with lament. So then, are you saying that it's okay for me, a white-majority person, to step in and not just be empathetic but also to offer critiques or possible solutions?

I'll give you the pastoral answer—it depends. There are times you just need to sit and listen. And that goes both ways. It's not just whites listening to Blacks but vice versa. It's the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: There is "a time to be silent and a time to speak" (3:7). Or, as Paul suggests, speak only "as fits the occasion" (Eph. 4:29, ESV).

So, you've weighed history. You've listened first. But the shooting just happened. I'm a mess. I'm angry. I'm sad. Do you have the right to offer your criticism or your suggestion? Maybe. Sure. But the Christian life is not about taking up our rights. It's about laying them down for the benefit of others. So, to repeat the words of Ephesians 4:29, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (ESV). So that's the lens; that's the kind of funnel you want to put your word through. Will this suggestion give grace to those who hear? If it will, say it. If it won't, don't.

On the other hand, let's say it's been a couple months since this shooting. I know you have a lot of resources and a lot of wisdom, so I ask, "Tim, what do you think?" Or I say, "I'm really struggling with this." And you say, "Hey, man, I know these dynamics. The reality is you and me are brothers in Christ. Can I just offer a suggestion?" And I'll say, "Yeah, please help." The bottom line is that if we are going to attack this Mount Everest of racial strife in our country, we are going to have to work together.

It sounds like much of what you're describing comes down to giving each other grace, which sounds so freeing. But I'll be transparent: I don't feel grace when talking about race, especially to a person of color. I often feel that I'm going to say it wrong—that I'm going to be insensitive despite my best intentions. Add to that the possibility of saying something that might go public and get you in trouble. How do you actually bestow the grace that frees up conversations?

The starting point is remembering the grace that has been bestowed on you. While it's true your community hasn't been good to my community, I need to remember that I haven't been good to God, and yet he's forgiven me. God has canceled the debt I owed Him and pinned it to the cross in Christ.

The church should be a different world in this sense. The rules are different. As a result, I'm actually going to hear you out. I'm not just going to look at you as an exemplar of your ethnicity, as a privileged white male. Instead, I'll say, "That's my brother in Christ before he's any of those things (if he *is* any of those things)." That's why we can't go into this conversation with a black-versus-white mentality. In reality, this is a Christian-*with*-Christian issue.

Let's shift to the advice you give to Darius. You tell him he can be angry but not rude or hateful. You add that "Black people can say ethnically hateful things just like white people can, just like Hispanics can, just like Koreans can." Can you elaborate?

Of course, people should be angry about racism, but only with the right kind of anger. There's a reason God says to be angry but "in your anger do not sin" (Eph. 4:26). David Powlison, the late Christian counselor, points out that God is the angriest person in the universe. It's really striking if you think about it. He hates sin. He hates injustice and oppression. And he sees all of it. By definition, then, he must be the angriest person in the universe, but his anger is always holy. It's always righteous. It's always pure. Our anger can be righteous, but so often it quickly becomes *self*-righteous anger.

You also mention to Darius that it's okay to leave your predominantly white church if you no longer trust leadership or you feel it's become hopelessly politicized. But didn't Paul say that we should bear with each other in love and protect unity at all costs (Eph. 4:2-3)?

I feel like there are only two options today based on how Black folks are treating each other: If you stay in your predominantly white church, you're considered an Uncle Tom; if you leave, you're considered a theological liberal. I think that's the devil's deal. Do I think there are better or worse reasons to join or leave a church? Of course, and I walk through all of those in the book. But at the end of the day, Jesus has not commanded you to be in First Baptist Tuscaloosa or whatever. He's commanded you to be a part of his people. He wants you to work for unity.

I thought we could wrap up this interview with something easy ... like structural racism! Honestly, I hesitate even to joke about it with a fellow brother, because at the Winsome Conviction Project we have found that in conversations about race, the minute systemic or structural racism comes up, it's a conversation stopper. How would you define structural racism, and how should that definition shape our conversations?

To me, structural racism is an unjust system that contains written or unwritten laws, traditions, procedures, formal or informal habits, or cultural practices that wrongly favor an ethnicity or a race. Structural racism is so insidious because it can exist regardless of one's individual intentions. I think one thing that's helpful in these conversations is to find a common ground. For example, let's talk about Jim Crow segregation. Would you call that structural racism?

I haven't found anyone who responds, "No, no, no, no, that wasn't structural." However, someone might quickly add, "Well, the whites-only signs are torn down, so you can't say it still exists." I liken the laws of structural racism to lit matches. The match was lit in the form of policies like whites-only drinking fountains. Today, the match has been blown out. Those laws are off the books. But what I'm trying to remind people is that the house is still on fire. And the haunting question for us is, Have we just gotten so used to looking at the fire that it doesn't really bother us anymore?

Today, many people are quick to dismiss the ideal of winsomeness, and there is a renewed call for prophetic voices and stances. What are your thoughts on this trend?

Prophets are great. We are all called to speak prophetically. Pastors are to speak prophetically. And so I'm thankful for prophets, but I fear we've reduced the prophetic task merely to confrontation and condemnation.

Ezra 5:2 speaks of “the prophets of God” being “with” God’s people as they returned from exile, “supporting them.” The prophets provided comfort and hope of restoration with God. Otherwise, what good is the condemnation? It’s just a sword at that point. It’s just a hammer. True prophets are saying, “Receive this hammer so you can have the hope of being right with God and with each other.”