

Attorney in Johnnie Cochran's Firm Is Committed, Outspoken Christian

Jock Smith challenges charismatics to begin honest dialogue about civil rights and religious-liberty issues

Conservatives who defend the public display of the Ten Commandments have found an unexpected ally in longtime Alabama trial attorney Jock Smith. A partner in Johnnie Cochran's law firm, Smith has spent much of his career continuing his late father's civil rights advocacy.

But he says those challenging religious liberty—namely those who opposed the efforts of Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore to post the Ten Commandments on the state's Capitol grounds—have “lost their cotton-pickin’ minds.”

“The Founding Fathers ... instilled a value system that had meaning, had purpose, gave sovereignty to God, separated church from state so that the church would not be swallowed up, gobbled up by bureaucrats in government,” Smith told Charisma. “That's what's happening today.”

Ironically, some of the lawyers and judges who opposed Moore in that case (a federal judge ruled the granite display unconstitutional) are friends of Smith's, people who have helped advance civil rights causes in his state. Though he admits that religious liberty is a significant legal issue facing the church, he believes it should be rivaled by concerns about equal economic and educational opportunities for all Americans.

“I think in order for there to be a fully appreciated, New Testament-integrated church, doors of opportunity [need] to be opened up,” said Smith, who attends Christian Life Center, a multicultural charismatic church in Montgomery, Ala. “And people need to be more tolerant or understanding about how past injustices have affected the opportunity of people, too. I don’t see that.”

Smith became a lawyer to continue the work his father began as a prominent New York civil rights attorney in the 1950s. An up-and-coming African American leader, Jacob Smith was murdered by an irate client in 1957 when his son was 8 years old.

In his memoir, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder*, Smith reveals the “father wound” that almost caused him to fail high school. He enrolled in Tuskegee University with help from a family friend and became involved in the Black Power movement of the 1960s. He went on to graduate from Notre Dame’s law school and has won several multimillion-dollar cases fighting for the underdog.

Considering his background, Smith finds it surprising that he ever would have accepted Christ, who was often cast as a white man’s god, or that he would attend—as he does today—a multiracial church led by a white pastor in the heart of the Deep South. But the Christian witness of his mother and his wife was more than he could take. Jaded by the hypocrisy he had observed among ministers, Smith had a change of heart when an associate minister convinced him that God wanted people to devote their attention to Him, not to men.

That was Jan. 1, 1986, and today Smith is as well-known—publicly and privately—for his Christian commitment as

his flamboyant dress. His pastors, Steve and Denise Vickers, are among his heroes.

However, his courtroom experiences have given him a unique perspective. He says many African Americans doubt white Americans would be fair and just toward blacks without government intervention.

Of the average multicultural congregation, he says: “[The] African American believes the person sitting next to them in a pew is an exception, an aberration, almost a comic strip kind of fantasy character who has somehow gotten through all the blight, and at the end of the walk through the forest has seen the light that racism isn’t right.

“That person has become almost a Howdy Doody character rather than a real flesh-and-blood symbol of a common American. I don’t think [whites] realize the depth of victimization African Americans [feel].”

Smith believes there is a need for honest dialogue among believers, particularly within the Spirit-filled community, where there are many multicultural congregations.

“I want to be educated. ... I don’t want to just go around with opinions that are maybe rough around the edges or don’t seem to be supported by the facts,” Smith says. “I like honest dialogue. ...We all need honest dialogue.”

Smith has what is considered the largest collection of game-worn professional sports uniforms in the world and leads a ministry called Scoring for Life! in which he uses sports analogies to help youth learn Christian principles.

He says his heart is moved by injustice, and he stays busy fighting what he describes as lonely battles for “the least of these.” In one way or another, he believes it’s a war all Christians should be engaged in.

“If [Christians] are going to be the leaders we’re supposed to be ... we’re going to have to get a handle on these issues—and be the leaders with regard to changing the way people act and the way people think about these issues.”

Adrienne S. Gaines