

# Episode 199 Rebirth 2.0

## with Jonathan Brant

*This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.*

### **Jonathan Brant**

Hi, I'm Jonathan Brant, I'm the Dean for Research and Cultural Engagement at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University. I'm also the Director of the Renaissance Project.

### **David Capes**

Dr. Jonathan Brant, Jonathan, good to see you. Welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

### **Jonathan Brant**

It's lovely to be here with you.

### **David Capes**

Well, we are face to face. Last time we saw you, we were on your side of the pond, as the saying goes, at Wycliffe Hall. We got a chance to briefly say hello to you while we were there at Yarnton. And now you're here because you've been here for a conference called the Christian Scholars Conference at the Lanier Theological Library in Houston. It's been a good conference so far.

### **Jonathan Brant**

It's been fantastic. I've really enjoyed the speakers and the people that are here.

### **David Capes**

One of the best speeches I've heard was by you yesterday, talking about hope, a good bit about hope in the midst of crises, and about the Renaissance Project. But for those who don't know, who is Jonathan Brant,

### **Jonathan Brant**

My name is Jonathan as I say. I have a wife, Trisha, and an adult son called Isaac, and for about the last 20 years we've lived in Oxford in the United Kingdom. I have been connected in various ways with Oxford University. Studying there, working on various projects in the theology faculty. And now for Wycliffe Hall, which is a part of Oxford University. So, I grew up in London, spent the first 17 years of my life in London, then spent a period of time traveling a while in the states. I studied over here. My wife and I, after we married spent a few years in Uruguay in Latin America.

### **David Capes**

How's your Spanish?

**Jonathan Brant**

It was okay. 20 years later, it's a little rusty. But we worked in Spanish down there, which was wonderful.

**David Capes**

And now you're working with Wycliffe Hall and the Renaissance Project. A lot of people maybe have not heard of Wycliffe Hall. They've heard of Oxford University. But Oxford is made up of lots of different colleges and organizations. How does Wycliffe Hall fit into that?

**Jonathan Brant**

Oxford has around 40 constituent colleges, and Wycliffe Hall is one of a small subset of those that are called permanent, private halls. And essentially these are religious institutions that are part of Oxford University. They function almost exactly like colleges, we can take students in a whole range of subjects, undergraduates and postgraduates. But alongside doing the academic work, we're also a Christian community that worships together, prays together, supports one another.

Some of Wycliffe Hall students are studying theology in order to go into ministry, in the Anglican Church or other churches. Many others are studying theology at the undergraduate level or postgraduate level. And then we also have the privilege of having as part of our community students who could be studying anything from nanotechnology, law, finance but they're doing Oxford University degrees.

**David Capes**

They work with other colleges as well, for those kinds of courses.

**Jonathan Brant**

They do. It works quite neatly in Oxford. In Oxford, colleges or permanent private halls like Wycliffe, are responsible for the teaching of their undergraduates. You actually have to have subject specialists to teach them, whatever it is that they're needing to learn. Primarily, in our case, biblical studies, theology, philosophy. But postgraduate teaching is the responsibility of faculties in the university. And what that means is that colleges can take postgraduates in any subject. They don't have to have subject specialists to teach them. They just have to provide their community in Oxford, and then the faculty is responsible for the teaching or the research or whatever. So that means that we can have a really diverse and engaging community without having to be physicists or nanotechnologist.

**David Capes**

The undergraduates, you teach. You also have what we would call master's level program and PhD programs through Wycliffe Hall.

**Jonathan Brant**

Yes, that's exactly right.

**David Capes**

One of the things that you have been tasked to do is to direct this Renaissance Project. We talked to Dr. Michael Lloyd, who is the Principal there about that, but I wanted to go deeper with you. He said, the person that I really needed to talk to is you. I hope that's alright. You can blame him!

**Jonathan Brant**

I frequently blame Michael for lots of this!

**David Capes**

And you gave an excellent talk here on the Renaissance Project. I want to talk a little bit about what that is and what the elements are as the person thinking about it, designing it, promoting it. Eventually executing that project, which sounds to me like something will take centuries to do not just something that'll happen within our lifetimes. It sounds like a big project. In 30 seconds, though that's not fair, but in 30 seconds tell us what it is.

**Jonathan Brant**

I think for precisely the reason that you've picked out, David, I like to distinguish between the Renaissance Vision and the Renaissance Project. The Renaissance Vision is this huge, big picture, global kind of sense. Or certainly, let's talk about the West primarily, that we need a renaissance of Christian culture and tradition, Christian identification, participation. We need more people to recognize what Michael often talks of as the humanity and the sanity of the Christian message. And that's something that no individual institution or person, or even network or movement can bring about.

**David Capes**

It really spans continents.

**Jonathan Brant**

It could do, absolutely. There's a recognition that we as Christians have something to share with the world, that we're not doing a good job of sharing. And we want to be better at that.

**David Capes**

When we think about the Renaissance historically, we think about the Italian Renaissance. Are there things about this moment that resemble that time?

**Jonathan Brant**

I certainly think that Renaissance seemed to take place in times of crisis and turmoil, and perhaps a lack of satisfaction with the status quo. With cultures that either are or feel themselves to be in decline or simply in a difficult place. And I think that was true of the 14th, the 15th century in the city states of Italy and other parts of Europe. And I think it's true now, that there's a sense that we need to do better than we're doing.

And in that sense, I think there's some commonality. I think a point of difference might be that the Italian or European renaissance of the 15th century, in some ways, was funded by reengagement with classical texts and sources and authors and thinking. And that brought new life into a culture that was ostensibly Christian, but perhaps had become stagnant. And in some ways, we still need the reverse of

that. We need a reintroduction of the beauty, and glories and the truth of the Christian tradition, back into our culture at this time. There will still be retrieval. There's a kind of commonality there. But what we're retrieving might be different. We need to find a way of re-engaging the culture with what scripture, Christian tradition in the Christian community, has to offer.

### **David Capes**

Have you heard anything here in the other papers or presentations that you're going to be taking back to Wycliffe Hall?

### **Jonathan Brant**

I think there's, in general, there has felt like there is a lot of resonances. There's a lot of we're in the same situation. There are differences of degree or intensity between the US and the UK. But we're all experiencing this cultural moment where there's a lot of polarization. There's a lot of conflict, there's a lot of canceling of people we disagree with. I think generally, I've been encouraged by the fact that there are great people here doing great thinking and great working to address those challenges.

The very last plenary talk that we heard was from David French. And he had this great concept which he'd drawn from one of his Sunday school teachers. He talked of orthocardia alongside orthopraxis and orthodoxy. The sense that we need to get our hearts right, at this moment in time, as well as having our doctrine right, and our Christian practices right. And I think that resonated with me. We have to have the right attitude, if we're going to re-engage culture. We have to have the right posture towards the world. And I thought he enunciated that helpfully.

### **David Capes**

I appreciated French. I hadn't heard David French speak before, but I was impressed with the way he knit all that together. And one of the things that you talked about was the Renaissance Project in three realms: scholarship, leadership and creativity. Take a minute and unpack those for us.

### **Jonathan Brant**

To be honest, this is not a deeply researched position that we have. It's more a sense that if we are going to see this renewed engagement, ultimately some form of cultural transformation, that actually all of those things are essential. So, having Christians re-engaging as scholars, Christians re-engaging as leaders, Christians engaging as creatives in the arts and other forms of communication. And I think the scholarship is just that recognition that most people don't think of turning to the church or to Christians when they want to address the most salient, pressing important issues of the day.

And clearly there is wonderful scholarship being done around the world by people who are not Christians. I don't for a second want to downplay that, and how grateful we are for all of the work that's being done. Nonetheless, we feel both that we have a particular perspective on the world because of our faith, and we have a particular way of thinking about things. And that if we can learn to do the deep thinking and the deep scholarship, and then communicate that well in the world, that will be good for the world. It'll be valuable and helpful.

But we'll also help to change the way that people think about Christianity and the church. A sense that in our universities, there's this idea of a kind of trickle down of thinking that what's being done at the cutting edge in academia, has downstream impacts in culture. We want to make sure that there are Christians in that upstream place in academia, developing the ideas.

**David Capes**

Are there enough Christians in academia, doing that level of work, in Britain?

**Jonathan Brant**

Well, there's certainly a good number of wonderful people within academia. Would we like to see more? Absolutely. And certainly, one of our visions and priorities as part of the Renaissance Project at Wycliffe Hall is to mentor the next generation of academics across the whole range of subjects. That's why we love to open up the college to these people in totally different non-theological disciplines. Because we feel that if we want to see more faithful, thoughtful, Christian academics in the future, we need to support them at these early stages of their career and their development.

**David Capes**

Whether they are teaching psychology, engineering, or technology.

**Jonathan Brant**

We want Christians in all of those places. A colleague of mine recently described it as we want Christians in the room, on all of those conversations. And we're intending to do everything we can to support that.

**David Capes**

There are some theoreticians and historians here in the US that have made the same case that if we really want to change culture, and engage culture, we've got to be in the elite universities. Places like, in the United States at least, Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Cornell, and Stanford. And there have not been for a lot of reasons. Some of that has been the cultural antipathy between Christians and those in the academy. I think on both sides of the Atlantic, we're looking at some of the same issues. Now, let's mention the word creativity. Why creativity?

**Jonathan Brant**

Again, something that we heard in the last session was a kind of analogy drawn actually by Jonathan Haidt, the psychologist. He says in the task of persuasion it's helpful to think of the elephant and the rider. And the rider, the human as it were on the elephant, is the cognitive faculties, our reason. We often think that if we're going to persuade somebody, we have to be able to reason them into our position. And that basically, what we need are some nice, neat arguments and some helpful facts and some evidence on our side, and that's what's going to change somebody's mind.

And this analogy says, no. Actually, the rider or human reason is one thing. But there's also the elephant. And that if you're actually going to change somebody's direction, change somebody's mind, you need to talk to the elephant. The elephant is everything other than your cognitive faculties, your reason. It's your context, your upbringing, the way in which you were nurtured as a young person. It's

perhaps your cultural position, your ethnicity, your emotions, your will, everything else that makes us up.

And if we're going to change the way people think, change the way they see the world, we've got to be able to address the totality of the person. And I think that arts are particularly effective in addressing people at that much deeper, perhaps almost precognitive level that touches people's emotions. It opens their eyes, maybe gives them the opportunity to experience the world through somebody else's eyes, if that's through literature, or film. And again, if we want for the Christian voice, the Christian message, the good news of Jesus Christ to be heard, we need to be talking not just to that narrow part of the person, the reason but actually to the whole person. And I don't think we can do that without arts and creativity.

**David Capes**

Yes, I think you're exactly right. How does media fit into all that? Media is not really the creative side, but it is persuasive.

**Jonathan Brant**

Yes. To be honest, we're still thinking through what the particular vocation of Wycliffe as an institution, as a community is. I'm fairly convinced at this stage; we'd love to have a community of creatives be part of our college community. And we would love that to include visual artists, musicians, and filmmakers.

**David Capes**

They are our storytellers.

**Jonathan Brant**

Right, exactly. At the moment, I think we're intending to partner with others in the actual media communications sphere, you know, we have great friends and colleagues who are already at work asking how we can get the message out. I think that we're going to look at that. But clearly, you can have the most wonderful piece of art. And if it's locked away in somebody's back room, and nobody ever sees it, it's not having much of an impact. So somehow, you need to work out how to propagate this? How do you get the word out?

**David Capes**

So, at Wycliffe Hall in particular, how do you go about fostering that vision?

**Jonathan Brant**

I guess this is to come back to my earlier point of wanting to make this distinction between the Renaissance Vision and the Renaissance Project.

**David Capes**

How do you because that's a big picture kind of thing.

**Jonathan Brant**

It really is and we're a small institution. And we have the privilege of being part of Oxford University, which is a big institution, but we ourselves are small. And we love that and want to maintain that sense of community and intimacy. Because we think that's the kind of context out of which exciting things happen. So essentially, for us, we can boil it down to first we're going to increase our research footprint, our research activity. We already have a fantastic group of academics or tutorial fellows that are teaching and researching, but primarily in theology. We want to move out and have Christian academics doing cutting edge research across the range of endeavors and investigations.

And then second, which is leadership, which we perhaps have talked less about. We have a very long history of training, particularly church leaders. We want to work out how can we form and train Christians who are going to be leading in the whole breadth of contexts in culture and society. Business and government, and the arts, media, all of these things. What can we offer to them that's going to equip them to serve Christ and witness to Christ and do good in the world, as leaders in all those different spheres.

And then finally, as I say, we want to have this actual community of creatives be part of us. And we believe that if we can bring in exceptional people, and we can give them exceptional formation and training, then they can have an exceptional impact.

### **David Capes**

And that exceptional experience is possible through Oxford, just simply by being the magnet that it is all around the world, bringing together some of the best and brightest. We're going to be tracking with you guys over the next few years. We'll do a checkup from time to time on the Renaissance Project. And to see how we are on the vision. Dr. Jonathan Brant, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

### **Jonathan Brant**

Thank you, David.

### **A Nugget of Wisdom from Jonathan Brant**

I have a favorite saying that I think of a lot. It's attributed to many different people. I don't know who's actually the original source of it. But the saying is this, that there's a simplicity on the near side of complexity that's worthless. And there's a simplicity on the far side of complexity that's priceless.

And I think as somebody who works a lot with ideas, works in academia, and is keen to be able to communicate those ideas beyond those whose job it is to study and read books and think deep thoughts. I love that sense that the people I really, really admire, are able to take very complex ideas, work through them carefully, and then present them simply. And I think that's absolutely priceless.

But sadly, we sometimes come across the other side as well of people who take complex ideas and pretend that they are simple and I think that's not so helpful. So, I often think: can I take this very complex idea, get beyond it, and present it in a way that's simple for people to understand and learn from and be changed by.