



A Conversation with Dr. Emmett G. Price III

Dr. Emmett Price joined the Gordon-Conwell faculty in 2016 as Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Worship, Church and Culture. His additional charge includes the development of a new Gordon-Conwell Institute for the Study of the Black Christian Experience, in collaboration with Dr. Patrick Smith, Associate Professor of Philosophical Theology and Ethics.

Dr. Price is an ordained pastor, scholar, musicologist, speaker and frequent contributor to Boston's NPR station, WGBH-Radio (89.7 FM) as well as WGBH-TV and WGBH online news. He recently shared with *Contact* editor Anne Doll his insights on racism, the Church, what believers can do to break down walls that separate individuals and races and his hope in God who is sovereign.

Anne: Could you please give us a brief history lesson on the roots of racism.

Dr. Price: "Racism has been studied by philosophers, sociologists, theologians, even musicologists. It spans the intellectual pursuit and even theology. It evolved out of the sinful nature of humanity, and the failure to see one another as the *imago dei*, as image bearers of God. Those who have been colonialists, those who have been imperialists, have used their authority to subjectify and objectify others into subordinate and condescending roles and functions.

"And so across time, we find humans mistreating and abusing one another. Whether you look at the colonialization, the slave trade, the early American history of the genocide of indigenous peoples, you find the same thing over and over and over: the racialization of one another, the desire of an oppressor to 'other-ize' another person based on their racial identity.

"And it's a sinful thing. God did not create racists; God created humanity. We were dispersed across the planet into peoples and

tongues, as many Bible interpretations have stated. Racism and racialization and the concept of race is a human oriented thing that is used to separate and segment us, which again is sinful because it goes against the nature of the *imago dei*, the ability to see each other as God's image bearers.

Anne: "It seems as if, in the U.S., there has been more discrimination against Black individuals than other minorities of color."

Dr. Price: "I think the indigenous have been discriminated against the most and the longest in this country. We don't have a huge population of indigenous in the country anymore, and those remaining have been ostracized and disrespected—which is a huge atrocity. Next in terms of discrimination would be African descendants, because chronologically, the Africans were brought here as indentured servants and slaves. That legacy of servitude and subordination is horrific. The reason why the Black narrative has emerged as prominent is because discrimination of Blacks still remains. We, those of us who are here, need to tell these stories, even in the midst of it.

“As we have recently celebrated the Fourth of July, which was a declaration of independence against the British Empire that led to the emergence of this nation 241 years ago, that document was signed and celebrated *even in the midst of slavery*. Even in this great nation, there is a conundrum, because as much as we celebrate citizenship, freedom and liberty, not everybody is granted full citizenship, freedom and liberty. And, unfortunately, much of that is based upon race and gender. So in that Declaration of Independence, where it suggests that all men are created equally, the word ‘men’ was not a substitute for mankind or humankind. The framers meant that all *white* men were created equal. If you were not a white man, you did not fit the mold.”

Anne: “*Do you see the recent demonstrations and emergence of groups like Black Lives Matter as a ‘boiling over’ response to longstanding discrimination?*”

Dr. Price: “I think it’s a progression. I don’t see it as much worse now than ever. I think the challenge is that because there have been violent atrocities against black bodies in our recent and past history, we’ve become immune to it. We have said, ‘As long as it doesn’t happen here...’ The challenge is that now it *is* happening

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here, and in a digitized era when we have video cameras in our hands at all times. These ‘live’ recordings, and the ability to replay, send and share videos make it seem as if it’s a new thing.

“But if you go back to Emmet Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy whose brutal lynching death in Mississippi is credited with galvanizing the Civil Rights Movement, and if you go back beyond that, if you look at the maiming and torturing and murder of black bodies, both male and female, and the lynchings—

back to many other horrific examples of this senselessness across the history of our country, I don’t see a new thing. I see it as a progression, although now with video proof. And the hope inherent in that for many blacks, for people of color and also many whites, is that somebody with authority will do something about it, because there is an awakening consciousness.

“So the whole notion of Black Lives Matter is not to suggest that black lives matter more than any other lives. But the reality is that until we all agree that black lives matter, too, or matter just as much as white lives, then we’re going to continue to have issues.”

Anne: “*You taught a course last year, the Project of Reconciliation: Intersection of Church and Culture. You have described that course as ‘a very detailed preparation of seminarians on how to lead local churches and the national and global church, knowing that we have a huge uphill battle against us, but knowing that God is sovereign.’ Could you please expand on this?*”

Dr. Price: “You cannot deal with anything if you don’t acknowledge that it exists. And factions of the church historically have either taken a blind eye or a slighted eye to racism. I believe that until we recognize the sin of racism and the sin of not seeing one another as image bearers of God, then we’re sweeping things under the rug. The moment we acknowledge that these issues exist, then we are able to open our eyes and learn how to relate with one another, ask the questions that seem silly about one another, spend time together, fellowship and break bread with one another in our churches and be able to take leadership from clergy together.

“What I’m looking at here is Acts 2:42 to 47, an example of the first Church and what those folks did. They broke bread and fellowshiped together. The churches in the New Testament wrote the very first script, and we can follow that New Testament model of what it means to spend time and learn and be with one another, to share heritages, to hear stories and share testimonies and realize that God has been working in your life just as God has been working in my life.

“And what that does is remove the fear of the unknown. It removes the anxiety of saying something that may be presumed prejudiced or discriminatory, because nobody wants to be called a racist. And, unfortunately, many of us see life and the world in a racialized perspective until we’re called to be aware of it.”

Anne: “*But there is God...*”

Dr. Price: “I do believe there is hope for those of us who follow Christ and believe that God is sovereign, that there is a time and a place we look forward to where we can eradicate this evil sin of racism, and see one another as image bearers of God—to the point of calling one another brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Anne: “*Toward that end, how do church leaders engage and help their congregations engage in reaching across the divide to hear one another’s stories?*”

Dr. Price: “There are a number of ways to do this, and many organizations are doing great work. The challenge is that certain organizations concentrate on certain people, some on intellectuals and some on youth and some on women. Some focus on churches, others, on people in the streets—those who are beyond

the churches. I don't think there is any one way to do anything. They're all important.

"However, the critical piece is that there have to be some people of color who are able to take a leadership role in the conversation. And the problem with many of the organizations is that they are run and led by non-people of color. It becomes a challenge if you want to get a critical mass of people of color, because the notion is that you are still asking us to submit to the authority of a person who is not of color. There have to be a number of organizations and entities that are led by people of color."

Anne: "Do you see some pockets of that occurring?"

Dr. Price: "Many organizations nationwide are doing that. African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Indigenous—we always forget about our Asian brothers and sisters and our indigenous brothers and sisters, both of whom are making great strides. This is the space the Institute wants to sit in as well. As a leading seminary

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in the country and in the world, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary has made a commitment to explore these questions, these challenges, in a way that no other seminary has endeavored to do. While many seminaries focus on Black Church Studies, we're looking at the Black Christian Experience, which is global, which is diasporic, which is inclusive. And so in that sense, we have a broader swath and much more flexibility to be inclusive, and encompass the narratives and stories of many folks who often get ostracized and left out."

Anne: "Let's suppose that I am a reader out in the heartland, and my heart is breaking for people of color who have

suffered so under racism. I want to do something. I want to take the first steps. How do I even begin?"

Dr. Price: "That is a beautiful question, one that is challenging to all of us. I think the first step is to do a self-examination, and really wrestle and reflect on whether you have been part of the problem in the past. We have to change behavior in order to create a different future. A lot of people suggest that whites join black churches or make a black friend. I think those are great examples of forward progress, but those don't do any good if you don't reflect, to make sure you're not part of the problem, whether implicitly or explicitly.

"The second step is prayer. We forget that God reveals so much to us when we quiet ourselves and spend time deliberately with God. Can we enter a season of personal prayer that would allow God to illuminate and show forth various ways that may be specific to each of us, of what we can do and how to do it. I don't believe in a one-equation-fits-all situation.

"And the third step would be to reach out prayerfully to a person of color to initiate a safe conversation within boundaries and perimeters that is focused on race and racial relations. The reason I say 'with boundaries and perimeters' is that these kinds of conversations can go on for four or five hours. You may want to establish a weekly dialogue, a time where you could set aside 45 minutes or an hour and a half, so that that you can initiate a series of conversations. Keep in mind that many such conversations need time to breathe. So take a few days to think about what you heard, what you said. Then maybe start off again by debriefing your last experience. This process helps us to grow.

"We forget that moving to a place where we eradicate racism and prejudice and discrimination means that we have to grow. We have to grow spiritually, emotionally and intellectually...and that takes time."

Prior to Dr. Emmett Price's arrival to Gordon-Conwell, he served as an Associate Professor of Music at Northeastern University (Boston) for 15 years. From 2008 to 2012 he also served as chair of the Department of African American Studies. He is a former research fellow of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University and Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, where he was lead scholar on the Rhythm & Flow Initiative. Dr. Price is also Founding Pastor of Community of Love Christian Fellowship in Allston, MA. In addition to the M.A. in Urban Ministry Leadership from Gordon-Conwell, he earned a BA from the University of California, Berkeley and both MA and Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh.