

Bridgeway Community Church
Series: Conversations of Hope
Interview by Dr. David Anderson with Phil Vischer
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Conversations of HOPE

With Phil Vischer

DA: “How you first came to know the Lord as your savior?”

Phil: Grew up in a VERY VERY Evangelical family, Christian Missionary & Alliance (CMA) denomination

Great grandfather was music director for the Founder of the CMA, A.B. Simpson

Grew up around missionaries, Bible conferences and church 3 or 4 times a week

Mom was choir director, Dad will fill in the pulpit sometimes

Father walked away from his faith and his family when Phil was 9 years old

- mom remarried, Phil didn't get along with step-dad
- “How can you have family devotions if you don't have a family?”

“Either I am going to accept this belief system because I actually choose to accept it or I'm going to reject it.”

- more intellectually focused, did lots of apologetics reading
- “I actually believe this. This is actually who I am not just who my parents wanted me to be.”

“...trying to figure out how I was going to do something big for Jesus like my grandparents, and great grandparents and great great grandparents and settled on talking vegetables...”

DA: How did you make vegetables fun?

Phil: In 1990 was a computer animator working in Chicago in the advertising industry doing logos

First character was a candy bar but wife suggested something else moms wouldn't object to for their kids - cucumber/veggies. Veggie Tales was born.

DA: My kids grew up in the 1990s and the song “God is Bigger Than the Boogie Man” from Veggie Tales

Phil: I am NOT a musician, so what I wrote had to be simple and THAT song was the first one I ever wrote for Veggie Tales.

“I discovered then that SIMPLE is STICKY and kids love simple.”

I was just writing a song, but then you get a letter telling how that song got a kid through cancer treatments and you end up crying in your office.

DA: Were you surprised by Veggie Tales success and how necessary it was in our culture?

Phil: I was just making products to be sold in Christian bookstores and wanted to make enough money so I could make another one. First two years nothing happened.

Christmas 1996 was the turning point where Veggie Tales really took off for about 5 years.

I thought I could be the next Walt Disney and impress God and impress my family and seemed like God was in it.

- had 200+ employees, biggest animation studio in between the coasts

I was trying to be someone I was not. I’m an introvert, like to be by myself, but now in these big corporate meetings. I was miserable, ended up in the emergency room with a heart condition caused by stress.

“I was killing myself to try to be someone that God had never asked me to be because I was pursuing impact, not pursuing Christ.”

“We can think we’re pursuing Christ when we’re pursuing impact because it’s FOR Christ...when I become a big star, this is going to be so good for Jesus! He will thank me for becoming such a big star.”

“God is watching me kill myself” - effecting my health, marriage, over extended both myself AND the company that it fell apart. In 2003 the company ended up in a bankruptcy court sold to the highest bidder.

Phil: “God how could you let this happen?!”

God: “I didn’t let this happen because I don’t love you. I let this happen because I love you so much.”

DA: “Were you disillusioned at all with God when that happened?”

Phil: I wasn’t disillusioned, I was confused.

“What’s wrong with my theology that made me think he was obligated to do this for me?”

Henry Blackaby: “If what you have told people you are doing for God isn’t working, maybe it’s because it didn’t come from God but rather from you. God doesn’t call us to be impressive, he calls us to be obedient.”

DA: “Joining what HE is doing!...That whole ‘Experiencing God’ thing it seemed so simple but was revolutionary even in my thinking back in the day when I read that - Join him where he’s working.”

Phil: “What is God doing and are YOU joining HIM? Not asking him to join you.”

“I had to deconstruct my theology of work and my theology of impact to come back and realize my purpose [in] life isn’t to have impact, it’s to be obedient. When I walk with Christ, I’ll have exactly the impact he wants me to have, but even better, I’ll have the joy that goes along with it, not the stress of not knowing if I’m doing enough.”

DA: I was introduced to you because of your “Holy Posts” podcast/video on systemic racism. When I have a hard time explaining systemic racism especially to white brother and sisters, I use your podcast/video with simple images, stats and clarity.¹ What was your journey like coming out as a white dude talking about racism?

Phil: My brother is a Harvard law grad who is a dean of a law school in Minneapolis.

- 4 years ago the shooting of Philando Castile² that led to protests
- one of the leaders of the protests was a law professor and brother was pressured to fire her for causing civil disruption
- instead his brother began to educate himself on why people would protest³
- his brother taught a class on racial injustice
- Phil took that info/stats and turned it into a podcast in 2017

¹ Phil’s video on systemic racism: <https://youtu.be/AGUwcs9qJXY>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Philando_Castile

³ The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander, The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America by Richard Rothstein

- now George Floyd happens in Minneapolis in 2020
- many of white evangelicals Phil knew were passing factually wrong videos about the protestors and about race in general
- Phil did a condensed version of the previous podcast as a video that went viral

DA: Any backlash?

Phil: quite a bit!

DA: the pattern seems to be that when a white person becomes educated on race and begins to speak out, they get backlash, and then there is a decision of to continue and possibly lose friends/family/relationships or to fall back into who they were before. Have you found that too?

Phil: I received so much encouragement and gratitude from African-American Christians that when a white Christian would try and refute what I posted, especially with African-American voices approved by white conservatives. I would be willing to listen and have dialogue if they were. Then I would create another video addressing that issue, like welfare.

“It’s tricky because some people say, ‘you’re creating division’...’you are creating so much anger in the church, you need to stop it...we want unity.’”

Yet when I bring up abortion as a parallel issue they can’t believe that he would equate them as the same.

“Many of my white brothers and sisters have built a hierarchy of sin and there are things that are worth people being angry with you about and there are things that are NOT worth people being angry with you about and we’ve pushed racism WAY down the list so that no one should ever get mad at you about your position on racism.”

Now I am a part of a multiethnic multigenerational church and has been in a small group with African-Americans, served as an elder with Asians, and heard their experience of America which is VERY different than mine.

“I am done with the church being a white church. I’m just done with that. We caused so much harm to the body of Christ when in the early 1900s we decided that pursuing social needs and pursuing the gospel were diametrically opposed and you could only pick one.”

“That did not happen in the black church because the black church never had the privilege of not having to be concerned about social issues...so they didn’t make that false split, so if we are going to put those things back together, I think our black Christian brother and sisters are the ones who help us figure out how to do it.”

DA: What help do you have for White Christians who really do want to be bridge-builders to keep going on?

Phil: One of the issues is who is 'disciplining' you by the news media you listen to?

"We need to bring Christian voices to the front more than political voices to the front. There are Christians that are saying we can't pick sides like this."

- the history of American political parties becoming racially separating Christians
- Christians sacred cows: abortion - learning facts & history - examine assumptions
- Now we can listen to/look at the global church helps you see your distinctly American version of Christianity and gospel

DA: Are there some particular scriptures or verses that guide and encourage you endure these days?

Phil: There are different ones at different times.

A summary of Proverbs I learned: "The righteous disadvantage themselves to advantage their community. The wicked disadvantage their community to advantage themselves."

"Public policy has biblical implications! Am I voting to advantage myself over my community or am I voting to advantage my community over myself...public policy is how we live out our faith all together. We have to care! What we do together impacts on a much broader scale than anything I can do all by myself."

Galatians 2:9-10

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. ¹⁰ **All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.**

DA: What words of hope can you offer?

Phil: “God has a plan. He’s going to make all things right. That is inevitable. There is nothing you...there is nothing [I]...can do to prevent God from what God is going to do which is making all things right. The invitation from him is to be a part of it! You can be a part of making all things right. YOU can be a part of the kingdom of God...You can show the world what is coming...what will attract people to your church community...is not how you figured out Pauline theology so well...its how you show the setting of all things right through love...Hold on! We can make it better.”

“We’ve been a little bit seduced by the feeling that the war we are called to is with the world, we have to clean up the world. In reality, quite often for the church, its cleaning up the church!...They will know Christ when they see it in us and if they’re not seeing in us then that’s where we start.”

John 13:35

[Jesus speaking] By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

How Bridgeway can pray for Phil: “God where do you want me to invest my time? Where can we show love most effectively? Can I still keep doing stuff for kids and doing stuff for grown-ups? And who will support it?”