



PROFILE IN FAITH

George Washington Carver (1860-1943):

“... the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

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Missouri

In the southwestern corner of the troubled border state of Missouri, Moses Carver and his wife, Susan, farmed 240 acres near the tiny settlement of Diamond Grove. They owned slaves, including a young woman named Mary who had at least two sons, the youngest named George. When George was an infant, probably in 1864, he and his mother were stolen away and resold in a neighboring state. Mary was never seen again, but George, small and frail, was found. Mr. Carver paid for the baby's return, giving up his finest horse.

The Carvers cared for George, and he stayed with them after the war. George was bright and eager to learn. Although black students were not allowed to go to the local public school, he was welcome at the church, where he listened to the sermons of traveling Methodist, Baptist, Campbellite, and Presbyterian preachers, acquiring a nondenominational faith. He memorized and recited Bible verses. He sang hymns and learned to play the church piano. “God just came into my heart one afternoon” when he was eight or nine years old, 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.”¹

Susan Carver taught George to read. Then, when he was thirteen, the Carvers sent him to a school, eight miles away. There in Neosho he boarded with a devout black couple, Andrew and Mariah Watkins, who took him to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. They gave him a Bible for Christmas, which he carried and read every day for the rest of his life.

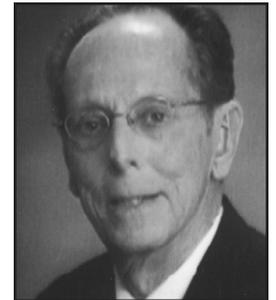
Kansas

Seeking more schooling and a livelihood, George wandered through the state of Kansas, taking classes and working in various jobs. He opened a laundry in one town and made enough money to buy some real estate, which he sold for a profit. He went to business school and worked as a stenographer. He was accepted at Highland College, in northeastern Kansas, but when he arrived and administrators saw his race, they refused him admittance. As he did in all the disappointments of his life, he “trusted God and pressed on.” He taught Sunday school in a Methodist church in one town, and in another joined the Presbyterian church.²

In 1886 Carver staked a homesteader claim in western Kansas. On his 160 acres of prairie land, he built a sod house. His neighbors appreciated his articulate and refined manner, his skillful accordion playing, and his love of nature. He developed an interest in writing poetry and in painting. Somewhere along the way, he gave himself a middle name; he was now George Washington Carver. Carver did not stay on his homestead long. In 1888 he set off for further ventures.

Iowa

In Winterset, Iowa, Carver took a job as hotel cook and attended the Baptist church, where he met John



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and Helen Milholland who became lifelong friends. Years later Carver wrote to them, saying he would never forget “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.”³

The Milhollands encouraged Carver to develop his love for music and art and suggested that he enroll at Simpson College, a Methodist school nearby. The only black student, he found the people very kind and the students “wonderfully good.”⁴ His art teacher encouraged him to transfer to Iowa State College in Ames, where her father was professor of horticulture.

Earning near-perfect grades in botany and horticulture, Carver completed his bachelor’s in agriculture and began graduate study in botany. Still struggling with whether to become a scientist or an artist or a missionary, he took classes at the Chicago Academy of Arts and at the fledgling Moody Bible Institute.

Alabama

Booker T. Washington, founder and president of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama, a vocational school for African Americans. Having heard of Carver’s acumen, Washington wrote Carver that “we shall be willing to do anything in reason to enable you to come to Tuskegee.” Carver answered Washington, pledging “to cooperate with you in doing all I can through Christ who strengtheneth me to better the conditions of our people.”⁵

George Washington Carver’s job at Tuskegee was to teach classes in science, agriculture, and art and to create and run a laboratory. He began with enthusiasm. Well before sunrise he was out walking in the Alabama woods, collecting samples. By nine o’clock he was in his laboratory, praying Scripture as he began his 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.”⁶

Teacher

As teacher, counselor, and friend, the quiet, somewhat “rumped” Carver quickly became popular with the students, who called him “the professor.” 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—saying that God “wants us to laugh.”⁷

Carver set out to build at Tuskegee a center for teaching, research, and agricultural outreach. He kept in touch with the local farmers, black and white, and helped them implement more productive methods. He published an advisory bulletin, written in plain language. The annual Farmer’s Conference soon became one of the largest and most important events in the state. Booker T. Washington’s ambition and skillful promotion and Carver’s training and teaching “placed Tuskegee Institute in the mainstream, and sometimes the forefront, of early agricultural education.”⁸

Carver and Washington

Carver did not always find his work at Tuskegee easy. The students, the grandchildren of slavery, were poorly prepared for higher education. The college had little money, and some of the teachers resented Carver because of his popularity with the students and his perceived special status.

Carver and Washington developed a respectful but uneasy relationship. Mr. Washington, Carver quickly discovered, was a stickler for detailed reports, which Carver had little use for. He wanted money to develop his laboratory, assistants to help him in his growing responsibilities, and a certain amount of freedom to develop things the way he chose.

Despite the aggravation that the two main people at Tuskegee caused each other, Washington and Carver cared deeply about the same goals—improving opportunities for black people and living their lives in a way that honored God. They also loved and respected each other. Washington said that Carver was “quite the most modest man” he had ever met.⁹ When Booker T. Washington died in 1915, Carver was devastated and took temporary leave from teaching. He gave 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.¹⁰

Sweet Potatoes and Peanuts

Carver was greatly interested in sweet potatoes and peanuts—“two of the greatest products that God has ever given us,” he said.¹¹ 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, like cotton.

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."¹² Frequently Carver told the following story:

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." So 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?"¹³

In 1921 Carver addressed the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means about the many uses of the peanut as a means to improve the economy of the South. 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?" When Carver said, "The Bible," the chairman asked, "Does the Bible tell about peanuts?"

"No, sir, 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."¹⁴ In less than an hour before the committee Carver won "a tariff for the peanut industry and national fame for himself."¹⁵

Racism

Like all African-Americans, Carver experienced racial prejudice. He was not allowed to enter a Presbyterian college in Kansas. He was required at first to eat with the janitors at Iowa State. Once, during a harrowing incident in Alabama, he feared for his life. As he traveled he frequently faced discrimination in the North as well as in the South.

Occasionally fellow blacks criticized Carver for what they perceived to be his accommodation to the racial situation. 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."¹⁶

"Love is more powerful than hate," Carver always said, and he practiced what he preached. He used the story of David and Goliath to illustrate the power of love to vanquish hatred. "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."¹⁷

Carver was "a dreamer with a vision of a better world and a very dim grasp of political and economic reality," writes L.O. McMurry.¹⁸ Like Martin Luther King, George Washington Carver had a dream: of a better America and of a new South. And through his interracial work in the 1920s and 1930s, a time of racial unrest and violence, worked hard to help bring this about. In 1939 he was awarded the Roosevelt Medal for Outstanding Contribution to Southern Agriculture, with the declaration: "To a scientist humbly seeking the guidance of God and a liberator of the white race as well as the black."¹⁹ A white man who heard Carver speak in Virginia said Carver had been "the greatest inspiration" of his life and noted, "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."²⁰

Science and God

Carver was a generalist in an age of increasing specialization. He did not make major scientific discoveries, and few of his inventions, if any, were commercially successful. But, according to L.O. McMurry, George Washington Carver was "one of the most effective agricultural educators and scientific popularizers of his era. Like an interpreter he served as a bridge between scientists and laymen, and he opened the door to later breakthroughs."²¹ In *Fruits of Creation: A Look at Global Sustainability as Seen through the Eyes of George Washington Carver*, John S. Ferrell notes his contributions:

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.*²²

On November 18, 1924, Carver addressed five hundred people at the Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. Without God to “draw aside the curtain,” Carver said, he was helpless to do anything.²³ The audience responded with warm applause, but a writer for the *New York Times* wasn't as impressed. Carver was deeply hurt when he read the article titled “Men of Science Never Talk That Way.” He later explained to a minister friend in Alabama: He wasn't troubled that “the cynical criticism was directed at me, but rather [that it was directed] at the religion of Jesus Christ. Dear brother, 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.”²⁴

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

*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.*²⁵

Carver's lectures at Tuskegee covered religious as well as scientific themes. His agricultural classes became one of the school's most effective means of teaching Christianity. As commencement day approached one year, Carver began a class by saying, “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.”²⁶

Bible Class

In February 1907 seven students asked Carver to help them organize a Bible class to meet during the thirty-five-minute break between Sunday supper and the evening chapel service. Fifty students came to the first meeting to hear Carver talk about the creation story. In three months, attendance had grown to more than a hundred. It continued to grow during the thirty years that Carver taught the class.

Carver, who was never seen without with a sprig of green or a flower in the lapel of his coat, began his Bible class with a brief prayer, a broad smile, and a few words of greeting. Then he stated his theme, such as “your aim in life should be to glorify God.”²⁷ Carver's Bible teaching, as remembered by his students, consisted of a Bible story or text, with the professor's exhortation to know and love the Creator, to live good and useful lives, and to reach out in kindness and help to all people.

“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,” Carver told the students. “And as God 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!”²⁸

One visitor to Tuskegee declared, “When we talked about the things of God his eyes sparkled and his soul caught fire.”²⁹ Carver and a literature professor in Minnesota corresponded for seven years. Though separated by distance, they set times to pray together. In 1935 Glenn Clark came to Tuskegee and prayed with 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 as well as black, and giving them to the Father.”³⁰ Lifelong friend Henry Wallace said: “To the world he was known as a scientist. Those who knew him best, however, realize his outstanding characteristic was a strong feeling of the eminence of God.”³¹

“Secretary of Inspiration”

Carver was the most popular professor on the Tuskegee campus. In time he became known through-

out the South and beyond the South and outside his field of agricultural research. In 1923 the newly founded National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) awarded him its highest honor as the person “of African descent and American citizenship” who had during the year “made the highest achievement in any field of human endeavor.”³² That same year Carver was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Great Britain and received a resolution from the Atlanta chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, thanking him for his good work and wishing him “God-Speed” in his future endeavors.³³

As Carver’s fame spread, so did his name—given to schools, parks, and public buildings. “Eventually it became practically impossible to enter a black community anywhere in America without being reminded of the existence of a man named George Washington Carver.”³⁴

Carver was a much sought after speaker at white and black colleges and church conferences. He became a favorite speaker at YMCA conferences at Blue Ridge, North Carolina. His “Blue Ridge boys” respected and admired Carver; they also liked him. One of Carver’s closest friends, the grandson of a Confederate major, praised Carver for helping him in his professional and personal life. “I think I will write President Roosevelt,” he said, “and ask him to make you Secretary of Inspiration.”³⁵

By 1938 Carver’s health began a slow, steady decline. He carried on his work at Tuskegee and taught his Bible class, which brought standing-room-only crowds every Sunday whenever the old professor was in town. The George Washington Carver Museum at Tuskegee was dedicated on March 11, 1941, with more than two thousand guests attending the inaugural festivities.

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.”³⁶ At 7:30 p.m., on January 5, 1943, he 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.”³⁷

George Washington Carver was buried on the Tuskegee campus, near the chapel. Students, alumni, and friends from far and near came to pay their respects. People across the country praised his lifetime of quiet devotion and his commitment to lifting up “the man farthest down.”³⁸ Most of the people who knew Carver did not consider him merely a symbol—for black pride or for Southern tolerance—but “a re-

markable individual, and some loved him as a fellow human being.”³⁹ Longtime friend Henry Ford said it best in a few words: “Dr. Carver had the brain of a scientist and the heart of a saint.”⁴⁰

Notes

1. William Federer, *George Washington Carver: His Life and Faith in his Own Words* (St. Louis, MO: Amerisearch, 2002), 75.

2. Apparently Carver considered himself a Presbyterian his whole life. See Rackham Holt, *George Washington Carver: An American Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1943), 37. This biography, published the year of Carver’s death, relies on 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.” Gary R. Kremer, *George Washington Carver: A Biography* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 182. This new book is one of the best basic biographies of Carver.

3. Federer, 30.

4. John Perry, *Unshakable Faith: Booker T. Washington & 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.

5. McMurry, 44.

6. Perry, 349.

7. Alvin D. Smith, *George Washington Carver: Man of God* (Middletown, OH: Perry Printing, 1960), 38.

8. McMurry, 128.

9. Perry, 303.

10. Perry, 300.

11. Perry, 309.

12. Perry, 315.

13. Federer, 35. Carver gave various accounts of his conversation with God about the peanut. See Perry, 337–38.

14. Federer, 36.

15. McMurry, 174.

16. Perry, 253.

17. McMurry, 107.

18. McMurry, 281.

19. Federer, 86.

20. Perry, 331.

21. McMurry, 80, 241.

22. John S. Ferrell, *Fruits of Creation: A Look at Global Sustainability as Seen Through the Eyes of George Washington Carver* (Shakopee, MN: Macalester, 1995), 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: 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.

23. McMurry, 208.

24. Federer, 56.

25. Federer, 71–73.

26. Smith, 51.

27. Smith, 39.

28. McMurry, 150.

29. McMurry, 268.

30. McMurry, 285.

31. Shirley Graham and George D. Lipscomb, *Dr. George Washington Carver* (New York: Julian Messner, 1944), v.

32. Perry, 318.

33. Perry, 324.

34. McMurry, 262.

35. McMurry, 284.

36. Federer, 68.

37. McMurry, 302.

38. Perry, 361.

39. McMurry, 283.

40. Smith, 75-76. The year of his death, the Seventy-eighth Congress of the United States created the George Washington Carver National Monument at his birthplace, Diamond Grove, Missouri.

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