

Oral History Interview
Timothy George

EVAN MUSGRAVES: I'm Evan Musgraves. I'm here with Dr. Timothy George. When and where were you born?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: I was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, January 29th, 1950.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: Okay. Who raised you?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: My father was an alcoholic, my mother had polio. Neither one of them were able to care for me or for my sister. I have a sister, two years younger, Linda. She was brought up in a Baptist children's home and I was left to be brought up by two great-aunts on my father's side, who, kind of, loved me and nurtured me through my early years, through at least the first grade, so I was brought up in a section of town that was not very wealthy. It was called Hell's Half acre between 23rd Street and Main Street, if you know Chattanooga and I was brought up in the care of these wonderful great-aunts, neither of whom could read or write, but they encouraged me to go to the library and do all kind of things.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: What was that community like, Hell's Half-acre?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Hell's Half-acre was—this was the 1950's, so it was an integrated community in the 1950s, well before Civil Rights, simply because it's where the poorest people lived, whether they were white or black. So I grew up with African American neighbors, not because we were trying to make a social statement or were uppity liberals, but simply because that's where we could afford to live. So, there was a sense of deprivation, of not having very much. I remember, for example, waiting while people would bring Thanksgiving baskets. You know that tradition? They bring poor people Thanksgiving baskets with turkeys. I remember that. But at the same time, I would have to say it was not terribly unhappy as in my memory, because these were friends, we knew them, we loved them, we played with them, we did a lot of things together. There was a closeness. It seemed odd to say both of those at once, in that it was quite poor, poverty-stricken would probably be the word, and yet there was the sense that we would be, we were part of a community that mattered.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: What was your early religious life like?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Well, my Aunt Mary...I had two great-aunts, Aunt Mary and Aunt Hattie. Aunt Mary took me to a little Baptist church. All the rest of that part of the family were Mormons, for example, her brother, my uncle Willie, was a dyed-in-the-wool Mormon and I learned to be a theologian arguing with him and the Mormon missionaries who tried to convert me when I was quite young, to the Mormon faith. I had to learn all of that stuff; read the bible and argue about the Bible, but Aunt Mary was a Baptist. She'd never become a Mormon and so

she took me to the Boulevard Baptist Church in Chattanooga. That was my early Christian religious training. Our grandmother, also, who was not a part of this, but she lived a little distance from Chattanooga, my father's mother, had a great influence on me and I would spend the summer times with her and visiting her country church, Mount Pisgah Baptist Church, near Ringgold, Georgia. So those were my early days, very rural, even though we were in inner city Chattanooga, the people in that church had all grown up in the country and they still smelled like the country, they worshipped like the country and so it was a little bit of the urban-rural mix.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: What were some of your favorite things to do as a kid?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Read; as soon as I learned how to read, I began to read—there used to be something called the “Book-mobile.” I don't know if we still have those anymore, but in those days, the public library would send out Book-mobiles into different neighborhoods and the children could come and check out a book for a week. Well, I remember one summer, I checked out 50 books and I read them all. They were mostly biography and I guess in a way, that's where my interest in history was born. So reading. I liked to chop wood as a kid, because we needed it, for one thing. It was a chore that needed to be done, because we had a wood stove, a coal-burning wood stove for fire, but also was fun. I guess it was a way of doing a little exercise, not much, but I just loved to chop wood.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: What was your education like from elementary school through high school?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Nonstop. I started the first grade and went straight to the public schools of Chattanooga through the 12th grade. I would just have to say enormously good things about my teachers. Teachers took a special interest in me and encouraged me. It was in one of those classes, I was asked to make a talk—it must have been the 3rd or 4th grade—and discovered I could speak and it was kind of fun. That was about the same time I started preaching, but all that was encouraged by the school system. I had wonderful teachers all the way through. I can hardly remember a bad teacher. I had some great teachers and some teachers I'm still in touch with, actually, now. One of them is 95 this coming summer. She was my music teacher in junior high school, Eloise Litz meant a great deal to me. I could probably name 10 or 12 others who did, so it was not overly structured, but it was, in a way, the two places in my life, I guess, growing up in the kind of environment I did with little, you might say, financial resources, or family, extended family resources, were: one was the church, the other was the school and I guess they still are the two most important non-family institutions of my life.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: Describe your call to ministry. When did you sense that?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: August 6th, 1961. I give you a specific date, because I remember that date. I had gone to church—we were going to a church at that time, not Boulevard, but another church, very Baptist kind of church, but there was something, an organization called the Woman's Missionary Union. Have you heard of it? WMU?

EVAN MUSGRAVES: Mmhmm.

TIMOTHY GEORGE: They still exist, but there not as maybe well-connected in all the churches as they used to be, but in those days, my mother was a part of that and so she brought home a magazine called the *Royal Service* and I remember one night, just reading, I guess it was a devotional or Bible study in the *Royal Service*, based on Romans chapter 10: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel” and so forth and that was the passage that kind of gripped my heart and I felt that that was meant for me, that I was to be the one to go over the hills and the mountains preaching the Gospel. I was called to preach and in the kind of church I grew up in, no one ever told me that you had to go to college or seminary and get ordained and certificated and all that to be a preacher, so I just started preaching and youth Sundays, youth days, I told my pastor, he’d give me opportunities to preach, so that’s how it started.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: What were some of your early preaching experiences like?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Well, I wanted to preach so badly, that sometimes I would preach at recess, that is the little time between class when you’d go out and play, so I would collar students; I used to be a bully, you can hardly tell that by looking at my gentle countenance now, but I’d say, “You’d better come over and listen to me” and I’d actually preach a sermon to the kids on recess. Another thing I did, I would do when I would be chopping wood sometimes, is I would string up bottles along the sill, I’d preach to Coke bottles and stuff like that. Once I had a bird’s funeral, I remember. This was when I was early starting out, but then I graduated to youth revivals. That’s what Baptist people like me did in those days. I was a Baptist preacher boy and I did a lot of youth revivals, all the way through high school. My last senior year in high school, I did 28 youth revivals, so almost every other week, and loved it all. Somehow I managed to graduate, I don’t see how now. I wouldn’t recommend it [laughter].

EVAN MUSGRAVES: So after you graduated high school, where did you go from there?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, which was the University of Chattanooga, in my first year. Then it became part of the state system, as it is now, UTC, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. So, why did I go there? I was offered a scholarship at a couple of Baptist schools: Carson-Newman, Belmont in Nashville and I thought about it, but I needed to be home, to be with my great aunt, my mother. This was a good school. I was highly recommended by people I knew who had come there and I have no regrets, having gone to the state University of Tennessee in Chattanooga. I could’ve done better, had I not been preaching so much and doing so many other things, but I don’t blame the school for that and they did give me a very good foundation for what I would do later on in my academic work.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: From UTC, you went...

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Went to Harvard Divinity School. I was there for seven years. I did a master of divinity and then stayed on for a doctorate theology degree. Why did I go to Harvard? I

don't really know, even now, looking back on it, except that I had some teachers at UTC whom I respected said, "You ought to think about going outside your region, outside your denomination," so I applied to five or six schools: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and so forth and was accepted at most or all of them and then had to decide and so I guess the lure in the name "Harvard" was a part of it, but there are two other reasons, maybe more important. One was the fact that I was a pastor at that time at Fellowship Baptist Church in Chickamauga, Georgia, had been the last two years of college, and so I wrote to what we now call the North American Mission Board. We used to call it the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. I said, "I'm a pastor. I'm thinking about going to Harvard Divinity School for theological studies. Is there anything I can do in mission work up there?" They wrote back and said, "Yes, actually, there's a church that needs a pastor and we would be glad to talk to you about doing this job while you're a student." Well that was just unbelievable. So I did become the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Chelsea, Massachusetts during my first years at Harvard and got \$300 a month from the Home Mission Board, so that was, I thought, an answer to prayer and a confirmation that's where I should go. The other thing, already at that time, I was very interested in studying history and studying the Reformation in particular and there was a book I had read by George Huntston Williams, a great, great historian, church historian, who taught at Harvard. And I said, "Wow, it would be great to study with this man." So I went to Harvard with those two things in mind: one, to be involved in Baptist mission pastoral work, the other was to study with George Williams. As it turned out I did both of them while I was there.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: What was it like being a Southern Baptist at Harvard?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: [Laughter] Well, it wasn't that bad. You know, I fit in somewhere between the Buddhists and the Salvation Army. I mean, Harvard, in those days, did not have a strong ideological caste to it. It was not a seminary in the sense that we think of a confessional community. We were a center for the study of religion and theology and the classical theological disciplines. No one ever made fun of me for being a conservative Baptist at Harvard. Now, you know, I needed to learn quickly to articulate why I believed what I believed and to do that in discussion with other ideas, other students who had different ideas, but that was good for me. I came out of Harvard; I would not say more conservative than when I went, but knowing more clearly why I was a conservative than when I went in, because they allowed that freedom and that breadth there. I had some wonderful teachers at Harvard. They had a great influence on me and still today, I look to them and read their stuff. We had a small group. They weren't just Baptists. I would call them evangelical students at Harvard. Not a big group. five or six or seven of us maybe and we would meet to read the Bible together, to pray together, to have coffee together, as students say now, hang out together. We didn't use that expression back then. It's very common now, "hang out." Hang out together and they were also an important part of my experience there and then of course, also, I was a pastor, so I was preaching every Sunday. I was doing all the things a pastor has to do when the rubber hits the road, real life, death and life issues and that was very important. I learned how to do ministry in stereo. Sort of, the academic

stuff over here, my mind being stretched in all kind of incredible ways and then coming home in the evening on the weekend to kids from the street to people getting divorced to all kinds of drugs and everything else going on. I had to deal with that as a pastor and so I was learning to do ministry while I was studying ministry and that sort of still, I would say, it shapes the way I think ministry should be done.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: After Harvard, you went to Southern.

TIMOTHY GEORGE: I did.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: You went straight to Southern after Harvard.

TIMOTHY GEORGE: I did, yeah.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: What was the climate of Southern when you arrived?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Well, let me say as I was—I didn't go to Harvard to become a teacher. I went to Harvard because I was a pastor. I wanted to be the best trained pastor I could be and I stayed on to do a doctoral degree for the same reason, but in the course of that, you know, I began to think about teaching possibilities and folks came to me and said, "What do you think about teaching here or there?" I was actually in discussion with three different schools about a teaching job during my last couple of years at Harvard. One was a school in Switzerland, where I later taught for a year, Rüslikon. The other was Southeastern Baptist Seminary, that's in North Carolina and the third was Southern. I chose Southern probably for two or three reasons. It was the best known and I think at that time, maybe not the largest, but one of the best libraries and academic reputations anyway and that attracted me. Also, I had met people from Southern who had come to Harvard on sabbatical and we'd become friends and they were cheerleaders for me to come to Southern, as was my friend Bill Leonard, who had graduated from Boston University about four years before I did from Harvard. He was already there. He encouraged me. Then, I think, maybe in addition to all these personal contacts, there was the fact that Southern was willing to hire me, essentially two years before I finished my degree, give me a contract on full salary at Harvard for that last year. So as somebody said, they bought out my contract [laughter]. That's a term they apply with football plays, not theologians, but anyway, they were very generous with me, let me put it that way and so I did go there. I actually joined the faculty in '78 and moved in '79 to Louisville. What was Southern like in those days? I loved being at Southern. I still to this day am in touch with former students. I was there for 10 years, so a big chunk of my life. Both of our children were born in Louisville, they're bluegrass babies. So, great collegiality, it was a great community. I clearly understood myself to be one of the more conservative members of the faculty. That was clear from day one but I didn't feel any particular discrimination or, you know, people maybe thought I was peculiar because I had these certain ideas or one person said, "We haven't had anybody like you around in 100 years." There was that feeling but it was not abrasive or it was not in any way condescending, as I felt it. I had a chance to teach, to preach. I was an interim pastor in a number of churches while I was there. I

look at it now, looking back on it as kind of a golden time in my life in a way. Our children were being born. We were buying our first house, you know. All those things were going on Louisville. Now, toward the end of my time there—I was there for 10 years—toward the end of my time there, it got a little more dicey in terms, as the seminary was drawn more and more and to what was then a raging controversy in the SBC and that just created some tense situations that involved me kind of on a periphery. I was not there in the thick of it, the way some people were, but because these were my friends, these were my students, because I had certain beliefs and expectations, that was not always in jive with sort of the party line, that became a little bit abrasive, I would say, in the last year or two, but that was certainly not a factor in why I left Southern to come to start Beeson. That was not even on the radar. I think I could've stayed at Southern and survived and done well at Southern.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: That was actually my next question. Why leave Southern and come to start Beeson?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: That's almost as hard of a question as why I went to Harvard. In one way it's hard and in one way it's quite easy. First of all, I need to say that I went to Southern. I was there all those 10 years. I never wanted to leave Southern. I never intended to leave Southern. My goal has always been, you go somewhere and you stay there as long as you can, as long as you know you're doing your work and people aren't throwing eggs at you too much. That was the way at Southern. I loved what I was doing. I didn't want to be an administrator. I didn't like deans. I used to say very bad things about deans, which I know now, were spoken in ignorance. If you had looked at the faculty at Southern in those days and you'd seen me, you wouldn't have picked me out as somebody who would become a dean, the founding dean of the new school. Make things run. I'm a scholar, I'm a teacher, I'm a preacher, but one day I got a call out of the blue from the president of Samford University. His name was Tom Corts and Dr. Corts said, "We are thinking about starting a new seminary, a new divinity school, here at Samford University." At that time, there were no such divinity schools on any Baptist related campus. That was just not heard of, but he said, "We've had a gift from a generous donor and he has some ideas and we wondered if you'd come down and talk to us about this position" so I did. I met him, I met Ralph Waldo Beeson, and got a sense of his vision for this school and I prayed about it, went back to Louisville, and they offered me the job. I said that I needed a week to think about it, pray about it. So I went back to Louisville, and I remember the day of decision took place at Cave Hill Cemetery, which is owned, or a portion of it, is owned by the seminary where I used to go with my students and talk about the great heroes of the faith who were buried there. It was a favorite place of mine, so I went there one day, spent the whole day in prayer and essentially two passages of Scripture over and over and over again. One was Psalm 119. It's the longest chapter in the Bible. It has 176 verses. A lot about the word of God, the law of God, the will of God, the precepts of God, and then the other passage was Hebrews 11, the first part. Abraham and Sarah called to go out to a place where they'd never been, went out, not knowing where they were going, and so I think those two passages of Scripture just kind of coalesced in

my sense of calling to Beeson Divinity School. So I have just a definite a sense of being called by God to come here and begin this work as I do of anything else in my life: being converted, being called to preach, and getting married. I'd put getting married way down. That was not nearly as hard a decision [laughter], but, you know, a lot of people thought I was crazy to do such a thing or try to do such a thing, especially those who knew me and knew that I was no good at this sort of thing and knew how difficult it probably would be in the vortex of a denominational crisis controversy to try to start a new theological school, but I kind of caught the vision from Ralph Beeson of the school that would be evangelical, interdenominational, focused on the global Christian movement, and that sounded to me like something I wanted to be involved with and could maybe make a contribution to. So on June 1st, 1988 I drove from Louisville to Birmingham and as they say, the rest is history [laughter].

EVAN MUSGRAVES: So what was the response of the Samford community to founding a divinity school here?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Well, I should say that in the first place, on the response of everybody, Samford and beyond Samford, there was skepticism. On the part of some people, cynicism, but certainly doubts about the wisdom of doing this. I think I'd been here a week or two when all of the six SBC seminary presidents issued a common press release blasting President Corts and me for trying to start a new—something that had never been done before. “Plowing new ground, why are you doing this? We've got our seminary. We don't need you.” So there was a lot of external opposition from all over the quarter. There was also a lot of misunderstanding about what we were doing. Now, you're too young to remember, but back in 1988, everybody took sides in the SBC controversy, so the moderates thought, “Well Timothy George is a conservative. This is an effort to take over another theological school and to play into the hands of the denominational fight from a—it'll be a fundamentalist school.” On the other hand--That's what the moderates thought. On the other hand, the conservatives thought, “This is at Samford University. Nothing good can come out of there,” and so they thought it would be a moderate, liberal reaction to the SBC that I'd left Southern fleeing the conservatives who were taking over, none of which was true and, you know, we had to kind of deal with those misimpressions and did a lot of talking on the phone, visiting people, having coffee with pastors, speaking to pastors' groups, to denominational leaders. “This is who I am. This is what we're trying to do. Pray for us, support us if you can.” Probably did a lot of that for the first several years and I think won enough friends to be able to make a little launch off the rocket pad. Nothing too auspicious. We had 31 students in our first class, but at Samford you ask about—and specifically at Samford—there were people at Samford in those days, who were I would say somewhat polarized in terms of the SBC conflict and I didn't seem to fit into any of their preconceived ideas and this was jarring to them and so we received some criticism from some people on the campus. It was not overwhelming and I will say this. I've been here now, how many years? You probably know more than I do. Since 1988 and in all of my years as being dean I have never felt anything but unstinting support and encouragement from the president and the provost and my fellow deans,

the leaders of the university. Every recommendation I've ever made as the dean of the divinity school has been supported. Now no dean could ask for anything more than that, so I have absolutely no complaints about the support I receive from Samford University to develop this school. There was some static. There was some incoming fire. There was some turbulence, you might say that we had to negotiate, but God helped us and we got through it and looking back on it, I think it made us better.

EVAN MUSGRAVES: Apart from the fact that the money was there to start the seminary, why keep going ahead to start the seminary with so much opposition?

TIMOTHY GEORGE: Because of Psalm 119 and Hebrews 11. It was really because a sense of God's call on my life to do this and the sense of the vision for the school that we needed this kind of place, a place that was not captured by any one denomination, that was evangelical, rock solid conservative in its core, honored the Bible, believed the Bible, and yet could train students in a place where we could learn from one another. Be evangelical, interdenominational. Even though I'm a dyed-in-the-wool Southern Baptist, that's the kind of theologian I am. I'm an evangelical, even a kind of ecumenical theologian, so this was a good place to do that and I didn't find places like that just bursting out all over the place. When you look at the country as a larger places like—in the early days of Fuller, I would say that was a model. Gordon-Conwell, up near Boston is kind of a model. Trinity, near Chicago. There were schools like that that were doing something like this on a different scale in a different context, but in our region of the country and in our kind of world, there was no such thing. So I felt there was a need for this and the fact that somebody criticizes you or doesn't like you, you have to learn to develop a pretty thick skin. Somebody once said to me—I did one of these personality tests. Do you ever take these MVVP—now what are they called? There's another name for them. Anyway, it turned out that I was inner-directed and when I first found that I said, "Wow, that's great. I'm inner-directed. I don't need people telling me how good I am. I don't need people to pat me on the back. I know what I'm doing. I have a sense of calling. I'm just going to do it." But of course, that can cut both ways. Hitler was inner-directed too. I hope I'm not following his model, but I am inner-directed in the sense that I have a sense of calling and a vision and I hope I've learned to be sensitive to what other people think and say and not bull-headed and strong-willed and authoritarian, but I think the fact that I could be criticized and sleep at night, you know, was probably helpful [laughter].