Imagine With Me: Telling the WHOLE story

Fall/Winter 2021

Transcript

Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another edition of Imagine With Me. Today I'm so excited to have as our special guest the Rev. Dr. Rick Lowery, a renowned Hebrew Bible scholar across our church. And I'm sure there are many of you who have been Rick's students, as he has taught at Phillips Theological Seminary and even done some teaching at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

And Rick is widely sought after because of his phenomenal gifts as a teacher and Hebrew Bible scholar, and now he serves as the president of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society. So welcome, Rick, and thank you so much for taking the time to have this conversation with me today.

Rick Lowery: Oh, thank you for having me, my pastor. I'm so excited to share with the church some of the exciting things that are going on with theDisciples of Christ Historical Society. The historical society is now located in Bethany, West Virginia, adjacent to the Alexander Campbell mansion and a state-of-the-art facility.

THO: But Rick, why don't we begin by talking about how the historical society is finding new ways to tell the story of our church?

RL: Thank you, Terri. Yes, we are very happy to be in these great facilities here in Bethany, West Virginia. Very appreciative to Bethany College for making this land available to us to host this archive of the church. And we are receiving lots of files and documents and important artifacts from all across the church and storing them in this climate-controlled facility so that they will be preserved for future generations to come and see some of the primary documents that tell the story of this movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

You know, our Disciples tradition within the broader Stone-Campbell tradition, which of course grew out of the reformations in Kentucky and western Virginia and the rest of the Midwest in the early 1800s, this tradition has a distinctive witness within the broader church community, a distinctive witness for unity - for the unity of the church and for the unity of the whole human family. And I know, Terri, you have had this experience as I have, moving in global ecumenical circles. When Disciples walk into the ecumenical room, you know, you go to the World Council of Churches headquarters in Geneva. When Disciples show up, people know who we are. And I've served for eight years on the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission, and I know that
people look to me as the Disciple's representative to the executive committee of Faith and Order, to kind of be the bridge, I mean, you know, I remember one meeting in particular where, you know, the Coptic representative had said something, and everybody was all upset, you know, and I was trying to, you know, and he just turned to me and he said, "You tell them what I was trying to say. You understand. You tell them." So, you know, our ecumenical partners really look to us as Disciples to be the ones who are going to consistently lift up the witness of unity, you know.

Some of our early slogans, you know, like, "No creed but Christ." You know, it's not that creeds and statements of faith are unimportant, but it is that our common confession that Jesus Christ is, in fact, the Sovereign One in the universe, you know, the God embodied in Jesus Christ who liberated enslaved people from Egypt and brought them into, you know, into new life. I mean, this is who God is and that God is embodied in the world, you know, through the whole human family, and that really is our distinctive witness as a Christian tradition in the world, and it has been from the beginning, and it continues to be.

And, you know, we've told that story. We've told that story of great reformers like the Scotch Irish immigrant Alexander Campbell or the native American-born Barton W. Stone, you know, who conducted these gigantic, this gigantic Cane Ridge Revival in 1801. I mean, you know, it just - this has been our witness. This has been our message: to reach across the separations between us and to say, "No, we are one human family under one God whose identity is the liberation of oppressed peoples."

So we've told that story, but it has been at least in the telling of it an overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon white European-focused story, but, of course, from the beginning, it has been a much more diverse story than that, right? You know, we've had leaders like the astounding Preston Taylor, who was born into slavery and, you know, eventually became this incredible entrepreneur in Nashville. He taught himself how to embalm bodies because, in middle Tennessee at that time, there was no funeral homes and cemeteries that would handle Black bodies. And you know Preston Taylor taught himself how to, I mean, he learned how to do that and, you know, and created this amazing Greenwood Cemetery on top of this hill in Nashville, Tennessee, and created an amusement park where African-American children could come, because all the amusement parks were segregated. I mean, you know, it's just incredible.

He started a school which became, ultimately, Tennessee State University, which is either the, I don't know whether it's the second largest or it may now be the largest university system in the state of Tennessee. And it has trained people, you know, for all kinds of occupations and academic careers, and, in fact, it, along with Fisk University in Nashville, became really, the center of the civil rights workers. I mean, you know, the folks who went north into Detroit, and into, you know, the cities of the northern United States and did community organizing and, really became, I mean, it was like the ideological intellectual center of the civil rights revolution that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States.
So I mean, this was a Disciple, this was a Disciple, Preston Taylor, whose vision of education for all peoples, including formerly enslaved peoples and their descendants, really, became, I mean, it just continues to have such an enormous impact on our culture.

Well, we haven't told Preston Taylor's stories in the broader church, though his story has been well preserved in, you know, the National Christian Missionary Convention that he established in 1917. And now it survives in the National Convocation in the general church of the Disciples, so these stories have been told in these, you know, in particular communities, but they've not been more broadly told in the churches. And so, we are really committed at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society to telling that broader story.

And so we're working hard through this conference, that hopefully we'll talk about a little bit later, in Tulsa this coming March, and through a book that we hope to publish out of it, and through biographies that we are commissioning - are in the process of commissioning - of some of these folks who have been such important leaders of our church and whose stories have not been more broadly told.

THO: Right, Rick. I think that's just so, so important that the stories of people like Preston Taylor. They've been told and shared in some communities. And these are not just the stories of these communities. You know, that Merger Agreement was about being whole church, right, and being exactly, and being one church.

So, Preston Taylor's story is all of our stories. The story of the work of Obra Hispana, of the Disciples who first were in leadership with with NAPAD, North American Asian and Pacific Disciples - those are all of our stories and I think that really gets to what we mean when we talk about story or narrative in terms of shifting it so that there's not a dominant one to which these other minority stories fit in, but that we're trying to embrace this wider story that really is all of us. It's truly whole church. Can you talk a little bit about how you see this work in the historical society helping us really live more fully into covenant as Disciples? It's not a new idea for us, but, as you know, that we have this new covenant conversation curriculum that's there, and how do you think understanding these stories really helps us live more fully into covenant?

RL: Yeah, you know, I'd like to share a personal experience that I had at, when I first went to Yale Divinity School. You know, I grew up in the acapella Churches of Christ tradition and, it's a long story, but I wound up at Yale because I was gonna pursue, you know, biblical studies and they had the best program in the world at that point. But I went to Yale Divinity School first to get my master's degree before I went on into the PhD program. And you know, we had worship at Marquand Chapel at Yale, this wonderful chapel they have there, and each church tradition would lead, you know, a worship on a particular day of the week, and, you know, coming from my little Church of Christ, southern Church of Christ tradition, you know, I see, you know, Episcopalian worship, and you, know Congregationalist works. I mean, and it was like, "This is
different." But it was when it was when the Black seminarians led worship, I sat in worship and it was like, "This is my worship." You know, so, what I understood for the first time, is just how much our culture, you know, white culture in the South, African-American culture in the South, had just mutually grown up together and mutually influenced one another.

This is my identity, I mean, this is my story. I mean, it's an important part of who I am as a Disciple - the story of Preston Taylor, the story of, you know, Dr. Jeu Hawk, you know, the story of Rev. Domingo Rodriguez. I mean, these are - this is my story, you know. It's part of me. It influences me, you know. I just came back from the Central Rocky Mountain regional assembly out in Salt Lake City, Utah, where I was so honored to be asked to keynote and preach. And the communities out there - the Tongan community, the Samoan community - the music that they provided. It was just such a - it was such a blessing. I mean, I said to them, "Gosh, I feel like John so many centuries ago who was translated up into heaven, and, you know, was listening to the heavenly choirs." I mean, it - just the blessing that this brought to all of us. I mean, this is who we are. You know, we're Haitian. We're, you know, we're Mexican-American. We're Puerto Rican-American. We're, I mean, this is us. And to not be telling that part of our story, we're not telling our whole story.

Yeah, and you know, it's just so important that we that we broadcast - I mean, these stories are told in their own communities, but, you know, they're our total story, and we've been hurting ourselves by not knowing our whole story.

THO: Rick before we run out of time here, I just want you to talk, tell us about the conference that the historical society is hosting in Tulsa next March, and talk about what you hope that event will help us - You know, we've been talking about imagining ourselves as a new church for this new world. What do you hope that event will do for the church?

RL: What we are doing is the historical society is sponsoring an academic conference that is open to the public, and that is to say, I mean, it is a scholarly conference and we'll have scholarly papers, but you know, the folks that we are bringing in are very clear that this is not to be just a kind of esoteric conversation between scholars. You know, I've said, "Look - think of this as education. Think of this as teaching in a classroom. It is solid scholarship. It is academic conversation, but it is for public consumption and education." And the title - it's being funded in part through the Kirkpatrick Lecture Fund, which is an endowment that we have at the historical society - so it's the Kirkpatrick Conference and the title is Systemic Racism, Anti-racism, and Reconciliation in our Shared History and Tradition.

And we've invited acapella Church of Christ scholars. We've got, you know, so-called independent Christian church scholars. We've got lots of Disciples scholars. And we're really gonna focus on the impact of, and resistance to, the ideology of white superiority that really was just part of the culture in America at the time that Alexander Campbell
and Barton W. Stone and all these folks were, you know, were starting these reformations that ultimately became the Disciples, you know. And Campbell and Stone were both progressives for their time, in my view. Stone was more progressive.

THO: I'd agree with you on that. I'd agree Campbell was - Campbell tended to be, in my opinion, a little paternalistic about things.

RL: But at any rate, you know, they were progressives, but it's still - it was just part of the culture, you know, and there were assumptions. And so, what we're hoping to do is really tell the truth about that history: to confront it; to critique it - so that we can begin to work toward healing and repair.

You know, as a thing that Stone published in the *Christian Messenger* said, you know, the first thing we've got to do to deal with slavery is we got to admit our sin and we got to take steps to repair the damage. So, reparations were something that Barton W. Stone talked about, yeah, in his journal.

So, what I want us to do is to talk about that, to know about it, and to think about, "Okay, knowing this stuff, what do we do from here, you know? And I want us - we're going to tell the story of Preston Taylor. This wonderful Church of Christ scholar, African-American Church of Christ scholar, from a historically Black college and university, Texas College, is going to give this piece on Preston Taylor. Our own Yvonne Gilmore is gonna talk to us about Sarah Lue Bostick, who was this amazing preacher and church leader in the in the early 1900s - early, all the way through the middle part of the century. You know, we're going to talk about them. We're going to have - Charisse Gillett, the president of Lexington Theological Seminary, is going to moderate a conversation between Newell Williams who's our, you know, current leading biographer of Barton W. Stone, and Doug Foster from Abilene Christian University, who is just published this magisterial biography of Alexander Campbell. And both of them have been very clear about, you know, white supremacy in our tradition, right, and very critical of it.

Dr. Timothy Lee is going to be, you know, giving us a paper. Lori Tapia will be involved. Sandyha Jha, our good friend from California, will be doing a presentation. Dr. Dean Leah Gunning Francis is going to be, all right this, is going to be there. You are going to be there to kind of wrap everything up for us and tell us, "Okay folks, you know, here's our charge." Dr. Frank Thomas, who runs the African-American preaching program at Christian Theological Seminary, is going to preach us out.

We'll have a service of commemoration for the Greenwood Massacre in 1921, there in the Black Wall Street community in Tulsa. We'll go to the site. So, and then our keynote speaker on Friday night will be our friend and fellow Disciples of Christ minister, the Rev. Dr. William Barber, who, you know, I think will probably be really toned down in what he's... (laughter) So, I think it's gonna - and Dr. Lisa Barnett at Phillips will talk about, you know, kind of our interact - how this all impacted our interactions with indigenous peoples.
Her student heading toward graduate school, Joshua Shawnee, will be delivering a paper. Santiago Pinon will be delivering a paper. I'm leaving out really important people, I know, but it's just going to be - I'm just so excited about this conference!

And we're going to produce a book out of it, hopefully in time for Experience 2022 in July 2022. So, anyhow, I'm really hoping that this is going to be a very significant gathering, and illuminating, too.

THO: Rick, I can't tell you how excited I am, and so I share your enthusiasm. What a stellar constellation - is that redundant? - a phenomenal constellation of minds and spirits across our church to speak to us about these important issues. And I think what you said - telling the truth about this history so that we can do the repair. We say that we are, want to become an anti-racist pro-reconciliation church, but truth-telling must happen in order for us to both name the injustice and then repair it. So, thank you for that reminder about Barton Stone's words.

We could probably talk all afternoon about this and I'm sure we will. It's always so good to engage with you, Rick. You helped to fuel - continue to fuel - my enthusiasm for the history of our church. It's so, so important. And thanks for always being such a great conversation partner with me, not just in this space, but off screen. Just the conversations that we have and our sharing together as we move the church forward.

Disciples, I hope that you will be looking for information about this conference, which is going to be held on the campus of Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in March of 2022.

If you haven't visited the Disciples of Christ Historical Society website, you need to go there. There's so much good information, so much important work that's being done to ensure that our whole story as a church has been told.

So, thank you, Rick, again for your time today. And Disciples, I hope that this has spawned in you, or ignited in you, a thirst to know more about the history of our church and how your story fits into the history of the whole church.

Join me again, won't you, for the next edition of Imagine With Me and until then, remember that God loves you and so do I.

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**References:**

Disciples of Christ Historical Society website: [https://discipleshistory.org](https://discipleshistory.org)

Visions of Wholeness: White Supremacy, Anti-racism, and Reconciliation in Disciples History and Tradition, March 18-19, 2022, at Phillips Theological Seminary

2022 Experience: It's Real information: 
https://www.nationalconvocation.org/2022experience

Phillips Theological Seminary website: https://ptstulsa.edu

National Convocation website: https://nationalconvocation.org

North American Pacific/Asian Disciples (NAPAD) website: https://napad.net

Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries a.k.a. Obra Hispana website: https://obrahispana.org

Greenwood Cemetery website: http://www.greenwoodcemeterytn.com/

Tennessee State University website: https://www.tnstate.edu/

Bethany College website: https://www.bethanywv.edu/

Cane Ridge Shrine website: http://www.caneridge.org/

World Council of Churches: https://www.oikoumene.org/