

BOOKS: When All God's Children Get Together — A Memoir of Race and Baptists

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BOOKS: 'When All God's Children Get Together' A Memoir of Race and Baptists

By Marv Knox

Editor

Baptists can change, and reconciliation is possible, Emmanuel McCall testifies in his new book, [*When All God's Children Get Together: A Memoir of Race and Baptists*](#).

McCall's book provides a travelogue of the journey Baptists in the South took during the past 50 years. It's a trek that transported them from segregation to repentance, from mutual mistrust to reconciliation.

That journey parallels McCall's ministry—from when he enrolled as the only African-American student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1959, to when he stepped down as the Southern Baptist Convention's race-relations leader in 1991, to his participation in bringing Baptists across the races together to affirm the New Baptist Covenant next year.

McCall recalls poignant moments in his own life that reflect a larger movement of racial awareness and an inch-by-inch march toward harmony. Born and raised in melting-pot Pennsylvania, he never encountered overt racism until he ventured south of the Mason-Dixon Line to attend Simmons College in Louisville, Ky., in 1953. That quiet, eager student couldn't have known he would spend the rest of his life overcoming racism. His efforts freed blacks and whites alike from bonds of bigotry.

This book pays tribute to the grace and dignity of McCall's fellow travelers. Like most memoirs, McCall's names names. But unlike many stories of racism, McCall tells about the heroes—the courageous people who led Southern Baptists toward the light of racial responsiveness and harmony.

They range from his friend Duke McCall, president of Southern Seminary during his student days, to Arthur Rutledge, who created a safe haven at the Home Mission Board, where Emmanuel McCall could become the first African-American elected staff member at any SBC agency in 1968.

McCall's memoir describes how God's grace turned calamitous events into stepping-stones toward racial understanding. In 1957, the SBC Executive Committee tried to withdraw a mission study book that highlighted race relations, *The Long Bridge*. In 1972, the Sunday School Board pulled a student magazine, *Becoming*, because its cover featured a black young man talking to two white young women. These were tense times, but McCall shows how champions of reconciliation advanced the cause, even in the face of powerful forces.

This book provides a vital resource by chronicling how two Southern Baptist agencies—the Christian Life Commission and the Home Mission Board—advanced the cause of race relations, even when the cultural foundations of the South leaned the other way. It tells about the principled staff members at those agencies, whose personal acts of courage and discipline in time changed the hearts and minds of their fellow Baptists.

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Although the book spans 50 years, it also looks to the future. McCall, a current vice president of the Baptist World Alliance and pastor of The Fellowship Group Baptist Church in East Point, Ga., and immediate past moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is promoting the New Baptist Covenant, a pledge of racial harmony and cooperation to achieve kingdom goals. About 20,000 Baptists of all races are expected to

“celebrate” the covenant in Atlanta next January.

Writing *When All God’s Children Get Together* taught McCall lessons—about Baptists and about himself, he said in an e-mail interview.

“I have learned that Baptists can and will change, despite our autonomy and stubbornness,” he noted.

And he also developed “a deeper appreciation for the extent of my commitment to racial reconciliation,” he added. “For a period in my life (when he worked at the Home Mission Board), it was my calling. Even after leaving the HMB, I am still involved in ministries of racial reconciliation.”

Since that time, he has started two predominantly African-American congregations in suburban Atlanta, Christian Fellowship Baptist Church and The Fellowship Group. Both times, the young churches shared facilities with predominantly Anglo congregations in transitional neighborhoods.

Now, his work on behalf of the New Baptist Covenant strengthens racial reconciliation, he said. “I am helping black and white Baptists discover each other and begin learning again how to work together across racial lines.”

Practical as always, McCall pointed out the value of the New Baptist Covenant will not be demonstrated at the Atlanta meeting, no matter how large the gathering.

“The New Baptist Covenant will be successful if local coalitions of Baptists can overcome whatever differences we have, find the common needs to be addressed and join together in challenging the human problems we face,” he explained.

Looking back, McCall said Baptists, particularly in the American South, should learn lessons from the journey they have taken in the past 50 years.

“We should be reminded that the Bible can be twisted to make us believe, accept and defend culture instead of biblical truth,” he warned. “We Baptists are a ‘people of the book,’ but we often have spoken our culture and insecurities instead of God’s truth.

“We must continue to let the Holy Spirit break through our cultural biases to confront us with God through Jesus Christ.”

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