

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings,
with Reverend Alton Hardy and Jason Williams”

Part Fourteen

June 21, 2020 • Sunday Evening

In this Q & A time we will also be talking with Reverend Alton Hardy and Jason Williams. Jason Williams and his family were members at Briarwood while he was going through seminary. He was our interim urban pastor and you will hear more about him in a moment. We also have Alton Hardy who moved to Birmingham, Alabama from Grand Rapids, Michigan and is now planting the church Urban Hope in Fairfield, Alabama and we praise the Lord for what is happening there. In light of all the issues around us particularly these days in the matter of the racial unrest we thought it would be great to have these two as a part of our conversations, to give insights and to learn from them as well as to dialogue with them. Before I get to the devotional I want to turn it over to Bruce.

Bruce: Gentlemen, I want to wish you a Happy Father’s Day and thank you for being with us. I am grateful for the works that God has called these two men to and even much more than that is the relationship we have with them to learn from each other. I would like for each of them to now share with you about themselves and their calling. Alton will go first.

Alton: I am a pastor and a church planter of Urban Hope in Fairfield, Alabama. My family and I have been there almost eight years. I moved here from Grand Rapids, Michigan. My wife’s name is Sandra and we have five children. We also have a non-profit organization as well that my wife oversees and it’s a development that kind of works alongside of the church. We are in Fairfield holding to the Gospel in these uncertain times but nevertheless that’s what we’re doing and God is getting the glory.

Bruce: It’s hard to believe you have been here almost eight years although at times it probably feels like more.

Harry: All I know Alton, is that you didn’t have that gray beard when you came. You came here from Grand Rapids, Michigan but in a sense you were coming back home.

Alton: Yes, I was born and raised about 20 miles outside of Selma, Alabama. I used to hate that I was from the Selma area. That didn’t show up in my sermons but it has become a very providential part of my life that God put me in Selma. I was a poor share cropper’s kid. I took a group of kids down to Sardis about six months ago and showed them the dump I used to eat from. They couldn’t believe this PCA elder in the church had a story like that. God has been given the glory for that so I’m glad to be here to have this conversation with you all about race, reconciliation and all for it’s really a true calling on my heart.

Bruce: Jason tell us about your calling with the Aspire Movement.

Jason: A number of years ago God led me to found the Aspire Movement which is a Gospel centered mentoring program. I hate to even call it a program because it’s just a platform for relationships to be developed. To learn a lot more about the program you can go to the website

at www.aspiremovement.org. One of the things we're really celebrating now is that the kids we started with in 2011 as fourth graders are now high school graduates. Many of them are going off to college or a trade school or even entering the workforce right now. It's been a huge impact not only on the lives of the kids but the families, the guardians who raised those kids, along with the mentors and their families as well. So now we have lifelong relationships that are established. We are really encouraging our young people at this pivotal time in their life to now engage in the local church where the discipleship and mentoring cannot be from just one person but it can be from the church by receiving the means of grace. My beautiful wife Jessica is the smart one who has many more gifts than I do. I have been married for 16 years and we have an 11 year old daughter, who still loves the soccer ministry here at Briarwood. The space I'm also called to is to reconciliation and not just racial reconciliation but reconciliation of God to sinners because I'm the chief of them and that's the commonality we all share as we approach these issues. So I'm excited and humbled to be a part of this conversation.

Bruce: I remember when Aspire was just a word, a concept and call. So praise the Lord for your faithfulness in doing that.

Harry: One of my blessings, is I get the opportunity periodically to sit down with these men one on one or the three of us (me, Alton and Jason) and it's been so helpful to me to get their insights and share things. They are various times have been part of a mentoring group that I do. If I start there I will never stop but one of the things we've been doing lately is meeting, talking and praying about this and that's why I asked them if they would be willing to share some of their insights and thoughts, not only with our members who tune in but those who will be reading this and listening online in other places all over the world. I thought that making this available would be really helpful.

Both of you guys are boots on the ground, right there in the middle of what is happening and I do have three African American grandchildren yet we have a predominately Caucasian congregation. We do have a Chinese congregational community, a Hispanic congregation community, a Korean congregational community, a Japanese congregational community, an international Sunday school class and some African Americans. We have been tackling this question of how can we get engaged but to properly get engaged to be a testimony of bringing the salt and light of the Gospel into this to understand, know and have insights.

The Bible is clear that only a fool starts giving answers until they hear people and ask the questions. I know some of our people are directly and indirectly engaged in your ministries but I would like for you two to share how we should be looking at this which would guide how we ought to be engaged as believers together no matter what our skin color is. I'll start with you Alton.

Alton: That's a great question Pastor Reeder. As I'm sitting here today I'm reflecting on almost eight years ago I stood here as I was being introduced to this prestigious audience and I don't know if anyone remembered what I said during that time but I talked about the racial issues I thought was going to come and that is obviously here now. What I said then, I will say now and that is that Jesus is the only true answer to that problem we see plaguing our country but I will go a little further.

I will use Urban Hope Community church which I think looking forward is something we should all look at. I think for churches like Briarwood how they can come alongside of this issue

speaking from a Gospel perspective, I am an urban inner city pastor of the ground and I've been in that calling for a length of time now. There are pathologies and issues that are there that are very difficult to speak into. They have to be nuanced in such a way where you have personal responsibility on one hand and you have what some say, the big systemic 'whatever that is.' There are probably other people who are better suited to speak to the systemic than I am and I used to deal with it quite a bit.

Here is what I found when I was addressing the systemic. I was frustrated. I was losing hope because the more I tried to speak to this abstract systemic I kept noticing that the issues in a particular community, like a Fairfield that it was deeper than just a systemic. It was deeper than what I know to be true where there is something intrinsically wrong with the human heart in all of us – black, white, brown, red and in-between. It's even in my heart. I'm born with a bent toward rebellion towards God. So no matter how much I dealt with the systemic that if I didn't deal with the true issue which was that we are fallen human beings and that God needs to step into our story, which He has in Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago, which He promised in Genesis 3:15, the first promise of the Gospel, then we're seeing the unraveling now of the Gospel in the areas of race has been mishandled in so many ways. But for Urban Hope Community Church we are head on addressing the greatest problem first, which is our relationship with God vertical and then when that one is aligned rightly we have peace with God (Romans 5 – I'm justified) and then the horizontal becomes easier to land the plane for people to have reconciliation with each other.

So I would say the best thing that Briarwood has done, not even knowing that they have done but could do a lot more which another conversation for another time, you gave the opportunity to put a guy on the ground to address what we see now openly in front of all of America. Many are seeing these pathologies of social issues, joblessness, fatherlessness, crime and everything else but what you did in God's providence in finding a guy who had a heart for that, burdened by that, and you put me there in that place with some resources around me which gave me the opportunity to preach the Gospel on the ground in these communities because people had been left behind or abandoned. What if Urban Hope wasn't there, didn't exist in 2020?

Since we have been there in the last eight years there are so many young men who are now working who wouldn't be and even more importantly who are now married, who are now living in Fairfield in church being disciplined, sitting under the Word of God weekly. I think what if that didn't happen and Briarwood didn't take the chance on Urban Hope or ministries like Briarwood? I would say one of the key things that needs to happen is, churches of the suburban area find some true leaders that God out of His providence have saved out of these communities and send these men and women back. Support them as they go back into their communities standing flat footed on the Gospel, preach the Gospel of reconciliation plus all of what comes out of the Gospel and hold them accountable to what they say they are going to do as you work together and in that we have what I call a manifold where they can do what they do best.

I remember what you said to me Pastor Reeder, when we first met. You said "Pastor Hardy I'm on this side of the mountain and with Briarwood I'm holding it down pretty good but you're on the other side so let us both preach the Gospel to both sides of the mountain." If we can do that together – black and white, churches here in Birmingham – then we are doing well. I can brag on Urban Hope Community Church form Gospel lives in the area of reconciliation but how did that happen?

It has happened because every Sunday I stand up and preach. Things have been done to me where I've been spit on, I've been beaten down, been fired at unjustly, been called a negative word, but I met a Man named Jesus. I had so much anger, resentment and bitterness in me that no one could get it out but there is something about Jesus and the Lord knew I was bound. The Lord reached down with His Gospel. People often ask me why I don't hold anymore unforgiveness and bitterness. I want them to realize it wasn't that I tried hard to break it, but Jesus is real and He showed me my sins. When I saw how sinful I was I ran to the cross and I haven't stopped running to it. It wasn't a one-time run.

Harry: The very things I have heard you say when you came down and we begin to talk about this, I knew not only would you be able to help me understand things but you were committed to the things that we all understood as foundational and true and that ultimately any reconciliation initiative begins with the Gospel message, guided by the Gospel message, saturated by the Gospel message and directed by the Gospel message. I thank the Lord that you stand flat footed preaching every Sunday.

So now let me turn to Jason who is now in a para church ministry that God laid on his heart while he was an interim urban pastor here at Briarwood. So Jason would you share your perspective on this as well? Jason's wife is not only beautiful, brilliant and an amazing woman but you all have a mixed marriage for she is African American and you are Caucasian, right?

Jason: That is correct. I have had the great blessing of growing up in a predominately black community, being saved in an all black Pentecostal church which was a part of Birmingham and yet being educated at Birmingham Theological Seminary and building church family with members of Briarwood while still retaining my first family at the Pentecostal church. So my experience is somewhat different than most people, I would say with a majority culture, but a couple of things have continued to play out in my life.

One of the things we can do is remember that each individual is uniquely created in the image of God. You cannot say 'here's the white thought on this' or 'here's the white guilt problem' or 'here's the black thought on this' or 'here's the black solution to the problem.' The reality of it is, if we truly believe the Gospel it starts with the fact that God created us all in His image. Creation is crucial and that's the commonality. That's where we start. We are all fallen and all sinful which Alton addressed and we all need the same Jesus.

For me and the impetus behind the Aspire Movement was to create a platform where people could crossover – ethnic and socio-economic line – to build friendships. Many times we retain our perspective on life that is out of fear – fear of unknown or fear that we were taught wrongly about individuals or we have one or two experiences that then shape the way we think about particular issues or races. The way we overcome that is by investing in relationships with others who we might even disagree with but learning why we disagree about a particular issue because then that opens the door for us to speak truth to the issues. I have learned a lot in that process.

I'll give one example. I was coaching the girls basketball team at Restoration Academy. I have heard great sermons from you on Romans 8:28 and great ones from John Piper, John MacArthur and Martin Lloyd Jones but I had a young girl who was 14 years old who witnessed her mother get murdered and then her grandmother was taking up raising her plus her three younger siblings. I remember her walking into the gym after practice as I walked into the bathroom and started praying 'Lord, how can I minister to her and what can I share with her

during this time?’ I came out and let her know I was praying for her and she preached Romans 8:28 to me in a way that I was literally standing there in tears because she said ‘God is not surprised by this. Does it hurt, yes, it pains me, but God is in control and God is going to give me the power to raise these children and I put my trust and faith in Jesus.’ At that moment I realized I probably could have told her those things but the kind of conviction she shared with me in those moments was an encouragement and that’s where I want us to be in these relationships.

When you are doing ministry you are also benefiting from the ministry part. Paul repeats the words of Jesus in Acts 20:35 when he says ‘it’s more blessed to give than to receive.’ I think part of that is in the giving God meets you and gives you things that you absolutely need to continue to follow Him. It’s amazing.

Harry: We have wonderful diversity in many ways but in our church we are predominately majority culture – a white congregation. Our first African American member died recently at 103 years of age but had been with our church almost 50 years. Her name was Mama Lois and she had joined our church in the 1960s. I’m so grateful for Dr. Barker’s leadership in this area. One of the things I see as a pastor, as Frank and I have talked about this, is that in the majority culture many are so intimidated by this they just want to bury their head but not because they don’t know it’s there, it’s just they don’t want it to be there and they feel so inadequate about it. Then there are others who say something has to be done but they feel inadequate as to how to do it and they are afraid they will say and or do the wrong thing about it. So the two of you have really helped me in this area so with what I’ve just said, what would you say to those reading this about how to step forward in this.

Alton: I receive lots of questions on this and most of these people I don’t know personally but I would say this to the great audience. Flee or run to the cross. Run to the Gospel. Run to John 17, Ephesians 2 and 3 and keep running all the way to the end of the Book to Revelation 5, 7 and 9, for theology in the Word of God.

I would say to my white pastors who are feeling that they are going to say the wrong thing, stand on the Gospel. To my African American pastors and those related to it, stand on the Words of Jesus. I put myself at the scene given in John 17. I say ‘Jesus they say You’re not telling the truth. They say Your words are not going to be true. Jesus the world is saying that we can’t be one. They are saying my skin color prohibits me from being friends with Dr. Reeder.’ Most of my life I have been told who I can be friends with or even standing over me telling me that what God says I’m not going to be. This is a time for the church in America and we all need to push into John 17. How can you say the wrong thing if you are saying what Jesus has said? So that would be my encouragement.

Some have asked me what books they can read to help in this situation but there are no books. I could give you a bunch of books that would take you over to the left side of the situation but you don’t want that. I am taking you to the main Book – the Book that has been written with all the answers we’ll ever need. So run to the Word of God. Run to the Gospel. Preach it and hold to it and continue in the faith.

Harry: I love you, Alton and that’s awesome! It overwhelms me. When you go to all these other things – left and right – they are all rooted in world and life views that cannot solve the problem. They may give insight on this or that but they can’t solve the problem and some of

them are designed to exacerbate the problem. Jason we'd like to hear what answer you would give to those who don't feel adequate in handling this situation.

Jason: To piggy back off what you just said, I enjoy reading from a diverse spectrum of those books because some are helpful but at the same time one needs to understand that most of them are putting forth their own ideologies and in some ways their own religion. So if you do read those resources you have to read them through a critical lens. There are two things I would like to share on this.

Number one, as the body of Christ we are called to bear one another's burdens. I understand the fear behind not wanting to say the wrong thing or not wanting to offend anyone but the reality of it is, if one part of the body hurts then we all hurt. So there is an entrance we need to make into relationships where we're willing to bear one another's burdens where we listen and learn. In doing that, the response to 'well, what if I get rejected or hated on' is 'Welcome to the Gospel message in Jesus Christ' because He promised in this world that we would have tribulation. I think beyond the racial categories that are big challenges right now that we're facing is an enormous issue and I don't want to diminish that but we're also dealing with classism, nihilism, nationalism and all these other 'ism's' and there is a bigger part in the church of America that does not want to be uncomfortable. They want to hang on to the comfort, convenience and have these nice neat little boxes that everything can fit into.

Alton will tell you this as well that when you enter this space be prepared to offend and be offended. When you want to have relationships with people across these various lines sometimes it's going to hurt. That's part of the ministry of reconciliation for you can enter into that and if you get wounded by someone's words are you going to take your ball and go home or are you going to say 'Jesus told me to love my enemy and not just love those who are like you or in the church'? That's when we're seeing the Gospel that we intellectually believe is really the Gospel that we live out that empowers us by the power of the Spirit and even when we're in the flesh saying something like 'I don't want to forgive you, I want to be mad at you because I'm angry' that the Holy Spirit in us will convict us and say 'I know you don't have the ability to love people the way I want you to love them, but here you go. I'm going to love through you.' Then the world sees that testimony and the needle gets moved in all these areas of life and not just in race but the other issues we're facing as well like anarchy being a big one.

Harry: I thank you two so much and I would like to finish up with a devotional from II Corinthians 5 and both of these gentlemen have somewhat quoted it and have been referring to it.

II Corinthians 5:18-21 says [18] All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: [19] that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. [20] We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. [21] God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We have been given reconciliation and we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Now that is focused foundationally and pervasively on reconciling men and women who are sinners, ungodly, helpless and enemies of God to God Himself, because God, when we needed Him but didn't want Him, who didn't need us wanted us, gave His Son so that our enmity has been removed. He didn't love our sin for He hated our sin but He loved us as sinners and gave

His Son to eradicate our problem so we could be reconciled to Him. So we are in Christ and Christ is in us. We have the Spirit of God who indwells us and we have a personal, intimate, vital, eternal relationship with the living God. Now if that is true and God has broken down the barrier of our sin to save us from its penalty, power and increasingly from its practice, what should show up as we deal across economic barriers, class barriers, ethnic barriers and even in the moment the Darwinian construct of race barriers and what should it manifest as the body of Christ teaches what these two men have just said – a Gospel saturated, Gospel framed, whole counsel of God taught world and life view – and then we model that in the body of Christ as we reach out to each other and even to those who would be our enemies, who are declared enemies of the Lord and love them with the love of Christ that they might be brought to Him and then we might grow together in the Lord? This is the message of reconciliation.

Jason felt much of this due to growing up in a minority community. Some of the things people don't know about these two are the basketball careers they have had and that's a lot of fun so if you get to the chance to talk more with them, ask them about that. I know some of where Alton has been and what he has faced and I know some of the things that have been done to him but you have heard it – I'm a sinner and I have been saved by God's grace. I cannot hold on to my bitterness and my anger for two reasons. Number one is that it will kill you if you do that. Number two, nobody out there will ever be able to do enough to satisfy your bitterness and anger to remove it. In other words, nobody out there can be your Savior, but when you know Christ and you're reconciled to God then in the fruit of the Spirit you can live with clarity – speak truth – and with charity – love with the truth. I get the opportunity to get this all the time but that is what these men have been encouraging you to do and I'm so glad we have been able to share it with you.

I want you to know that I'm available if you want to follow up with any conversations with me directly and you can contact me at (205) 776-5200. You can find out more about Alton Hardy's ministry at Urban Hope Community at urbanhopecc.com and you can find out more about Jason William's Aspire Movement ministry at aspiremovement.org.

Bruce: Thank you to both of you for your friendship and your service to the Lord for our sake that hour includes way beyond us – every tribe, nation, language and people group – and for our sake II Corinthians 5:21 says *[21] God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* That is unimaginable and unbelievable but that's our Savior Jesus Christ.

That's all we have time for in this Q & A but I want to encourage you to continue to send your questions, perhaps even a personal question to askthepastor@briarwood.org and we'll look forward to answering them. This is a journey for this kind of change will not happen overnight or a flip of a light switch but we'll continue to deal with these things together. Thank you for joining us.