

# A Conversation on Race and Reconciliation

Timothy George and Robert Smith, Jr.

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(Editor's Note: *SBJT* asked Dr. George and Dr. Smith to join us in a conversation about the theme of this issue.)

**SBJT:** Let's start by getting your definitions of racial reconciliation.

**Dr. George:** Whenever I think of reconciliation I always think of it in terms of what Paul says about reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." Racial reconciliation is not totally separate from the primary reconciliation that we have with God through Jesus Christ. In fact, the reconciliation that Christ has won for us on the cross impels us to racial reconciliation. Not to be involved in racial reconciliation is to deny the primary reconciliation that Christ has won through his death on the cross. The Greek word for reconciliation is *katallagē* which involves more than simply a bringing together of parties at war in a truce; it involves a transcending of the deep structural differences that divide and a bringing about of what Paul calls "a new creation." That's what *katallagē* is. And we are brought together in this way only through the work of Christ on the cross. So I want to put it in those Christological terms myself.

**Dr. Smith:** I like the way Clarence Jordan paraphrases that verse in his Cotton Patch version of the New Testament: "God was in Christ hugging the world back to himself." So racial reconciliation for me can never be achieved rationally, intellectually, unless there is some contact. I have to hug you, and you have to hug me. We have to be in contact with each

other, a sense of eating out of the common bowl that a lot of missionaries experience in Africa and other places where they lay down their protocol and their culinary etiquette, and they put their hand in the same bowl. Eating out of the same bowl and hugging each other so that we become one is for me a metaphorical way of understanding it. And, I also think that we have to move from ontology, from "being," to epistemology, to "knowing." Racial reconciliation has to be a reality that is born in us first of all as children of God where we experience the new birth, the new being, and then move to knowing, rather than first getting all of the information about it epistemologically speaking and then move ontologically to being.

**SBJT:** Are there other images or metaphors that help us understand the reality of reconciliation?

**Dr. George:** Well, Dr. Smith mentioned hugging and eating from the same bowl together, and I think that it is very significant that the civil rights movement began at a lunch counter. They said of Jesus, "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them" (Luke 15:1). When you eat with somebody there is, in a sense, a deep *communio* going on. Beyond just the physical nourishment you are taking in, you are sharing a common life, a common loaf of bread, so there is a profound metaphorical (but not merely metaphorical) and a deeply symbolic meaning to eating together. I can give you an illustration from history that is very different from our American context. William Carey

went to India as missionary to share the gospel of Christ with those people. He served seven years and did not win a single convert to Christ. But once he began to win people from Hinduism to the Christian faith, and they desired to be baptized, he refused to baptize them until they would renounce caste because caste was one of the artificial forms of distinction. He saw that you could not really be a truly baptized Christian as long as you kept caste. The one dramatic symbol of breaking caste was being willing to share a common meal with an untouchable. When you can breach that barrier and come to the table with me, then we are in some ways involved in *katallagē* and then you are ready to be baptized. To say you are a Christian and still separate yourself and remain at table with your own kind is a pretty good sign you have not really accepted Jesus as Lord. Well, that was a very prophetic thing for Carey to do in India, but it was based on this same principle that we are talking about.

**Dr. Smith:** When I was a small boy, we did not get a lot of new clothes. My mother and father, generally my mother, would take us down to Goodwill and Mama would always buy clothes that were larger than our sizes and kind of stitch them and, as we got bigger, unstitch them so that we could grow into our clothes. You buy clothes larger than the person so that they can grow into them. I think racial reconciliation is a process of always growing into our clothes—growing into the clothes of racial reconciliation; never getting there. The church is *reformata sed semper reformanda*—reformed but always in need of reforming on the basis of the Word of God—and I think that is true with racial reconciliation. We are growing into the clothes of it. We never get there until the

eschaton. There, people from every nation and tribe and kindred and tongue will be one, and finally the prayer of Jesus for the church will be answered. We will be one even as he and the Father are one.

**SBJT:** Reconciliation seems to imply that there is a desire on both sides to get together. Do you feel that that desire is there on the part of all races, that there is a desire for reconciliation?

**Dr. George:** Not naturally so. I think because of the state of original sin, it is easier to group within your own comfort zone, to stick with the familiar. So I do not think there is a natural desire to seek reconciliation. Reconciliation is hard work, and it has to be initiated by something outside yourself. We have been reconciled in Jesus Christ. This has been accomplished. So we need to live out the reality of that reconciliation intentionally, because it does not just come naturally.

**SBJT:** Tell us your views about preaching, Scripture, and the biblical basis for racial reconciliation.

**Dr. George:** I want to respond in two different ways to this question. First, to the biblical basis, I think the whole thrust of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation is involved in this question of racial reconciliation. It is not just a proof text here or there. It is the whole shape of the biblical narrative that pushes us in this way. It is God's effort to reach out and hug us in Christ. But there are two passages that I want us to lift up. The first is Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond or free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ." Paul there deals with the three biggies: race, money, and sex. Those are the primal powers in human life. He does not say that they *are* intrinsically evil, but that they have been impacted by sin in such a way that they

have become slave masters to us. We are in bondage to these forces because they have been corrupted and perverted. Now what happens in Jesus Christ is that there is a transvaluation of values going on, so that these things no longer define us. Race, money, and sex are not our ultimate identity. They are not eliminated but we have been baptized and that is our new identity. That is the identity we have in Jesus Christ. "We are all one in Jesus Christ. As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put him on." You have a new name and a new reality. This new reality in Christ puts everything else in perspective. It redefines it, and so I think that is a keen way to think about racial reconciliation. We are no longer defined in terms of the old primal powers that controlled us, but these have all been relativized in the light of our baptism in Christ. Dr. Smith has already alluded to the other text, Revelation 5. When we get to heaven there are people from every nation, kindred, race, tongue, tribe, ethnicity, and affinity group that has ever been. Thus, what we could call the multi-colored wisdom of God is seen in the eschatological reality. Every voice, every color, every speech pattern, every accent is represented there around the throne and they all join together in singing just one song. They are not singing 17,000 songs! In all of their multi-colored multiplicities, there is unity. That is the vision. Now, we are not there yet, but that is where we are headed, and our baptism points us in that direction.

**Dr. Smith:** You have awakened in my memory the book *Every Tongue Got to Confess* by Zora Neale Hurston. One of the stories that she writes recalls an experience of an African American who wanted to join a White congregation because it was the only church in that area. She was not

allowed to join it and was told by a relative that Jesus Christ would probably not be allowed to join a church like that either. Any church in which Jesus Christ would not be allowed to be a member is not the kind of church it ought to be. It is not a mere matter of White injustice against Black, nor Black injustice against White. It is not a skin problem, it is a sin problem, and so the question I would ask is "Is this the kind of church Jesus would want to be a member of?" I would want to say that racial reconciliation is not something we preach. We do not preach a concept, we preach a person; we preach Christ. The prayer of George Matheson the great English hymnist who said, "Lord make me a captive and I shall be free. Take away my sword and I shall conqueror be." I am free when I am captive. I am a conqueror when my sword is taken away. This has to be done internally. Martin Luther King Jr. was right when he said you cannot make people love you, but you can establish legislation that will keep them from killing you. The truth of the matter is you cannot make people love you, but Christ puts love in our heart so that we are not forced to do it. The love of Christ constrains us. When you preach Christ you get to the root of the problem, and the fruit then becomes racial reconciliation. As long as we stay at the conceptional level alone, we will never deal with the root issue.

A couple of other things that Dean George mentioned about racial reconciliation from an eschatological standpoint are important. We are always, even here, using the eschaton as a model for how we shape and how we define what we are doing. Eschatologically speaking, I must always pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." That is why I must never become satisfied. The kingdom is here but yet it

is always coming. It is an “already” but a “not yet” at the same time, and so I must never become satisfied with where I am now because I have not yet arrived. When I say this, I mean the church and everyone involved in it. As long as we keep our eyes on the future reality of the kingdom, then we are always striving toward a principal reality that is in us, yet ahead of us. It is never achieved in this life. And then the passage that I particularly like is the Luke 4 text where Jesus is fine as long as he is reciting Scripture; but when he starts showing how God moves in other people, aside from those Israelites who claim their own racial identity, he gets into trouble. Jesus declares that God moved in Naaman the Syrian even though there were lepers in Israel, and that he moved in the widow of Zaphath even though there were widows in Israel. God is at work among all of us and none of us can say that we have a monopoly on God. We are God’s people in the sense of relationship, but we do not own God. Therefore when we appreciate God working (specifically, the multi-color purpose of God), we can appreciate God working in *all* people. When we focus on being God’s “chosen people” and when we think no one else is like us, we make the same mistake that many of the Israelites made: we think we own God.

**SBJT:** Dr. Smith, how do we mirror and model racial reconciliation?

**Dr. Smith:** I think we model racial reconciliation by considering ethos prior to going into the pulpit. If I am selfish and an exclusivist before I get to the pulpit, then when I get to the pulpit and I preach, say, in a White congregation and I act cold and distant, I am ill-mannered, and I have this air about me of “Black power,” Black superiority, then basically I am not going to be

heard. When I get in the pulpit, I want to be the kind of preacher who models racial reconciliation by the spirit of charity and openness that I bring as well as by the examples I use.

**SBJT:** Dr. George, what about you and your cross-cultural preaching experience; how has that affected your outlook on racial reconciliation?

**Dr. George:** I believe the gospel is culture-permeable. Consider the example of Acts 2, the day of Pentecost, and all of those languages. The gospel is able to penetrate different cultures. Now, it does it in such a way that it does not eliminate the culture. It permeates it without eliminating it. And so there is a kind of integrity for the culture that the preacher has to respect. Not to do it in a superficial or condescending way, but to enter into that culture and to accept it as part of a common humanity that you share with all of your own distinctiveness that you bring. I will say, when I have had opportunities as an Anglo to worship and to preach in African American churches, the overwhelming emotion that I experience is one of being lifted up into the reality of a Christian tradition that is deep and rich and textured (in terms of its history—not just the different style that is involved, but resonance with the story of the people) that comes through in the songs, in the prayers, the moans, and the call and response of the congregation. There is a resonance here of a history that is deep and rooted in the American context and in the context of slavery, and before that back to biblical times. So undoubtedly, that has shaped my own thinking about preaching, and I think the Anglo church has a great deal to learn about preaching and worship from African American congregations. I am not talking here about adapting a certain

style; I am talking about entering into a certain life commitment that is reflected in worship and that comes out of the experience of suffering.

Let me mention an experience I had when I was a teacher at Southern Seminary. I taught a course on worship, and I gave the students an assignment. They had to pick two very different congregations, visit them, do an analysis, and report to the class what they had learned. I will never forget this one student who went one Sunday to a White suburban congregation, rather wealthy, upper middle class. The worship was vibrant, good, structured, and ordered—but the point of comparison was the pastoral prayer. In the pastoral prayer that morning in this White suburban congregation, the pastor reminded God of all of the many things the church was doing for him. The youth group was going to the amusement park, the senior citizens were taking a foliage trip to the Smokeys, and there was a skiing excursion planned, and a building program going on. He asked God to bless them in all of the things they were doing for him and let them continue to do it. David Bebbington says that activism is one of the marks of evangelicalism, and this was a very activist kind of prayer! Next, this student went to an intercity African American church in Louisville. He noticed the prayer, very common in the African American tradition, a prayer of supplication: “Lord, it is just so good to be here today; we’re so grateful that you let us survive the night, that you woke us up this morning to breathe fresh air, and come to church with the freedom of God’s people. And, Lord, we’re just so glad to be here in your house to worship you one more time.” Here was a sense of vulnerability and therefore gratitude before

the mystery. I don’t want to stereotype because you could go to Black churches, undoubtedly, where you would have the same kind of “Lord this is what we are doing for you” prayer, and you can go to White churches where they know something about suffering and supplication. This is not just a White/Black thing, but they are coming out of a history and a tradition, these two congregations, that speak about a posture before the divine in worship that does impact the way we pray, the way we do community, the way we welcome strangers, the way we live out the faith Monday through Saturday.

**Dr. Smith:** Last year when William Augustus Jones gave our preaching lectures, he came to my doctrinal preaching class and was talking about this very thing. His preaching now goes beyond 50 years. He said that in the White church, to a great degree, he has to start with the head and move to the heart, the emotion or feeling, and in the Black church you move from the heart and go to the head. That too is a stereotypical statement, and he knows that it is not true in every situation, but he is onto something. The end result is that there has to be a holistic connection, but your point of departure in a lot of Black churches is connecting emotionally, cardiologically, and moving to the intellect, and in the same way in the White congregation from the head to the heart. This is not always the case but in many experiences, yes. One of my students went to Africa to participate in a missions work there. He proceeded one morning to give a very deductive sermon, three points, alliteration, and all that. He shared with the class that it did not go well; they did not connect with it. His supervisor told him that the people there were very narrative, that he needed to be

inductive that evening when he preached. He did not change the sermon, he repackaged it, he told it in a narrative way, and the people instantly grasped what he was saying. Paul does this so well in Acts 17. He knows they are poets, so he quotes one of their poets. Since they are abstract and deductive, he enters into the preaching event by pointing out what they left open in terms of that monument to the unknown God. He starts with Adam—all cultures have creation stories—and then moves to talk about our moral accountability before God and the final judgment that awaits us all. Eventually, when the groundwork has been laid, he preaches to them about Jesus and the resurrection. I think preaching means that we know our audience very well and find a way to present the gospel without compromising the truth.

**SBJT:** What are some of the greatest challenges and/or barriers to racial reconciliation for those in ministry?

**Dr. Smith:** A natural disinclination toward it. It is hard work, and no one wants to be rejected. Moving people out of their comfort zones and making the comfortable uncomfortable, that is the prophetic part. The priestly part is making the afflicted comfortable, and that is what we would rather do. I think this rejection is a big thing.

**Dr. George:** In my view, one of the great hindrances is lethargy that arises from a false sense of progress. In the sixties the issues were clear-cut. Are you going to open your doors to African American worshipers or not? It was clear-cut. Today you do not have many churches that say, "If your skin is a certain pigmentation you cannot enter this place of worship." The doors are open but hearts are not open. There is a lethargy that comes

from a false sense of progress. I do not want to minimize the fact that progress has been made, and I do not want to deny the wonderful things that God has done over these 40 plus years, but I think it is a narcotic because we do not fight those same battles like we did then. It does not mean the battle is over, it just means the battlefield has shifted.

**SBJT:** So do you believe that racism has gone more underground now, that it is much more subtle?

**Dr. George:** I do think that it is insidious and more subtle. I do not think it has been eliminated by any means. It is still there and we have just scratched below the surface. It comes out as we see some of the ugly instances in our recent history and as we still see in the way in which institutional racism continues. It is a systemic problem. It is a personal problem but also a systemic problem. I think it is easy to be lulled in the church into a kind of complacency. That is something we need to be aware of and find ways of addressing.

**Dr. Smith:** I taught at a seminary, and the course was on worship in the Black church. I had about twelve students, seven White and five Black. One of the White students, a very serious student, said, "Why don't we stop talking about Black and White stuff and forget about the history and let's move on from this point. It just keeps opening up old wounds." I think that is a barrier people do not want to revisit. The same is true when it comes to the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel's words are very important, "Don't talk about the Holocaust; just tell the story to keep it from happening again." It's true. One lesson we have learned from American history is that you have to keep going back and revisiting it to keep things from

happening again. It is painful to go back and revisit it because of what we did not do or what we should have done. Memory is a painful thing. We are all guilty to some degree.

**SBJT:** What importance does context play in how a church or Christian institution looks at racial reconciliation?

**Dr. George:** Well, I often say that it was not accidental but providential that Beeson Divinity School was created and founded in Birmingham, Alabama. Samford University was founded in 1841 in Marion, Alabama, and was moved to Birmingham in the late nineteenth century. This is a city with many scars. These are well known scars. When you say Birmingham, Alabama, you think about the hoses and the dogs. You think about Bull Connor, and the freedom riders and the molestation. You think about the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. And so, what better place could there be, with so much pain and suffering, for there to be a redemptive act of God which is what is required in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. That is what I mean by “the stewardship of geography.” If we did not feel this as a passionate commitment in our hearts and lives, as Christians who live in this place, we would have to answer to God for our dereliction of duty. This is not just cosmetics, it is something that our calling requires of us. While Birmingham is a unique place, every community has its own intersection of history, geography, and baggage that needs to be redeemed.

**Dr. Smith:** I have been criticized, particularly from my race. When I was in the dissertation stage in my doctoral studies I did research on a White German theologian and several of my Black colleagues criticized me for that. “Why aren’t you writing on some African American that

would enable your work to find instant reception in the Black community and also make a contribution to the Black church?” My response was a statement I have lived with from E. L. Alexander, who was my father in the ministry, “Don’t be a Black preacher,” he said, “be a preacher Black.” That is, don’t let your blackness define who you are. Be a preacher who just happens to be Black. Transcend cultures; be bigger than your culture or race, as Christ was. So, I have taken some licks and ridicule, but I find a natural residence wherever I am, and being in Birmingham is a natural fit for me. I want to serve as an agent of healing in the contexts of our faculty, the student body, the history, and the city.

**SBJT:** The two of you have developed a new course on Reformation Theology and the African American Tradition. Talk to us about that.

**Dr. George:** It was a seminar type course, and we looked at the way in which these two seemingly disparate traditions within the Christian faith at a deeper level really connect to one another and inform one another diachronically, across time. From the Reformation side, a theme like the theology of the cross was the major motif for Martin Luther. There is a sense in which the theology of the cross, when you transpose that into an African American setting, takes on a deeper, richer hue. This is also true with the sovereignty of God, one of the great themes of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition. God is almighty, all sovereign, the omnipotent Lord and King, and creator of heaven and earth. This sense of the almightiness of God, God can do anything, God is God, let God be God, this is something that resonates deeply in the African American spirituals. Very often Christian slaves appealed

to the sovereignty of God over against humans who had a pretended sovereignty that was illegitimate. How do you counter that? Well, truly only the sovereignty of God can counter that, and we worked through several things like this.

**Dr. Smith:** I use the terms survival, elevation, and liberation, terms I borrowed from Gayraud Wilmore, a great African American church historian. For him these words characterized three epochs or periods in the history of African Americans in this country. These periods were 1607-1831, Jamestown to the Nat Turner revolt; 1840-1876, the Civil War and Reconstruction; and 1877 to the present time. He characterized these three periods—survival (1607-1831); elevation (1840-1876); and liberation (1877 to the present). Survival came first. We had to survive the tortuous condition of slavery and oppression. There was a distinct elevation with the Emancipation Proclamation and the early stages of freedom in our churches and communities. Today, we are still working toward the kind of liberation Martin Luther King Jr. envisaged in his “I Have a Dream” speech, and so the struggle continues. Liberation will be finally accomplished only when God makes all things new, when we’ve been there ten thousand years, so to speak! What I would want to underscore in terms of the Reformation emphasis is that all three of these phases or stages in African American history have been marked by the sovereignty of divine grace. *Sola gratia*—by grace alone! As we sometimes sing in African American churches, “If it had not been for the Lord on our side, where would we be?” All that Black people have known are the Scriptures and faith in Christ. Grace and the Scriptures are what kept them.

**SBJT:** Do you want to elaborate on the theme of *sola scriptura*?

**Dr. George:** There are obvious differences between the way Reformation theology was developed in the sixteenth century, and the way in which it was appropriated in the African American community. One of the differences has to do with the fact that the Reformation tradition comes out of medieval scholasticism, so it is a very cognitively oriented process. The African American tradition comes out of the more emotive and experiential reality. What we were doing in this course was looking at the points of connection, the deeper resonances on things like the Scripture; not always a formal theory of scriptural authority as has been well understood in the traditional, scholastic terminology. But the fact is that most African American Christians have always accepted the Bible as the totally true and trustworthy word of God. They have believed that, in the Bible, the history is historical and the miracles are miraculous. Without using sometimes the language of inerrancy, there has been a strong sense that this is the totally true word of God, and we need to trust in and depend on it. It is sufficient for us, and we do not need another kind of authority outside of this. Black preachers, in particular, have appealed to this with great imagination and power. There is a deeper resonance that we sometimes ignore because the form in which the two traditions have been given to us are rather different. We see the differences and miss the deeper connections. This was an experimental course and, who knows, we may teach it again. I do think there is something there to explore.

**SBJT:** Let’s talk about racial intermarriage. This remains a taboo in our society,

and it seems that many Americans are more comfortable with gay marriage today than with racial intermarriage. Can you comment on this?

**Dr. Smith:** My concern for an interracial marriage is this: Is the person marrying someone of another race because he or she feels that that race is superior? If that is the case, then it is racism because what you are saying is that God has made certain races better than other races so you want to marry a member of a race that is superior intellectually, physically, and so on. I have a problem with that. If a person is in love with someone else because of who that individual is as a person, and God has led that individual to a person in marriage, that is one thing; but for a person to do it on the basis of skin differences or something else troubles me. I know too many people who do this for the wrong reason. I think we need to appreciate the uniqueness—that all of us are different. God has made us that way, not accidentally at all. I am not an accident because I am Black. But for me to somehow disregard myself, or to choose someone else because I think they are superior, I do not believe God approves of that.

**Dr. George:** I think laws that in the past have prohibited interracial marriage are bad laws. If any of them still exist, they should be repealed. But I do not think interracial marriage is the number one problem we are facing. In some ways it is a distraction from more pressing issues. I think we should recognize that race is not a barrier to two persons loving one another in following God's call in marriage, and we should be open to that and receive it with welcome and hospitality when it occurs. It is not an agenda that we need to push, and it is not the solution to the deeper problem we face in our

culture and country today. Where those old taboos linger on we need to have the courage to say, "Let's move on."

**SBJT:** Dr. George, you were the chief draftsman of the Amsterdam Declaration, a statement that represented persons from many different races and cultures. What was that like for you?

**Dr. George:** Dr. Billy Graham convened this meeting in Amsterdam in 2000 and there were over ten thousand people represented from 212 countries around the world. More people came to that meeting from more places and more races, for the single purpose of strategizing about sharing the gospel, than has ever happened in human history. A couple of events that happened that week stand out in my mind. One of them is when Cliff Barrows asked us the first night to all pray together out loud in our own language. You had this vast sea of Christians in this huge arena in Amsterdam, praying out loud in their own language. Yet there was a unity of purpose and spirit there that was amazing. The other event was the closing communion service led by Dr. Richard Bewes. Again, we were drawn together despite all of our diversity around the body and blood of Christ as we extolled and praised our risen Lord. Yes, I would say what we saw in Amsterdam 2000 was a foretaste of that great eschatological banquet when we will gather around the table of the Lord. They will come, as Jesus says, from the East and the West, the North and the South, from many races and tempers of people to share together in the marriage supper of the Lamb. This was a foretaste of what the church is intended to be in the world today. As Dr. Smith likes to say, "What we are experiencing in the church now ought to be a Kodak moment of the future state that awaits us in eternity."

Sadly, we experience this all too little. Too often we find ourselves segregated in our own little boxes cut off from one another. Amsterdam 2000 was a breakthrough experience. It certainly had a great impact on me and, I think, on everyone there.

**SBJT:** How are the concepts of conscience and power related to racial reconciliation?

**Dr. Smith:** Dr. Gardner Taylor has spoken about the arrogance of power without conscience, and the impotence of conscience without power. There must be a sharing of both power and conscience if we are going to have real dialogue about racial reconciliation. One cannot have all the power and the other all the conscience. I think this is an important point. There is only tokenism, no dialogue, and certainly not reconciliation, when one person or group holds all the levers of leadership, all economic and organizational direction, while the other person or group is supposed to supply the ethics, the morals, and the conscience. The New Testament tells us to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

**Dr. George:** The concept of speaking truth to power comes to my mind. That implies that there has to be a conscience that is informed by a moral standard if it is going to be able to speak truth to power. I do not know if I myself would equate these in terms of racial categories. These are things that cut across races. They could apply within the White church exclusively, or the Black church exclusively, or in a bi-racial situation. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is the mandate of the church to speak truth to power, and we must do that if we are not to violate our conscience before God. I do accept the premise that there is a proper and accountable exercise of power informed

by conscience and spoken to by the truth on the part of the believing community. This sometimes calls for a holy boldness, but a boldness that is always tempered by humility, discernment, and love.

**SBJT:** Let’s talk about your personal lives. What is the greatest experience you have had seeing racial reconciliation in your lives and in the church?

**Dr. George:** I grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in “hell’s half acre” which is what we called our part of town, a very poor section, a section that was integrated in the 1950s, simply because it was the only place the poorest people could live regardless of their race. We were not trying to make a social statement; it was just where the poor people lived. I grew up living across the street and next-door sometimes to African Americans, but there was still a legacy of segregation that perdured through all that, and that undoubtedly influenced my own attitudes and me. I remember once in the fifth or sixth grade giving a speech in class on the conflict in Haiti between Napoleon Bonaparte and Toussaint L’Overture who was the liberator of Haiti. I remember quoting the words of Napoleon Bonaparte favorably, “I am for the Whites because I am a White.” This was the context of segregation in the South in those years. I think being converted from that for me happened through relationships, getting to know individuals who were not of my particular race but who were real people and people with whom I struck up friendship. I will mention one man in particular, Roy Noel Sr., who was a graduate of Tuskegee Institute. He was the youth coordinator of the city of Chattanooga and I was his assistant. This was in the late 1960s. We worked in an inner-city environment. I came to know him and respect him. He

was my boss, but more than that, he was my friend. He was a godly, Christian man, and if you knew Roy Noel Sr., you were in the presence of someone who could not be stereotyped. He was a very generous man, compassionate and deeply, deeply Christian in the roots of his soul. He was the first African American with whom I had a relationship and friendship. On the other side of that, you begin to see the fallacy of some of those stereotypes I grew up with in that culture. In addition, I would say another helpful experience was working in an inner-city church in Boston, a church that was multi-racial, not only Whites and African Americans, but Puerto Ricans, as well as Jewish, Hispanic, and Vietnamese persons. It was an amazing thing to see a oneness that transcended the barriers without anyone having to give up their own distinctive cultural legacy. I would point to that as one of the places where I truly have seen the reality of racial reconciliation lived out in a Christian community.

**Dr. Smith:** Going back to my childhood, I was experiencing racial reconciliation as a young boy of ten or eleven years of age before I knew it. I lived in an integrated community in Cincinnati, Ohio, and went to a school called Rothenberg. There was a friend of mine named Elbert Spurlock. He lived right down the street from us. We lived on the third floor of our apartment building, and he lived on the first floor of his apartment building. He spent the night in our apartment, and I spent the night in his apartment. We didn't know, we just shared and this was in the 60s—1961, 1962, and 1963. We played together; it was just that way. We were exemplifying racial reconciliation, and what it meant to be members of the body of Christ without trying. Later on

E. L. Alexander, my boyhood pastor who baptized me, married me, ordained me, and licensed me also modeled for me God's love for all people. To watch him pastor and to watch him preach, he knew the people, White people, Black people. He would go into a grocery store, and they respected him; he would hug the men and the women, Black and White. They would come to his church. He had White members; that was just the way it was. That is just the way E. L. Alexander was, he had a spirit of racial reconciliation exuding from his pores. He was a very proud, strong, and tough man but at the same time very tender. I would also mention Dr. James Earl Massey, a product of White and Black culturality. Everything he does is representative of the kind of kingdom that we will inherit when we get to the eschaton. Those two persons as adults were models, and Elbert Spurlock as my young friend helped me model what I think it means to be a representative of that kingdom.

**SBJT:** What was the purpose and impetus of your book *A Mighty Long Journey: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation*?

**Dr. George:** Dr. Smith and I went to the city of Chattanooga, and we were walking across Walnut Street Bridge, a historic bridge dating back to Civil War times. I think the idea for the book came out of that experience. We really wanted to bring together a book that would represent the church, that would have representative voices from the church, half White and half African American, speaking to this idea of racial reconciliation from the pulpit. I think Dr. Smith suggested the title *A Mighty Long Journey* that comes from an African American spiritual: "It's a mighty long journey but we are on our way." And we felt that connoted both the sense of movement and also the sense of

incompletion. We are not there yet. We are what they called in the Middle Ages, *in via*, on the way, and so it is a mighty long journey. This book has had a ministry, and we hope it allows us to hear what the church can say about this that no one else can say. What we need is not just another opinion, social or political comment, it is the voice of the church and the voice of Christian faith.