

Southern Baptist summit calls pastors to work against racism

by [Heidi Hall](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

Southern Baptists did not mince words about their racist past during a two-day summit in Nashville devoted to making churches more diverse.

During the first half hour of the conference, the Southern Baptist Convention's top ethics leader acknowledged that the denomination's heritage included preaching family values while splitting up the families of black slaves.

"Our heritage comes to us through a trail of blood, but not all of it is Christ's blood, and some of it cries out from the ground right now," said Russell Moore, president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

He assured the audience that racial hatred would land them in hell.

But fewer than a fifth of the nearly 550 attendees at the Gospel and Racial Reconciliation summit March 26-27 were black—even with powerhouse names such as African-American pastor Tony Evans on the agenda.

This was the second year that the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission held a summit for pastors and other church leaders. Registration drew more than twice last year's number, when the summit focused on sexuality.

Commission officials attributed that jump to a national conversation surrounding the Ferguson protests that followed the shooting death of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown.

Moore said the work of racial reconciliation isn't just for people whose "bedsheets have eyeholes," referring to the Ku Klux Klan. It's for people whose racism finds expression in complex and indirect ways.

"Racial reconciliation is going to take the courage of knowing who you are in Christ," he said, earning a shower of amens and yeses. "We are not the state church of the Confederate States of America."

The Southern Baptist Convention was born in 1845 in a split over its support of slavery, a stance its leadership didn't formally apologize for until 1995.

Still today, of the 50,474 Southern Baptist congregations in North America, only about 20 percent self-identified as predominantly people of color, including 3,502 African-American and 3,229 Latino churches.

Four years ago, the SBC considered a name change to increase opportunities for expansion outside the South. Moore, a Mississippi native, was among those who rejected the idea. He said the denomination doesn't need rebranding; it needs repentance.

The name can be challenging to overcome, admitted Carlos Smith, a black youth pastor from First Baptist Church of Chesterfield, Missouri, who attended Thursday's summit. Start any phrase with "Southern," and some African Americans will stop listening, he said. The only solution is to speak candidly about the denomination's history and move forward with events such as the summit.

"I am thrilled to hear a white man, Russell Moore, stand up and preach the message he just preached," Smith said during a break in the program. "We need some of our white brothers and sisters saying that it isn't just race-baiters and people with a victimized mentality who believe these things. [Racism] is a real problem."

Evans, a well-known speaker among evangelical African Americans, connected modern racial divisions to the biblical account of Jesus overcoming ethnic differences to talk to the Samaritan woman at the well.

He went on to counsel Christians who would let political differences get in the way. "God doesn't ride the backs of donkeys or elephants," Evans said. "Jesus didn't come to take sides. He came to take over."

An afternoon panel explored racial discussions about Ferguson and veered off into abortion as a social justice issue for African Americans.

Robert George, a Princeton law professor and antiabortion activist, tied the Black Lives Matter movement to the abortion debate. George pointed to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showing black women are more likely to have an abortion than white women. —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on April 14, 2015.*