

LIVING & EFFECTIVE TRANSCRIPT – EPISODE 3 – A Church Divided

Jemar Tisby: What I study is very depressing.

Rich Clark: Jemar Tisby's life's work has been to study the history of the United States with open eyes. And that work has started to take a toll.

Jemar: Honestly, it's a spiritual battle to read story after story in all different ages of US history, in all different places geographically not just confined to the South or somewhere, about people dehumanizing other people. And not even that abstract. These are stories about people dehumanizing people who look like me; dehumanizing my ancestors; dehumanizing me.

Rich: Tisby is the author of the upcoming book *The Color of Compromise*. And even though he's more invested in the study of these things than most, his struggle isn't particularly unique. He echoes a feeling many African-American Christians share. The story of the Evangelical Church's response to the Civil Rights movement isn't pretty. The church was starkly divided on the issue of segregation. Biblical arguments in favor of segregation weren't as potent as those Pro-Slavery arguments that were so ubiquitous in the lead up to the Civil War. Without grasping for the word "slavery" there's not much in the Bible that aligns with codifying a quality by race. Quite the opposite, actually.

Of course, a lack of biblical support didn't stop white Christians from supporting segregation *politically*, or turning a willfully blind eye to legal disenfranchisement and unchecked racial violence against their black brothers and sisters, being especially averse to any kind of protest movement for Civil Rights. They weren't exactly using the Bible to justify the status quo, but they were convinced that Scripture didn't call for its disruption. The church was, yet again, divided by political and cultural interests, rather than Scriptural conviction.

So what was God up to? And what did His word have to say to those on the front lines of the Civil Rights movement?

The *Christian Standard Bible* and *Christianity Today* present *Living & Effective*, a podcast about the moments when humanity and the Bible collide.

Jemar: I think a lot of Christians today would like to believe, of themselves, that they would have supported the Civil Rights movement. They would have marched with the marchers, or at least they would have supported the cause. The reality is much murkier. The reality is, a lot of the institutions that we trust, a lot of the publications that people trust in terms of Christianity, *they were against it*.

Rich: We can be thankful for the positive impact of the movement led by Martin Luther King Jr., but certain conservative and evangelical institutions were

shaky-at-best on the principles that guided that movement. Maybe you caught that part where Tisby mentions Christian publications that people trust. Yea... that applies to us. The reality is that the institution I work for, *Christianity Today*, faced a choice during the Civil Rights movement, and the decisions made at that time weren't exactly inspiring.

Not long ago, a podcast I do production work on for *Christianity Today*, called *Quick to Listen*, invited Michael Hammond, a historian and dean at Taylor University, to come discuss the evangelical reaction to Martin Luther King Jr. And part of me expected to hear that familiar story of evangelical leaders unable to sway the populace throngs, a kind of failed attempt to wrestle popular opinion into righteous submission. What I found instead was that many institutions were far more ambivalent on this issue than I had hoped, and *Christianity Today* was a part of that trend.

Michael Hammon: The initial editorial staff of three [was] Carl Henry, Nelson Bell, and Marcellus Kik. Nelson Bell was a retired surgeon who had been a missionary in China, but more importantly he was Billy Graham's father-in-law. He was a southern gentleman; he was the leader of a Southern Presbyterian Church. He was a sort of moderate segregationist and what that means [is], "look, we can have integration but it just needs to happen naturally. We don't want the government to come down and force it." If you read those editorials, like you suggest, from *Christianity Today*, through the '50s and into about the mid '60s, you can pick up one editorial and another within a month or two and they seem like they're on opposite sides of it. I see that as: there's one that Carl Henry wrote, there's one that Nelson Bell wrote. They knew that their goal was to create this intellectual word *around* the work of Billy Graham, and Billy Graham was *nothing* if he wasn't adept at trying to keep the middle ground together. And that's what he did throughout his ministry, [that's] why he was such a popular evangelist, because he refused to get involved, too much, in politics. But Bell would write very articulately, and before he wrote for *Christianity Today* he wrote for *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*. [He wrote] very clear arguments why the mixing together of whites and blacks wasn't appropriate. He would cite what he saw in the South, as a doctor; what he saw in China, thinking of different races together. Henry didn't know what to do with it.

Rich: We tend to revere those who came before us, especially those who helped shaped the institutions we love and trust. But when you take off the rose-colored glasses long enough to see the truth, the hard reality is that those who came before us made major mistakes, too. Maybe what really got to me as someone who happens to work for this particular institution, is the mundanity of it all. It turns out it's entirely too easy to change the course of history with something as simple as a simple delegation of responsibility.

Michael: There's a memo and it's classic, it's on that notepad that you see on people's desk, "From the desk of," and this is from the desk of Carl Henry and it says, "Nelson, you're pretty much our conscience on this race issue. Because you're a

Southerner, because you have more experience dealing with race issues, you handle this.”

Rich: “You handle this.” That phrase is haunting to me. It’s as reasonable as it was misguided; it’s as unremarkable as it was impactful.

Michael: And that decision, in my estimation, clearly leads to that fractured voice that you see, not only in *Christianity Today*, but also has an impact on Graham, because Bell answers a lot of Graham’s correspondence. [Bell] writes back to Southern pastors who are concerned when they hear Graham speaking out against racial segregation, and Bell, in some instances, writes back and says, “Look, Billy doesn’t support this stuff any more than you or I do.”

Rich: By the time of Martin Luther King Jr.’s death, many within the evangelical movement had caught on to the fact that something was wrong in our approach to these things, but apathy seemed to reign over and above repentance. Here’s Ted Olsen, a CT editor, on that same episode of *Quick to Listen*:

Ted Olsen: Shortly after King’s assassination, the Letters to the Editor published in *CT*. There’s one issue where there’s two letters from New York: one from a white pastor who’s kind of decrying the deafening silence of evangelical leaders to King’s death and saying this is literally an assassination, and the folks who supposedly are against the Civil Rights movement over issues with the rule of law are saying nothing about this illegal murder; followed by a letter from a black Christian, Joseph Fields, he says, “Most evangelicals that I know do not hate Negroes,” he says, “but they simply do not love them.”

Rich: When it comes to the status quo, it turns out it’s way too hard to swim upstream and way too easy to go with the flow. That had real implications for those who were negatively impacted by the way the world works.

When we’re talking about something we all agree was terrible and wrong, like we all agree that now?

Jemar: Yeah.

Rich: It seems pretty clear from hindsight that what we’re talking about is worldliness. The church was okay with worldliness. It’s a pretty good example of friendship with the world, right? And what strikes me is just how easy it is to fall into that, or conversely, how you have to be brave and courageous to stand up to that. You have to really work at it.

Jemar: Black people knew that the system not only wasn’t working for them, but it was constructed to work against them. And so it was, in some senses, natural to push back against this oppressive system, it was at least a lot clearer (chuckles) . . .

Rich: Right.

Jemar: ... that they needed to be doing so. For white Christians it wasn't so clear, because the system, and I mean politically, economically, socially, had been set up to cater to white people, to give advantages to white people, particularly white men. And so if you got a system that works for you, then you're not gonna want to disrupt it too much. From a white citizen perspective, and you can include white Christians because everyone's part of the world they live in, a lot of times it didn't seem so bad. There were a lot of times when white Christians had no clue how bad it was for black people.

Rich: It feels like the Christian argument, and certainly this was one of the ones in CT, back in the day, either like, "leave well enough alone," or, "let's strive towards unity here and not shake the boat," which are kind of hand in hand.

Jemar: The word I would use to characterize conservative Christian interaction with the Civil Rights movement was *compromise* with the racial status quo. A lot of Christians were willing to give concessions when they saw black people sprayed with fire hoses and bitten by police dogs. By and large, white evangelical Christians are not in favor of that, they're not rooting for that.

At the same time, if a black family came to your segregated church, you wouldn't curse them out and say the N-word. You would simply say, "Well you know what, there's a nice black church down the road. Wouldn't you feel more comfortable there?" It's kind of this veneer of politeness, and that's what happened often times with, not even just the white church, but with conservative and middle-class black people, as well. We over inflate the involvement of Christians in general in the Civil Rights movement, but especially of black Christians.

Rich: If you wanted to confront the injustice that was happening in that time in concrete ways, you'd find yourself in a particularly lonely position.

Jemar: Nobody can put a hard number on it, but somewhere around 10%, or even less, actively engaged in the struggle, meaning they're out marching or their hosting meetings or things of that nature. Now there could be a far larger number of people who were somehow, like, giving moral support to it. But the people getting imprisoned, going down for Freedom Summer, doing all of these things that we read about in the history books, [involve] a very small number of even black churches. So, it's interesting to note that Martin Luther King Jr. left the National Baptist Convention and became a part of the Progressive National Baptist Convention with several hundred other ministers because the NBC, at that time, its spokespeople and its president, were against these direct action, nonviolent protests. They wanted to work through different means and didn't think this confrontation was effective. And so

King didn't really even have freedom in his own denomination; [he] had to go and join another one.

Rich: As Tisby points out, the story of Martin Luther King Jr. is also the story of several hundred ministers who found themselves unable to find support in the work of activism they felt called by God to do. For those few brave souls in the conservative church who wanted to be actively involved in the struggle, support had to be found elsewhere. They were isolated from their theological allies, and reaching for courage. So where did they find it?

Jemar: Just think about it: you know you're going into a situation where you could be arrested, you could be maced, you could be beaten. What's gonna encourage you? It's gonna be all those Bible verses. Psalm 23, you know? "Walking through the Valley of the Shadow of Death," you know, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" And so black people, and their allies in the Civil Rights struggle, are drawing on these. And I think there's a certain encounter with Christ that you have in the midst of these kinds of injustices that you simply can't understand unless you get in the fray.

Rich: For the Civil Rights activist who was a Christian, everyday it got more and more risky and painful to be an active part of the Civil Rights movement. More and more, despite the hopes that their brothers and sisters might turn to them in repentance and unity, black Christians and their allies found themselves on an island.

Jemar: Just from a very human level, this was costly. I mean, at minimum, you could lose your job. People would sit outside of NAACP meetings or voter registration meetings and write down license plate numbers, and they would send those to the cops and see who was there and literally make lists of people who were involved in Civil Rights activity so that there could be repercussions. And the white community would often intimidate more moderate whites and say, "Well, if you're employing this person and they showed up at this meeting... you better do something about it or we're gonna do something to you." And so there was intimidation going on even among whites.

Rich: For an African-American Christian just trying to live and thrive, doing whatever you believed you needed to do to get a hearing, the experience would have been exhausting at best and traumatic at worst. And we see this sentiment spelled out most acutely in the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

Jemar: I find the letter from a Birmingham Jail [to be] such a prophetic text. And you can almost hear the pain coming through the words of the pages, because he's saying, "I thought our staunchest allies would be other Christians, but it turns out that it's not even the Ku Klux Klanner, but more so the *moderate* who is an obstacle in the way of Civil Rights, because rather than demonstrating overt racism, they demonstrated complicity with the status quo. They created an environment by their

mere silence that enabled bombings and racial terrorism and the obstinacy of massive resistance during the Civil Rights movement.”

Rich: Let’s be clear: as far as we know, these white Christians weren’t necessarily doing this intentionally. Their motives weren’t to hurt as much as they had to do with maintaining an atmosphere of safety and security for themselves and their families, but the effects were the same nonetheless.

Jemar: And so Civil Rights activists, especially Christians, are looking around at other believers and they’re asking, “Are we reading the same Bible?”

Rich: Right.

Jemar: “How can you not be involved in this struggle for justice? Even if you’re not on the streets with us, why are you opposing us? The Church is a family. Black or white, North or South; we are united by the Holy Spirit. What’s supposed to happen is your burdens become my burdens; your struggles become my struggles.” But many branches of the American church said, “When it comes to racism, that’s not my fight; or when it comes to racism, I don’t agree with you. I like the way things are.”

You know, there’s no hurt like church hurt.

Rich: It might make us feel good to think about all the good things Martin Luther King Jr. accomplished through nonviolent means. [It] gives us hope in his assertion that the arc of history is long and bends towards justice. But Martin Luther King Jr. also experienced that same kind of church hurt that so many other African-American Christians did, and still do. His particular accomplishments and successes were an exception, but his struggles were not.

Mika Edmondson is the author of *The Power of Unearned Suffering*, a book about Martin Luther King Jr.’s approach to this reality.

Mika Edmondson: Suffering always causes that kind of wrestling for people. God is good, God is powerful, God is just, God is able to relieve this suffering, so why do we find ourselves in the midst of it? That’s been a very deep question, and it’s taken African-Americans three centuries of wrestling with this question.

Rich: In that period of time, it’s the wrestle that often takes center stage in art, writings, and other forms of cultural expressions. Expressions of hope and joy tend to be future-oriented rather than centered in the present, and there’s a reason for that.

Mika: These kinds of wrestlings you see in the spirituals, in the blues, in prayers, in sermons; you know, I think of one spiritual, “Did my Lord deliver Daniel? Did my Lord deliver Daniel? Did my Lord deliver Daniel? And why not every man?” So that last

phrase essentially says, “Hey look, I know God is able to deliver. How come I’m not delivered? Why couldn’t I be delivered? Why shouldn’t I be delivered?” That’s kind of the double entendre that you find at the heart of the black church and the black experience.

Rich: In fact, it was this cultural reality that made Martin Luther King Jr. who he was.

Mika: That’s the kind of faith that’s been handed down, like a faith that persisted through chattel-slavery, through Jim Crow, through the lynching tree, through segregation. And so King, when he arrives on the scene, he inherits a three centuries old tradition of nonviolent direct action and of redemptive suffering that finds ways in which to maintain faith in the midst of suffering; to use it as an opportunity to show faithfulness to God and to show a hope in the triumph of justice in the face of injustice.

Rich: How would you describe Martin Luther King Jr.’s approach to the Bible?

Mika: So King grew up in a traditional black Baptist church setting, okay? Ebenezer Baptist Church under King Sr., Daddy King, and Daddy King was what King Jr. would call a fundamentalist Baptist preacher. The Bible is [the] infallible Word of God and he just preached verse by verse, okay? It’s kind of a traditional Baptist style. And so those were King’s roots.

Rich: The word “roots” here is instructive. It’s easy to overlook your own roots because you can’t see them, but they’re fundamental to shaping who we become. You don’t grow up in that kind of setting, being exposed to the God of the Bible, and forget Him. Though I will say, for a time, it kinda seemed like Martin Luther King Jr. had strayed.

Mika: When he went to higher education and he began to rub shoulders with other, sort of, black elites? He kind of wanted to distance himself from that...

Rich: You do that thing where you come home and tell your parents all the ways they’re wrong.

Mika: [laughing] Exactly, exactly! He wanted what he considered to be a more intellectually robust expression of the faith. And he wanted to find ways in which the faith more thoroughly addressed the problems of black suffering and injustices the blacks faced daily.

Rich: King wasn’t seeing the kind of social action he imagined ought to be at least allowed by the Christian faith among his Christian brethren. So he sought out something that would allow him to pursue his passions for justice. This meant Martin Luther King Jr. would go down a road so many Christians invested in social justice have been warned about.

Mika: So when he got to Morehouse, he almost walked away from the faith until he met a guy named George Kelsey his junior year. And George Kelsey was a black liberal who used the categories of Protestant-Liberalism in order to address the issues of black suffering and injustices the blacks faced. Now, the way in which Kelsey dealt with the Bible, is he sort of dealt with it as kind of moral tales and moral fables that kind of show us things that are true about our moral lives, but he's sort of using it to address the issues of black life. So you got this look at the Bible that: King always believed it was authoritative. He always believed it carried the weight of divine moral prescription, and even in a certain sense description.

Rich: As you can see Martin Luther King Jr. being pulled between those two extremes, he left the National Baptist Church for the Progressive National Baptist Church because they were advocating, basically, this sort of, I guess, nonaction, right?

Mika: Yea, acquiescence. That's right, social acquiescence, that's exactly right. And those were the two predominant responses to oppression: we're either gonna lay down, stay down; or we're gonna become militant and we're gonna become nationalist. Those are natural responses, and so it takes revelation, it takes redemptive power, to embrace a third way.

Rich: Sometimes it goes unappreciated just how difficult it was for King to embrace that third way so consistently. We may have mythologized him over time, but he was just as human as any of us, and that temptation towards either fight or flight when pressures apply is a pretty universal human instinct. Even in the midst of this pressure, though, King held on to the biblical truths he grew up with, and over time his suffering really just enriched his faith.

Mika: King would often say [that] unearned suffering is redemptive, that we must continue in the hope that unearned suffering is redemptive. And he got that from the Cross. Jesus Christ being the One who took upon Himself injustice, oppression, sin, violence. And if you look at the various responses you see, for instance Peter's response; Peter had a response to suffering when suffering came Jesus's way in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter responded with violence. He met violence with violence. He drew his sword, he resisted violently. And then you think about the other apostles' responses. Their responses were to acquiesce and run away. But in the midst of that, Jesus actually reveals a redemptive response, not the response of acquiescence, not the response of violence, but the response of redemptive engagement with suffering. Nonviolent direct action. Entrusting Himself to God, to Him who judges justly, knowing that ultimately justice would triumph. And when everyone else gave up, and when everyone else was in despair and thought that justice would never win, Jesus had faith in God that justice would prevail, and that He would be vindicated. So King was gripped by this.

Rich: Even while King worked within the structures of liberal Christianity, he still had his differences with a lot of the assumptions of his peers.

Mika: King understood the reality of sin and the pervasiveness of sin, especially racialized sin. And so the kind of low view of sin that Liberals were forcing upon him, King was not comfortable with. Also their view of Christ, [which was in opposition to] his view of the omnipotence and the power of God. King could not abide the idea that God is not able to deliver, [laughs] right? Because he's a black man that grew up in the South. He's like, "No! We need a deliverer! We need someone that can actually bring us into freedom."

Rich: It's hard enough to deal with the constant negative peer pressure alluded to here; to reject a liberal approach to sin and christology and to embrace nonviolent means when so many tried to pressure him to become more radical. And we've become familiar with Martin Luther King Jr.'s "brave face."

His most iconic moment was that speech. You know the one, the "I Have a Dream" speech. It was the moment he cast a vision for a world without injustice and racism, and he made a positive case for a world that wasn't yet. A dream, he had. You might get the impression from that speech that King was always as confident, but in private he dealt with a very real and visceral fear.

Mika: One night in particular, a few nights into the bus boycott, he almost gave up. He almost left the entire movement, left the bus boycott. He had gotten a phone call. The person essentially threatened to bomb his house, to kill his daughter and his wife. Normally he's able to, sort of, shake this sort of thing off, but he couldn't shake it this time. He was really struggling.

Rich: While the threat of alienation from his peers was real enough, the threat from the other side took on much more sinister forms. And it took a toll on King's resolve. He knew he'd need supernatural help to keep going.

Mika: He says that at that time he drew down on the theologies that he learned and the answers to the problem of evil that he got from Liberal circles and he said the answers didn't come there. So he's seeking to try to get some comfort, using the resources of Protestant-Liberalism, and he says, "I just... I couldn't get them from there," and then he says, "And then, I remembered the God my father taught me about. The God that makes a way out of no way." [laughing] And then he says he called out to that God. And he says in that moment, that God answered him and told him that He would be with him. You know, when folks ask me, "Okay, was King a thorough going Liberal?" I say, "King critically engaged Liberalism, but at his core, when he was pushed up against the wall, and he didn't know where to turn, he turned to the God that has been proclaimed in the black fundamentalist [laughing] Baptist church. The God that can make a way out of no way."

Rich: King was brave, but he was also afraid. Those things aren't mutually exclusive, and we know now that King was right to be afraid. On April 4th, 1968, he would be

assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. This dark turn essentially marked the end of one chapter of the Civil Rights movement, but it wasn't the end of the story; and King understood this.

Mika: The struggle for black freedom is a struggle that is ongoing, and it never stopped, even when King was killed. The struggle for freedom continued on. The Written Word and the Living Word is the revelation to us that truth and justice will triumph in the end, right? And so King made it clear that it may not happen in this life, and God never promises that it would. What we're called to is to be faithful in a winning war, right? [laughs] That we know is winning because of the resurrection of Christ. So the question is: would you rather give your life to a winning battle in a losing war, or what might appear to be a losing battle in a winning war? So even though King gives his life, and even though there are many others that have given their lives and might not have ever actually tasted the fruits of social, political freedom in this life, they did it in faithfulness to Christ who has shown us that they were actually fighting on a winning side. And again, we're called to be faithful, not successful. Christ is successful; Christ is victorious. What we're called to be is faithful. If you look to our government to see the victory, you're gonna be disappointed; and if you're looking to where we are in this moment, you might be disappointed; but if you look 2,000 years ago, and you look at the resurrected Christ, and you think about the fact that that resurrected Christ has all power in His hand and is reigning even now and is putting all things under His feet, right? [laughs]

Rich: Mhm.

Mika: Then you have hope! Right? Then you say, "Hey, this thing's worth dying for!"

Rich: King was human. He wasn't foolish for being afraid, but he wasn't foolish for being brave, either. King was the mouthpiece of a movement. The Words of Scripture came billowing out of his mouth like thunder, and for a moment it seemed like all of America was listening. The potency of God's Word animated real, dramatic action. But the Scriptures gave hope in the quiet place too, when he was alone. They motivated King when fear and alienation closed in. The reverberations of that Biblical hope spread out beyond King to thousands of others who also participated in the movement, and they endure today in those who carry on his work.

On the next episode of *Living & Effective*, the Christians who marched behind King during the Civil Rights era were built on a centuries old foundation of Biblical hope to accomplish something new. That was in the mid-20th century. But back in the 16th century, King's namesake, Martin Luther of Wittenberg was at the forefront of a global disruption that used a brand new technology to recover something ancient.

Next week's guest: He's in and of the printing press. He's raised on books and he brings a printer to Wittenberg to sort of turn himself into a household name.

Something like 30% of all writings that were in print at the time were written by Luther.

Rich: This has been *Living & Effective*. You can find more info at www.livingandeffective.com. Make sure to rate and review us on iTunes to help us spread the word. *Living & Effective* is a collaboration between Christianity Today and Christian Standard Bible. It is written and produced by me, Richard Clark, an editor at Christianity Today, and Cray Allred. Executive Producers are Nick Rynerson and me, Richard Clark. Engineering by Johnathan Clausen. Music by Sweeps and The Always People, and from the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts choir. Special thanks to Trevin Wax, Brandon Smith, James Kinnard, Michael Wojcik, Jennifer Clark, Morgan Lee, Natalie Liederhaus, Derek Rishmawy, Alicia Sharpe, Ted Olsen, and Mark Galli.