

A series of candid conversations in October about

THE STATE OF RECONCILIATION IN AMERICA

Examining the *case for hope* in troubled times

HOSTED BY



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NOON TO
1:00 CENTRAL
EVERY TUESDAY
IN OCTOBER

Dr. Michael O. Emerson session | Discussion guide

Dr. Emerson describes his own call to the work of reconciliation as “a spiritual transformation” stemming from the grief race causes God. This culminated in a vision wherein God said, “Starting right now, until I say otherwise, you and your family will live as the racial minority.” Are you in touch with how race and racism grieves God? What might it look like for you to listen for how he might want you to be involved in his reconciling work?

How did his story of this process and journey affect you?

Emerson gave a 50-year backdrop of racial reconciliation from the Civil Rights movement up to today. He mentioned how Black Christian leaders sought to help white Christians understanding that this was not something to be avoided, but “fundamental to the Gospel.” He quoted Samuel Hines as saying, “reconciliation is God’s one-item agenda.” Did anything specific stand out about the history of this movement?

The three initial reconciliation principles were: (1) Admit, (2) Submit, (3) Commit. (Admit there is a racial problem resulting from sin, submit to God’s leading or call, commit to working in multi-ethnic community for reconciliation and justice.) Do you think these principles are still relevant? Are they enough? Would you dedicate yourself to these in life? If so, how?

Do you see justice as a means to reconciliation or reconciliation as a means for justice? How did Emerson describe their relationship? How do you see the relationship between these two values?

Why do you think white Christians tend to be so resistant to justice as an expression of their Christian discipleship? Why would Christians not apply the bible “to determine right and wrong” in this moral area the way they do in others? Can you think of Scripture that speaks directly *against* racism and inequality or *for* justice and reconciliation?

Emerson offered a strong conclusion regarding white believers who will not obey the bible’s teachings on racial reconciliation and justice, namely that they are practicing a false Christianity. (“White Christianity *isn’t* Christianity and *hasn’t* been... it is actually ‘a religion of white.’”) Do you agree? Why or why not?

Based on his conclusion, Emerson says that reconciliation efforts must focus on true conversion—conversion to an *actual* Gospel-based, biblical Christianity. Where does your own spiritual life fall within that assertion? How would you know if your Christianity is “white religion” with Christian symbols rather than biblical Christianity? How would you define a reconciling Gospel? (What Scripture informs that decision?)

Emerson says we need to move “major aspects of our world” out of being entirely white: work, relationships, church, neighborhood, etc. Are there aspects of your world that can be moved out of predominantly white contexts?

Dr. Emerson’s final admonition to the church is that this turbulent time is similar to what was experienced by pilots attempting to break the sound barrier: “It feels like the plane is going to break apart.” He went on to say that Jesus is assuring his people that he has something amazing on the other side of this violent turbulence: “Don’t pull back!” How are you feeling turbulence? How does the vision of forming communities of reconciliation compel you? Can you think of any Scriptural promises or pictures that could enable you to persevere?

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FAITH AND WORK CHICAGO

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Dr. Christina Edmondson session | Discussion guide

Dr. Edmondson led by saying, “People, just like nations and cultures, are a series of stories.” What do you think she meant by that, and how does a desire for Gospel reconciliation show up in your story?

Did anything stand out about Christina’s story? How did you see God’s hand in her life?

Dr. Edmondson is the wife of a pastor and mentioned that she has “a deep love and commitment to the local church, that *includes* not denying its warts and problems.” Why do you think a commitment to the church must involve love, commitment *and* uncomfortable honesty? What happens when any of those things fall away?

She mentioned the importance of knowing what we mean when we talk about a topic like “racial reconciliation,” and that it disserves us when this is pursued without a commitment to justice, equity and repair. (“We can’t Starbucks our way out of this.”) Talk about the importance of having *this* version of reconciliation be part of our discipleship and community life.

Edmondson mentioned that the first barrier she sees is a spiritual one (“powers and principalities”) along with a “heresy that promotes a hierarchy of human worth.” She said this takes profound “sobriety” and courage. How do you understand these spiritual forces? Are there ways you see them in play?

She also mentioned the “dominant cultural” value of being avoidant of negative history along with an unfounded hope that “time heals sin.” Why must we grapple with the evils of the past in order to overcome the evils of our racialized cultural context?

Her final word on barriers pertained to “maturity.” How do you see a need for greater maturity in your life so that you can be engaged in this work for a lifetime? She also said this must be rooted in grace. Why do you think this is?

How did Dr. Edmondson address questions of colorblindness versus blatant racism. Why is colorblindness a “band aid” and not a treatment of racism.

According to Christina, colorblindness is problematic because “it’s not true” and because “it requires for us to pretend an aspect of someone doesn’t exist” in order to be in community. What do you think she meant? Do you agree? Would you add anything?

Edmondson said that Christ died to see the beauty of a reconciled, ethnically inclusive community brought together. “If Christ thinks that’s beautiful,” she concluded, “then we ought to find that beautiful.”

She mentioned that “unconscious bias” should be easily accepted by Christians, and ought to be an area where, through acknowledgement, we allow the Spirit to continue sanctifying us. What would it look like to give these biases over to Jesus?

She went on to say that our uninspected and untransformed biases can lead to real harm. How do you see that?

Edmondson advocated for mindfulness and also said that the idea of “anti-racism” assumes that “racism is the system we are in”—to “actively resist” these systems and structures. In light of this, what would a prayerful and Scriptural Christian mindfulness look like around anti-racism?

Why must Christian anti-racism be (1) rooted in faith in God, (2) loving toward others, and (3) humbly aware of one’s own sinfulness and shortcomings.

She said that we are to *battle* principalities in order to *win* people, but that we shouldn’t get it the other way around. Talk about why that matters in your life.

She mentioned that love for one’s neighbors (even non-believing neighbors) should mean “walking together as long as we can” and being “salt and light” in the work of anti-racism, but we must do so with a biblical and eschatological “critical discernment.” Talk about the way this can look.

She also mentioned that at times the world rebukes us by seeing this more clearly than the church. Have you experienced this?

Edmondson said that intercultural *exposure* isn’t enough; our interpretation matter. Our *proximity* must be combined with a learners *humility*. (“There was lots of proximity on the plantation.”)

She described how multi-ethnic or multi-racial Christian communities must not be centered on the anxiety levels and sensibilities of white people? How do you know when that is happening or being corrected? (“Leadership must have a fierce commitment *not* to diversity but *equity*.”)

Dr. Edmondson’s final word was that this work is about *discipleship* and that we cannot fail people in our disciple-making by failing to present a more lovely picture of what Christ is offering in the realm of racial reconciliation.

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Dr. Efrem Smith session | Discussion guide

Dr. Smith described himself as “a product of both the African American church *and* evangelicalism.” He went on to mention that the history of slavery and racial exclusion has created these two separate church communities in America. Is this something you were aware of? How should this legacy of race America inform the dynamics of multi-ethnic congregations?

What stood out about Efrem’s own story. How did he describe the gifts he’d received from the Black church? What impacted you about Efrem’s experience in the multi-ethnic church he got involved in during high school?

How did Efrem describe his decision to plant a multi-ethnic church? What drew him into this calling and vision?

Did any specific lessons from Dr. Smith’s work as a pastor in the multi-ethnic church challenge, surprise, encourage, or help you?

Smith mentioned that white pastors and Christian leaders often forget that they have a distinct culture and approach (“culturalized Christianity and whiteness is not really acknowledged”). Where do you see this? Why does this present a challenge for white pastors, leaders, and lay-people as they enter multi-ethnic space and/or seek to participate in racially reconciled community?

Smith describes the American phenomenon of European people losing their ethnic distinctives in order to assimilate to whiteness. Is this something you can understand? Why might a deepened understanding of this phenomenon help a white believers approach multi-ethnic contexts in a better way?

Smith says we should never expect the church to be a place of “cultural assimilation” and that multi-ethnic, reconciling Christian community *should* be “challenging and difficult and messy and beautiful and wonderful and glorious all at the same time.” Does this challenge or reinforce *your* picture of Christian community?

Helen Musick’s observed, “people don’t realize that for reconciliation to take place there has to be ‘disequilibrium’ (loss of equilibrium) first—a shaking.” Like Emerson, Smith said this is similar to the breaking of the sound barrier. How do you experience disequilibrium in multi-ethnic spaces? How does resigning ourselves to this allow us to be brave and resilient in our reconciliation work?

Dr. Smith mentioned that our picture of the Great Community in heaven from Revelation 5:9 (“with your blood you purchased people from every tribe and language and people and nation.”) is what enables us to remain motivated to give ourselves to multi-ethnic and reconciling community—to offer “a sneak preview of heaven” amidst the divisions of the world. Does this vision captivate you? Explain.

Smith also said that Jesus' call to disciple making is irreducibly cross-cultural, multi-cultural venture ("make disciples of all nations"; Matt. 28:18-20). Thus, this is a matter of obedience to Jesus. Do you find obstinance within yourself toward Jesus' call in this?

Smith advocates for cultural engagement instead of cultural domination (e.g. Acts 17:16-34). How would you differentiate between those? Can you think of examples of each?

Smith reminded us that there was "multi-cultural and multi-ethnic blood flowing from the head and hands of Jesus falling to the foot of the cross." Talk about the significance of this.

In order to be resist from social and cultural forces that pull us away from the reconciling vision of Jesus, Smith says we need to see sin as existing both in *souls* and *systems*. The church's faithfulness to Jesus must involve both *righteousness* and *justice*; a confrontation with sin in soul *and* society respectively. How might God be asking you to step into each?

Are there ways in which your social, political, or national identity and values have conflicted with the identity and values that come with your citizenship in Jesus' eternal kingdom?

Like our other guests, Efrem voiced concern about our reluctance to "go after" the idol of race, racism, racial systems, racial injustice, and racial brokenness with the truth, power, and implications of the Gospel. Do you see this taboo? What do you think animates it? (We must say, "The Gospel movement can't flourish in cities ...unless we show how the Gospel goes after the societal divisions between *ethnos*...")

Smith noted that multi-ethnic churches aren't always the right place for a Black person to flourish spiritually—especially in light of the ways these churches can be shaped by racialized social values—and that this should be a matter of calling rather than guilt ("a missional unction you can't shake"). What is your response to this?

He said that a white "journey into the multi-ethnic church" must be biblically informed. (He mentioned Nehemiah and Romans being two important books to go to.) What happens if we are motivated by something less substantive than firm Scriptural convictions?

Smith points to how Nehemiah and Romans each offer pictures of humble, God-centered ways of relating to privilege. Share a way your own privilege can become surrendered for the sake of Jesus' purposes on earth.

Smith described this current moment as representing two opportunities: Firstly, the opportunity to recognize the ways we've been in captivity to social and cultural ways of thinking and to repent in order to live the kingdom of God, and, secondly, the opportunity to begin "digesting one another's stories"—one another's pain, dreams, journey—and to have Jesus change our tastebuds. Share any specific ways you might put these things into practice.

Smith's final word was that we should, "keep hope burning in our hearts ... as we strive for a church that look more like heaven... and will commit to the work of cross-cultural, reconciling, justice-oriented disciple making—like our lives depend on it." Do you feel more discouraged or energized right now? Where are you finding hope and motivation right now?

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Dennae Pierre session | Discussion guide

Dennae said she “grew up watching a lot of different cultures and observing the ways that people struggle to get along through different barriers.” This could have resulted in cynicism, but instead she said created an enduring passion for reconciliation and building multi-ethnic Christian community. How can the pains of awareness of divisions and tensions offer you clues or motivation for your own calling or vocation?

Pierre explored the theme of reconciliation as an integral aspect of our Christian “vocation” and that this concept of “the vocation of reconciliation” can inform every facet of your life. Where are you seeing the need for this vocation in your sphere?

Pierre suggested that times in which violence, enmity, strife, and injustice become unmistakably seen, the “anxious longing for reconciliation” becomes more deeply felt. Are you feeling that lately? What are you doing with those emotions?

Biblical reconciliation, according to Pierre, “give a glimpse of hope” that relationships between enemies can be shifted, dividing walls of hostility can be torn down, and healing can happen between people groups. What would it look like a live from such a hope?

Pierre said that God’s qualities of peace and unity are part of the story God has written into all people’s hearts, and that the life of the church can hold out this Gospel wholeness as a witness within a hope-starved world. How much thought have you given to this aspect of the Gospel?

She also said that an abstract assent to reconciliation with God *can* be easier to grasp than an experiential reconciliation with others *but* that this experience of human reconciliation is meant to be a means by which we gain a fuller and more vibrant understanding of our reconciliation with God. What do you think about this? Do you have any powerful experiences that have taught you about the beauty of reconciliation?

Pierre shared three quotes by Christians writing from prison (see next page). Read those through and each share an idea or phrase that grabbed your attention. Why does it matter that each person was in prison because of their respective acts of Christian faithfulness?

“Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship—all these things are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture to speak any more of them. In the traditional words and acts we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Papers and Letters from Prison

“Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on with the conviction that they were a 'colony of heaven' and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be 'astronomically intimidated.' They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest. Things are different now. The contemporary Church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the Church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.” – Martin Luther King Jr, Letter from the Birmingham Jail

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body...”
– Paul, 2 Corinthians

Pierre mentioned three things about the vocation of reconciliation. Talk about the importance of each.

- 1) **It is massive yet personal** (cosmic yet commonplace). We move into spaces where reconciliation is lacking and provides a winsome “foretaste of the kingdom.”
- 2) **It resists the spirit of the age but not in our own strength:** “Christ has given us a way in which we can resist the spirit of the age through our union with each other and our union with Christ—Christ has deposited a part of himself into every part of the body of Christ.”
- 3) **Involves an entire life obedience yet has already been accomplished by Christ.** It isn't a reality we create but one we are invited to enter into—by the Spirit of God “we get to be a ‘show and tell’ people.”

Pierre emphasizes that reconciliation must become a practice for those of us who “want a revolution”: confession, repentance, forgiveness, constructive conflict, peacemaking, etc. Is there a reconciliation area you've been avoiding or that God has been putting on your heart (big or small) that you could step into in the near future? Are you willing to share about that?

She mentions that we need to align with (and show solidarity with) those suffering or on the margins while still “speaking the truth in love” toward those who minimize or dismiss the harms of racism, inequality and the like. Talk about the challenge of that.

Pierre said that, regardless of your geography, living in the American story means understanding the history of how and why segregation and inequality came about, and looking for ways to bridge the gaps a racialized society has created. Do you understand the “hows and whys” of American racial segregation? What is a way for you to be a bridge to the margins?

Pierre described herself as feeling “very hopeful” in terms of what God is doing in the church but added “we are going to see a lot more suffering and pain in the months and year ahead.” Does this seem clear or confusing to you?

As other guests mentioned, Pierre said that her hope is that these days would see a return to “a strong focus on Christian discipleship and the narrow way of Christ—radically following him.” Are these days of division and brokenness deepening your yearning to follow Christ and join him in the vocation of reconciliation?

Are there any specific things from this series that have grabbed you? Any ways you are feeling specifically led in areas of multi-ethnic community, reconciliation, justice, repentance, or surrender?