

Ed Stetzer: Alright, there we go. So, Vince Bacote is the director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College, associate professional of theology. Here really believes the doctrine should be central to the life of the church, author of, most recently, Political Disciple, A Theology of Public Life and lots of others.

Speaker 1: We've had lots of kuyperian conversations about some of these things. He's become a good friend here as well. I ask ... one of the questions we gotta ask, Vince, is why is this an issue, that Christians should be concerned about, when there are so many issues out there that we should be concerned about?

Vince Bacote: If Christians want to take the entirety of the Bible seriously, then you can't avoid matters of justice. It's easy to think about matters of justice in terms of thinking about law and order, but if you're really going to be thinking about law and order all the way down, that also needs to include, how are we stewarding things like the way that we go about justice, when people are arrested and go all the way through to deciding whether people are in prison, how long they're in prison, what the conditions are like for them in prison, the fact that they are human beings, irrespective of whether they've committed crimes or not ...

Vince Bacote: If we're really committed to justice all the way down, to me, it seems unavoidable.

Speaker 1: Okay. In the summit, we're talking about mass incarceration, we're talking about people who have committed crime ... I mean, there will certainly be cases where there are exceptions to that, but by and large, what about the victims here? Where does that fit into the Christian conversation?

Vince Bacote: I don't think you should forget the victims. If you care about justice all the way down, that doesn't mean you're ignoring victims. I'm not sure that the problem that we have is, what happens with victims and their families.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Vince Bacote: The problem, I think, is more with the people who have been involved ... 'cause mass incarceration isn't just people who are the worst offenders. There are a lot of people who wind up in jail because of problems that we have with public defenders being overloaded, people pleading and winding up in a situation where, arguably, there's no reason for them to be in jail nearly as long as they are, or even to be there.

Vince Bacote: But because they can't lawyer up, because they don't have enough money, they wind up in these situations. That's why we need to care about that situation. Of course, we should care about the victims. The point about those who are the ones who have committed the crimes, it's not even necessarily a question of whether or not people have committed crimes, the point is that, if you are a Christian and you believe that all humans are image bearers, does that mean

that you somehow treat people as if they forfeited being an image bearer, because they've committed a crime?

Vince Bacote: I think a lot of times we can forget about that. But if you really believe this Bible, nowhere does it say that people have forfeited their being an image bearer for anything. You know, whether you're thinking about someone like John Wayne Gacy or whether you're thinking about a kid who took a piece of candy, there's not a forfeiture of them being an image bearer and the fundamental dignity that people have.

Vince Bacote: Irrespective of the crime, a Christian should think, "Regardless of how I'm proceeding with this, I want to make this as human of a circumstance as possible."

Speaker 1: To be fair, as we're hosting this, certainly I share those views, but I'm trying to ask the questions that people will be asking.

Vince Bacote: No, I think it's a really important question, because people can wonder, with all the talks of mass incarceration, do we care about victims. To me, I think there are lots of victims in mass incarceration. I mean, we just heard all the families, all the collateral effects of the people that go to jail. There's a victimization that takes place there as well, often under the guise of the pursuit of justice.

Vince Bacote: We need to think about that as well as the people who certainly have been harmed because of something he stole from them, or because of murder, or because of various other kinds of offenses.

Speaker 1: It seems that the conversation has maybe shifted the last few years. If you go back to the tradition binary of maybe the 70s and 80s. One party's tough on crime. One party less. It's literally how the campaign would be run.

Vince Bacote: Sure.

Speaker 1: But now it seems people on the left and the right are talking about mass incarceration. How did we get there?

Vince Bacote: They're beginning to talk about it.

Speaker 1: Is this even a discussion? Why is Newt Gingrich engaging in some of these conversations? Why are we hearing people say that maybe this idea, this, in a sense, an experiment, is not working?

Vince Bacote: I'm not sure that everyone has the same motives, actually. Some people, it may just be because it's really just costing too much money. If you're a fiscal conservative, why are you spending all this money doing this? Whereas for other people, it is a concern about wanting to treat people like they're humans, recognizing the fact that there is the disproportionate imprisonment of people

who are poor and of color. If you're really committed to being just, then you need to do something about that.

Vince Bacote: I guess, also thinking about the fact that this idea of being tough on crime, it plays a certain way, to get elected, but are you really thinking about the good of these communities? If you're going to talk about economic empowerment, are you really going to think about the economic empowerment in these impoverished places where you have higher crime rates? Are you thinking about that in rural Appalachia? What are you doing to facilitate that?

Vince Bacote: If you're really going to be committed to those things, then certainly this is something you also want to address, because certainly all the people that are taken away, these aren't people who can be economic actors in these situations. Do you want those people to be economic actors in those situations or not? Or do you want them to just be stored in a prison somewhere?

Speaker 1: These kind of conversations require maybe a level of complexity-

Vince Bacote: Yes.

Speaker 1: That doesn't play well in the political discourse.

Vince Bacote: Yes.

Speaker 1: It's very clear, sort of, "lock 'em up," crime on the streets, the dog whistle phraseology at times is very, very clear. How do Christians think, and people in general, how should they think more deeply on this issue to get beyond the initial, just the fear issue, or just the anger issue, or just the retribution issue? How do we think more discerningly?

Vince Bacote: Well, I think making sure the Christians actually know what the Bible says, is a good place to start. Even though Evangelicals, for example, may be more Biblically literate than other Christian traditions, that doesn't mean that they're massively literate about the Bible. Do you take Matthew 25 seriously? If you take Matthew 25 seriously, you cannot avoid this issue. If you're really talking about following Jesus, wanting to be Christ-like, then do you really want to know what he's asking you to do? Are you going to take that seriously all the way down? Or are you going to say, "I only want him to sponsor my good American life." Is that what you want? Are you willing to ask the question more about your pursuit of a good American life, rather than your consistent pursuit of the life of Jesus, which may put you against certain ways of pursuing your good American life.

Speaker 1: So, take Matthew 25, take us beyond Matthew 25. People will debate, is that they're referring to Christians, how does that work ... take us beyond.

Vince Bacote: I definitely think it refers to us.

Speaker 1: There you go.

Vince Bacote: Think about it this way; Matthew 25 is asking Jews, if you must say he's only talking to Jews, is asking Jews to do nothing other than God's always Jews to do to begin with. You can say that all of what's going on with Matthew 25 is, you're because you didn't love your neighbor.

Vince Bacote: Every command that has to do with how we're engaging those who are not ourselves is some version of loving our neighbors. How are we helping people to understand practices of discipleship where you're really taking loving your neighbor seriously? And you're refusing to put an asterisk beside "neighbor," because of something that you think gives you a right to either say they're not really human, they're not really your neighbor, so I can just set them aside and go with my comfortable neighbors and not my uncomfortable neighbors.

Vince Bacote: I think, are we talking about forming people so that they're really thinking about being neighbors?

Speaker 1: An overwhelming issue, like mass incarceration, a lot of churches look at it and say, "How can we ... We can do prison ministry," but we're talking about beyond prison ministry. We're talking about public policy advocacy. We're talking about speaking into issues of justice. Christians are maybe more comfortable with, "I want to go visit and minister and do a program where I teach something." Why does it matter that we move to a different level of engagement on issues of justice?

Vince Bacote: In a country like the United States, what I would say, Christians in general need to be more committed to participating in the political process from the local level on up, rather than only looking at the political process when there's a crisis. Generally, we treat politics like we treat the fire department; I'm glad you're there, but I don't want to look at you 'til I've got a fire."

Vince Bacote: We need, actually looking at the political process when we're not thinking about crises. Because there are a lot of factors, it's complexity that plays into how you get the conditions out of which you might get rising crime. Are people willing to be more attentive, just a little more attentive, to what is going on politically? I think that's one thing.

Vince Bacote: Second, to recognize that to be politically active does not mean that you only care about winning. It's not even necessarily that you're caring about being hyper-partisan. It really is one expression of your care for the common good of all people. The fact is, it's just easy for us to take it for granted, because relative to other circumstances where there's a high-crisis environment all the time, when you don't have that, people just generally trust that somebody's taking care of it.

Vince Bacote: Helping people to have more of an attentiveness to the political process, I think is one of the most important parts. But I would also say, asking a question that Dean Trulear walking out here right now. But when he spoke in chapel here a couple years ago, he asked people in the audience to stand if they were related to anyone who had was in jail at the moment. Are churches even asking about the people in their own congregations who are affected by this?

Speaker 1: Sure.

Vince Bacote: And looking to those situations? I would wager, they're probably not doing that. You can start there. I don't think that question is also being asked.

Speaker 1: From a theological ... you're a professor of theology here. You've talked some about the Imago Dei issue, the image of God, how we might think about people maybe that we're not aware of, behind bars, if you will, who are made in the image of God, did not forget that. You talked about caring for our neighbor. You referenced Matthew chapter 25 and lots of other references to that. Are there other ways we should think Biblically? That was your concern, we should read our whole Bible. Are there other ways you think we should think Biblically about this?

Vince Bacote: As a person who is influenced by this Abraham Kuyper guy, for me, it's always important to talk about the larger question of our stewardship of the entirety of the created order. Our stewardship of the entirety of the created order has to do with the entirety of our life. If you're going to talk about the stewardship, what I call the first great commission, which has to do with what our responsibility as humans, for managing life in this world.

Vince Bacote: Out of that more robust view of creation, that view ought to be leading us to having at least our antenna up about how we are trying to not bring the kingdom, I'm not a post-millennialist in my eschatology. But, how we are at least, in our witness, gesturing what the kingdom is looking like, giving previews of this kingdom that is coming, by the ways that we steward our life culturally and politically, et cetera.

Vince Bacote: If we take that seriously, and I think we should, because Jesus says He did not come to obliterate the law, but to fulfill it. He said, "Teach them everything I commanded you." He's in continuity with everything that came before Him. Because of that, we should not then pretend that we're people who ignore, select things in the past, in the Old Testament, because now Jesus has come. No, Jesus had come to fulfill those things, not to obliterate those things.

Vince Bacote: In fulfilling those things, how do we participate in that? Really what I would say is, his reclaiming of creation by engaging that creation, rather than saying, because it's hard, because there are peaks and valleys, because it's not easy, then we just shouldn't do it. We're not dealing with things that are easy. We're not dealing with things where you need to have a short-term point of view.

You've got to play a long game here, be thinking about it as a long game, and disabuse yourself of the idea of thinking that if I don't immediately bring the kingdom in doing this, then I shouldn't do it.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Vince Bacote: No, you should focus on faithfulness, irrespective of how much you're getting the results that you're hoping for.

Speaker 1: Last question. You framed this, centered around the Imago Dei, around caring for our neighbor, and then maybe the Christian mandate on how we care for all the spheres that are at work in the world. I want you to take just a moment and, in your last comments ... because we've talked about this beforehand, actually, many of us have talked about this. We think this is an issue where we can work together across of partisan divides and, matter of fact, I'm talking about to Tim Keller ability this six months ago. He said, "This is an area that Evangelical Christians should lead and be engaged in more."

Speaker 1: Speak to the folks here in the room and the folks watching by live stream. Call them to get involved and how and why they should get involved now.

Vince Bacote: You should get involved because we are committed to loving our neighbors. Our neighbors are all human beings. And, our neighbors are not just the people that agree with us, or just who share the same politics that we have. In fact, we ought to be the people in this moment of great division and duress and craziness and confusion in our culture, we ought to be the people who are able to be beyond that, because, our hope isn't in our great plans to accomplish bringing in the kingdom. Our hope is in Christ, who's established the kingdom and who will bring it in its fullness. In the meantime, we live in faithfulness to Him.

Vince Bacote: Part of that faithfulness is radically treating other people as human beings, as people who, even if they think I'm evil, I am committed to their good. I'm always disposed to them toward their good. If that's my disposition toward them, then I'm committed to working with you whether you like me or not.

Vince Bacote: But, you're not going to say that I'm the one who's not willing to work about this. I'm not the one who's being partisan about this. I'm not the one who's being ideological about this. I'm the one who is saying, "Hey, we're both human. Let's go bowling. Let's talk about this. Let's talk about things that have nothing to do with this and discover how much we actually might have in common. Then let's come back and talk about this and work together on this problem, that, if we really want our country to be better and to live up to its aspirations, we are failing ourselves if we ignore it."

Speaker 1: Would you join me in thanking Vince Bacote today.

