



# PRESBYTERION

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## GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER (1864–1943):

### “GOD JUST CAME INTO MY HEART ONE SUNDAY AFTERNOON”

David B. Calhoun\*

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#### EARLY LIFE AND WANDERINGS

In the southwestern corner of Missouri, Moses Carver and his wife, Susan, lived on 240 acres near the tiny settlement of Diamond Grove during the years before and after the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Despite their opposition to slavery, the Carvers purchased from a neighbor a girl named Mary. When she was seventeen years old, Mary had a baby and, a year later, probably in 1864, a second son, named George. George never knew his father, who was likely a slave from the adjoining plantation. When George was three years old, he and his mother were kidnapped and taken to Arkansas. Mr. Carver sent a neighbor to look for them, promising the neighbor a racehorse worth \$300 if he found them. The neighbor found little George in the woods, with some women he described as squaws, but he could not find the little boy’s mother.

The Carvers cared for George and his brother, Jim, as their own children. George loved and remembered his adoptive parents his whole life. In 1929 he wrote to the daughter of one of his boyhood playmates, thanking her for a newspaper

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<sup>1</sup> After I retired from Covenant Seminary, I became a member of the pastoral staff of Galilee Missionary Baptist Church, an African American church in St. Louis, Missouri. For Black History month one year at Galilee, I prepared a lecture on George Washington Carver, a lovable man, a devout Christian, and a brilliant scientist. This article is a development of that lecture. There are many books about Carver. Rackham Holt’s *George Washington Carver: An American Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, 1943), published the year of Carver’s death, makes use of the author’s conversations with Carver and many of his friends. Gary R. Kremer writes that Holt’s book presented “Carver’s life as he wished it had been, not exactly as it always was, and he loved it.” Kremer’s own book, *George Washington Carver: A Biography* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011) is one of the best basic biographies of Carver. L. O. McMurry, in *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 41, fully describes and evaluates Carver’s scientific endeavors, but only lightly touches on his religious thought. The most complete and scholarly work is *George Washington Carver: A Life*, by Christina Vella (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 2015). This definitive volume has many strengths, but one notable weakness. Vella attempts to downplay Carver’s religious life and evangelical faith. In her book, however, Carver’s Christianity comes through from his childhood to his death.

clipping about the death of “dear Mr. Carver. I treasure it very much.” He added, “My heart indeed goes out to my dear ‘Home Folks.’”<sup>2</sup>

Small and frail, George was bright and eager to learn. Because he was black, he could not go to the local school, but he was allowed to attend Sunday school in the church, and then sit on the steps outside and listen to the grown-up service. He heard sermons from traveling Methodist, Baptist, Campbellite, and Presbyterian preachers, and began to acquire a faith that would sustain him for the rest of his life. The little boy excelled in memorizing and reciting Bible verses. He sang hymns and learned to play the church piano. Carver believed that he became a Christian when he was eight or nine years old. “God just came into my heart one Sunday afternoon,” he wrote years later, “while I was alone in the loft of our big barn, shelling corn to carry to the mill to be ground into meal.”<sup>3</sup>

Susan Carver taught George to read a little, and to do spinning, knitting, and fine needlework. When he was thirteen years old, the Carvers sent him to an elementary school for colored children in Neosho, eight miles away. There George lived with a devout black couple, Andrew and Mariah Watkins, who took him with them to their African Methodist Episcopal church. One Christmas the Watkinsons gave him a Bible, which he carried everywhere and read every day for the rest of his life.

George stayed with the Watkinsons for about three years. Seeking more schooling and a way to make a living, George wandered through the state of Kansas for a few years, taking classes wherever he could and working in various jobs. In Fort Scott he saw a black man lynched. Sixty years later, he wrote, “As young as I was, the horror haunted me and does even now.”<sup>4</sup> In Olathe, Lucy and Christopher Seymour took him in. Lucy, an ex-slave, was gentle and motherly, and Christopher took him to services at the Presbyterian church. George became a lifelong Presbyterian, or so he assumed since he “never heard of being turned out,” but in truth he “never made much distinction between denominations and attended whatever church was near him.”<sup>5</sup>

George was accepted at Highland College, a Presbyterian school in northeastern Kansas, but was refused admittance when he arrived because he was a Negro. In 1886 he went as a homesteader to western Kansas, where he staked his claim to 160 acres of prairie land and built a sod house to live in. His neighbors appreciated his articulate and refined manner, his musical skill on the accordion, and his love of nature. He developed an interest in writing poetry and painting pictures. Somewhere along the way, he gave himself a middle name; he was now George Washington Carver.

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<sup>2</sup> William J. Federer, *George Washington Carver—His Life and Faith in His Own Words* (St. Louis, MO: Amerisearch, 2002), 69.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Vella, *George Washington Carver* 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

After several years in western Kansas, he turned up in Winterset, Iowa. He took a job as cook in a hotel and began attending the white Methodist church in town. John and Helen Milholland appreciated Carver's fine voice as he joined in singing the hymns at church and became his lifelong friends. Years later Carver wrote to them: "I think of you often and shall never forget what you were to my life, how much real help and inspiration you gave me. You, of course, will never know how much you did for a poor colored boy who was drifting here and there as a ship without a rudder."<sup>6</sup>

### ACADEMIC CAREER

The Milhollands encouraged George to develop his love for music and art and suggested that he enroll at Simpson College, a nearby Methodist school. He was the only black student at the school, but he found the people in town very kind and the students "wonderfully good."<sup>7</sup> His art teacher at Simpson encouraged him to enroll at Iowa State College in Ames, where her father was professor of horticulture.

At Iowa State some students shouted racial slurs at him, and the dining hall manager refused to serve him with the other students, forcing him to eat in the basement with the janitors. Carver found comfort in God and pressed on. He wrote to the Milhollands:

Oh how I wish the people would awake up from their lethargy and come out soul and body for Christ. I am so anxious to get out and be doing something. . . . Let us pray that the Lord will completely guide us in all things, and that we may gladly be led by him.<sup>8</sup>

George and one of the professors started a prayer meeting and Bible study groups. The professor wrote, "Before Mr. Carver and I left the institution, there had been quite a reformation brought about, and now the college is famous for the firm stand taken by its students along Christian lines."<sup>9</sup>

George Washington Carver was a good student, with near-perfect grades in botany and horticulture. He earned his bachelor's degree in agriculture and began graduate study. He thought about being a missionary to Africa, and planned to study at Moody Bible Institute, founded five years earlier by Dwight L. Moody. Four of Carver's paintings were exhibited at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. "I really love to paint," Carver wrote to a friend. "My ambition is to paint a flower or a fruit so that you can see God in it."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Federer, 30.

<sup>7</sup> John Perry, *Unshakable Faith: Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1999), 148. Perry's book includes interlocking biographies of Washington and Carver and gives Carver's religious faith full expression.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>9</sup> Vella, *George Washington Carver*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

Iowa State expected George to remain there as a botanist, but Booker T. Washington, founder and president of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama, wrote to Carver that “we shall be willing to do anything in reason that will enable you to decide in favor of coming to Tuskegee.” Carver answered, “It has always been the one ideal of my life to be of the greatest good to the greatest number of ‘my people’ possible, and to this end I have been preparing myself for these many years.”<sup>11</sup> A little later he wrote to Washington again, pledging to cooperate with him “in doing all I can through Christ who strengtheneth me to better the conditions of our people.”<sup>12</sup> Carver spent the summer completing the requirements for a master’s degree at Iowa State. He arrived in Tuskegee in October 1896 “filled with missionary zeal.”<sup>13</sup>

Carver’s job at Tuskegee was to teach classes in science, agriculture, and art and to create and run a laboratory. He got up early, often by four in the morning, to walk in the Alabama woods before sunrise, collecting samples of whatever caught his attention. By nine o’clock he was in his laboratory, praying as he began his day’s work: “Open thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law. My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth, and all that in them is.”<sup>14</sup> One visitor to Tuskegee declared, “When we talked about the things of God his eyes sparkled and his soul caught fire.”<sup>15</sup>

Carver quickly became popular with the students as teacher, counselor, and friend. He enjoyed teaching them in class and, even more, interacting with them out of class. He delighted in good humor, both his own and that of others. He said that God “wants us to laugh.”<sup>16</sup> The other teachers, however, did not welcome Carver, and the administration, tightly controlled by Booker T. Washington, made his life difficult. “For the entire nine years Carver and Booker worked together at Tuskegee,” writes Christina Vella, “they made each other wretched.”<sup>17</sup> Even so, when Booker T. Washington died in 1915, Carver was devastated and took a temporary leave from teaching. “It was the grief of a son, who lost a demanding father without ever having succeeded in satisfying him or even winning his grudging respect.”<sup>18</sup> Carver donated a thousand dollars—a year’s salary—to a memorial fund in Washington’s honor. “I am sure Mr. Washington never knew how much I loved him, and the cause for which he gave his life,” Carver said.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>11</sup> McMurry, *George Washington Carver*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Perry, *Unshakable Faith*, 349.

<sup>15</sup> McMurry, *George Washington Carver*, 268.

<sup>16</sup> Alvin D. Smith, *George Washington Carver: Man of God* (Middletown, OH: Perry Printing Company, 1960), 38.

<sup>17</sup> Vella, *George Washington Carver*, 60.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Perry, *Unshakable Faith*, 300.

The Tuskegee students asked Carver to teach a Bible class to be held during the break between Sunday supper and evening chapel. Attendance climbed to almost three hundred. Carver, with a sprig of green or a flower in the lapel of his coat, began his Bible class with a brief pause for prayer, a broad smile, and a few words of greeting. His teaching consisted of a Bible story or text, and an exhortation to know and love the Creator, to live good and useful lives, and to reach out in kindness and help to all people. Carver's last assistant described him perfectly: "He was kindness itself."<sup>20</sup>

Carver applied the Bible stories to the lives of his students. He said:

We are told that in the beginning all was void, and darkness covered all things and that our Creator and Father began his work by setting all things in order. And as He proceeded with his work, it was with deliberation and by well-ordered degree. Not one of all the millions of things He made was left until it was pronounced "very good." What an example for us!<sup>21</sup>

Responding to a question about how to find the will of God, the professor answered:

Pray in silence. Ask God for guidance. Keep your thoughts pure. Forget yourself. Know that you are an instrument through which your Creator wishes to pour out some blessing for others. Be not over-anxious. Keep your mind on God after you have prayed. See the good in all things. See the good in your classmates, in your instructors, in your parents, in both colored and white people. If you find yourself in a situation in which your mind strays from the fact that God is good and is in all things, wrestle with yourself and get back on the track. It behooves us to stay in contact with him, because we know not the minute, hour, day, or year when he is ready to reveal to us a wonder of his universe.<sup>22</sup>

## THE INTERSECTION OF SCIENCE AND FAITH

In his research Carver worked especially with sweet potatoes and peanuts, two Southern foods, and "two of the greatest products that God has ever given us," he said.<sup>23</sup> Sweet potatoes and peanuts, he believed, would provide essential nutritional supplements to Southern diets and could be easily and cheaply grown by the average farmer. Furthermore, they would not deplete the soil as cotton was doing. People asked Carver how he came up with so many innovative and unusual ideas for using peanuts and sweet potatoes. "I don't make these discoveries," he answered. "God has worked through me to reveal to his children some of his wonderful providence"—the kind of statement that irritated most scientists.<sup>24</sup> Carver told several versions of the following story:

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<sup>20</sup> Vella, *George Washington Carver*, 144.

<sup>21</sup> McMurry, *George Washington Carver*, 150.

<sup>22</sup> Perry, *Unshakable Faith*, 288–89.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

One day I went into my laboratory and said, "Dear Mr. Creator, please tell me what the universe was made for?" The Great Creator answered, "You want to know too much for that little mind of yours. Ask something more your size, little man." Then I asked, "Please, Mr. Creator, tell me what man was made for." Again the Great Creator replied, "You are still asking too much." Then I asked, "Please, Mr. Creator, will you tell me why the peanut was made?" "That's better," God answered, "what do you want to know about the peanut?"<sup>25</sup>

In 1921 Carver addressed the U. S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means about the many uses of the peanut. When he finished, the chairman asked him, "Dr. Carver, how did you learn all of these things?" Carver answered, "From an old book." "What book?" asked the chairman. Carver replied, "The Bible." The chairman inquired, "Does the Bible tell about peanuts?" "No, sir," Carver replied, "but it tells about the God who made the peanut. I asked Him to show me what to do with the peanut, and He did."<sup>26</sup> In less than an hour before the committee Carver won "a tariff for the peanut industry and national fame for himself."<sup>27</sup> "He was loved by thousands of people who had met him," wrote Vella, "and respected by hundreds of thousands who had not."<sup>28</sup>

In *Fruits of Creation: A Look at Global Sustainability as Seen Through the Eyes of George Washington Carver*, John S. Ferrell writes:

Far from resembling an environmentalist as that term is currently understood, Carver was a potentially puzzling combination of nature mystic, saint, scientist, and business booster. He certainly stood in awe of creation as he found it, but his wonder was combined with a sense that God had placed in nature vast potential for human betterment. He was a St. Francis armed with test tubes, seeking, through scientific means, creation's undiscovered fruits to enhance the well-being of all people.<sup>29</sup>

Carver expressed eloquently his conviction about science and God in a letter written in 1930:

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<sup>25</sup> Federer, *George Washington Carver*, 35. Carver gave various accounts of his conversation with God about the peanut. See Perry, *Unshakable Faith*, 337–38.

<sup>26</sup> Federer, *George Washington Carver*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> McMurry, *George Washington Carver*, 174.

<sup>28</sup> Vella, *George Washington Carver*, 204.

<sup>29</sup> John S. Ferrell, *Fruits of Creation: A Look at Global Sustainability as Seen Through the Eyes of George Washington Carver* (Shakopee, MN: Macalester Publishing Company), 91–92. Mark D. Hersey has developed more fully this neglected aspect of Carver's work in *My Work Is That of Conservation: An Environmental Biography of George Washington Carver* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011). Hersey includes a chapter on "Divine Inspiration" (179–93), in which he describes Carver's religious convictions. He agrees that Carver possessed "conventional" Christian convictions, but attempts to show that he went beyond orthodox Christianity at a number of points. Carver was not a theologian, but he was a Bible student, and his ideas appear to fall well within what could be viewed as interdenominational Protestantism.

The singing birds, the buzzing bees, the opening flower, and the budding trees all have their marvelous creation story to tell each searcher for truth . . . from the frail little mushroom, which seems to spring up in a night and perish ere the morning sun sinks to rest in the western horizon, to the giant redwoods of the Pacific slope that have stood the storms for centuries. . . . Nature in its varied forms are the little windows through which God permits me to commune with Him, and to see much of His glory, majesty, and power by simply lifting the curtain and looking in . . . I love to think of nature as unlimited broadcasting stations, through which God speaks to us every day, every hour and every moment of our lives, if we will only tune in and remain so. . . . I am more and more convinced, as I search for truth, that no ardent student of nature can “Behold the lilies of the field,” or “Look unto the hills,” or study even the microscopic wonders of a stagnant pool of water, and honestly declare himself to be an infidel.<sup>30</sup>

George Washington Carver had many friends with whom he corresponded. He developed some very close, very loving, friendships—black and white, old and young, male and female. To these he wrote letters expressing his feelings, often in extravagant terms. One woman he hoped to marry, several others hoped to marry him, and Jim Hardwick, a young white man, seemed to mean more to him than anyone else. “I did not have to learn to love you,” Carver told Jim. “I did this the first time I saw you, before you ever spoke to me. It was the Christ in you, of course.”<sup>31</sup> He wrote many letters to Jim in which he let him know that he loved him deeply, missed him terribly, and treasured their relationship “in Christ.” Some have seen a sexual relationship between the aging black man and the young white man. Even though she seems inclined to that view, biographer Christina Vella acknowledges that in his letters to close friends, one can easily find examples of Carver’s “verbalizing his love.” She adds that except for one remark, “which might mean everything or nothing, not a syllable in Carver’s letters suggests that the old professor put his hands anywhere but on Hardwick’s head”—when he blessed his “Blue Ridge” white boys who met him in the North Carolina mountains each summer for instruction and fellowship.<sup>32</sup>

Carver’s love for people and his deep spirituality are prominent in his letters to all kinds of people, as the following quotations show:

I know that my Redeemer liveth . . . Pray for me please that everything said and done will be to His glory. I am not interested in science or anything else that leaves God out of it.<sup>33</sup>

God will come in and rid you entirely of self so that you can go out after souls rightly, or rather have souls seek the Christ in you.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Federer, *George Washington Carver*, 71–73.

<sup>31</sup> Vella, *George Washington Carver*, 210.

<sup>32</sup> Vella, *George Washington Carver*, 213, 218.

<sup>33</sup> Federer, *George Washington Carver*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> Federer, *George Washington Carver*, 51.

We are told to “go unto the four corners of the earth and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” That can be done by those of you who will not be in the pulpits of the churches, as well as those who will.<sup>35</sup>

My heart goes out to everyone . . . I want them to find Jesus and make Him a daily, hourly, and momentarily part of themselves. . . . How I long for each one to walk and talk with the Great Creator through the things he has created . . . Keep your hand in that of the Master, walk daily by his side, so that you may lead others into the realms of true happiness.<sup>36</sup>

As I sat in my little “den” reading and pondering over [your letter] . . . I was attracted by a strangely mellow light falling upon the paper. I looked up and out of the window toward the setting sun, which was just disappearing behind the horizon leaving a halo of never to be forgotten glory and beauty behind it. . . . As I sat there unconscious of everything except the scene before me, behold, before my very eyes it changed from the marvelous rainbow colors to the soft, ethereal “Rembrandtian” browns and the midnight blues of Maxfield Parrish. But the most marvelous of all was the pristine light which came from behind those strangely beautiful clouds. . . . As I came to myself I said aloud, “O God, I thank Thee for such a direct manifestation of Thy goodness, majesty and power.”<sup>37</sup>

## INFLUENCE AND LEGACY

George Washington Carver experienced racial prejudice in the South, and, when he traveled, outside the South. By the time of Tuskegee’s twenty-fifth anniversary in 1906, Booker T. Washington was internationally recognized as the leading spokesman for his race. Washington often said that “the best means for destroying race prejudice is to make oneself a useful and, if possible, an indispensable member of the community in which he lives.” On at least one occasion he added, “I do not know of a better illustration of this than may be found in the case of Professor Carver.”<sup>38</sup> “Love is more powerful than hate,” Carver always said, and he practiced what he preached. He illustrated the power of love to vanquish hatred with the story of David and Goliath. “David, though small, was filled with truth, right thinking and good will for others. Goliath represented one who let fear into his heart, and it stayed there long enough to grow into hate for others.”<sup>39</sup>

Carver and a literature professor in Minnesota corresponded for seven years and set times to pray together. In 1935 the professor came to Tuskegee and prayed with Dr. Carver in person. He wrote: “Never have I experienced more dynamic praying than I experienced that day. He, a black man from the deep South, I a white man from the far North, he, loving and taking into his great heart all of the South, white

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, *George Washington Carver*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Federer, *George Washington Carver*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 63–64.

<sup>38</sup> Perry, *Unshakable Faith*, 253.

<sup>39</sup> McMurry, *George Washington Carver*, 107.

as well as black, and giving them to the Father.”<sup>40</sup> A white man who heard Carver speak in Virginia wrote: “The man who has been and is to this day the greatest inspiration in my life is a Negro. In the whole life of this saintly man I see the future of a great race. In his eyes I see the soul of a people who experienced God and understand the meaning of the Cross.”<sup>41</sup>

Carver wrote to his friends who usually sent him Christmas presents and asked them instead to make a gift to “some poor, hungry, sick, jobless soul.”<sup>42</sup> Toward the end of his life, Carver gave himself to trying to help victims of polio, with a treatment of massaging with a concoction of peanut oil that he had created. At first there seemed some hope that it would work, but gradually it was clear that it had not.

By 1938 Carver’s health began a slow, steady decline. He continued his work in the classroom and laboratory at Tuskegee and taught his Bible class that brought standing-room-only crowds every Sunday. Near the end of his life Carver wrote to a friend, “When you get your grip on the last rung of the ladder and look over the wall as I am doing you don’t need proofs. You see. You know you will not die.”<sup>43</sup> At 7:30 p.m. on January 5, 1943, Carver met the Great Creator face to face. “Not expected to survive infancy, he had drawn on an incredible reservoir of will, courage, and faith for almost eighty years.”<sup>44</sup>

George Washington Carver was buried on the Tuskegee campus, near the chapel. Students, alumni, and friends came to pay their respects and place flowers on the grave of a man who was never seen without a flower in the lapel of his coat. People across the country praised his lifetime of quiet devotion and his commitment to lifting up “the man farthest down.”<sup>45</sup> Most of the people who knew Carver did not consider him merely a symbol—for black pride or for Southern tolerance—but “a remarkable individual, and some loved him as a fellow human being.”<sup>46</sup>

In the program for Carver’s funeral some of his favorite Bible verses were quoted:

In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He will direct thy paths. (Prov. 3:5–6)

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. (Ps. 121:12)

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. (Gen. 1:29)

Some of Carver’s favorite hymns were sung, including “There is a Balm in Gilead,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” and “My Faith Looks Up to Thee.” Carver believed in the

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>41</sup> Perry, *Unshakable Faith*, 331.

<sup>42</sup> Vella, *George Washington Carver*, 226.

<sup>43</sup> Federer, *George Washington Carver*, 68.

<sup>44</sup> McMurry, *George Washington Carver*, 302.

<sup>45</sup> Perry, *Unshakable Faith*, 361.

<sup>46</sup> McMurry, *George Washington Carver*, 283.

God who created all things and came into his heart when he was a boy. He trusted Christ who died on “the old rugged cross,” and lives in his people. He prayed that the Spirit would lead him and use him. On his tombstone in Tuskegee are inscribed the words: “He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world.”