Dr. Vernard Gant on Urban Education Reform

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Dr. Gant: Hello, Vernard Gant Speaking.

Brent Stevens: Dr. Gant, this is Brent Stevens. How are you?

Dr. Gant: I'm fine, Brent. How are you?

Brent Stevens: Thanks so much for spending time aside to talk more to it.

Dr. Gant: Sure.

Brent Stevens: OK. So there's just a couple orders of business that I need to take care of before we start the interview. So, if I could have your permission to record the interview.

Dr. Gant: Yes, you have my permission.

Brent Stevens: Excellent! And then I will be uploading this to something called the University of Dallas oral history repository. So, it's just a database where a number of the students have done projects similar to this, and then uploaded it for scholarly use. Do I have your permission to put into that?

Dr. Gant: Yes.

Brent Stevens: Thank you so much. I will be sending a transcription to you and you can look over it and if there's anything that you need to redact, I will redact whatever it is that you would want me to fix, so that it's 100 percent accurate and everything you want to be in there.

Dr. Gant: Okay.

Brent Stevens: So, really what I'm hoping to capture is just your experience as an educator. I mean you have a wealth of knowledge and experience and you know and learning and so I would like to just glean as much wisdom from you as I possibly could. And then, you know how me as a young educator, as a young administrator would use my time.

Dr. Gant: Sure.

Brent Stevens: So, I can start really broad, and just ask what, you know, what caused you to give your life to education?

Dr. Gant: Well, my wife and I started in ministry over 40 years ago. And our desire was to address the plight of our people, African-Americans.

Brent Stevens: Yeah.

Dr. Gant: Given the fact that at this point back in the late 70's regarding very dismal records on the plight of the black community. This was on the heels of reports like the Mordihan Report that was published in 1965 under the Johnson Administration, and fast forward 12 years later, what I call a generation of students - 14 years. We were not only not seeing any kind of real progress. It was regressive. Like I said very dismally. So, we started with what I call adult change ministry. Church-based ministry that included things like job training. Service ministries, etc. We came to the conclusion that we were dealing with generational problem that wouldn't have lived up to five years or even a year goals. Instead, we had to back way up to say, "What can we do now that will make a difference a generation from now?" So, now you're talking about children. We were doing a youth ministry both the church level and the camping level. And, again, came to the same conclusion that, as our parents, and what their parents had known. That the real way out was is an education. And we backed into education, we didn't come into it on the front end. As a career thing, as a graduating college with teaching credentials. And we came to it by way of conclusion. We started our first school in mid 80's, and then our second school 7-8 years later.

Brent Stevens: What was the name of the first school you guys started?

Dr. Gant: It was called Frontier Christian School. The name of it now is Restoration Academy in Birmingham, Alabama area. I think it's actually in Fairfield. It's Restoration Academy, now. My wife was the first principal of the school as well.

Brent Stevens: What was the name of the second school you all started?

Dr. Gant: Cornerstone School of Alabama. At one point she was the principal of that school as well.

Brent Stevens: That's awesome.
Dr. Gant: Anyway, that's how we got started. What put us on the national stage was a report that appeared late 90s. This was in the middle of our second school, Cornerstone. An article published by Education Week, which was the nation's largest education publication, and this report was the first comprehensive study of the educational plight of children in urban school districts. Children like the ones (can't understand). That report state there were 575 urban school districts in the nation. Those schools were serving the 11.6 million children.

Brent Stevens: Wow.

Dr. Gant: And that not a single one was considered academically successful. That kind of catapulted me to write to ASCI, Association of Christian Schools International. I wrote a letter to the president of that School. We had met him earlier at an event we hosted at our school. So, I sent the essence of that report to him. And eventually I asked him to dream with me, that what if the people of God established a Christ-centered school like ours? And, ever one of these urban school districts. And, what if those schools were only serving 100 children? I stated that that would mean that nearly 60,000 children would come under the influence of Jesus Christ like no ministry could boast. And those children would be given a life altering education. Now, what if there were two schools, and those schools were serving 200 children, and held out the promise and the hope, and the greatest impact that any ministry could have, to the plight of the children living in those districts under those conditions. I was invited to share that with the board. The ASCI board. I received a letter a couple weeks later, whereby the board voted to not only establish a position, but to create an entire department dedicated to that end. And, I was invited to head it up. Long, long story, less long I accepted, and that was 18 years ago.

Brent Stevens: Okay, so that was in 2000. Where did you guys, this is just out of curiosity, where did you get the funding to start both Frontier Christian School, and Cornerstone of Alabama?

Dr. Gant: The first school, Frontier started as a tuition-based school. And so, we charged a very modest tuition. We were targeting moderate and low income families. I think tuition was only $50 a month, or so. My wife basically worked for nothing. We set it up using a model that allowed multiple grades per classroom and it was largely program based. It would be equivalent today to a digital classroom, but it wasn't digital then. And, so that allowed us to get it started. It struggled financially. Our second school, Cornerstone, was just the opposite - it was donor based. we raised 90% of the funds for running that school. The tuition only covered 10%, so we set that school up on a sliding scale of tuition based on the family's ability to pay. And, so it was not tuition based at all. As a matter of fact, even what we charged the families was not on a per student basis, but on a per family basis. Whatever our formula indicated was that family's ability to pay on a private education. That's what their tuition was, no matter how many children were in the family.

Brent Stevens: So as the curriculum at Frontier Christian School, was that full day school?

Dr. Gant: It was.

Brent Stevens: And you said, so it was, programmatically based. Does that mean you guys kind of worked off of modules?.

Dr. Gant: So the students worked at their own pace. They didn't sit at desks, they sat at little cubicles, and worked at their own pace. So, we didn't have to have credentialed teachers, or anything since it was kind of a self-directed program.

Brent Stevens: Did you have to have students that were pretty adept already. Already, you know, just naturally gifted to where they can teach themselves? Did that limit?

Dr. Gant: No, and that's why it didn't last very long. Our children needed more direct instructions, they really needed more hands on engagement. The ones who were adept could easily manipulate the program, I mean, they could figure out, you know, how to get the answer. So, it was a very anemic instructional tool.
Brent Stevens: Yeah. I was wondering how that would of, you would really just need to have students that were self-guided, self-motivated, for that to be successful. In a lot of ways, a digital platform now probably provide more of the accountability that you're hoping to have.

Dr. Gant: Exactly. Because, at our second school we did implement that as a supplement, it wasn't the core of what we were doing. But we knew that the urban reality for the student, from an academic standpoint, was that children could be all over the map in terms of their abilities. So, the rule of thumb is whatever grade you have, that's how many grade-levels are probably present in the class. So, if you're teaching a 5th Grade class, the children can be performing at 5 different grade levels. So, the concept that, the digital platforms, the digital learning systems have really matured over the years and allowed not only for the instructional piece, but for the assessment component as well. It's kind of like miles from where we were.

Brent Stevens: Yeah. Do you suppose, there's, I mean like you said there's a real stratification of ability. Once you get into urban district, do you suppose that, when thinking within a liberal arts paradigm, which most thinkers tend to push against a digital platform as a viable option for a liberal arts education. Do you suppose the difficulties inherent in education in urban contexts lends a digital platform to delivering a liberal arts curriculum?

Dr. Gant: The only other option is hands on, which are several times more costly. and that would be so so, so resource intense, as to make it impossible. The schools that are implementing blended learning are the ones that are making significant strides.

Brent Stevens: Yeah.

Dr. Gant: In that arena, because the best teacher in the world can only teach by approximation, you have 15 children in the class with multiple abilities. I mean, the best teacher is only going to operate within a certain lane - their zone. So, children will only be left behind or held behind. So, there is no substitute for time on task in this. So, the digital component is the only real viable way to address it. Now, the question is what is the ratio between high tech and high touch component? And, again, that's going to vary on a classroom by classroom, and even a child by child basis. But, definitely the reality now for us is not an either-or, it's a combination. Finding that magic combination. Really now falls into the hands, whether the new tools that educators must be equipped with.

Brent Stevens: Ya, that's interesting. I just think about the liberal arts tradition, and especially as a Christian school, character formation and training in virtue is one of the critical elements at the center of the education. And, it's hard to do that on a purely digital platform, and so finding some blending between the two, would really be ideal for the kind of challenges that urban schools are facing.

Dr. Gant: Well, and then I don't even subscribe to a character-based curriculum, because it won't lend itself to that. Transformation is always, always, and only, a life-on-life transaction. You don't put it in a book, you never heard a testimony of a child saying, "oh, it was this character book that changed my life! Oh, that school got a new curriculum and I'll never forget where I was when the head of school announced it!" Nobody, nobody ever shares a programmatic testimony. They always name a name. And whether it is a character-based school, a traditional public school, or a high-resourced Christian school. And so I don't - I really don't...I've said this Brent, to reformers in Washington, D.C. and everywhere, the reason that despite now more than 50 years and time bring about education reform for the most disadvantaged children. And, as you know, we have gotten away from the "urban" label. "Urban", was outdated when we started. Urban has gone the way of "inner city" and "ghetto." In the minds of too many conservative whites it means black, and brown. And not just black and brown, but the worst of black and brown - the scary black and brown. And, so we've, uh, and again it doesn't capture the reality that most of the poor children in this nation live rural areas of the 50 poorest counties in the nation, 47 are rural. And that is why we have
adopted the description ACE for children that are academically disenfranchised, culturally
diverse, and economically disadvantaged. These are the children that we've been trying, for
over 50 years spent untold dollars to try to effectively educating, but we keep coming up
short. We celebrate the smallest gain, that really doesn't move the needle unless there's a
microscope to see it. We've taken a two dimensional approach to educating these children,
from the standpoint of what teachers know in their heads, but what their credentials show,
and from the standpoint of professional development that includes all of these other things of
what we've just said. Don't mean there is no rational development which would include all of
these other things that we have talked about. And I have said that as long as we continue to
put all of our emphasis on those two dimensions, we are going to keep coming up short.
Because, I say to them: "Think about it." Every testimony you've heard, every book you've
read, every movie you've seen, you don't even have to go out (can't understand) The teacher
always had a profound impact on children, particularly the disadvantaged. It's always the

Brent Stevens: I mean, it goes back to, you know, when Christ said, "it's enough for the
people to become like their teacher." I mean, the idea that the teacher proceeds the child in all
things, and that includes their character. So, if you have a shyster in the room, it's likely that
the child will go in that direction, or at least to learn some things that are ill from that teacher.

Dr. Gant: To that point, Jesus of course is the greatest teacher that ever walked the face of
the earth. This exactly why he (can't understand). He knew his content. He knew how to
teach. He taught using parables, illustrations. He knew his pedagogy. He would say to them,
"no longer do I call you servants, but I call you friends." He was a relational teacher. And so, they don't come more three dimensional than that.

**Brent Stevens:** So, what do you, I mean if you're to step back and look at education over the last, say, 40 or 50 years. What would you say is the most important development. If you look at the things that encourage you, encourages you the most. It gives you hope for the future. Can any point to one or two things?

**Dr. Gant:** The thing that I'm most excited about is what I'm involved with in terms of shifting the focus from the institutional focus to a people-based solution. God never proposed an institution-based, a program-based solution, it was always people-based. And I'm convinced that God has educators everywhere that ACE children are. And I see that there are two models that He's using. One I call the extraction model. That's Christian schools that extract children from their settings, bringing them into a setting regulated by the people of God. And, endeavoring to bring to bear upon the lives of these children what I call a kingdom class education, which is infinitely above a world class. The challenge to the extraction is that you're only going extract a small percentage of children, even with school choice. You're going to only be able to extract a small percentage of these children who are going to have to be predisposed to success because they're going to have a lot of success factors in place, such as engaged parents, such as a culture that is regulated by the people of God. So, the atmosphere is favorable, but they come from favorable conditions, etc. I'm thankful for the parental choice programs, we now have 30 states, unlike Texas, that have some form of parental choice, and all of the parental choice programs in a nation are geared towards ACE children. All of them. They have an academic component, or an economic component, once you marry those two you are automatically talking about the cultural component, because children of color disproportionately occupy those areas. The other model is what I call the infiltration model. In all of my years now of doing this. This is the part that is absolutely thrilling, and exciting. These are the folk that God has placed in the schools where the vast majority of ACE children are, and they are simply operating in systems and institutions that are publicly regulated. Nevertheless, they have direct access to the children.

**Brent Stevens:** You're thinking like charter, or public schools?

**Dr. Gant:** I'm not thinking of schools at all, I'm thinking about people, only.

**Brent Stevens:** Oh okay.

**Dr. Gant:** So there you have a charter school, a traditional public school, alternative school. I've seen all of the above, and there is a large network of them. They're like that when God said to Elijah, where he had thousands, in this case we're really talking about hundreds of thousands who have not bowed the knee to Baal, and who have the opportunity to bring a life altering education to bear upon children. We have network in communist China going on now. Um, there's large group in the New York city that I visited a week ago today. There's this work in New York City that is lead by the the recently retired deputy chancellor, who is the number three person in New York City Public Schools - the largest school district in the nation. We have with educators from across three boroughs and they are kingdom-class educators. And I use a couple of illustrations that paint a picture of what is happening in the extraction model is like what happened in the Old Testament. If you knew wanted to come to God. You had to come from your nation and become a part of Israel. You were extracted. When Jesus came it was just the opposite. It was God coming to where the people were. Jesus came as an infiltrator.

**Dr. Gant:** [00:36:54] The Old Testament model is very, very limited. It was confined to one nation, to one people. With the filtration it is now possible to go to the ends of the earth. The Christian school model is an extraction model. Praise God for those children that can get there, but it will always be limited. Infiltration now we can get the children to the ends of the nations and beyond. And the principles are equally the same. It requires an intentional
educator, so I know people who have come to Christ that are in full-time Christian service, etc. who were lead to Christ by Christian educators in public school. Just as I know people who were so damaged in Christian schools that they say adamantly, "I would never put my child in a Christian school." Well, you see the school can't do either one. Schools can't do anything. We certify schools, but they can't act. It's always the people within the schools that are the actors. That said, you could have a three-dimensional educator in any place at anytime with any child. It doesn't limit itself to geography; it doesn't limit itself to government; it doesn't limit itself to funding sources, etc. It is the spirit of God inherent within his people. So, the extraction model said, "Hey, come to this well; come to our school and drink from this well." The infiltration model says, "the teacher stands up there, and it is said of her: 'out of her innermost being will flow rivers of living water. So that, with the infiltration model, you could even have streams in the dessert. There's no program. There's not any entity that's driving that. The only explanation for this, Brent, is the Spirit of God, because these children were never left out of his equation. No more than the Gentiles were left out of his equation. It was a tactical move. And it operates within God's timing.

Dr. Gant: Now his timing has come for the children who we would deem as the "least of these." And the forty years that I have been doing this, this is the most exciting thing that I've seen, because in all of all of my travels, Everywhere I go, I'm witnessing what God is with his educators to address the plight of these children who are so near and dear to his heart.

Brent Stevens: So, me asking this question is personally selfish. So before, before I started working at Covenant, I applied to 20 plus Title I schools in Fort Worth, Austin, and in part of Dallas, because I wanted to do exactly what you're describing. And just in the Lord's sovereignty for whatever reason, didn't find any work and landed here at Covenant, which has been fantastic. And I think I sort of live in this tension of knowing the situation I'm in, right, and so does Eric, and Andrew and a number of the teachers here. And so, what would you, if you could, if you could vision cast for us. How do you see schools like Covenant, who are operating with an extraction model. I mean they're not even really or you know we're we're an all white school right so we are not directly serving any African-American student.

Dr. Gant: Or any ACE children for that matter.

Brent Stevens: Right. No, Right. So, what do we do to come alongside teachers, institutions that are serving ACE children.

Dr. Gant: It's going to take some discipline to get there, but institutions don't serve children. I'm working with everything within me to say to God's people, "you've got to stop personifying this thing," it is called anthropomorphism in the Greek. Where attribute you know human actions to to inanimate objects.

Dr. Gant: Oh, that's a terrible school. That's a good school. This was a low performing school. Schools can't be terrible and perform. It's always the actors within them. I Absolutely cannot subscribe to an institutional solution. So, if you take Covenant and say, "So we've got a great system here. Now we're going to replicate this. Covenant is only as replicable as the people in Covenant. It is not the classical model that is doing anything. It's not a Charlotte Mason philosophy that does anything. You know you could just go down the list.

Brent Stevens: Right.

Dr. Gant: I have to process it that way. Otherwise, I'm going to keep doing what we've been trying for fifty years and expecting a different outcome. A Classical, Covenant model is across the nation and there are exceptions, as to what is happening there. ACSI is struggling for survival because we have half the schools in our membership. That's what I started eighteen years ago, and the pickings are becoming slimmer and slimmer. It is that model pretty much is now left, if I were to use Acts as an illustration, Acts 1-12 was all centered on
the Jews, and it was all centered in Jerusalem. In chapter 13, if you recall, the Holy Spirit
does a seismic shift, saying separate the Barnabas and Saul for the work that I have called
them to do, and then as God's tactician very methodically and systematically starts taking this
thing to the ends of the Earth. We no longer hear about that original batch. Peter and the
others who Jesus mouth the words, they're only mentioned one other time in Acts 13-28. And
that one time they're still in Jerusalem. God's plan includes Jerusalem, just as I believe God's
plan includes Covenant, because God loves those children too. But the shift has been now
towards the River Trees, Hope Academy, I mean Promise Academy, rather, in Tyler Texas.
These new schools that are springing up that don't even have to charge a tuition that is the
wave of the extraction model.

Brent Stevens: Right.

Dr. Gant: But the bigger wave, the tsunami, is with the infiltration model.

Brent Stevens: Are you're seeing an uptick in the number of Christians who are entering into
public education?

Dr. Gant: Well, I think they've already been there in terms of a sleeper cell. Like a sleeper
cell. You go to Liberty University, Wheaton College, Niach, Baylor, Biola. Their Deans of
Education say seventy plus percent of our graduates going to public school. Wow.

Brent Stevens: Wow.

Dr. Gant: There's been a steady line of that happening over the years. They've been unsung,
like I said they've been more like sleeper's. We don't know of the impact that they're having.
But, now we are seeing an awakening that's happening, and they're identifying each other.
They are joining together. We got educators, principals, who march around their public
schools doing lunch. Like the people did Jericho, believing God to break on their school. We
have folk, administrators, superintendents, who are emboldened now. They don't hear what
you can't do in the public school. One of them tell me what I can't do, all they're telling me is
what I can do. And so, realizing that the Holy Spirit is absolutely not bound by anybody's
institutions, regulations etc. Because, transformation is always, always, always, a life on life
transaction. And, so they're discovering that...So, you can't pray in the the public
school...You can't pray out loud. You can pray without ceasing. You can't share the gospel,
you can show the Gospel. One brother said last Tuesday: share the Gospel at all times and if
necessary use words. So, they're discovering that they're being unleashed to do that. And so,
I'm encouraging all of God's educators to bring down the dividing wall. It is artificial. God
did not put that up. It's an artificial dividing wall. And so, joining hands like we saw last
Tuesday infiltrators and extractors come together around God's one agenda, because he does
not have an agenda for extractors of a different agenda for infiltrators. Jesus came with one
agenda, and so all of his educators should be able to say with Christ: the Spirit of the Lord is
upon me, for he has anointed me to teach the poor; He has sent me to heal broken hearted
children, and proclaim liberty to children who are bound up, and recovery of sight to children
who are blind, and to set at liberty children who are already oppressed at their very young
age. And to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, because God favor's these babies. The
acceptable year of the Lord, because he accepts every single one of them. No matter who
their parents are. No matter what school they have been enrolled in, and no matter who is the
President of the United States. No matter who runs the district - whatever. They are all
equally precious in His sight. And His educators have, all of His educators have, that singular
agenda. And so, we need bring down this "us against them." The enemy is the one who likes
to divide, because he knows that division brings down the a house, brings down an effort.

Brent Stevens: That's a good... that's a really good word. It's refreshing in a lot of ways. I've
felt that tension between, you know, as you call them, the extractors and infiltrators. I've felt
that present tension, and it's it's not, I mean you're really helpful to point out that it does, it
does no good, and it divides us unnecessarily.
Dr. Gant: Yes, because if the enemy can divide he can conquer. Jesus stated that. He stated that very well.

Brent Stevens: Well, Dr. Gant I really appreciate your time. I know you're a busy man, so let you continue with your day, but this is really helpful.

Dr. Gant: OK. If you have any follow up questions or anything of that nature, please feel free to call me. You don't have to try to schedule something. This my cell. Direct. I'm 24/7. So, if there is anything I can do to support you in any way I can, I'm happy to do so.

Brent Stevens: Thanks again I really appreciate it. I hope you have a good day.

Dr. Gant: OK, Brent. You too, my friend.