

Q&A Interview |
Pastor Melvin Cross Jr.
Glory House International

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Biandudi Hofer: When the news broke in June of this year that the Supreme Court had overturned Roe v. Wade, how did you address that with your congregants?

Cross: When I found out, I had so many mixed emotions, and if I'm honest, I was excited and almost fearful all at the same time. The reason being is I value life in such a beautiful way. At the same time, I know the state of our nation, how fragile it is, and how the systems need a drastic upgrade. So I'm like, this is my value system, but this is my heart. I know there's so many moving pieces to it. And I know other pastors might disagree with me; there's not one place to stand on because it's just so many vacillating and moving spots.

I remember Wednesday night, we had bible study and prayer, and I talked to my congregation about it. It opened up a whole dialogue with around 50 people in the bible study. And people started sharing their own personal experiences of having abortions and the pain that came along with it.

And some people were excited about the overturning. And we were able to come together, pray, honor the pain of our brothers and sisters around us, honor the feeling of progress for others, and we prayed together. And we were able to honor everybody within the room.

Biandudi Hofer: Tell me more about how you navigated the mixed emotions people were experiencing.

Cross: Very genuinely and just being very real. In those moments, we usually go wrong when we act like we have all the answers. So I just very forthright, put it out there, "I don't know everything, but I do know this...as the leader of this church, I'm going to be very honest, this is where my experience is. I understand your experience might be different. Let's come around. Let's come around it all. Let's just come around this dialogue of humanity. Let's come around this dialogue of angst, uncertainties, and excitement. Let's come around that, and let's not deny it, and then let's not demonize because of any of those feelings."

Biandudi Hofer: You created an opening where people could have very different feelings about this, very different perspectives on this, and for that to be okay.

Cross: Yeah, which is very unusual in a faith-based Christian context. But the reality is, that's the state of our world. I'm a deeply valued man of faith. Faith is a part of my value system. I'm a Bible man. At the same time, I realize that there are people around me that might have some of those same values, but they might not be in the same space of their journey. And so I have to

understand where they are and love them to a place or be a part of their journey to getting to wherever they feel like they need to be in their faith in Jesus.

Biandudi Hofer: What was the reaction from your congregants during that bible study?

Cross: Tears of pain just from their own personal experiences. I was very proud as a pastor because people were voicing their concerns and their opinions, but they rallied around the pain of those who were in the room, which is so necessary because oftentimes, we try to win an argument for the sake of risking the relationship. When we walked out of that room, it was just such a surreal sense of, "Wow, this is my tribe. We love each other, we support each other, we pray for each other," as we're all coming into the full awareness of who we are in our faith, who we are in Christ.

Biandudi Hofer: So we don't all have to agree, but we've identified the things we do have in common and we're here to support one another.

Cross: If everybody was honest, that's where most people are.

Biandudi Hofer: What do you think is oversimplified about the issue of abortion?

Cross: What is oversimplified? On both ends, I think on one end for the pro-lifers, it's oversimplified the experience of the individual. We, I say "We," I'm a pro-lifer, even though I feel like I'm more moderate than anything, but we assume that people are out just to harm or to take life when we don't take into consideration the backdrop of circumstances, the socioeconomic class of people, sometimes the tragedies around experiences. We have to take those things into consideration.

On the pro-choice end of it, they think pro-life people are just staunch, bigoted, conservative, when in our actuality, it just comes from a healthy value of life. And if we position it well, we can convey that it's not just that it's a staunch place; it's the sheer love that we have for life, for conception, for children coming into the earth. It's just a beautiful value system. And I'm always thinking about how I felt when I found out my wife was having our child. The pleasure, the joy, and the excitement that filled my heart. And then I have to understand that there are certain people that they find out in whatever the circumstance is, and it's anxiety, it's "How am I going to live? How am I going to support? What am I going to do?" So both ends have to take those emotions and those truths into play when we have these dialogues and these conversations.

Biandudi Hofer: It sounds like what is oversimplified is the labels that each side places on the other and the assumptions that each side places on the other without the consideration of why people feel and believe the way that they do on both sides. Does that sound right?

Cross: That's 100% accurate. We lead with labels. We don't lead with understanding. If I started this conversation, "Hey, I'm pro-life." Immediately, people shut down and they already have their preconceived notions of who I am. But when I lead [from] a place of understanding, "Hey, let me

hear your heart. Let me hear your story. Why do you feel this way?" Then we can come into a common ground of humanity and realize like, "Hey, we're all human here. And we're all on a journey of understanding and becoming who we're going to be."

Biandudi Hofer: What do you think are some of the preconceived notions people have about your church, and most non-denominational Christian churches for that matter?

Cross: I think the assumption is that this church believes one way. We are nondenominational. Most of us come from more of a charismatic, Pentecostal background, which is very conservative, and we honor that. But there are people that come to this church that are new to faith. There are people that come to this church that are seeking and searching faith. And so we are aware that they are, you're going to hear me say this word a lot, that they're at a different space in their journey. As they are following Christ, they might be at the beginning of their journey, while there's another individual that's been following Christ for some years now. So the challenge is to get this person that's new and this person that's been here for a while to come to a place of understanding, and we can start walking this journey together.

So we think that there is one type of person in this church. This is the type of person in this church, this is the type of belief system. Even though we all have an overarching belief system, people are coming to a place of understanding in their faith. So it's not just one type of person. It's not just this one staunch place of, "This is what we believe, and this is it." As a pastor, it's my responsibility to set that standard in the congregation, to set the standard, "This is our statement of faith. This is what we believe. This is what we believe about social issues. This is what we believe about X, Y, and Z." And it's my responsibility to set that standard. Now, as my congregation, they come to a place of rising to that standard or come to a place to navigate to see, "Okay, I'm navigating this. I love this place, I love these people. So I'm learning to navigate in my understanding of what this means."

And it's really a beautiful wrestling of understanding and faith and belief. Everything is not so black and white. People live in [the] gray. And guess what, we honor that because it's scriptural. The scripture talks about being shaped and formed into the very image of Christ. I've been doing this for most of my life, and I'm still being conformed into the very image of Jesus Christ. So who am I to say to you, "You don't look like Him enough." You're on your journey, and it's a beautiful one.

Biandudi Hofer: How has the issue of abortion affected you personally, if it has?

Cross: I was a teenager and I guess I've always had this value system. And I remember, just young and just crazy high school student. I actually thought I was having a child. And I remember getting the call, and I was like, "Whoa." In that moment, I remember I was with my parents. I was in the downstairs bathroom on the phone. We didn't have cell phones, so the cord was in the bathroom, I had the bathroom door closed. I was like, "What?" And I was like, "Okay, I got to go tell my parents." She's like, "Wait, wait, no, no, no, no, no, no, no." I was like, "Oh, this is what we're doing. I know I'm young, but this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to be a

dad." And she's like, "No, I have to figure this out." I was like, "Oh." But in my mind, there was nothing in me that said, "I'm going to abort this child."

I don't know where that came from. Maybe because my parents, they did foster care, and raised 24 foster children aside from their own children. So they were always in the business of taking children in, people that didn't have the same luxury, the same benefit of family. And so I have seen them bring children in and love them and raise them. So in my mind, I'm like, "Okay, here it is. My parents are going to be," I know I'm in a church. I was going to say pissed. I just said it. "They are going to be pissed at me. I'm probably going to get a whooping or something." But there was something in me that said, "This is what I'm going to do. This is life." And long story short, it didn't happen. It didn't happen. But in that moment, I realized, I was like, "Wow, I remember. This has to be a value system of mine. It's a value system of mine." And I've always been okay with that.

Biandudi Hofer: So there was no doubt in your mind that if she was pregnant, you had a role to play, and that role was father.

Cross: Yep.

Biandudi Hofer: The way in which you were raised, it sounds like your parents modeled for you how to nurture and love children through their role as parents and foster parents. Perhaps that's why you could so quickly see yourself as a father if necessary.

Cross: Yeah. I was every bit a 15-year-old. I remember I always wanted to travel and go to college. I've always had this idea of who I wanted to become. But in that moment, I was like, "Wow, everything's about to change. I'm going to figure out how to do it because this life is so valuable." And like I said, just seeing how my parents did that, even with my family, my cousins, my aunties, and uncles grew up down south. Things were different down south back then. So if somebody got pregnant, they'd send you up north, you have the kid, and then the family helps raise the baby. You know what I mean? The family is going to help take care of this, but we're going to send you away till you have that baby. And then we're going all raise this baby together. And so it was just always that value system like, "Oh, this is our baby. We're going to have to take care of this baby."

Biandudi Hofer: When it was all said and done, your high school girlfriend wasn't pregnant, but was she shocked by your response?

Cross: She was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute." Because I was like, "Oh, I got to go tell my parents." "No, no, no, no. You can't go tell your parents. I don't know what I'm going to do." Because I was like, "I'm shocked, I'm scared, but okay, we're going to do this." "No, I have to still figure out what I want to do." That's the conflict right there. And I'm like, "What do you mean? We're going to do this."

So now my conviction is very strong. She has to figure out because she wasn't a Christian or anything like that, or she was, I don't know where she was, honestly, I don't remember. But clearly, she had some conflict on the inside, and so we had to wrestle with that. I remember three days of conversation. I didn't tell my parents. She said, "I just need you to give me time."

I wanted to honor her and respect her. That is a very key point. That was my conviction. But I had to honor and respect her because that wasn't her conviction. I didn't demonize her. I [said], "Hey, life is valuable to me. I know you have to figure out what you're going to do." But I mean, it was a long three days, and turned out she wasn't. Thank you, Jesus. Hallelujah. But if she was, I was like, "I'm about to be somebody's daddy right now. I'm about to raise this kid."

Biandudi Hofer: Thank you for sharing that.

Cross: No problem. I don't think I've ever told that story publicly like that. It's all good.

Biandudi Hofer: It really sounds like family tradition and values and culture shaped how you feel about abortion.

Cross: Very much so. My father, his mother was young. He didn't even know he was adopted. So his mother gave him up, left him in the hospital, and my grandmother came in, picked him up out of the hospital, adopted him, and raised him. So it's just those type of experiences that I come from, that has shaped my understanding of life. I think about my dad, and I'm not going to get emotional, if this young girl, she came up from the South during apple picking season, got pregnant with this kid, had the baby, left him, and then he had an opportunity with this family who raised him. So this is why we should lead with understanding instead of labels. Because for me to just say, "I'm pro-life," you'd be like, "Horrible guy, bigot, conservative." No, there's a story behind my reasoning. And if you hear my story, you'll understand. And then, in your understanding, we can find the common ground of honor and respect.

Biandudi Hofer: What do you want to understand about those who disagree with you? Specifically, those who say their religious beliefs support abortion rights.

Cross: I am a man of scripture. I don't see where faith supports that.

When Jesus was talking to people, he said, "You have to make a decision to pick up your cross and follow me." He didn't say, "I'm going to force you to. You have to make a decision to do what you feel is necessary." And there's a story about a rich young ruler where he says, "Hey, I've followed all of the commandments. I've done X, Y, and Z." Jesus says, "Go sell all your belongings and then come back." And the guy had this discontented look on his face like, "What?" And the guy walked away. The stunning part about this story is that Jesus didn't chase him. Jesus didn't berate him. Jesus let him go along his way. Because guess what? He has a choice, to follow or not to follow. And that's on him.

So I see it and I don't see it. Life is valuable. It's very valuable. But also, the beautiful gift that God has given us is that of free will. And the moment that we take people's free will away they don't have the opportunity to exercise their God-given ability to make a decision.

Biandudi Hofer: So, within the Christian faith, scripturally, you don't see anything that condones abortion?

Cross: Right.

Biandudi Hofer: And for those of different religious backgrounds and faiths who believe their faith allows women to have bodily autonomy, how do you process that?

Cross: I hold tight to my convictions and I understand that they're not yours. And I understand we live in a democracy. We don't live in a kingdom or a monarch where it's a ruling or it's not this iron fist. So what do democracies do? They give people options to make their own choices. But don't demonize my decision to value life, just like I'm not going to demonize your decision to choose what you want to choose. You have every right to feel the way you feel. At the same time, I'm going to be very honorable and loving, while conveying how I feel. And how I feel doesn't mean I don't like you. It doesn't mean I hate you. It doesn't mean I think you're the scum of the earth. No, this is just how I feel. And it's a beautiful thing that I can feel how I feel and still look at you and love you and respect you.

And when you come around, I'm not thinking any ill or any worse of you. I'm like, "You used your God-given right to make a decision. And I'm using my God-given right to have this value for life." Guess what? We can still be friends. We can still love each other. We can still respect each other.

Biandudi Hofer: What would you want those who hold different beliefs to understand about you?

Cross: That I'm not evil. I'm not antiquated. And I do value and honor women. I have a high value system, if this makes sense, for women in my life. I love my wife. She's an amazing, strong woman. My mother is an amazing, strong woman. I have sisters that are amazing, strong women. I have women all around me who I think are amazingly brilliant and strong. And so, my belief system doesn't devalue how I feel about women. Honestly, I think they are some of the backbones of our society. Women in my church have a high value system. I believe in women in ministry. I believe in women having leadership rights and positions. So I don't devalue women; I don't devalue their right to choose what will happen in their body. I just have a high value system for life as well.

Biandudi Hofer: Is there anything about the issue of abortion that makes you feel torn?

Cross: Yes. One is, I don't feel like we have an adequate social service system to handle this decision to overturn Roe versus Wade. We need to have the welfare system, the social services'

system. It's not established in a way that can handle this influx of children coming in. At the same time, I want to give these children an opportunity. You know what I mean? So it's that we don't have a system prepared for this. We're celebrating. Even though I felt a sense of excitement, I started thinking, "What are we going to do? This is going to be a systemic issue now. How are we going to support? How are we going to give the care to these mothers?" You know what I mean? That's one. We're celebrating life, but we don't have the structural value to handle what we're celebrating.

Two, if a woman doesn't want to be a mother, there's no amount of legislation that's going to change that. She just doesn't want to be a mother. And what that's going to do is it's going to cause so much harm, not only to herself but potentially to this child that doesn't deserve it. We already see now in this world where children are unjustly abused and hurt and pained. Now what's going to happen is a mom that doesn't want to be a mother, and she doesn't have the proper support...I just don't see how that can end well. And so now what we're going to have to do, you know the quote where it's talking about, "It's better to raise strong children than to heal broken adults." I'm paraphrasing. We're going to have to do a lot of healing of broken adults if we don't figure this out.

Biandudi Hofer: What's a question nobody's asking when it comes to the intersection of abortion and religious faith that we should be asking?

Cross: The question that no one is asking as it pertains to religion and abortion is how can the church maintain its value, while still opening its arms to those who have had abortions or to those who feel like it's their right to do so? One. That's on this end. On this end, how can society that is pro-choice still respect and revere this sacred religious institution that holds to these high values without demonizing, degrading, or, another D word, deteriorating this institution? Let's respect their value and understand that this is an ancient system that they value, while they still have their opportunity to choose. If that makes sense. So the question on both ends is how can I maintain my value system while respecting yours? Nobody's talking about that. Everybody's busy arguing and talking at, instead of taking time to understand.

Biandudi Hofer: That's something you feel?

Cross: That's something I feel. I rarely see people sit to come to a place of understanding. I often see people sit to run an argument. That's just the nature of our culture. It's very polarized and I don't think we were ever meant to be polarizing. We were meant to have common ground, and come to a place of understanding. Come, let us reason together. Let us reason together, on these issues of abortion.

I have women and men in my church that have been impacted by abortion. They've had abortions. If I got up on this pulpit and preached a fiery message about "baby killers going to hell," what benefit does that have for these people who are coming for healing or coming for solace or to come to connect with their God? What benefit does that have? Zero. It has zero benefits. The scripture says, "A man who wins souls is wise." I feel like in this era, we're lacking

a lot of wisdom because it's just, we want to win our argument. It doesn't make sense. So I have to be able to stand here, keep my high value system of life and say, "Hey, wherever you are, guess what? God's arms are open for you. And He's still here, waiting [with] open arms for you to come to him. Wherever you are, whether you've had an abortion, whether you're anti-abortion, God is in the middle waiting for you to come to meet Him right where you are." That's what needs to be said and understood.

Biandudi Hofer: Pastor Melvin, is there anything you'd like to share that I did not ask you?

Cross: One thing I want people who are pro-choice to know is that I respect your choice and I respect you as a human and I love you. And then what I want people to know who are Christian, religious, is that my decision to have my arms open does not mean I have compromised anything. I love them regardless of their decision. And that's the love of Christ. He says, "I love you whether you change or not, but my love remains the same". Because it's His love. Love is the thing that compels people to come. Love is the thing that should bring people together.