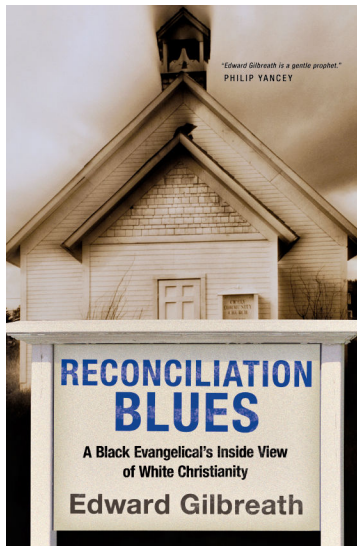




AN INTERVIEW WITH
**EDWARD
GILBREATH**
ABOUT
***RECONCILIATION
BLUES***



Edward Gilbreath draws attention to areas in evangelical churches where true racial reconciliation has not been fully realized, though it may appear so on the surface. He looks at a wide range of figures—Howard O. Jones, Tom Skinner, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson and John Perkins—to tell the story of racial reconciliation in evangelical churches. He charts both progress and setbacks in the church, offering encouragement and understanding for both black and white evangelicals.

Q: Explain the significance of the title *Reconciliation Blues*.

Ed Gilbreath: The book grew out of my own experience as a black Christian who was educated at an evangelical college, and who now works, worships and serves in mostly white evangelical settings. While doing research for *Reconciliation Blues* I talked to dozens of black evangelical men and women who have been on similar journeys. As I interviewed them about their experiences, I kept hearing this common theme: They feel called to the world they're in, but their lives are filled with varying degrees of angst and uneasiness about being one of the only African Americans at their respective institutions. Many of them are strongly committed to bridging the racial divide that still exists among Christians, but they're often discouraged by the slow rate of substantive progress. They also sense that, for a lot of white Christians, the "racial reconciliation" thing is over—"been there, done that"—and that blacks who continue to harp on it just need to move on. I decided to call this frustration that many black evangelicals feel the "reconciliation blues." Traditionally, the musical genre of "the blues" describes that raw, gut-level expression of one's deepest pains and yearnings. It's not whining; it's a form of spiritual confession.

Q: What led you to write *Reconciliation Blues*?

Gilbreath: The experience of black evangelicals in America tends to get overlooked, in part because many people don't realize there is such a thing as black evangelicals. Over the years I've heard story after story of how other blacks have struggled in white evangelical circles, so as a journalist, and a black evangelical myself, I felt called to explore this phenomenon. I needed to write the book as much for my own personal understanding as for the mission of contributing to the larger discussion about evangelicals and race.

I also wanted to write a friendly and accessible book on the race issue. This is a vitally important topic for the church, but too often the books on the subject go down like thick doses of castor oil. Yes, race relations is serious stuff, but I don't think we need to always take ourselves so seriously when addressing it. In fact, I think the glum demeanor that we bring to the discussion are part of our problem. We need to lighten up sometimes, and I think *Reconciliation Blues* invites readers to explore a heavy topic without the heavy-handed haranguing. At the same time, I've attempted to be very honest and real about the magnitude of the problems confronting us.

Q: The subtitle of the book is *A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity*. What do you mean by the phrase "white Christianity"?

Gilbreath: During the book's titling process I settled on that phrase reluctantly. Of course, we know that Christianity transcends all racial categories: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). But one of the things that black evangelicals struggle with the most is how much today's evangelical institutions seem to be shaped by a Eurocentric and white American brand of Christianity, whether it's through our theology, worship styles or business practices. One prominent black leader remarked that, as a result of being trained at evangelical colleges, his perception of his faith and culture were filtered through a grid that reinforced middle-class white values. In retrospect, he wondered if that early influence hindered his ability to connect with other African Americans. Other black Christians confided to me that their experiences in white evangelical institutions often left them with

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Edward Gilbreath is editor at large with *Christianity Today* and managing editor of *Today's Christian*. He is also the author of *Gospel Trailblazer*, the story of Howard O. Jones, the first African American preacher at the Billy Graham crusades.

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a sense that they had to conform to some white model of faith in order to be considered a *true* evangelical. This is the stuff that's confronting nonwhites in our major evangelical institutions every day, yet it goes unaddressed because we haven't figured out how to get the issue on the table and talk about it honestly. I hope *Reconciliation Blues* can help facilitate a bit of that discussion.

Q: You also include a chapter called "The 'Other' Others" about the experiences of evangelicals from other ethnic minority groups.

Gilbreath: I had to. Though this book deals primarily with the black-white relationship, since that is my personal experience, racial reconciliation in the church is by no means just a black-white issue. Native Americans, our nation's first occupants, are a people whose voices are typically forgotten or ignored in our discussions of racial justice. In 2002 the Hispanic population surpassed African Americans to become the largest minority group in the U.S. The Asian American populations are also growing at record paces. Already, in states like California, Texas and Hawaii, whites are no longer the majority race. Evangelical believers from these ethnic communities know how it feels to live on the margins of the movement. So I wanted to tell a few of their stories as well.

Q: Why was the chapter on politics, "God Is Not a Democrat or a Republican," the hardest for you to write?

Gilbreath: The old saying goes that you should never talk about religion or politics in polite company. And I've seen the wisdom of that maxim firsthand. Bring up the topic in the wrong setting, and you're liable to get your head bit off. So the last thing I wanted to do was address the topic in print, where people who don't know me can hate on me over and over for years to come. Seriously, though, I felt it was impossible to avoid the topic when writing a book about evangelicals and race. Politics, and the various ways that Christians infuse it into their practice of faith, is central to how we relate to others today. As I say in the book, once upon a time black and white were the classic "clashing colors" that told the story of our nation's internal strife. Racism was our country's original sin—and the black-white divide was its most notorious manifestation. Lately, though, the two primary colors have morphed from *black and white* to *blue and red*—as in "blue states" and "red states." Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world, but today many evangelical Christians seem to believe that the United States should be that kingdom, and that the Republican Party is God's chosen vessel for making it happen. That's a troubling proposition. In the book, I don't suggest that Christians shouldn't be involved in politics or that there aren't crucial moral positions that we should be championing, but I do believe we've allowed politics to divide us—black from white, black from black, white from white, you name it—in ways that should not be so for followers of Christ.

Q: What is your hope for the readers of *Reconciliation Blues*?

Gilbreath: I pray that my book can help both blacks and whites get a better measure of the state of our "racial reconciliation," and the distance we need to travel to make it real. I can't wait for readers to meet the fascinating and devoted men and women of God whom I encountered during my quest to better understand this issue. Through their stories, and mine, I hope to give readers a glimpse of what it means to be black and evangelical.