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SPEAKERS

RC: Ross Cochran

EB: Eli Bonilla Jr.

0:00:00.1 RC: Welcome to the Resilient Disciples Podcast, powered by Awana. I'm Ross. You know who you are, and I am so glad that you were listening today because today I have Eli Bonilla Junior who is... If you don't know Eli, you are about to become one of his biggest fans, just like I did in preparing for this conversation. Because one, eli has all the jobs, and he is just a powerhouse for the kingdom in so many different unique ways that we'll talk about... But... I rarely do this, but if you are someone who is really into following people on social media, you gotta make sure you follow Eli... All of those links are gonna be the show notes today, but Sir, welcome to the podcast. I'm really, really happy to have you with us today.

0:00:44.0 EB: Thank you, thank you so much for this opportunity. I love you guys out there at Awana, all the stuff that you've done, my mother was freaking out that I was gonna be on an Awana podcast. Like, "Oh my God, Awana" shout out to you mom. I know you're listening.

0:01:01.3 RC: There you go. Yeah.

0:01:03.5 EB: Glad to be here.

0:01:04.8 RC: That's awesome. So really, I'm talking to members of what we're calling our faculty for the Child Discipleship Forum, but I'm really big in the demo for their moms, that's really where this podcast really resonates... One of the things that stands out to me, particularly about your ministry is, I joked about it, about you having a thousand jobs. You're the National Millennial Director for the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, and... The day job, if you will, is with the fantastic organization, One hope... One of the things that stands out to me about you is you have found a way to have your ministry, fuel your passions and your impact in a way that I think is unique, and when people who are listening to this podcast... A lot of them are the local kid ministry leader, a person who is really focused on child discipleship, but also the person who has to make sure the snack cabinet gets filled. So you, as someone who is... How have you been able to just stay as driven as you clearly have been, stay as focused on the mission and not get sort of bogged down with some of the details in the method that comes with your various roles?

0:02:17.5 EB: Yeah, that's a good question. I want to preface this with... I grew up in church, I'm a pastor's kid. Okay, so pray for me. But my dad's a pastor's kid and my grandfather is a pastor's kid, so pray for all of us! I guess I'm in that world, I'm drowning in local church ministry, but I think that was the greatest thing for me to be honest, wrestling through just

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the day-to-day of local church ministry, and I think that that's what keeps, I guess, a honest eye on what's going on when you're so tethered to what's happening in the community, and because once you get to the macro levels and you're dealing with just absurd numbers of people and high profile people with a lot of influence, you can kind of... I don't know, this illusion of big being better for the masses can kinda creep in, and I really have found that staying tethered to the local community has kept me on the pulse and then saying things that actually can influence people in a real way in real time. And so the local church, I think, has been the biggest help in that direction.

0:03:37.8 RC: 100%, man. That's beautiful. And it's one of the reasons why we're so happy to have you a part of the faculty for the first child to semester, because one of the things that I think is so crucial is that we are speaking both to an audience of pastors and influencers within the kingdom who... We want to make sure that they recognize the priority of child discipleship, but also to that local leader, the person who's engaged in this work every day. And for them to see the value in the work that they're doing, that they're doing so much more than just coloring in a picture next to a five-year-old, they're really shaping the future of the faith when they do that. You and I are in a similar position, in that we are both young dads and I'm curious to bring discipleship all the way home, quite literally. When we talk a lot about the future of the faith, as in terms of the church of 2050, and as we are coming out of that, I find myself constantly looking at my kids and praying over their discipleship and how they are going to have to shape the church of 2050. How do you begin to think about the church that you grew up in as a pastor's kid, and now that essentially your kids are fifth generation pastor's kids, like how do you begin to think about and unpack what their discipleship is gonna look like compared to what you experienced?

0:04:50.5 EB: Restate, are gonna be exposed to things way younger than I was exposed to things, and just this flood of ideas, this flood of various thoughts around identity, spirituality, political views, all of those things are flooding them sometimes in 30-second formats and in other cases, like a Joe Rogan podcast where it's three hours of sifting through who knows what with so and so doctor so and so. You have all these various mediums where young people have access to that, and I think what fuels me the most is that what an amazing opportunity to wrestle younger. I think that, yeah, it's scary for the real world to hit them younger, but when you have people like... You guys do want us here at one home and its various other groups that care about the next generation, that are willing to lean into those subjects with those young people going through them in real time, I just think that that will mature. I think we're gonna see a generation mature a lot quicker in their spirituality, then maybe a lot of us as they had to wrestle through a lot of the philosophical, theological wrestling younger, and who knows what that could produce later on, what type of Christian work will come out of that generation. And so that's what fuels me. It's like, Hey, this is an opportunity to build some really heavy hitters because they're just jumping into the fire early on the optimistic and perhaps...

0:06:45.2 RC: But that is such a great lens for it, and I think sometimes optimism is what's required, and you were someone who grew up in the church, and a lot of folks who listen to this, that is also their story. And I didn't come to know Jesus until I was in college and

looked like I was 50, but that's a separate conversation. And when that happened for me, and every time I talk to somebody like you, I'm reminded of essentially how much time I missed with the Lord because it took me so long to realize that I needed him, but I'm so encouraged by your optimism, by your motivation. A lack of cynicism that permeates everything you do, because I personally think it would be very easy for me to become cynical, to look at that data and be like, Nope, we're out, I guess the enemy and we lost and that's entirely un-Biblical. I do wanna bring the conversation more into this forum and your talk in particular, now, if people were aware of you going into this podcast, they may have seen somebody you... Your conversation, some of your talk, not only about your unique identity, but your perspective on race, what I heard in your Q talk and when I think you're gonna wanna bring into the Forum is what you feel like is something that's missing from the racial conversation that we're all having in our own communities, in our own context, can you share with our listeners what that is, what do you feel like is missing in this current race conversation?

0:08:16.0 EB: Yeah, I feel at the moment we are heavily leaning into this binary of black and white, and I want to say that I do feel that the emphasis is justified because of just our history as a nation. I don't think that I can overstate just how tragic parts of our history we're getting to where we are now, so this is not one of my talks on of my thoughts are dismissive in any way of that reality, but I am who I am and I'm trying to find my way, like I still have to be me, and whenever I am presented with, okay, you can be you, but you gotta pick a side, and once you pick that side, you're picking the identity of that side, you're picking in many ways for the general public, they're very superficial identities, so you have race, you have political ideologies, but for me, coming from a mixed background, and for the listeners that don't know me... My mother is from the Dominican Republic. She's an immigrant from Santa Domingo, and my father is an immigrant from Mexico. He was born in Nogales, raised in Mexico City. They both moved here around the age of 12 to the United States, they met in college in Tennessee. My dad moved to get his Masters at Fuller in Pasadena where I was born, so I was born in LA, but I was raised in south Texas. Okay, and so I'm as American as they come, like my mother when she moved, she moved to New Jersey, and a lot of my family, they married new Eureka, so I have that in New York, New Jersey. You do my mother's side in the States, and then my father from the south west, a lot of family in Tucson, Phoenix, San Antonio, LA. And so my world view is all over the place, and so when these conversations come up and the silos are built and saying, Okay, we all have to rally now a all hands on deck on rallying around things like justice equality, we gotta rally around those things and when you don't neatly fit into any of those boxes, that's what's missing. We don't allow, I would say the word is a conjunction, we don't allow conjunctions, don't allow ourselves to be this and that you could be this, but you're also that right leg with those conjunctions, we either say, you're this or you're that. And I think that we're missing out on that, and me being a person of mixed race and mixed ethnicity, I wrestled through that and then I married a Palestinian-American, and so even with that conversation, and then now we have kids, and my kids are a quarter Dominican Mexican, Palestinian and Anglo.

0:11:28.6 RC: Wow.

0:11:29.0 EB: And so how will they identify if we continue on this continuum where it just continues to diverge, where are they allowed to land, what parts of them do they have to suppress to be tolerated on the side that they chose, it sort of plays back into what we're talking about with digital discipleship for our kids and what that's gonna look like, because the public discourse, the public square has become so binary, and yet the stakes of what we're talking about are so high that we can't let... Binary win the day.

0:12:37.2 RC: And I personally think about that as such a great opportunity for the church, and people are listening to influence what the future of the face looks like, because the church should be a leader in that conversation, the church should be a leader in leading people through that nuance and helping kids like your kids and kids like my kids, celebrate the fullness of their identity with Jesus and not have to surprise parts of themselves to conform, if there's any place in the world that that should be permissible is within the context of the body of Christ. And I hope we get there. I am curious. Obviously, we here at Awana, you guys at One Hope. We are constantly engaged in the conversation about the future of the faith, and how we talk to kids about this is so crucial, we all need to engage our kids in this conversation, and we all need to be in to talk to our kids with a biblical world view of what race means and what race more importantly, doesn't mean... I'm curious how you begin to unpack that with your own kids or advise others to impact that with their own kids, because we as adults can talk about it, but frankly, we're gonna get it wrong a lot, and my hope is that if we get it right with the kids that they're gonna have a cleaner version of this conversation as they age into the future of the fit.

0:13:18.9 EB: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I really do believe that understanding and I think that the our whole conversation is around identity and really trying to unpack that, and first and foremost, some packing... The imago dei, the image of God that's within all of us. That is within all of us. We all share that. That's the thing that really does unite, is that God put his hands on us as he formed us, but that within that commonality, there's also distinctive, there's the diversity, and I always thought it was fascinating, and one of the passages that I've always leaned on, and I leaned on in my Q Talk as well, and has really helped me is the passage of Romans, Romans revelation or Revelation 7, where it talks about the throne room of God at the end of all things, and who was gathered there, and it says that it gathered a great multitude and have right here that it's every nation, every tribe, every people. In every language, and that word nation, there is the word ethno, and so it's every ethnicity, every tribe of people, every language, and that's taking place in eternity, and so it makes you wonder, you're like, Okay, I get to keep a couple of things when I go to eternity. And so I gotta think about What are the things that I get to keep. And it highlights, you get to keep that, you get to keep your color, you get to keep your language, your tribe, that you were born into, your ethnicity, and so I think that understanding that God loves that about you, that God loves your skin color, do loves the language that you speak, God loves you know the culture that you come from it. And I think that one thing is... So I have three ways of breaking that down, and the first one is understanding the difference between your identity and your identifiers, people right now, especially within this conversation, is we have become way more prejudice, I believe, more so than ever, which is judging people by their appearance or maybe a Facebook post or comment that they made and we just silo

them off and we identify you by your identifier, the way you speak, or what you look like, the way that you dress, and if we're not careful, we can all identifiers to become our identity. And then instead of developing a Christ character, we just become caricatures of other people's labels on us, and coming from 2020, I found myself even becoming a caricature of a Latino where I'm like, I'm not... I'm Latino, but I'm not first generation. And all of a sudden I felt this pressure to be perfect in my Spanish or learn all of the Spanish songs that I never knew growing up, 'cause I just... I grew up here just to justify my Latino-ness or to really accentuate all of that people were throwing on me, they're like, Oh well, you're the Latino in the circles, you gotta encapsulate all of the Latino cultures, and I'm like, well, first I am two distinctive nations of Latino, Dominican Republic and Mexico are not similar at all, and so very quickly, I found that those felt short, and so I think for children, teaching children about the difference between their identity, the mango day, that God loves the way he created them, but that they are not that what they look like and where they come from is also not the fullness of who they are, and kind of diving into that a bit and teaching that I think would be beneficial to our children, and that's my kids...

0:17:41.8 RC: That's so great because I feel like the number of identifiers that our kids are gonna have are gonna continue to feel more prominent. It reminds me of something that I think is so critical in this conversation in the kids and stuff, that people who live into the sea, which is when our kids become followers of Jesus, there is not... As Dr. Keys Bo said recently, there is not a junior version of the Holy Spirit, they get... Biblically, they are full brothers and sisters in the faith, and yet so often we treat them with one of their identifiers of being a kid rather than recognizing the fullness of the Amaro day, and if we can do that work just in their spiritual development and their discipleship we can certainly do that work and how it relates to their race or other ways in which division is trying to be sown, particularly amongst the kingdom.

0:18:35.2 EB: Yeah, can I make a comment? Eyes so yeah, a part of something I've studied as well as Jeremiah Chapter 1 versus live through it, and that's famous passage where Jeremiah is like, I'm only a young person, I'm only a youth, and then God says, Do not say that you are only the youth, and I take that as... And maybe I'm using that passage generously, but many times we say, I'm only and then we fill in the blank with an identifier that we've adopted for ourselves, saying, Well, you know my whole life I've been known as this. And so now when God asked me to do something different or to jump into another conversation, I've limited myself either by outside labels or an internal label to say I'm only... And I do believe we're entering into a season where God is taking those only tables off and saying, Yeah, you're this, but... And you're that. And that's awesome, because now you're able to do so much... Yeah, there is an attention of identifiers within, and I deal with that because I'm like, I don't neatly fit anywhere, but what a great privilege to be able to enter into various conversations because I'm this and I'm also that.

0:19:53.9 RC: And I hope that that begins to broaden folks perspective on not only their own potential, but the potential in their church depends on their communities, because I think to your point about Revelation where this ends, we have to be able to lean fully into these things to better reflect God's kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven

0:20:15.7 EB: So it's identity as identifiers. I kinda went into the second one a little bit ago, versus character, identifiers versus identity is what we didn't get to choose. I don't get to choose when I get followed around in a Walmart discretion. You know what I mean? Like there are various experiences when we talk about the people of color, when they talk about their experience in the US. Yeah, I've had those moments where I didn't get to choose to be labeled and followed around and these people don't know, I'm like a credential minister, like the second thing is character versus caricature, and that's what you get to choose... You either get to choose to buy into the narrative that culture has put on you and you can just lean into that and just make that your identity, 'cause it's easier, you can grow a platform quicker that way, and we've noticed that about influencers, they're playing characters. The caricatures, their extreme versions of whatever category people are either identifying with or they appreciate, and they just go all in and people support that, or you can choose to have character, which is way more in depth, and I don't believe is marketable... That's something that you're saying, you're sticking to your convictions, and so... Yeah, the first one, you don't get to choose, this is one that you do get to choose and say, Hey, I know that the predominant view of people that look like me sound like me or come from my background, come from my neighborhood, statistics show this about me or the narrative is this about my group, I don't ascribe to that, I want my character to be built on something more robust, and I think that that's only given... And that's kind of my last one is uniform versus unity, and that's what only God can do, and I think that we do Unity poorly because our version of unity in the church is just getting everyone on the same page to see the same songs, just think the same things to be passionate about, all the same things, and so we call a unity, but it's more uniformity and what we need when we get into diverse situations... And this is the difference, and I'm gonna open a can of worms when I say this, it's the difference between the multi-ethnic church in a multi-colored church, and a multi-colored church is a Church where everyone is the same thing as of the same thing. The language is all the same, and this kind of not a difference from person to person, maybe in their homes... Yes, but not in the church space. But a multi-ethnic church is equal sacrifice amongst all involved parties, where you're saying, Okay, for example, I'm Latino, and I do have African roots within me from the Dominican side, but I'm not African-American, and so I do have to allow my African-American brother and sister to lead me into the unknown of their experience that I don't have, and the moment I can allow them to lead me into that unknown, and then vice versa, them allow me to lead them into the unknown of the Latino experience within a church context. Then we have unity, and that's unity, that's unity and diversity, because there is an equal shared sacrifice of, Hey, we're gonna create space for everyone that comes from a different place to lead us into what we don't know, and not just assume we do... Or just gloss over and say, Okay, that's just too complicated. Let's just all just do one thing...

0:24:14.7 RC: One thing I do hope the people who come to the Forum begin to hear and unpack all this in their local context, because I think about that in conversation with kids and the amazing opportunity to make that foundational in the lives of kids like this just happened with my daughter, where she was hanging out with this girl and he kills mom and other little bit says, mommies don't work. And my daughter was like, My mom, my works,

and I watched on that little girl's face where just her foundation was changed, like truth immediately set in of like, Oh, I was wrong about this, and now I understand that life is more complicated or it's more nuanced, like kids get that, and I'm using very benign example, but how much more important and how much more impactful to be able to teach kids about what you're describing for something that the world is gonna try to... Tell them a different story. The world is gonna try to tell them that these identifiers matter more, that to your point, characters are more remarkable and therefore more successful, if people who are listening to this are uncomfortable, I hope that they pay attention to that and lean into that and we... Into the spirit with that, because otherwise, we're gonna keep having the same conversation over and over again.

0:25:34.1 EB: Everyone has that. Yeah, yes. For everyone listening, just even with Ben, as mixed, as mix as I am, I don't know everything and I couldn't possibly even know everything of the nations my parents come from. Sure, which is a two-part of the tension is because... Am I Mexican enough? Am I Dominican enough? On one side of my family, I'm the Mexican, on the other side of my family, I'm the Dominican. So yeah, we're all invited into that, but I believe that we share this grace to leave people that don't know, and we're humble enough to be the people that don't know and walk quietly and listen to stories, I just think will be healthier as a church united in this country and even worldwide, and we need to...

0:27:06.2 RC: That's sort of where it comes back to where we started this conversation. When you look at what the future of the face is gonna look like the church needs to be united in... Formed will not work. We see that particularly in a conversation around children's ministry, where so much of the work that was done, it turned out to not bear enough for... We see so many kids leaving the faith in high school, and we see so many of the kids that the Sunday school answers they kept receiving when they stopped asking Sunday school questions began to lead them to be to a place of disillusionment with their faith. And I hope that voices like yours can continue to ring out over some of that noise because in my opinion, it is what shapes the future of the faith, and it is what makes this actual conversation around discipleship really count. I want people to come to the Forum. I want people to see you in person in 3D, 'cause I think it's particularly impactful, we are... The conversation online as well, the last question I'll ask you is just... You are someone who is a leader in this next gen space. You are someone who now is being asked to speak at a lot of different conferences, you're pulled in a lot of different directions, a lot of different responsibilities. Can you speak to folks who have listened to this conversation up to this point, about why gathering a community specifically dedicated to child discipleship is so important for such a time, is this why are you excited that the form is happening, even if you weren't speaking at it...

0:28:01.5 EB: Yeah, because I don't believe that one, people are not being disciplined, everyone is being disciplined. We have the unique opportunity to be the ones to do the discipline, and the way the culture is at the moment is we have phones, we have tablets, and if we are not intentional with our discipleship of our children, our tablets and our iPhones will be the ones doing the discipling. And in that we don't get to choose. Technology is what it is, and we can't put our kids in a bunker, he knew like that, that we will

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make crazy people out of trying to hide them from the realities of the world, but I do believe in the Holy Spirit, and I do believe that the Holy Spirit is equipping father's mother's pastors for the next generation to lead children in the way that they should go, to give them wisdom in times of very gray area to conversations for revelation to spring up and for us to not underestimate how receptive and perceptive young children are and how open they are to hearing very complex topics in nuance, get children in front of diverse voices, get your children in front of diverse experiences, take them to various restaurants, if you got families in your church that are multi-ethnic, go to their houses, hang out with them, let the kids hear different languages, if you're listening to this and you're in the United States, there's plenty of opportunity for your children to experience a broad variety of people, and I think that that comes with our intentionality to introduce them to those things. So forms like these, man, they're great opportunities to build up the next wave of Christians that are gonna see the Gospel going to the future.