

"SINGING AS I GO:" AN EXPLORATION OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCHES'  
REACTION OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

LOGAN BRIDGES EDWARDS

(Under the Direction of Sandy Martin)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the response of white southern Baptists during the Civil Rights movement. It seeks to explain why white Baptists, specifically members of the Southern Baptist Convention, did not get involved issues of racial injustice. After demonstrating that southern religion and southern culture have a long history of symbiosis, the paper turns to the SBC. The SBC was founded as a regional response to perceived abolitionist leanings on the part of northern Baptists. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the SBC maintained a biblical defense of slavery and a strict allegiance to the Lost Cause. Following WWII, however, cracks began to emerge in the denomination's commitment to white supremacy. As evidenced by the case study of Tattnell Square Baptist Church, liberal ministers often found their hands tied by congregants who believed the church's mission was to convert souls, not challenge the standing social order.

INDEX WORDS: Southern Baptist Convention, Civil Rights Movement, Southern religion, Tattnell Square, Sam Oni, Thomas Holmes

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to first to my family and friends who kept me motivated and moving forward. Without out your help I never would have made it this far.

I would also like to dedicate this work to all those who continue to stand tall in the face of bigotry and in injustice.

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## INTRODUCTION

On April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in which he expressed disappointment with the white church that too often “remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows” while injustices took place outside.<sup>1</sup> Like many others over the course of southern history, King searched for tangible proof of the white south’s commitment to Christian ideals. From slavery, to racial violence following Reconstruction, and the entrenchment of segregationists during the Civil Rights era, religious white southerners both ignored and perpetuated racial injustice with clean consciences, often under the sanction of the local church. Surprisingly, few have bothered to ask why this was the case. The lack of attention does not stem from want of scholars of southern religion. Since the 1960s, the field has grown significantly, and there are now more historians looking at southern religion and culture than ever before. The failure to look at white churches cannot be attributed to the need for research options either. Church records are abundant, as are denominational publications, newspaper reports, and eyewitnesses.

It is impossible to account for all the reasons scholars may be overlooking the white Christians’ responses to the integration battle, but it seems that there are

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan S. Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 251.



at least two major issues at work. The first comes from the mystique of The South. In some ways, the study of the religious and cultural history of the American South is hindered by the very aspects of the region's peculiar past that attract scholars to it in the first place. The South is not unique in having dealt with slavery, the violence of the Civil War, and the struggle of African-Americans to find acceptance and equality within society, but such issues loom larger in the history of the area than in that of the nation as a whole and attract the bulk of scholarship. The vast majority of southern research focuses on the antebellum society of the nineteenth century and its demise following the war years and Reconstruction. The story is dramatic and given its influence on the Southern character, certainly worthy of attention, but it should not be told to the exclusion of other aspects of Southern history. Likewise, the history of the twentieth century often focuses on the fight of African-Americans against Jim Crow. It has all the components that interest historians: heroic martyrs, visible villains and sweeping change when good triumphs over evil. The problem with such a view is that it fails to take into account the silent majority of southern whites, people who undoubtedly believed in segregation, but who did not agree with the radical methods taken by flamboyant men dressed in hoods or those who stood in schoolhouse doors holding shotguns.

The second issue facing scholars who may be interested in the white side of segregation is that, in a post-Civil Rights, politically correct atmosphere, it is difficult to write about the perpetrators of injustice as moral, reasonable people. It is easier

to deal with the fanatics than the moderates because it is simpler to peg the fanatics as bad guys. The judgment is clean, uncomplicated. It becomes more muddled when the villains of the piece become real people who, despite their faults, honestly believed they were in the right. The last thing a scholar wants to do is suggest that regular white Southerners were innocent or that they were justified in their silent acceptance of segregation. However, they must be treated fairly and warrant a determined effort to understand their reasoning, no matter how abhorrent it is to modern sensibilities. To do otherwise ignores latent racism that may continue to exist and offers no suggestions for future advancements.

While there has been little direct attention paid to how white southerners dealt with race during the Civil Rights Era, the groundwork has been laid by many Southern historians. Anybody writing about the South, whether its history, culture, or religion, has to deal with race. From a religious standpoint, nobody provided as comprehensive a view of the Southern church's inattention to race as Samuel S. Hill. Hill is best known for his *Southern Churches in Crisis*, first published in 1967 and later revised and updated for republishing in 1999. In the book, Hill focuses on the "Baptist-Methodist syndrome" that dominated southern religious thought in the first half of the twentieth century. According to Hill, southern Christianity was essentially a homogenous blending of Baptist and Methodist evangelical teachings, focused primarily on the moment of conversion. Southern religion's fixation on the moment of salvation left it ill-equipped to deal with social issues. In addition to this concentration, Hill argues that because the South was isolated from the national mainstream, the churches developed an intense identification with all aspects of

southern culture, including segregation, essentially robbing them of their ability to criticize southern society.<sup>2</sup> His observations of Southern Religion and the prominence of the Baptist and Methodist in the region are astute and have certainly stood the test of time, but Hill does not go into detail about how the churches and the culture became so entwined to begin with. If, as he contends, Southern churches never developed a Christian social ethic because they were focused solely on saving souls, one has to question seriously the churches' role in the growth and entrenchment of Lost Cause theology.

Following in the footsteps of Samuel Hill, John Eighmy's *Churches in Cultural Captivity* focuses on the social attitudes of the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>3</sup> Like Hill, Eighmy writes that the southern denomination upheld the conventions of the social order instead of critiquing them. He differs from Hill in his explanation for the phenomenon, however. According to Eighmy, the root cause of the denomination's silence on social issues stems from its lack of a hierarchical leadership, not an eschatological fixation. Because the SBC is governed by consensus, it is a reflection of the people who make up its body and is less likely to be led by a small group of liberal elites. There was, therefore, no real way to combat congregational attitudes. Eighmy believed the entrenched stances of the people in the pew should not be confused with a lack of social concern. He states that after WWII, the SBC placed more emphasis on their role in building a Christian society with the establishment of the Social Service Commission (later the Christian Life Commission), but that they

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel S. Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>3</sup> John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1972).

had a long row to hoe, making any efforts to address social issues seem paltry and superficial.

More recently, the task of explaining religion and race in the South has fallen to Paul Harvey, who has taken up the mantle admirably in *Redeeming the South and Freedom's Coming*.<sup>4</sup> In *Redeeming the South*, Harvey provides a comparative history of black and white Baptists, highlighting the differences between them and how the development of each was highly influenced by the presence of the other. Harvey tends to be heavy-handed in his treatment of the contradictions found within the SBC regarding race, but his insistence that scholars of southern religion move past the conversion experience to take a more integrated look at southern religion and culture is helpful. He posits that while the white religion of the region may be culturally captive, one can just as easily claim the culture is a captive of the church, a theory that holds resonance but is never fully developed.

In *Freedom's Coming*, Harvey returns to illustrating the captivity of the church, though his presentation of the region shows Christian devotion to segregation was not as monolithic as it has often been presented. Within the work, Harvey focuses on the interaction between southern whites and blacks during periods of social change – Reconstruction, Populism, and the growth of progressivism in the twentieth century. In the course of the study, Harvey describes an arc of racial cooperation along religious lines, beginning with theological racism and the justification of segregation, moving toward religious interchange as black

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

and white religious cultures encountered and borrowed from one another, and culminating with brief moments of Christian interracialism. As in the case of *Redeeming the South*, the biggest contribution of the book lies in its equal treatment of both black and white southern religion. His look at how the two religions coexisted offers readers a more developed, balanced way of looking at southern religion than has been demonstrated by many scholars.

The study of religion can be tricky business. Religion is rooted in history, but it is also deeply reliant on the culture and people to which it belongs. It becomes necessary then, to incorporate the research of people from different fields in order to gain as holistic a view of what was going on as possible. The study of southern religion has benefitted from several such scholars in the last several decades. Perhaps one of the most influential has been Charles Reagan Wilson, whose *Baptized in Blood* provides a comprehensive history of the development of Lost Cause theology.<sup>5</sup> Wilson takes both a sociological and anthropological approach to religion to argue that, after the Civil War, the leading clergy developed the Lost Cause Mythology as a way of proving that the struggle of the South had not been in vain. Ministers recast the South as a Redeemer Nation, fighting for moral reasons. Over time, Lost Cause ideology developed into a Southern “civil religion” that influenced white Southern behavior for at least the next six decades. Wilson’s evidence that Southern ministers used Christianity to give the region’s history a purpose is impressive and provides a useful starting point to begin unraveling the

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980).

influences that impacted the response of southern whites to the Civil Rights Movement.

Seven years after Wilson published *Baptized in Blood*, Andrew Manis put forth *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict*.<sup>6</sup> Manis, Like Harvey, divides his time between the black and white population, in this case focusing on the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention. Manis reveals how both groups used the authority of God and the Constitution to justify differing views of race, sometimes using the exact same passages with different interpretations. One of the most interesting discussions in the book revolves around the white view of desegregation as a symbol that America would never fulfill its role as a Christian nation, meaning it would never reach its white, homogenous, protestant, ideal. Whites who held this view were simultaneously loyal to the nation and the regional culture. Manis may take extreme views more commonly held among members of Citizens Councils and apply them to the whole of white society, but his observations, when used with Wilson's, provide a handy tool to begin looking at the thought process of white Christians facing the end of segregation.

If there is one work that can be seen as a guiding influence for this thesis, it is Jason Sokol's *There Goes My Everything*, a book that actually has very little to do with religion.<sup>7</sup> Sokol's starting premise is the same one taken here: most southern whites did not wear hoods or walk with civil rights activists, they were moderates who often held conflicting views on integration. The book works best when it lets white

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Manis, *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict: Black and White Baptists and Civil Rights, 1947-1957* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2006).

southerners speak for themselves, both through interviews and historical records. It provides an example of the wealth of material that is available to those interested in trying to understand how the Civil Rights Movement challenged and ultimately changed white society. Sokol does touch upon religion, but only briefly. His main interest is in showing that there was not one stock response of southern whites to integration. The book opens the door to new research questions, however, and holds the promise of becoming an important lynchpin for future work in southern history.

“Singing as I Go” is intended to pick up where scholars like Hill and Sokol have left off, going further back to explain the development of the religious-cultural symbiosis in the case of the former and filling in the religious components of the later. To begin, it is important to trace how religion became engrained in southern culture. Many characteristics of southern religion that dictated how white churches would react to the Civil Rights Movement found their origin in the rise of Evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century. As the Second Great Awakening swept through the South, it introduced an emotionally-based Christianity that focused on the eternal rewards in the here-after. Many of the new Baptist and Methodist converts lived on the periphery of society and found in the new religious rhetoric an escape and a equality that they had little hope of achieving within southern society. The eschatological orientation of the evangelical groups also impacted their relationship with the southern culture. The duty of the Evangelicals was to save souls, even if it meant aligning themselves with southern culture, as evidenced by the rise of Lost Cause theology. As time progressed, the churches and

the culture became so entangled that the church lost any capacity it may have once had to criticize the culture in which it was a part.

After establishing how southern religion is intertwined with southern culture, the paper turns its attention to one of the dominant branches of southern religion – the Southern Baptist Convention. Since its inception, the SBC has served as the “folk-religion” of the South and been more closely tied to the culture than the ecumenically driven denominations. Chapter two explores the founding of the SBC and shows that a defense of slavery was at the heart of the denomination’s inception. The Conventions founders were unapologetic about their commitment to slavery and proffered biblical proof that institutional slavery was not a sin. Their arguments that God was on the side of the Southern Christian are important because they set the stage for the events of the twentieth century and act as a point of comparison. When faced with a radical shift in racial standings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baptists decided to fight back, removing themselves from the parent organization and using the Bible to buttress their convictions. During the period of the Civil Rights movement, the actions of the Southern Baptists reveal a much less cohesive response to outside pressures.

In the final chapter, Tattnell Square Baptist Church in Macon, Georgia is used as a case study to explore the different reactions within a single congregation to integration. A problem when discussing religion is differentiating between the denomination as a whole and individual actors. By limiting one’s focus to an individual church, one can see how each was affected by the changes within society. As an examination of Tattnell Square reveals, the denomination faced an internal



struggle between liberal ministers and members of the congregation. Within the SBC, the local church is the only real authority and ministers pastor by the approval of the church members. Many times, this allowed segregationists to silence those who might preach about the need to integrate. The events surrounding Tattnell Square show, however, that the segregationists could not provide a unified front against the encroachment of new social ideas. Gone were their biblical defenses for white supremacy, replaced with a moral outrage that had no real center of support. Congregations split over the right for all Christians to sit in the house of the Lord. By the 1960s there was little direct interaction with the Civil Rights Movement on the part of Southern Baptists, but it appears at least some hearts were beginning to change.

## CHAPTER 1

### “IN THE SWEET BY AND BY”: TIES BETWEEN WHITE RELIGION AND CULTURE

While many have claimed the South is “Christ haunted,” such was not always the case. From the perspective of the eighteenth-century American landscape, no indicators pointed to a future in which religion would dominate southern culture; religion was the concern of New England. At the beginning of the nineteenth century however, the Second Great Awakening hit the South, forever changing the region. Evangelicalism swept through like a fire, leaving its mark on the people and the culture. But why? Scholars have analyzed and prodded, seeking to explain why so many responded to the Evangelical message. While dissenting arguments abound, scholars overwhelmingly cite the frontier conditions, widespread poverty, and strict social hierarchy to explain the Evangelical phenomenon. Interestingly, few examine how the same variables affected the region’s Lost Cause theology to help explain why southern culture and religion intertwine so intimately. Despite widespread urbanization and economic and social development, the South of the new millennium is not far removed from the South of 1800. Historical memory, only semi-forgotten, continues to reside beneath Southern progress and remains a strong shaper of southern religious consciousness.

The connection between religion and southern culture is distinct in the United States and has long been a matter of interest to scholars who seek to answer, “Which is dominant – the religion or the culture in which it resides?” For decades,

the easy answer was culture. When southern society failed to uphold Christian ideals of brotherhood, it was because southern norms held the church captive. Southern Christianity did not fail; it simply did not have the power to break through the restraints created by the prevailing ideology. More recent scholarship, however, expands the premise of a bound church. Charles Reagan Wilson states, “It should now be (and is) historical orthodoxy to assert that the Southern churches were culturally captive. By focusing on this related but still separate issue of the role of religion and history in Southern culture, one can see that the churches exploited the secular as well. The culture was a captive of the churches.”<sup>8</sup>

Evidence certainly supports Wilson’s claim. Throughout the modern South, one can find dry counties, Sunday liquor laws, public nativity scenes at Christmas, and prayer before civic functions. The pervasiveness of religious symbolism found throughout the region is a remnant of nineteenth-century southern pietism. Though Evangelicalism moved into the southern religious scene a mere seventy years before, by 1860 a “religious culture had been established, wherein a religious outlook and tone permeated society. At a time when Northern religion was becoming increasingly diverse, the southern denominations remained orthodox in theology and evangelical orientation.”<sup>9</sup> This orthodoxy remained unshaken through the decades, leading Samuel S. Hill, perhaps the foremost scholar on southern religion, to declare in 1966 that “southern life is everywhere self-consciously

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<sup>8</sup> Wilson, *Baptized in the Blood*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

biblical.”<sup>10</sup> While minority religious groups were always found in the South, Evangelicalism saturated the region, dictating its ideology and shaping its history.

### Rise of Evangelicalism

The South is not simply Bible-oriented; more accurately, it derives from an Evangelical interpretation of the Bible and Christianity. Dominating southern religion is the question of salvation – “What must I do to be saved?” For Hill, “each part of the question reveals something of over-all meaning to southern Protestants: the note of urgency by the use of ‘must,’ the stress on personal decision and action as captured by ‘I do,’ and the particular way in which the human plight is posed by the [use] of the word ‘saved.’”<sup>11</sup> Evangelicalism offered a simple answer. Southern Christian theology flowed from a problem-solution reasoning, and manifested a belief system in which Christ became the easy answer to religious questions. It did not rely on elaborate ritual or even concise doctrine, but on the emotionally based knowledge that one was fully accepted into the fold of God’s children.

Evangelicalism originated as a turn away from the theological naturalism of Great Britain and British America in the eighteenth-century towards a “radical supernaturalism” and became one of the guiding factors of southern culture during the nineteenth-century.<sup>12</sup> Revivalist preachers introduced Evangelical teaching to the South during the Second Great Awakening. Compared to the earlier Awakening, the religious resurgence represented a shift from a highly symbolic and liturgical

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<sup>10</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches*, 90.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Donald G. Mathews, “Evangelicalism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, 2<sup>nd</sup>, ed. Samuel S. Hill and Charles H. Lippy (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), 306.

European style of Christianity to a fundamentally American mode of expression. This transition brought with it a “Common Sense Realism,” encouraging people to interpret the Bible and personal experience on their own and a democratic sense of achieving personal religion through conversion.<sup>13</sup> In the South, the importance of having a choice in religious matters also manifested in a strong push for congregational power, especially among the Baptists. Southern culture strongly identified with America’s belief in self-determination, and the “emphasis upon human agency in the salvation process – individuals could choose their spiritual destinies rather than relying on the caprices of a distant God – held enormous appeal.”<sup>14</sup>

#### Frontier Influences on Evangelicalism

Southerners emphasized the individual’s independence and autonomy in part because of the crucial need to be self-reliant when living in the backcountry. While the antebellum South had pockets of urbanization along its coast, the history of the South “throughout a very great part of the period from the opening of the nineteenth century to the Civil War is mainly the history of the roll of frontier upon frontier – and on the frontier beyond.”<sup>15</sup> Popular history has inundated America with images of the antebellum South, images in which wealthy planters overlooked expansive tracts of land where field slaves toiled. While great plantations certainly

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy Koester, *The History of Christianity in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 53-4.

<sup>14</sup> Randall Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 9.

<sup>15</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 4.

existed, the vast majority of southern whites were yeoman farmers who spent a great deal of time working the land with their own hands. Sometimes referred to as “plain-folk,” yeoman farmers “engaged primarily in subsistence farming and thus were marginal to the major political, economic, and social considerations of the antebellum South” whose economy centered on the exportation of plantation agriculture. Life on the frontier was difficult for this group of southerners, as attested by high mortality rates and the precariousness of a local economy built on agriculture. Their primary concern was physical and financial survival, both of which depended on the ability of the individual to conquer his environment. The personal accountability required to make a living on the frontier led many southerners to think of themselves as “strong and reliant, the equal of any man, and in full control of [their] own destiny.”<sup>16</sup>

Evangelicalism offered frontier southerners something more than just a sense of control. The camp meetings of evangelical groups, especially the Methodists, gave southerners a much-needed opportunity for social interaction. Compared to other parts of the country, the South’s was “a lonelier frontier, settled by individuals, not by groups, composed of scattered clearings in the forest, not of compact villages and towns.”<sup>17</sup> Poor transportation routes and sparsely populated regions meant little opportunity for social interaction for most farmers. What interaction occurred often originated in the need for communal cooperation in getting work done. Corn shuckings, quilting bees, and barn raisings may have taken

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<sup>16</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 25.

<sup>17</sup> James McBride Dabbs, *Haunted by God: The Cultural and Religious Experience of the South* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972), 193.

on festive atmospheres, but, at the end of the day, all functioned primarily as a way to get a job done. In contrast to the established forms of public gathering, camp meetings allowed people in a wide territory to come together for a social activity not centered around the need to work.<sup>18</sup> Most who first attended camp meetings were only partially interested in seeking a religious experience. The appeal of entertainment and, perhaps, a sense of curiosity attracted them, but “the loneliness of existence in the agricultural South, the human yearning for a better life after death, the excitement of the crowd at a Sunday meeting and the suave persuasion of evangelicalism was a combination that rarely failed to produce an abundance of emotional and physical ecstasy.”<sup>19</sup> This ecstasy was the basis of the conversion experience, welcoming new Christians to enter a world-order founded on heavenly teachings that guaranteed their equality and acceptance.

### Evangelicalism, Poverty, and the Social Hierarchy

Scholars of southern culture are quick to point out the significant role African-Americans played in the development of white southern identity, asserting that despite class differences, white southerners felt a commonality among themselves. No matter how low a poor white was on the social scale, he was not black and, therefore, merited a certain amount of respect. Though true, this observation does not negate the fact that southerners placed great emphasis on social status; “everybody in the South was aware of, and habitually thought and

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce, *And The All Sang Hallelujah*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Erskine Caldwell, *Deep South: Memory and Observation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 165.

spoke in terms of, a division of society into Big and Little Men, with strict reference to property, power, and the claim to gentility.”<sup>20</sup> For all that a plantation owner might speak courteously to a yeoman farmer in town, he was unlikely to invite the farmer home to dine with him. Southern plain-folk lived at the margin of society. They had neither the economic nor political power to garner much respect in a society geared toward and fiercely protected by the planters, creating resentment among poor whites towards members of the elite. Few attempts manifested to uproot the existing social order, however. While the southern planters often maintained airs of old-money and used family ties and marriage to keep money within tight social circles, some planters emerged from the lower classes.

Everybody knew of a man like Cash’s “stout young Irishman” who began as an immigrant farmer with a small tract of land and rose to own two thousand acres and a hundred and fourteen slaves.<sup>21</sup> The idea that a man could rise to a position above his own had a major impact on southern culture in two ways. The first, as described by historian Dickson Bruce, was that “the plain-folk were devoted to the Southern way of life...their failure to challenge the plantation system may... have stemmed from their belief that, given enough breaks and with a lot of hard work, they too could rise into the elite.”<sup>22</sup> Even while resenting their stranglehold on the southern power structure, yeoman farmers admired and aspired to the ranks of the planters. They were thus loath to embrace any ideology not rooted in the southern

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<sup>20</sup> Cash, *Mind of the South*, 34-5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-17.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce, *And They All Sang Hallelujah*, 22.



experience, creating an early need for Evangelicals to tie themselves to the regional landscape.

The idea of social improvement also had a profound impact on southern consciousness, making it receptive to evangelical teachings of brotherhood. Where a belief that hard work and a little luck will allow one to improve his condition, there exists the inevitable question: “Why have I not succeeded?” With the hope of a better life comes a feeling of quiet desperation. The natural assumption is that the successful are more worthy of their good fortune, leading to questions of the individual’s value. Evangelicalism presented southerners an alternate interpretation of personal worth not connected to social wealth or position. The new order focused on piety and moral righteousness, and while “all men and women were not equal in the Evangelical view of the world...they could be made equal through rejecting conventional canons and accepting Evangelicalism.”<sup>23</sup>

Evangelicalism was available to all, but only those strong enough to pick up the mantle and have a conversion experience could enter into the fold of God.

Evangelical preachers appealed

to their audience’s sense of grief at who they were and their hope in whom they could become [dismissing] traditional invidious distinctions that enslaved the old self. The offer of a new self (perhaps the real me) could encourage African slaves, white women, and troubled men to participate in worship that resonated with their own needs and imaginations (and cultural baggage) and compensated for their sense of despair, powerlessness, and damaged self-consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Donald G Mathews, “Lynching Religion: Why the Old Man Shouted ‘Glory!’,” in *Southern Crossroads: Perspectives on Religion and Culture*, ed. Walter H. Conser Jr. and Rodger M. Payne (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 336.

One's position in the heavenly realm, not on ephemeral classifications, signified worth. Given this understanding, "it was inevitable in a region where it was an economic necessity to resort to primitive barter and swap that an ... evangelistic Protestantism would make hard-core religion a product eagerly sought by the impoverished and unenlightened Southerners of Anglo-Saxon decent who had become imprisoned there."<sup>25</sup> In a culture beleaguered with the disenfranchised, many leapt to be counted among those whose true selves God saw and appreciated.

With a new way of validating themselves, southern Evangelicals found themselves at distinct odds with the established Episcopal church that resented "the effrontery of people who, at least according to the aristocracy, pretended to be better than they actually were in social as well as in moral terms."<sup>26</sup> Evangelicalism was the religion of the lower class. The Episcopal Church strictly adhered to the old way of doing things. Social stratifications remained visible within the church hierarchy, and the congregation did not give itself over to excessive bouts of emotionalism. The comparatively stale faith of the established church held little appeal to yeoman farmers who already had "a disdain for formal institutions. To the plain-folk, the frontier stood for personal freedom and a life unfettered by the artificial restraints of 'civilization.'"<sup>27</sup> W.J. Cash's observation about the religious needs of the southerner is astute and bears repeating in length. According to Cash the southerner required:

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<sup>25</sup> Caldwell, *Deep South*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, *And They All Sang Hallelujah*, 31.

a faith as simple and emotional as himself. A faith to draw men together in hordes, to terrify them with Apocalyptic rhetoric, to cast them into the pit, rescue them, and at last bring them shouting into the fold of Grace. A faith, not of liturgy and prayer book, but of primitive frenzy and the blood sacrifice – often of fits and jerks and barks. The God demanded was an anthropomorphic God – the Jehovah of the Old Testament: a God who might be seen, a God who had been seen. A passionate, whimsical tyrant, to be trembled before, but whose favor was the sweeter for that. A personal God, a God for the individual, a God whose representatives were not silken priests but preachers risen from the people themselves.<sup>28</sup>

Evangelicalism began as a fringe movement among those already on the periphery of society, but by the eve of the Civil war, evangelical Christianity pervaded the region, instilling an orthodox theology and religious outlook in southern culture.

#### Rise of Lost Cause Theology

The period between the Second Great Awakening and the Civil War brought significant change to the South. With the advent of the Whitney's cotton gin in 1793, cotton became much more profitable and larger plantations began to spring up in the southern interior. The move of plantations away from the coast pushed yeoman farmers further into the wilderness. Simultaneously, cotton and lumber mills began to crop up throughout the Piedmont region. However, increasing tensions between northern abolitionists and southern slaveholders heralded trouble. Non slave-holding southerners began to resent northern attitudes; according to historian David Goldfield, "what galled [these] southerners was not their difference from the North but that northerners refused to accept them as equal moral, political, and

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<sup>28</sup> Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 56.

economic partners in the American enterprise.”<sup>29</sup> Tensions extended into the religious realm, with each of the region’s major denominations creating a separate southern entity and withdrawing from national organizations. The shift to a regionalized religion indicated a profound merging of evangelical religion and southern culture. Driven by the biblical call to convert lost souls, southern churches blended “increasingly well with the general culture, imperceptibly espousing regional attitudes and beliefs which had little or no direct relation to the objective message which they hailed as their standard.”<sup>30</sup> Nothing trumped the church’s duty to the unsaved. Evangelical ministers removed as many obstacles as possible that separated individuals immersed in southern culture from entering the fold until the church’s identity began to mirror that of the wider population.

The first shots of the Civil War fired at Fort Sumter in April 1861 forever changed southern religion. Beginning in the 1850s Southern leaders started thinking in terms of European ideas of cultural nationalism, leading to a “longing of a homogenous people for national and political existence...Southern religious leaders were not among the major formulators of the dream of Southern nationalism, but they had done their part in creating the conditions for it by encouraging the growth of sectional churches” implying a tacit agreement that the South was not like the rest of the country.<sup>31</sup> As Confederate troops marched north to defend their homeland, Evangelical ministers in the South supported the war with religious diatribes against northern morals and values. The South was cast as

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<sup>29</sup> David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 16.

<sup>30</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, *Baptized in the Blood*, 3.

the defender of justice and Christendom. Evangelical ministers taught that God would use the South as a mighty sword to chastise the North for its infidelity. The South “was peculiarly Christian; probably, indeed, it was the last great bulwark of Christianity...the God of the Yankee was not God at all but Antichrist loosed at last from the pit. The coming war would be no mere secular contest but Armageddon, with the South standing in the role of the defender of the ark, its people as the Chosen People.”<sup>32</sup> The South tolerated no notion that it could not, and would not, win the War Between the States. God was on its side.

The Confederate surrender at Appomattox presented white southern Evangelicals with serious theological problems. Throughout the war, Southern clerics preached that the southern cause was holy, interpreting victories as signs of God’s blessing and defeats as punishment for transgressions. The South’s loss transcended military terms and took on dark philosophical overtones. W. Fitzhugh Brundage states, “For many southern whites, the Civil War had broken the ribbon of time, severing the present from preceding eras. The predominant postwar white memory dwelled on loss – of battles, loved ones, a way of life, prestige, and power. When white southerners scrutinized the past, they found irrefutable evidence of their victimization.”<sup>33</sup> Brundage fails to acknowledge perhaps the biggest loss of all, however – God’s favor. The Union’s victory forced many who saw Confederate soldiers as Christian crusaders into a bleak religious crisis. Presbyterian Robert Mallard wrote in a letter,

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 100.

I know [what God] does is and must be right but when I see a cruel and wicked foe prospering and penetrating farther and farther into the very vitals of our country and when the prayers of God's people seem utterly fruitless in arresting them, I am perplexed and were I to listen to the Tempster, I would be disposed to question the utility of prayer for at least for this object.<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, In May 1865, Moses Hoge, a Presbyterian minister from Virginia wrote to his sister that "God's dark providence enwraps me like a pall," leaving him feeling "like a shipwrecked mariner thrown up like a seaweed on a desert shore."<sup>35</sup> The righteous cause of the South had failed, leaving many to question their new role in the nation. As John Jones, son of Charles Colcock Jones, wrote, "However we may be able to prove the wickedness of our enemies, we must acknowledge that the providence of God has decided against us in the tremendous struggle we have just made for property rights and country. The hand of the Lord is upon us!"<sup>36</sup>

### Lost Cause Theology and the Social Hierarchy

The Confederate defeat brought the rise of a new social order and with it a new religious viewpoint. Prior to the Civil War, southern society was highly and visibly stratified. A persistent wariness of those who belonged to a different class existed beneath most polite conversation. The war united white southerners of all social distinctions; Appomattox did not destroy that sense of commonality. During Reconstruction, these southerners developed a minority psychology that allowed them to cast themselves as victims singled out of the American society and the

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<sup>34</sup> Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 444.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, *Baptized in the Blood*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Clarke, *Dwelling Place*, 444.

objects of collective discrimination.<sup>37</sup> The importance of working together to withstand northern cultural encroachment meant those who remained loyal to the Confederacy could find a support and camaraderie that crossed social lines. Moreover, those who suffered for the southern cause merited deference. The poorest Confederate veteran outranked middleclass northern carpetbaggers or, worse, planter scalawags.

Ministers, fearing that northern carpetbaggers would turn hard-won southern Christians from their chosen path, began to preach that defeat was part of God's plan for the South. Southerners chose to interpret the military failure as a vehicle for future victory. They accepted the verdict of the war, but not cultural defeat. Southern religion "inspired white southerners to endure as a testament to their heroic past. From the nation's least-churched region, the South became, after the war, the most church-going part of the Union. Evangelical Protestantism flourished as never before...Religion and history merged; history – the Old South, the war, and the war's Redemption – ratified faith; and faith sanctified history."<sup>38</sup> Tempered by the fire of war, the South would rise again to make America a truly Christian nation and re-instill biblical ethics and morals in society. The future emergence of the South depended, however, on the survival of southern distinctiveness. The Christian Index, a Baptist newspaper published in Macon, Georgia, stated in March 1866, "The victory over Southern arms is to be followed by

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<sup>37</sup> Lewis M. Killian, *White Southerners*, revised (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 29.

a victory over Southern opinions.”<sup>39</sup> Ministers feared the Confederate loss might destroy southern identity and so reasserted its validity at every turn. Besides promoting the societal obligation to join sectional churches, preachers celebrated “the Southern Way of Life. By affirming the tenets of the Southern creed and evoking the memory of past sacrifices, Southerners could be made to realize their place in a distinctive culture and to understand the need for their continued commitment to it.”<sup>40</sup> Southern religious institutions became the bastion of southern culture.

In an effort to provide examples of what God desired from a true southern Christian, the South’s religious leaders promoted the idea that Confederate heroes were holy and virtuous. Men like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson were praised not for their military prowess, but character and commitment to the Christian ideal. The Methodist hymn “Let Us Pass Over the River” was written using Jackson’s last words: “Let us pass over the river and rest under the shade of the trees.”<sup>41</sup> St. Paul’s Church in Richmond, Virginia, replaced their old windows with stained-glass that portrayed the Confederate history in terms of Old Testament stories. Southern history became a matter of faith as “the civil religion and Christianity openly supported each other. To southern preachers, the Lost Cause was useful in keeping Southerners a Christian people; in turn, Christianity would support the values of society.”<sup>42</sup> Religious groups founded schools such as Vanderbilt and Emory to instruct future generations on Christian and Southern ideals. The confusion of a

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<sup>39</sup> Wilson, *Baptized in the Blood*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, *Baptized in the Blood*, 33.



little girl illustrates the blending of history and faith. Her uncle, Father Joseph Ryan, sometimes called the “Poet-priest of the Confederacy,” stood in front of a painting of the crucifixion and asked her if she knew who the evil men were who killed Jesus. She instantly replied “O Yes, I know...the Yankees.”<sup>43</sup>

The southern hierarchy during Reconstruction did not depend solely on one’s loyalty to the Lost Cause. Caught up in Lost Cause theology was the idea that God would only redeem the South if it proved itself worthy and faithful to biblical teachings. Preachers focused on the importance of living a moral life. God would judge the South on how its people lived their personal lives. Emphasis shifted from a need for personal morality to a communal morality. The lesson of the early nineteenth century that true worth rested in one’s adherence to Christian faith broadened to encompass society as a whole. White southerners, whatever their social background, earned respect through outward displays of piety and sacrifice. The poor grandmother who toiled in the garden during the day and read her Bible by the fire at night outranked the planter’s son who caroused through life. Interestingly, according to James McBride Dabbs, “morality is found among the poor and deprived, especially among the poor and deprived whites,” the very people who felt the most resentment for being ignored by the planter class prior to the Civil War.

Evidence that poor whites gravitated toward replacing class with morality abounded in areas in which teachings on personal morality were most prominent: the Piedmont and Appalachians versus the coastal plain – the old farm areas rather

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<sup>43</sup> Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 54.

than the plantation areas.<sup>44</sup> Those who desired respect the most became the strictest adherents to the South's religious moral code. Their desire to be part of the southern family, related to more important Southerners by ties of cultural kinship, kept them striving towards the South's eventual redemption. Methodist Bishop Warren Candler claimed, "The blood of our slain on a thousand fields is the cement which holds the living together in bonds too dear to be easily forgotten or heedlessly broken...Should [the Christian South] ever cease to be Christian, or become less Christian than it is, the effect upon our entire nation would be disastrous beyond the power of thought to conceive."<sup>45</sup> As with dreams of a Confederate victory, southerners knew without doubt that God would deliver the South. The idea of redemption took on powerful connotations; it "signified individual salvation as well as the deliverance of society from evil."<sup>46</sup>

### Lost Cause Theology and Frontier Individualism

The sense of independence and self-sufficiency that developed on the Southern frontier continued to inform white southerners' view of themselves. As early as 1800, white southerners on the frontier took a certain pride in their class standing. Though not wealthy, frontier yeoman found meaning in their struggle that surpassed the ideal lives of the élite. Francis Asbury's writings reveal a "ferocious pride in his low status and that of his circuit riders." White frontier southerners were poor, "but their poverty was perceived in relation to the wealthy, with whom

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<sup>44</sup> Dabbs, *Haunted by God*, 106.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, *Baptized in the Blood*, 167.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 22.

they wished to be identified, and not to the landless, unambitious folk who in the Evangelical's view had no aspirations whatsoever...[they took] a certain stubborn pride in the inadequacy of traditional social distinctions to define them."<sup>47</sup> White southerners from outside the planter class did not accept the idea that the social elite were inherently better than they were.

During the period of Reconstruction, the intense pride in struggle and perseverance found on the frontier at the turn on the nineteenth century manifested itself as a continued pride in southern heritage in the face of northern aggression. Northern missionaries, both black and white, moved south to begin the arduous task of "uplifting" freed people, often bringing with them a sense of cultural and religious elitism. Northern evangelicals felt a need to change the very fabric of southern society. George N. Green, publicist for the American Missionary Association wrote, "We begin at the foundations of society, and hope to impart to schools, homes, and people an elevating and Christian power." First, however, the AMA had to contend with the major problem of the South that lay in "ignorance and degradation of the blacks and the prejudices and hatreds of the whites – in other words...in the minds and hearts of men."<sup>48</sup> White southerners viewed men like Green as cultural missionaries, missionaries neither welcome nor required. Eventually, some southerners may have grudgingly conceded that slavery was wrong and the source of their divine punishment, but never that the southern culture, especially southern religious culture, was inherently inferior. If anything, southerners maintained the pre-war belief that their regional religion was less corrupted than that of other parts

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<sup>47</sup> Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 30.

of the nation. Southern churches were “the repository of southern identity, the prime institutional embodiment of southern regionalism, and the treasuries of the region’s religious folklife.”<sup>49</sup> Angered at Yankee presumptuousness, southerners clung even harder to their understanding of the southern experience until “history was no longer a mere recitation of tradition; it took on the trappings of a biblical ethic and became as holy, as unerring, and as immune to diverse interpretations as the Bible itself.”<sup>50</sup> The idea that northern missionaries would dare attempt to teach the former Confederacy what it meant to be Christian only strengthened the long-established ties between southern religion and culture. The two were so intricately braided that one could no longer differentiate one from the other without destroying both.

It should be noted that southern blacks’ sense of identity closely mirrored that of their white counterparts. Blacks, too, had a strong belief in America’s promise of equality and freedom and an understanding that they were the agents of God, commissioned to raise America to its divinely appointed place as a Christian nation.<sup>51</sup> Though similar in structure, the black and white sense of divine mission differed radically on the expectation of how a Christian nation would look. Traditionally, southern blacks emphasized that the blood of Christ made all men who accepted him equal brothers. Georgia’s black Christians revered America for its potential, but the country would not become a Christian nation until all men were treated as equals under the law. By challenging social injustice, the black community would help the country realize the

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>50</sup> Goldberg, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Manis, *Southern Civil Religions*, 50 -56.

promises set down in the Constitution. Black churches had always acted as defenders of black rights, but during the twentieth century, challenges to Jim Crow took on a more emphatically religious tone; ending segregation meant creating a society on earth that more closely mirrored the heavenly kingdom. For Fred Shuttlesworth, a prominent black activist in Alabama, “America was *not* a Christian nation...it was founded upon Christian principles, Christian pronouncements, Christian platitudes [but] it had really never been a Christian nation...And I think God intended it to be a Christian nation.”<sup>52</sup>

Southern blacks saw the transformation of America into a Christian nation as part of their divine purpose. As such, blacks in Georgia expected the church to take the lead in changing the political order. As early as 1933, the General Missionary Baptist adopted a resolution stating, “the church has been too much divorced from politics” at their Macon convention.<sup>53</sup> Black churches felt a responsibility to address social issues and began to look for ways to use their influence in the community to give a voice to the disenfranchised.

### Southern Religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Though Reconstruction officially ended in 1877, the impact of southerners’ perceived injustice and oppression carried easily into the twentieth century, guided in part by myths and legends invented, or at least exaggerated, by southern whites. The endnote of Reconstruction in the twentieth century was a hypersensitivity to attacks on the validity of southern culture and identity that, while sometimes overshadowed by national events, was always there. For at least the first three-

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew M. Manis, *Macon Black and White: An Unutterable Separation in the American Century* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), 111.

quarters of the twentieth century, white citizens living below the Mason-Dixon line were habitually aware of what it meant to be southern. Proof resides in the writings of two of the South's favorite sons who, though critical of their culture, never opted to stand apart from it. Ralph McGill, the Pulitzer prize winning editor of *The Atlanta Constitution* wrote,

It is the fate of the Southerner to be involved in his region, always to feel himself held by it. He may never have believed the myths...but nonetheless, he is a part of what he has met, and been. And the past, in tales of his grandparents, his great-aunts and uncles, has been in his ears from birth. Nor is that all. He has absorbed much by what be called cultural osmosis. The more sensitive Southerner often is self-embarrassed by the realization that he has accepted unquestioningly some aspect of his community life...<sup>54</sup>

William Faulkner, as if proving McGill's point, in an interview about race relations stated, "The Negroes are right. I will go on saying that Southerners are wrong and that their position is untenable, but, if I have to make the same choice Robert E. Lee made then I'll make it." If forced to choose between the U.S. government and Mississippi, "Then I'll choose Mississippi."<sup>55</sup> Faulkner made his point more boldly in fiction. In *Requiem for a Nun* he writes, "The Past is never dead. In fact, it's not even past."<sup>56</sup> Intrinsically tied to all three statements is the understanding that the act of being southern sprang from a profound appreciation of history and that loyalty to the South was paramount.

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<sup>54</sup> Ralph McGill, *The South and the Southerner*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1964), 218.

<sup>55</sup> qtd. James Sellers, *The South and Christian Ethics*, (New York: Kissinger Publishing Co, 1962), 47-8.

<sup>56</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, (New York: Random House, 1951), Act 2, sc. 1.

## CHAPTER 2

### “WHITER THAN SNOW:” RACE AND THE SBC

The Southern Baptist Convention, more than any other denomination, was able to portray itself as the “folk church of the white South,” fully conforming to Southern culture.<sup>57</sup> Baptists viewed the SBC as particularly Southern, as it alone of the denominations found its origin not in a distant theologian, but in the group response of southerners who, at least in the mythology of the denomination, represented the will of the people. The SBC also dominated the religious scene, particularly in the Deep South. By 1945, with the exception of Louisiana, more than half of the white population in the Deep South states identified with the SBC.<sup>58</sup> The strong connection between the Convention and the culture, taken into consideration with the sheer number of churches in the South places upon the denomination a heavy implication – it had the power to reform southern society. History proves that issues of social reform that the SBC rallied behind, temperance for example, often found significant success in the South. However, “change, when and where it has come in the region, has, almost without exception, been principally the product of ‘outsiders,’” sometimes in the form of “Northern Agitators” and other times by those who were “on the periphery of mainstream society – ethnic, racial, religious,

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<sup>57</sup> E. Luther Copeland, *The Southern Baptist Convention and the Judgment of History* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 14.

<sup>58</sup> Alan Scot Willis, *All According to God’s Plan: Southern Baptist Missions and Race, 1945-1970* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 2.

cultural minorities, seldom accepted as ‘true Southerners.’”<sup>59</sup> Southern Baptists defended the status quo, particularly when it came to segregation. The denomination’s failure to contribute towards the fight for racial justice has its roots in the founding of the denomination and was justified by both the evangelical priorities of the denomination and the region’s historic theological justification of racial supremacy.

### The Southern Baptist Convention

In Boston on December 17, 1844, the Acting Board of the Foreign Missions Board responded to the Baptist State Convention of Alabama’s demand that they answer a simple question: Could slaveholders serve as missionaries? Pushed to answer plainly, the board stated if “any one should offer himself as a Missionary, having slaves, and should insist on retaining them as his property, we would not appoint him. One thing is certain; we can never be a party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery.”<sup>60</sup> The Board’s words echoed through the South and ignited Baptists leaders. In less than six months, southern Baptists broke away from the national organization and created a new religious organization that eventually grew to dominate the region. Though the decision by the Foreign Missions Board was the catalyst for the break, long-standing tension between Northern and Southern Baptists made a division within the denomination

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<sup>59</sup> Glenn Feldman, “The Status Quo Society, the Rope of Religion, and the New Racism,” *Politics and Religion in the White South*, Glen Feldman, ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 290.

<sup>60</sup> Robert A Baker, ed. “Reply of the Acting Board,” *A Baptist Source Book: With Particular Reference to Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 108-109.



inevitable. While the issue of slavery ultimately split the denomination, underlying differences in political structure and feelings that northern Baptists looked down upon those south of the Mason-Dixon line further strengthened the southern resolve to create an independent southern convention.

### The Triennial Convention

The origins of the emergence of the Southern Baptists Convention lay in the inception of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions. Commonly called the Triennial Convention, the first national organization of the Baptists began as the brainchild of Luther Rice, a missionary from outside the Baptist tradition. In 1811, the Congregationalist American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions appointed Rice as a missionary to India. As he traveled towards Burma, Rice and fellow missionaries, Adoniram and Ann Judson, explored the use of baptism in the New Testament, expecting to have to defend their stance to English Baptist missionaries already working in the area. As they explored the issue, the trio became convinced of the Baptist position. All three were baptized by immersion in India. The conversion left the missionaries in a bind; as Baptists, they could no longer ethically accept money from American Congregationalists. On September 12, 1812, Judson wrote to the Congregational Board resigning his position, stating, "I have now the prospect before me of going alone to some distant island, unconnected with any

society at present existing... Whether the Baptists churches in America will compassionate my situation, I know not.”<sup>61</sup>

Judson had reason to worry about the response of the Baptists. As an evangelical denomination, the Baptists were passionate about mission work but leery of religious organizations other than the local church. Baptists stressed religious liberty and the importance of believers’ ability to read the Bible and worship according to their personal interpretation of God’s will.<sup>62</sup> As such, they distrusted any organizational model with the potential to usurp control from the local church. Following a timeline common throughout the colonies, the first southern Baptist association was not established in Charleston until 1751, almost sixty years after Baptists appeared in the region.<sup>63</sup> Even associations held little power over local congregations. Many associations worked under bylaws that forbade the group from interfering in member churches. They were designed simply to offer advice and pool resources for shared interests. While many associations aspired to support missionaries, most were small and did not have the financial abilities to sustain long-term missions, especially overseas. The loose organization of American Baptists simply did not lend itself to the extended support of foreign missions at the time of Judson’s letter.

Still, Luther Rice and the Judsons were desperate for aid. With the encouragement of his fellow missionaries, Rice returned to America in 1813 to

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 54

<sup>62</sup> Carol Crawford Holcomb, “Baptists Missions and the Turn towards National Denominational Organizations: The Baptist Missionary Society and the Triennial Convention, 1792-1812,” *Turning Points in Baptist History: a Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, Michael E Williams, Sr. and Walter B Shurden, ed. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>63</sup> Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 2.

speak with Baptist congregations about the importance of foreign missions. His goal was to organize as many missionary societies as possible and then to try to gather their delegates together in Philadelphia, though he always credited W.B. Johnson, head of the Savannah Baptist Society for Foreign Missions, with the idea for the joint meeting.<sup>64</sup> Rice met Johnson in 1814 and, in him, found a partner willing to help create a national organization capable of sustaining long-term mission work abroad. Some Baptists leaders had proposed a similar national structure in the past but were unsuccessful in garnering support. The rise of benevolent societies shortly after the turn of the century, however, strengthened Rice and Johnson's bid and led to the creation of the Triennial Convention, which served as an umbrella organization for Foreign and Home Missions as well as a publication house. Though ultimately rejected by the South, the Triennial Convention served to strengthen denominational loyalty and pride throughout the region. It also deeply affected the eventual emergence of the Southern Baptist Convention by establishing a precedent for southern leadership within the denomination and a polity upon which southerners sought to improve.

The Philadelphia meeting reveals the prominence of southern leadership within the Baptist denomination. Richard Furman was elected the first president of the Convention, while Johnson led the group that drafted the constitution. The south had talented leadership. When time came for the split, they had the means and personnel to create a successful power structure. More importantly, the work of Johnson on behalf of the Triennial Convention proved helpful when he later

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<sup>64</sup> Baker, "Luther Rice's Idea for a National Organization of Baptists," Baptist Sourcebook, 61.

drafted the constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention. The most important precedent set by the Triennial Convention, however, was the pivotal importance of missions as a uniting factor among Baptists and the growing denominational sentiment as a result of the excitement of missions and the common literature produced by the Publication society. Southerners enthusiastically supported the Convention. It allowed them to directly connect with missionaries and to work actively in promoting the gospel, even if only by sending in a contribution. Without a strong mission emphasis, the Triennial Convention would have failed early in its inception. Thus, the exclusion of southern slaveholders from missionary appointments enraged southern Baptist leaders. With the southern elite banned from missions, there was little purpose in their continued support of the Convention. The missionary purpose of the Triennial Convention united Baptists; it also became the rallying point for southerners itching for an excuse to withdraw from the national organization.

Even as support of the Triennial Convention flourished in the South, growing sectional tensions pointed toward an increasingly rocky relationship between northern and southern brethren. Sectionalism was apparent as early as 1837 when Kentucky Baptists complained about the appointment and deployment of missionaries by the Home Mission Society. Baptists in the south and the southwest charged the Triennial Convention with favoring missionaries from the Northeast and ignoring the needs of those in other parts of the nation. Many believed the Home Mission Society used their donations in other parts of the nation at the expense of southern regions in need of attention, though this claim is hard to

substantiate. If Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri were classified as western as opposed to southern, the southern states gave \$28,149 for missions between 1832 and 1841 while only receiving \$13,646 in mission support.<sup>65</sup> If these states are included in the southern cadre, the difference between the amount donated and amount spent is negligible.

While the Home Mission Society may or may not have been biased in how it spent its funds, it certainly placed priority on sending missionaries to the northern Mississippi valley over the neglected Southwest, though they strived to find missionaries willing to go south. During this period, most missionaries were northerners reluctant to live in the south because of both the presence of slavery and a widespread belief that the southern environment was debilitating to one's health. Interpreting the Home Mission Board's actions as a sign of northern neglect, southern Baptists increasingly saw themselves as distinct from those in the North, an idea "cultivated and maintained by denominational loyalty, a commitment to southern culture, and a universal sense of mission rooted in individual religious experience."<sup>66</sup> Southern Baptists began to develop strong sentiments that they needed their own Foreign and Home mission societies free of discrimination against their missionary candidates or accusations that their funds were "tainted."<sup>67</sup> For southern Baptists, religious and regional responsibilities merged into a uniquely

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<sup>65</sup> Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and its People, 1607-1972* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), 154.

<sup>66</sup> C. Douglas Weaver, "Southern Baptists," *The Baptists River: Essays on Many Tributaries of A Diverse Tradition*, ed. W. Glenn Jonas, Jr. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>67</sup> Fletcher, 40.

southern dogma capable of justifying and defending the southern way of life and the institutions at its base, namely slavery.

### The Southern Denomination

The period between the establishment of the Triennial Convention in 1814 and the split of the Southern Baptists in 1845 brought “considerable turmoil and rapid change across the South. It is difficult to separate the history into economic, social, political compartments, for most of the factors impinging upon the history of the South during this period overlapped into all these areas.”<sup>68</sup> The period saw a significant shift in how southerners viewed slavery and their religious interpretation of the institution. Contrary to popular belief, the South did not initially embrace slavery. Prior to the Revolution, many southern colonies rejected slavery out right; for example, James Oglethorpe opposed slavery and originally founded Georgia as an anti-slavery colony. British governors and businessmen pushed slavery on the colonies, however, establishing large rice plantations along the coast. Still, most southerners embraced slavery only after 1793 when the invention of the cotton gin made the large-scale growth of cotton economically feasible. As the South changed its conception of slavery, relations with the North became much more heated. Southerners felt increasingly condemned and estranged by northern Baptists.<sup>69</sup>

Despite southern characterizations of the North, the majority of northern Baptists were content to overlook the issue of slavery within the context of the

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<sup>68</sup> Baker, *SBC and It's People*, 118.

<sup>69</sup> Fletcher, 13.

Triennial Convention. They were uncomfortable with slavery, to be sure, but they did not intend to make it a divisive issue. Ironically, it was the actions of English Baptists that pushed the matter to the forefront of North-South discussions; the English forced slavery on the South and now condemned the region for it. Baptists helped lead the campaign for abolition in England, which ended in the 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act mandating the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies. Flush with their success, the English Baptists wrote a letter to Triennial Convention that same year chastising them for not taking a strong stand against slavery, stating

We wish rather to fix your attention on the system as a whole - its unchristian character, its degrading tendency, the misery it generates, the injustice, cruelty and wretchedness it involves. Is it not an awful breach of the Divine law, a manifest infraction of that social compact which is always and everywhere binding? And if it be so, are you not, as Christians, and especially as Christian ministers, bound to protest against it, and to seek, by all legitimate means, its speedy and entire destruction? You have a high and holy part, dear brethren, to act...An opportunity is now offered you of extending the happiness of your species, of raising a degraded class of your population to freedom, intelligence, and virtue; of redeeming yourselves from reproach; and of vindicating the character of your most holy faith.<sup>70</sup>

The letter, as expected, received mixed response from the convention gathering. Some commiserated with the English Baptists, saying they understood those who hated slavery, but refused to make abolition a test of faith.<sup>71</sup> A smaller group vowed they would no longer have anything to do with slaveholders.

Most northern Baptists were willing to look the other way on slavery in order to maintain cooperation with the South, but abolitionists continued to push

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<sup>70</sup> Baker, "From the Board of Baptist Ministers in and Near London to the Pastors and Ministers of the Baptist Denomination Throughout the United States of America" Baptist Sourcebook, 87-88.

<sup>71</sup> Fletcher, 40.

the issue, causing southerners, even those who were not slaveholders, to go on the defensive. In 1840, northern Baptists formed the American Baptist Anti-Slavery Convention, declaring that southern churches needed to confess the sinfulness of owning slaves.<sup>72</sup> As tensions rose, the Triennial Convention strived to maintain unity. The Convention took an official stance of neutrality on slavery in 1841. Unfortunately, their official declaration eventually gave southerners grounds for withdrawal. Southern Baptist leaders also sought to hold the Convention together. Sitting president W.B. Johnson rejected his nomination for reelection at the 1844 convention in an attempt to forestall schism within the denomination. While he cited health reasons as the reason for his decision, reports from friends indicated he sought conciliation between abolitionists and slaveholders.<sup>73</sup> Francis Wayland was elected president, and, though his opposition to slavery was well documented, the convention maintained its neutral position. That neutrality came crashing down the next year when Baptists from Georgia and Alabama decided to test the Home Mission Society and the Foreign Mission Society's willingness to commission slaveholders as missionaries.

On August 2, 1844, the Georgia Baptist Association decided to test the Triennial Convention's detachment from the abolitionists by submitting James E. Reeve as a missionary candidate for the Home Mission Board. The Georgia Baptists openly stated that Reeve was a slaveholder, hoping to provoke the many leaders on the Board who actively supported abolitionists into showing their true colors. Sensing a trap, the Executive Board refused to consider Reeve's appointment on the

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<sup>72</sup> Jonas, 45

<sup>73</sup>Fletcher, 47.



grounds that the test “violated the purpose and letter of the constitution, compromised the principles of the neutrality circular issued by the society in 1841, ignored a resolution introduced in 1841 by Richard Fuller which denied right of anyone to introduce the subject of slavery or anti-slavery into the society” and generally threatened the harmony of the society.<sup>74</sup> Georgia Baptists were angered, but could not refute the decision. The Foreign Mission Board was not as skillful in sidestepping the challenge brought before them by the Alabama State Convention. On November 25, 1844 the Alabama General Convention demanded of the Foreign Mission Board a clear statement that slaveholders had the same status regarding appointment as nonslaveholders. The Board’s answer, no slaveholders would be approved by the Board, incited southern Baptists. The line had been drawn in the sand.

Word of the Board’s decision spread like wildfire throughout the South, carried mostly by the region’s Baptist publications. Founded in 1822, the *Christian Index* was the official newspaper of the Georgia Baptist Convention and had a large circulation in neighboring states. The *Christian Index* relayed the responses of various organizations and carried editorials from Southern ministers incensed at the Triennial Convention’s “unconstitutional stand.”<sup>75</sup> The Virginians were the first to suggest a meeting of southern Baptists to discuss creating an independent Convention able to “promote the foreign mission cause, and other interests of the

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<sup>74</sup> Baker, *SBC and Its People*, 158.

<sup>75</sup> In fact, there was nothing in the Triennial Convention’s constitution regarding slavery. Rather, there was a general understanding that the issue would not be discussed. Some historians such as Copeland and Carter suggest the emphasis placed on the constitution serves as a way to deemphasize the role slavery played in the creation of the SBC. (See Carter, 174 and Copeland, 8.)

Baptist denomination in the South.”<sup>76</sup> They proposed the meeting be held in Augusta, Georgia, on the second weekend of May, a proposal unanimously supported by the Georgians, who championed William Sands’, editor of Virginia’s Religious Herald, assessment of the crisis within the denomination. Sands blamed the impending disunion on northern stubbornness, stating

We have for some time felt apprehensive, that union could not be much longer maintained. The altered tone of the Baptist periodicals in the New England...their constant and unremitted denunciations of slaveholders...the passage of anti-slavery resolutions at the annual meetings in Boston and Salem associations – gave strong premonitory symptoms of the existence (sic) of a feverish excitement, which would probably, at no distant period, exhibit itself in some overt act which would compel the South to withdraw...we determined that no act or agency of ours should increase the difficulty or hasten the catastrophe. If the Union should be dissolved, the responsibility should be their own.<sup>77</sup>

The righteous stance taken by Sands was echoed in much of the Baptist diatribe leading up to the Augusta meeting. Southerners wholly blamed northern abolitionist sentiments and their failure to maintain convention law for the impending break. Despite the focus on convention law, however, it is clear that the defense of slavery was at the heart of the split.

Southern Baptist publications rarely came directly out in stating that their separation from the northern Baptists hinged on a defense of slavery, but accusations that the Foreign Missions Board’s location in Boston made them more susceptible to abolitionist doctrine reveal the slave issue was at the heart of the split. As many below the Mason Dixon line interpreted events, the northern Baptists “will be compelled by the party into whose

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<sup>76</sup> “Southern Baptist Convention,” The Christian Index 13:3 (March 28, 1845).

<sup>77</sup> “Our Relations with the North,” The Christian Index 13:13 (March 28, 1845).

arms they have thrown themselves to go to. They will not be permitted to recede. The Convention must be rid of any alliance with slavery or slaveholders, and self-respect points out that it would be more honorable to withdraw than be driven off.”<sup>78</sup> Southern Baptists who were against the split also recognized the pivotal role of slavery in the decisions being made. An editorial to the *Christian Index* argued that Southerners who were neither slaveholders nor who had any sympathy for slavery should object to the impending schism, stating “Should these brethren pursue the cause,... no general rupture in denomination will be realized. And who knows but that one grand object of the Great Head of the Church in scattering them all over the South, was to prevent the anticipated division between the North and the South.”<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, these Southerners had little chance to speak. The majority of Baptists, who included women, slaves, and non-slaveholding whites from the lower classes and border states, were suddenly thrust into a new denomination.

Delegates for the southern Baptists meeting arrived in Augusta on Thursday, May 8, 1845. Due perhaps to the hurried nature of the event’s planning, of the 293 delegates sent to Augusta, all but twenty represented Georgia, South Carolina, or Virginia.<sup>80</sup> The vast majority of messengers to the convention were from Georgia, who held slaves at a rate six times higher than the average southerner, revealing a definite economic bias in forming an

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<sup>78</sup> “Usurpation of a a Minority,” *The Christian Index* 13:13 (March 28, 1845).

<sup>79</sup> “Events Justify our Former Positions,” *The Christian Index* 13:18 (May 2, 1845).

<sup>80</sup> Baker, *SBC and Its People*, 161.

institution willing to maintain biblically based slavery.<sup>81</sup> Robert Fuller and W.B. Johnson, who according to historians, arrived in Augusta with a constitution already drafted in his pocket, led the convention. Before the end of the day, Fuller was appointed as chair of a committee made up of the most influential southern leaders to create a preamble and resolutions regarding a new convention for the delegates to consider the next day.

On Friday, Fuller read over the committee's suggestions, including "that for the peace and harmony, and in order to accomplish the greatest amount of good, and the maintenance of the Scriptural principles on which the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination was originally formed, it is proper that this convention at once proceed to organize a society for the propagation of the gospel."<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, the delegates used the term "Scriptural principles" instead of setting forth a clear creed of what they believed, providing evidence that the new convention was not created in response to theological or doctrinal issues.<sup>83</sup> The constitution drafted by the group closely resembled the convention first proposed by Furman and Johnson and the founding of the Triennial Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention operated along the associational, not the societal, model and acted as an umbrella organization for any benevolent groups the denomination decided to support, stressing denominational unity over any single cause.

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<sup>81</sup> Robert G. Gardner, "A Decade of Debate and Division: Georgia Baptists and the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 30.

<sup>82</sup> Southern Baptist Convention Annual, 1845, 3-5.

<sup>83</sup> Fletcher, 47.

Though the Convention initially focused solely on supporting missions at home and abroad in hopes of eventually reuniting with northern Baptists, they soon expanded. The Southern Baptist Convention eventually became the largest Protestant denomination in America, let alone the South. While other denominations experienced a similar north-south split in the years bookending the Civil War, the Southern Baptist experience is relatively unique in that it never sought to reunite with its northern counterpart. While there are a wide variety of theories regarding this phenomenon, ranging from a different view of denominational polity to the entrenchment of the southern sense of distinctiveness, historian E. Luther Copeland offers a compelling reading of the denomination's history, stating, "One can see why the concept of Southern uniqueness might more easily pervade a denomination without definite rootage in a historic founder outside Southern history."<sup>84</sup> There is no great Baptist leader such as Luther or Wesley to draw Baptists together. Instead, they have only their sense of shared identity, an identity that in part rested on a tradition of entrenched racism, even if it was never articulated by the denomination itself.

### Theology of Racism

The Southern Baptist Convention originated because southerners actively rejected the condemnation of slavery directed towards them by northern abolitionists. Though most Baptists were in the lower economic class and,

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<sup>84</sup> Copeland, 14.

therefore, did not own a large number of slaves, they were fully immersed in the culture of the region.<sup>85</sup> Cotton plantations could not function without slave labor, and every aspect of southern society, from economics to religion, was dependent on the one-crop system. It is not surprising that southern theologians strongly articulated a biblical defense of slavery. Southern Baptists, with a strong fundamentalist belief in biblical inerrancy, relied on a number of arguments to prove that a slave society could also be a Christian one. One of the most prominent defenses of slavery was that Jesus did not expressly forbid it. This reasoning stated that Jesus and his disciples were aware of slavery as it existed within their society, yet none felt the need to denounce it, clearly showing that it did not register as a sin. In the 1857 treatise, *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, George Armstrong writes

The Bible, and the Bible alone, is her [the Church's] rule of faith and practice. She can announce what it teaches; enjoin what it commands; prohibit what it condemns; and enforce her testimonies by spiritual sanctions. Beyond the Bible she can never rightfully go, and apart from the Bible she can never rightfully speak. 'To the law and to the testimony' and to them alone, she must always appeal; and when they are silent, it is her duty to put her hand upon her lips.<sup>86</sup>

If the Bible did not say that slavery was a sin, then modern Christians could not go back and read meaning into the original text. To further make their case, Southern Baptists frequently believed that slavery in Judea and Egypt was more oppressive than their form and, therefore, more likely to be branded a sin. In the absence of condemnation, one could assume that slavery was acceptable to the Lord.

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<sup>85</sup> Copeland, 125.

<sup>86</sup> qtd in Archie C. Epps, III, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery: A Theological Analysis," *The Journal of Negro History* 46:4 (Oct., 1961): 244.

Southern Baptists also described slavery as a Biblical and moral mandate by which Christians fulfilled a duty in their treatment of Africans. J.R. Graves from Tennessee focused on sin's curse, which brought servitude in to the world, and especially God's curse on Ham and his descendents. Graves believed universal freedom and equality were conditions of innocence and therefore lost in the Fall. The servitude that came following the Fall was further refined through the curse upon the descendents of Ham, believed to be the Africans, who were forced to serve the descendents of Ham's brothers.<sup>87</sup> While the Hamitic determinism is often viewed as a common argument among pro-slavery Christians in the south, most Baptists preferred the idea that Africans benefited spiritually and physically from slavery, an idea best defended by South Carolinian Richard Fuller, one of the founders of the SBC.<sup>88</sup>

In an 1822 series of letters to Rev. Wayland of Rhode Island, Fuller set forth the basic tenants of the Positive Good defense of slavery, stating liberty is to be preferred to slavery, "but in the light of faith, the soul alone has true value, and even the hardest bondage is nothing at all, the most cruel treatment nothing at all, not worth a thought, if the slave has been called to the glorious liberty of the gospel."<sup>89</sup> Though slaves, African-Americans had access to Christian teachings they would not have had had they remained in Africa. Patrick Hues Mill, a Georgia Baptist, wrote in 1846, "in every respect, the condition of the slave, in these United States of America,

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<sup>87</sup> Copeland, *Judgment of History*, 13.

<sup>88</sup> Terry Carter, "Baptists and Racism and the Turn Toward Segregation: 1845," *Turning Points in Baptist History: a Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, ed. Michael E Williams, Sr. and Walter B Shurden (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 170.

<sup>89</sup> Richard Fuller, *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution: In a Correspondence Between the Rev. Richard Fuller of Beaufort, S.C. and the Rev. Francis Wayland of Providence, R.I.* (New York: L. Colby, 1847), 190.

is better than that in any part of the world, now, or during any past age.”<sup>90</sup> As late as 1908, H.E. Belin, a self-purported southern “insider,” believed “slavery, so far from degrading the negro, has actually elevated him industrially, mentally, and even morally, the terms of his involuntary tutelage to the white race raising him to a vastly higher level than ever occupied by his kinsmen.”<sup>91</sup> The Positive Good defense rested on the argument that through exposure to Christian civilization, the slaves were being elevated to a higher state of being. This line of thinking necessitated action on the part of southern churches and Christian slaveholders, however, to hold up under the scrutiny of Northern abolitionists. In order to validate claims that the slaves themselves benefited from bondage, southern Baptists had to prove their good intentions. This meant a verbal disapproval of slaveholders who mistreated slaves or who did not support plantation missions. The very first mission work organized by the Southern Baptist Convention was geared to evangelizing among the slaves, a move designed to alleviate northern accusations that slavery was incompatible with Christianity. Such paternalistic teachings continued to play a major part in the SBC’s Home Mission Board, who continued to have special committees and funds earmarked for work among African-Americans into the 1960s.

As one moves into the twentieth century, Baptist historians attribute the SBC’s lack of action for social justice to its position within southern culture; it was captive of a dominant ideology that stressed loyalty to the Old South and to the

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<sup>90</sup>H Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But...: Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 143.

<sup>91</sup>H.E. Belin, “A Southern View of Slavery,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 13:4 (Jan 1908): 517.



standing racial caste system. For Southern Baptists, the traditions of the South were the traditions of the Christianity practiced in its purest form, and so could not be incompatible.<sup>92</sup> Such thinking is remnant of Lost Cause theology, which remained a driving force in the development of Southern Baptists' stance on segregation.

Andrew Manis, writing on Southern civil religion states,

One should view resistance to the integrationist goals of the civil rights movement as more than merely a hypocritical rejection of Christianity's universal acceptance of all persons or as the captivity of the churches to the traditional Southern social and racial arrangements. This resistance also constituted a virtual pledge of allegiance to a Southern civil religion...that viewed desegregation and the movement that fostered it as a threat to its understanding of America's sacred meaning as a nation.<sup>93</sup>

By the 1960s, the South began to look more like the rest of the country, but it still clung to the belief that it was set apart in its commitment to upholding the Christian ideal, an ideal that had little trouble ignoring racial injustice.

The crucial influences of the evangelical message in shaping the Southern Baptist view of morality should not be dismissed. Most southern Baptists fundamentally believe the Bible to be inerrant and so look to it for validation that what they do is right. Interestingly, few Southern Baptists pulled out worn-out arguments claiming God sanctioned segregation. Rev. G.T. Gillespie, who was one of the most influential segregationist preachers, stated in a speech in 1957:

While the Bible contains no clear mandate for or against segregation as between the white and negro races, it does furnish considerable data from which valid inferences may be drawn in support of the general principle of segregation as an important feature of the Divine purpose and Providence throughout the ages...Concerning matters of

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<sup>92</sup> Willis, *All According to God's Plan*, 35

<sup>93</sup> Andrew M Manis, "Dying From the Neck Up": Southern Baptist Resistance to the Civil Rights Movement." *Baptist History and Heritage* (Winter 1999): 34.

this kind, which in the inscrutable wisdom of God have been left for mankind to work out in the light of reason and experience without the full light of revelation, we dare not be dogmatic.<sup>94</sup>

Such a statement is hardly a ringing endorsement of racial theology. Biblical defenses of segregation, where they did crop up, were often found among the laity as a form of “folk theology.” Baptist ministers, who were frequently more liberal than the folks in the pew often kept quiet on racial matters because issues of social justice did not fit into their teleology. Evangelicals did not get involved in politics; they “sang hymns and tended to souls, but left the burden of legislation and social policy to their more worldly counterparts in the Protestant mainstream.”<sup>95</sup>

The trademark of southern, evangelical religion is the emphasis placed on the connection of the individual’s solitary human soul. In the conversion experience, only two beings matter – the sinner and the savior. The myopic view that the human’s vertical relationship with God was all-important transitioned into the development of a morality with no real social dimension. The Southern Baptist church understood “Christian morality (like salvation) as essentially vertical, private, and static...churches consistently expended far more energy attacking the passage of pornographic materials through the mails, the liquor industry, and the houses of chance than they do in grappling with such issues as discrimination, disenfranchisement, poverty, and ignorance.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> David L. Chappel, “Disunity and Religious Institutions in the White South, Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction, ed. Clive Webb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138.

<sup>95</sup> Bill Leonard, “A Theology for Racism: Southern Fundamentalism and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Baptist History and Heritage* (Winter 1999): 49.

<sup>96</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, 107.

Baptist churches, mandated to spread the Gospel above all else, attacked the social vices that hindered people from having a pure relationship with God. Liberal Baptists among the ministers saw racism as a moral question, but “moral questions were individual questions. Solving the race problem was, therefore, a matter of individual moral change, and that mandated evangelicalism.”<sup>97</sup> What was required was more preaching, not activism. Only when individuals were converted to Christianity, and eventually the Christian understanding of race, would the social institutions change. The problem, however, lay in the fact that the majority of southern white Baptists did not view themselves as racists, and so could nod in agreement to sermons about brotherhood on Sunday morning and continue to uphold segregation on Monday. Racists hated blacks; most Baptists saw themselves as intimately connected to their black neighbors through a complex paternalistic rationalization. According to a South Carolinian,

You’ll see white and colored little kids playing together all the time. We live with ‘em all day...I don’t let ‘em come in and sit down at my table, sit in my living room, but they can come up to my back porch and talk to me anytime they want to. I carry them to the doctor, carry them to the hospital, loan ‘em money if they need it, do everything I can for ‘em.<sup>98</sup>

Most Southern Baptists simply did not see the inconsistencies inherent in such a social system.

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<sup>97</sup> Willis, *According to God’s Plan*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> James Sellers, *The South and Christian Ethics*, (New York: Kissinger Publishing Co., 1962),

## CHAPTER 3

### IS THERE ROOM AT THE CROSS? THE FAILED INTEGRATION OF A SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH

Where cross the crowded ways of life,  
Where sound the cries of race and clan,  
Above the noise of selfish strife,  
We hear thy voice, O Son of Man!<sup>99</sup>

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On Sunday, September 25, 1966, Ghana native Sam Oni stood outside the doors of Tattnell Square Baptist Church while the congregation inside sang “Where Cross the Crowded Way of Life.” Two large deacons barred Oni from entering the building as church members voted to dismiss three ministers for allowing blacks to attend a summer worship service. Tension between liberal leaders and Baptist segregationists cropped up throughout the South, but reporters brought international attention to the small church in Macon, creating a unique opportunity for scholars. The reality of the situation at Tattnell Square was not unique in the South. Erwin L. McDonald, editor of the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine, wrote after learning of the church’s decision, “The tragedy of Tattnell Square is that its policy is not a rare instance but the overwhelming pattern of practice among Southern Baptist churches. The big question among us Baptists continues to be whether or not any people but whites will be permitted to darken the doors of our churches.

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<sup>99</sup> Frank Mason North, “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life,” Baptist Hymnal (Nashville: Convention Press, 1975), hymn 311.

This is strange for practicing Christians in 1966.”<sup>100</sup> The difference between Tattnall Square and the thousands of other Baptist churches with similar racial policies is that Tattnall Square’s became public knowledge, fueling debate and embarrassment among white southern Baptists. While it would be easy simply to attribute the actions of the church to entrenched racism, it is important to acknowledge that the church was divided by the issue. The church, like the denomination, was not monolithic, and numerous factors were at work. By treating the refusal of the church to integrate not as an isolated event, but as part of the southern church’s larger history, it becomes clear that the while the culture of American society was changing, the white southern church continued to follow the well-laid path before it.

Mercer University, the Campus Church, and Sam Oni

Tattnall Square Baptist Church began as a mission of the First Baptist Church of Macon in 1891. The church founders intended to minister to the students and faculty of Mercer University as well as those living in the surrounding areas. From its inception, Tattnall Square had strong ties to the university. The school deeded Tattnall Square the land used for the church building and the congregation met in the university chapel while raising funds to begin construction. In time, the church contributed to the cost of maintaining a Baptist Student Union secretary on campus, and the school bestowed honorary doctoral degrees on nine different church pastors.<sup>101</sup> The historic autonomy of the local congregation in the SBC kept Mercer

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<sup>100</sup> “Ouster Gets Worldwide Reaction,” *The Christian Index*, October 6, 1966.

<sup>101</sup> Centennial History Committee with Fred and Elizabeth Hinesley, *History of Tattnall Square Baptist Church – 75 years* (Macon: Panaprint, Inc., 1991), 9, 12.

from having any direct control of the church, but it was generally assumed the two operated in conjunction with one another. Most students viewed it as much a part of campus as the dorms or administration buildings.<sup>102</sup> The relationship between the school and the church, official or not, meant Mercer's decision to integrate would inevitably lead to a confrontation between the church's Christian and cultural loyalties.

In 1954, the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision put an end to legal segregation in southern schools and began a new war between southern whites and the rest of the nation. News reports showed black students being escorted by members of the National Guard between crowds of hostile whites in Little Rock and men like Georgia's Governor Herman Talmadge swore to close public schools before letting them integrate. For the most part, Southerners, who often reacted violently when forced by "outsiders" to integrate, simply ignored the Supreme Court's directive; many rural public schools remained segregated into the seventies, especially in the Deep South. The same held true of Baptist colleges. The Southern Baptist Convention had a number of private Christian schools that were founded primarily to train future pastors for the ministry. Many of the schools, while not expressly forbidding the admission of blacks, did little to encourage their entrance.

The first push for integration at Mercer University came from Harris Mobley and Sam Jerry Oni. Mobley, a Mercer alumnus, served as a Southern Baptist missionary in Ghana. While there, he struggled to push past racial prejudice, both on the part of other Southern Baptist missionaries and of the Africans. Mobley

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<sup>102</sup> Will Campbell, *The Stem of Jesse: The Cost of Community at a 1960s Southern School* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 97.

believed many missionaries carried the old paternalistic attitudes with them into the mission field, often living in large houses removed from the people to whom they preached and employing Africans as servants, hindering the spread of the Gospel in Africa. He also found himself continually struggling against the image of Southern Baptists broadcast around the world. Africans knew of the Civil Rights struggle and were aware that the SBC had done little to alleviate the situation of blacks in the region it so heavily dominated. Mobley believed the SBC needed to set itself apart publically from its surrounding culture. He encouraged his friend Oni, a Christian converted to the faith by Southern Baptist missionaries, to apply to his alma mater in an effort to begin to integrate the Convention and to reshape the message it sent to global populations.

Oni applied to Mercer in the fall of 1962. As part of his application, he was asked why he wanted to attend Mercer. Oni responded, "I am so anxious to come to Mercer not only because it is a Christian institution, but it would afford me the opportunity of meeting many of the good people of the Southern Baptist Convention who have done so much for my own people."<sup>103</sup> Oni's statement cut to the heart of why he was chosen to push against Mercer's racial policies; he could not be ignored as just some black trying to make trouble. As John Mitchell, Mercer's director of admissions stated, "Mr. Oni was converted through the work of a young man who was graduated from our university. Would this young Christian understand that the doors of the university which prepared the missionary who brought the Gospel

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<sup>103</sup> Campbell, *The Stem of Jesse*, 38.

were closed to his converts? Indeed, he has a closer relationship to our university than the Negro of Macon, Georgia. He is one of our constituents.”

Oni’s application presented a serious problem to Mercer. Regardless of the individual’s ethical or social conflict, the Board of Trustees had to think about how their decision would be received by Southern Baptists. Mercer answered to the Georgia Baptist Convention and relied on donations of local congregations to offset the cost of running the school. The school had to walk the fine line between upholding their Christian principles and maintaining its allegiance to Georgia Baptists. The personal notes of Walter Moore from the executive committee of the Georgia Baptist Convention report that the group

did not address themselves to the question of Christian ethics or even nod toward the missionaries who with one voice [were] crying for Christian attitudes on the race question, many saying that if we [did] not change we may as well bring them home. The one consideration was the effect on the Cooperative Program [the unified budget of Southern Baptists] and fear of controversy in the convention.<sup>104</sup>

The Southern Baptist Convention strove always for the approval of the majority, a trend that spilled down into every aspect of Baptist life. A move to desegregate a Baptist college, while wholly the decision of the Board of Trustees, had to be done with majority opinion in mind, a majority renowned for maintaining the status quo. While some members of the Board continued to worry about disrupting their relationship with Georgia Baptists, however, most had liberal leanings regarding race and could not stand to see Mercer embroiled in a battle over integration. President Rufus Harris stated frankly, “Mercer, a Christian university, should do by

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 37.



grace what the University of Georgia was required to do by law.”<sup>105</sup> When Mercer’s doors opened on September 16, 1963, three black students entered as part of the freshman class.<sup>106</sup>

The reception of the black students by Georgia Baptists was mixed. Some praised the school for upholding Christian ideals and standing as a shining example to public universities that integration could come peacefully. Others were not so supportive. President Harris received a number of letters from angry Baptists who felt the school had overstepped its bounds, purposefully ignoring the wishes of the Baptist majority. Mercer alumnus Bob Steed wrote:

I object to the program [of integration] itself. It is, I believe, hostile to the views of the alumni of Mercer, hostile to the churches belonging to the Georgia Baptist Convention, and a gross affront to the vast majority of the people of this state whose thoughts on the question have been made clear by their eight-year struggle in opposition to an involuntary imposition of a condition which you urge for Mercer on a voluntary basis. While many of us watched in dismay as public schools and universities were forced, some at point of arms, to integrate, we were secure in the knowledge that our University would never be the object of such coercion. Now that which we thought so secure is being supinely surrendered with apparent disregard and indifference to the thoughts of what surely must be a substantial number of alumni.<sup>107</sup>

W.S. Rogers, Jr., pastor of the Horeb Baptist Church in Mayfield, Georgia, announced that the church had voted unanimously to oppose integration of Southern Baptist churches, colleges, universities, and schools. Similar letters came from Sweetwater Baptist Church in Thomson and the Mallery Association in Sylvester.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Grace Bryan Holmes, *Time to Reconcile: The Odyssey of a Southern Baptist* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), 225.

<sup>106</sup> “Admit Three Negros,” *Christian Index*, September 12, 1963. p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Campbell, *Stem of Jesse*, 53, 57-8.

<sup>108</sup> W.S. Rogers Jr., “Oppose Integration,” *The Christian Index*, October 3, 1963, p 7.

Surprisingly, many of the negative letters stressed that Oni should have been admitted as a foreign student, a position advocated by The Christian Index editor John J. Hurt. Georgia Baptists were willing to concede that Oni was a special case; he deserved a spot at Mercer, but not the African-Americans who were a part of southern community. Though never articulated, the difference seems to lie in the assumptions of what would happen to the students after graduation.

White Georgians believed Oni would return to Ghana to continue spreading the Gospel. In doing so, he offered no threat to the standing social order. Locally born blacks were a different story. Historians such as Jane Dailey believe southern racism is rooted in fears of miscegenation. The integration of the school played into these fears; African-Americans would be in close proximity with white students, in an environment that could foster interracial relationships. One Baptist woman, identified only as Mrs. West stated, “nowhere can I find anything to convince me that God intended us living together as one big family in schools, churches, and other places.” Mrs. G. P. Smith agreed “My strong religious conviction tells me that God does not require this of us. He made us different and put us separate on His good earth.’ Should schools be integrated, she warned, ‘in less than ten years we will face the problem of intermarriage.’”<sup>109</sup> Georgia blacks would not leave Mercer to travel to some distant land; they would remain in the South, demanding further entrance into white southern society.

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<sup>109</sup> Jane Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance: Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown.” *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction*, Clive Webb, ed. (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 163.

Mercer's decision to integrate demanded action of the Tattnell Square congregation. Oni was the only black student living in the dorms. His roommate, Donald Baxter, was a junior who had attended Tattnell Square since beginning his studies at Mercer. That Oni would try to attend church with the student he knew most well was considered a given. Indeed, Baxter and Oni made plans to attend Tattnell Square Baptist Church the first Sunday of the semester. According to Thomas Holmes, as of 1963, Tattnell Square had not settled on a policy regarding seating blacks for worship; it simply had not been an issue. Fearing Oni would try to use his student status to attend the church, the deacons decided to make a preemptive strike. They informed the pastor, Rev. Clifton Forester, that they did not want the young man to enter the sanctuary. Details are hazy on whether Forester talked to Baxter or to Oni himself, but it is clear he visited the dorms during the first week of school to deliver the message that Oni "would not be welcome at Tattnell Square Baptist Church, that if he approached it, he would not be allowed to enter, and that if he tried to force his way in, he would be arrested."<sup>110</sup> Tattnell Square had dug in, ready to fight to preserve the sanctity of their worship service.

Their decision would not become public knowledge for several years, but there were early indicators that they would lose the battle for public opinion. After being rejected by Tattnell Square, Oni and Baxter began to look for another church to attend. Their first stop was Vineville Baptist Church, located just a couple of miles from Mercer. Walter Moore, Vineville's preacher, heard about the actions of Tattnell Square and send word to Baxter and Oni that they would be welcomed at Vineville,

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<sup>110</sup> Campbell, Stem of Jesse, 96.

though as actions later proved, he may have jumped the gun in his announcement. At the end of the Sunday service, Moore invited anyone who wanted to join the church to come down to the front of the sanctuary, an invitation that is the staple of any Baptist service. Baptist congregations generally accept new members without question; there is nothing with Baptist doctrine that would require the church to debate about whether or not to extend someone membership. This particular Sunday was different than others, however. After the church had voted to accept several whites for membership, Moore called Oni up to be voted on individually, perhaps anticipating problems from some members. In making his case before the congregation that Oni should be allowed to join the church, Moore argued that “Oni was not an ordinary local Georgia Negro. He was a peculiar Negro...a unique Negro, one who had come to know the Lord through their own praying, their own gifts, and their own efforts on the mission field.”<sup>111</sup> After some debate, Oni was accepted by a margin of two to one, becoming the first black member of the Georgia Baptist Convention since slavery.<sup>112</sup>

The response to Vineville’s decision reveals that cracks were beginning to form in the theology of race that had long been the accepted norm by the SBC. Fifteen Mercer students joined the church at the evening service following Oni’s admittance. In time, this number would grow as many of the students and faculty of Mercer shifted their allegiance from Tattnell Square to Vineville, believing the church off-campus was more relevant to the needs of a changing world.<sup>113</sup> Vineville

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<sup>111</sup> Thomas J Holmes, *Ashes for Breakfast*, (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1969), 14.

<sup>112</sup> “Oni Joins Church,” *The Christian Index*, October 3, 1963, p. 15.

<sup>113</sup> Holmes, *Ashes for Breakfast*, 23.

also received support from others throughout Georgia. Two weeks after Oni answered the church's invitation, *The Christian Index*, the weekly publication of the Georgia Baptist Convention, ran the following editorial:

We bow in humble gratitude for Mercer University and the Vineville Baptist church which in the true spirit of Christ have brought added distinction to themselves...Vineville Baptist Church is to be commended for accepting Sam Jerry Oni, a product of Southern Baptist missions, for membership. This decision, too, wasn't easy nor was it unanimous. The fact 15 persons joined at the night service after the Ghana student was accepted in the morning service should prove Vineville did not suffer in its decision...we can differ about the policies but surely we can be united in commendation for those who practice the Christianity they preach.<sup>114</sup>

While it is important to recognize that the vote to accept Oni was not unanimous, nor was it an indicator that the church would be receptive of any blacks seeking membership, it did open the door for a new understanding of Christian brotherhood and shows that at least some were ready for the change.

#### Tattnall Square and Thomas Holmes

For a time, it seemed that Tattnall Square could rest comfortably on Mercer's campus without having to engage with the black student body. The church continued to lose its student members over the course of the school year, however. When Rev. Forrester left the church to work for the Baptist Children's Home, the church hired Thomas Holmes who they hoped could revitalize the stagnant congregation. In his memoirs, Holmes recalls, "I expressed my opinion unequivocally that the church would have to make a very important decision if it

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<sup>114</sup> "Mercer, Vineville Deserve Gratitude," *The Christian Index*. October 3, 1963, p. 6.

was to reach the university community. It would have to be willing to gear its program to minister to all of the students who might desire to come, including foreign students and Negroes [sic].<sup>115</sup> The deacons stated the church believed in a worldwide mission, and so would be willing to accommodate any students who wanted to attend service. With that reassurance, Holmes accepted the church's call on December 4, 1964. Within a few months, the number of students attending church had significantly increased. Holmes believed the attendance of some of Mercer's black students was inevitable. Following basic Baptist procedure, he called for a study committee to recommend a policy on seating black guests in the spring of 1965. The committee was to study the issue from a variety of angles and then present their suggestions to the church body to vote on. The committee contently dragged its feet, however, willing to "wait, say nothing, do nothing, and hope the trouble would go away."<sup>116</sup> The group seemed to believe that so long as they did not take an official stance, Holmes' arms were tied and they could continue to worship as if the world were not changing.

For over a year, Holmes watched the posturing of the committee, frustrated by both their duplicity and hypocrisy. Even after his warning that black visitors were inevitable, the committee did nothing. In the summer of 1966, the director for Mercer's Upward Bound program approached Douglas Johnson, Minister of Students. The director wanted to know what churches in the area would be receptive to his group of racially mixed teenagers. Johnson, with Holmes' guidance, explained that without the backing of the deacons, Tattall Church "could not invite

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>116</sup> Holmes, *Time to Reconcile*, 228.

the Negroes to come, under the circumstances, but if they [did], they would be seated.”<sup>117</sup> Soon after laying out the situation, Holmes received a call from the Upward Bound director saying a couple of students planned to attend his church on Sunday. On Wednesday, June 22, Holmes quietly informed several ushers of the probability that black students would be coming, asking them to be available to make sure the guests were welcomed. For Holmes, Tattnall Square “was at last face to face with its destiny. Its members had long contended that a congregation had been placed on the Mercer University campus by divine appointment and this had been attested by the potent influence on the life of the university in years past. Yet, when Mercer...had struggled to meet her moral obligations in the changed world of the 1960’s, the church had refused to accept its responsibility.”<sup>118</sup> Holmes waited to see if the church would turn away the black students as they had Sam Oni three years before.

Various accounts of Tattnall Square’s service on June 26, 1966, report that it was relatively uneventful. There were no ostentatious scenes of outrage over the two fifteen-year old visitors who had entered through one of the side doors. A handful of people left the church after the opening prayer, but nobody directly accosted the students. Trouble did not appear until after everybody had time to make it home and compare notes on the morning’s events. Angry church members began to call Holmes’ house, accusing him of orchestrating the incident. Clearly he had known the students were coming and could have chosen to stop them. Within days, a group of church deacons created a movement to get rid of both Holmes and

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<sup>117</sup> Holmes, *Ashes for Breakfast*, 41.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Johnson. This faction did not, however, represent the whole congregation. On July 17, a supporter of Holmes called for a vote of confidence following the service. The vote was 300 to 18, overwhelming supporting Holmes and the other ministers on staff. This vote did not deter the church's segregationist leaders however, who were among the most powerful men in the congregation. The deacons held a closed-door meeting to discuss the dismissal of Holmes and the other ministers. All reference to their discussion of the situation was stricken from the record, something unheard of in the Baptist church. When church members heard of the meeting, they demanded a public vote in which any member could voice his opinion. The matter was set to be decided on July 24. The day of the vote, Holmes recalls, "I estimated that there were at least one hundred people in church that Sunday that I had never seen before. It is likely most of these newcomers voted to close the doors to Negroes."<sup>119</sup> The church voted 286 to 109 to keep blacks out. After the ballots were counted and verified, they were burned and the ashes dumped down the sewer.

Nobody expected the storm of publicity that followed Tattnell Square's decision. Local reporters, knowing of the vote, stood ready to give their account of events. The story was picked up by the Associated Press and transmitted throughout America and around the world. Holmes' original statement to the press was brief: "I have not and cannot be a party to closing our church doors to any person wanting to enter and worship. A pastor's heart may be broken by a church action but, for a time at least, he has a pastor's responsibility to his membership."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>120</sup> "Bar Negroes Seats," *The Christian Index*, August 4, 1966, p. 5.



Others were not so willing to forgive the congregation for their actions. An editorial in *The Christian Index* read:

No Baptist church is an island unto itself. Each is sovereign, to be sure, with supreme allegiance to God. There is also a responsibility to others which cannot be ignored.

So it is now with the Tattnell Square Baptist Church in Macon. Its location on the edge of Mercer University's campus gives it a status far greater than for most churches its size.

The church is embroiled in controversy over the seating of Negroes. The cameras of world opinion are focused there. Nothing the church can do will alter that fact...

The real issue at Tattnell Square Baptist Church is the future of that one church – and whether there will be another burden for those who seek to win a lost world to Christ.<sup>121</sup>

Letters in other states' Baptist publications echoed similar themes, though it is important to note that the disapproval did not necessarily land on the church's decision not to seat blacks. There were hundreds of Baptist churches throughout the South that had similar policies. The problem was Tattnell Square's historic mission statement. Tattnell Square was the only Baptist church in Georgia located on a Baptist college campus, giving it a much higher profile than other segregationist churches. Baptists were outraged that the church's decision might hinder the spread of the gospel, both on Mercer's campus and in foreign lands.

On September 25, the congregation met to vote on the future of Thomas Holmes, Douglas Johnson, and music director Douglas Jones. Unknown to them at the time, Sam Oni stood outside the church, trying to make one last plea for the congregation to think about the message they were sending the world. The doors blocked by two large deacons, Oni made his statement to the reporters gathered nearby, saying, "Do you not see the inconsistency of what you are doing? You send

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<sup>121</sup> "Tattnell Decision Affects Many" *The Christian Index*, August 25, 1966, p. 6.

missionaries to my land to tell me about the love of God, and then when I come to your land I do not find this same love in your hearts. Does God not love in the same way here? Do you not care if my people go to hell?" When police officers came to remove him from the premises, he left saying he would not be back, "The world will see what is going on – the empty mockery in that holy of holies."<sup>122</sup> The three men were ousted by a vote of 259 to 189 and released the following statement to the press:

We can feel only sorrow at this action of the Tattnell Square Baptist Church in discharging us from our positions. Not sorrow for ourselves, but sorrow that a church with such a distinguished history of Christian service, and with such a great opportunity for the future, has allowed itself to be shattered over the issue of the seating of all persons who desire to worship in our sanctuary. This church is blessed with many dedicated Christians. It is our hope that these people will now devote their energies toward rebuilding the church.<sup>123</sup>

Following the church's decision, Holmes received more than 200 communications from all over the world, many from missionaries who believed that what happened at Tattnell Square was detrimental to the global Christian cause.<sup>124</sup> Local Christians also criticized the message Tattnell Square sent to non-Christians by supporting segregation. A Georgia Baptist, identifying himself only as S.S.G. wrote:

... Recognition is made of the fact that Baptist people and churches are united in a common bond of faith, fellowship and service, and that the influence and witness of Baptists everywhere is adversely affected by conflict within a church or denominational body. Strife is destructive and does not serve the best interest of a Christian body.

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<sup>122</sup> Holmes, Ashes for Breakfast, 17.

<sup>123</sup> "Tattnell Square Ousts Ministers," The Christian Index, September 29, 1966, p. 7.

<sup>124</sup> "Ouster Gets Worldwide Reaction," The Christian Index, October 6, 1966 p. 5.

It is well that in humility we recognize that we have not been successful in dealing with some of the most difficult social problems of our time. We affirm the universality of the gospel and the brotherhood of believers.

With concern for our brethren in trouble, and for the effectiveness of our Baptist witness, may we pray for increased wisdom, for a fuller measure of compassion, and for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in dealing with problems which defy solution until resolved in the spirit of the Lord Jesus.<sup>125</sup>

The Atlanta Ministerial Alliance released a statement supporting Holmes, as did Mercer's President Harris. Harris told The Atlanta Constitution, "The recent trauma at the Tattnell Square Baptist Church of summarily choosing to cut off the life of its ministers, who favored seating a Negro student in its worships service, its not only an act of savagery, but also a denial of the relevancy of Jesus Christ as Savior in 20<sup>th</sup> Century life."<sup>126</sup> Embarrassed by the actions of the church, Mercer began severing ties to the church that had served its campus for 75 years. In time, Tattnell Square Baptist Church relocated to suburbs and opened a Christian Academy. In its Centennial celebration history, church historians merely state, "The widespread and far reaching social changes of this period [the sixties] had their effects on this church, and on September 25, 1966, the pastor, associate pastor and minister of music ended their association with the church."<sup>127</sup>

For those familiar with the history of southern churches during the Civil Rights movement, the Tattnell Square's decision to get rid of their ministerial staff comes as little surprise. While national denominations often took an official stance in support of civil rights activists, and certainly of new laws, their formal position

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<sup>125</sup> "Macon Church Needs Our Prayers," The Christian Index, October 13, 1966 p. 6.

<sup>126</sup> "Mercer Comments on Church's Decision," The Atlanta Constitution, September 28, 1966, p. A8

<sup>127</sup> History of Tattnell Square Baptist Church – 100 years, 10.

rarely translated to the attitudes of individual congregations. As far as the Georgia Southern Baptist Convention was concerned, the opinion of the national convention did not even extend to the state level. In 1956, the Convention's Social Service Commission recommended Georgia Baptists accept the Brown vs. Board decision and cultivate an atmosphere in which public schools could comply with laws requiring integration. The state convention rejected the suggestions by a vote of three to one.<sup>128</sup> Church leaders balanced precariously on the edge of a cliff as they struggled to negotiate the official stances of the denomination and the sentiments of those in the pew.<sup>129</sup> Many ministers were more liberal than their church members, but they were muzzled by strong feelings of congregational authority and independence found in many southern churches. It was common for preachers who spoke against segregation to find themselves without a pulpit as angry deacons decided it better to exorcize leadership than risk splitting the church into warring factions.<sup>130</sup>

What catches the attention when looking Tattnell Square's ousting of Holmes is not that it happened; in some ways, such a decision was inevitable given the church's history. Rather, it is the large number of people who supported Holmes and the black students that draws notice. More than a hundred church members voted to open the church doors to anyone willing to come, regardless of race. Almost twice that number voted to keep Holmes in his pastoral position. As little as ten years before, both positions would have been incomprehensible. There were

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<sup>128</sup> Manis, *Southern Civil Religions*, 70.

<sup>129</sup> Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 50.

<sup>130</sup> Holmes, *Ashes for Breakfast*, 126.

still plenty of people in the pews who used the Bible to justify their racism, but their arguments increasingly held less water as the way Southern Baptists thought about Christian brotherhood began to change. Following Holmes' dismissal, someone painted a bed sheet that read, "Jesus loves the little children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight" and hung it over the church's bulletin board.<sup>131</sup> Mercer students reacted by avoiding the church, and almost a hundred members of the congregation left to create a new church where they hoped to create an atmosphere that welcomed all. Such progress may have been scarce and long overdue, but it did represent a radical shift in the traditional view that Christianity was compatible with southern culture.

According to Glen Feldman, "The history of the South is, in many respects, the story of an ongoing clash – a centuries-old conflict now, between progress and tradition, change and continuity, reform opposed to reaction."<sup>132</sup> Tattnell Square Baptist Church got caught in that conflict. When Mercer chose to integrate rather than let others question its commitment to Christian principles of brotherhood, the church turned its back on its responsibility. The church's name was dragged through the mud by press from around the world and many accused it of causing irreparable harm to the Christian message. Ironically, it seems the church learned little from its experience. As it moved towards the end of the millennium, it continued to operate under segregationist thinking. It created a Christian Academy, a private Christian school where children did not have to worry about the threat of

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>132</sup> Glenn Feldman, "The Status Quo Society, the Rope of Religion, and the New Racism," *Politics and Religion in the White South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

integration and moved away from a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly populated by minorities. One wonders if they ever listened to the hymn they started back in 1966 as a black man stood barred from the building, trying desperately to give them a message about the face of Christ they were showing to the world.

...

O Master, from the mountainside,  
Make haste to heal the hearts of pain;  
Among these restless throngs abide;  
O tread the city's streets again,

Till sons of men shall learn thy love  
And follow where thy feet have trod;  
Till glorious from thy heav'n above  
Shall come the city of our God.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> North, "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life."

## CONCLUSION

### “WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN?”

On June 20, 1995, one hundred and fifty years after southern church leaders converged on Augusta, Georgia to found a new denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution renouncing its racism and apologizing for its heritage rooted in defense of slavery. The resolution rejected any biblical justification for slavery or segregation used in the past, stating in part “Racism profoundly distorts our understanding of Christian morality, leading some Southern Baptists to believe that racial prejudice and discrimination are compatible with the Gospel...we affirm the Bible’s teaching that every human life is sacred, is of equal and immeasurable worth, made in God’s image, regardless of race or ethnicity.”<sup>134</sup> The resolution encouraged Southern Baptists to be aware of individual and systematic racism and to work to eradicate in all forms within the denomination. Since 1974, the greatest growth in the denomination has been among minority groups who now make up about eighteen percent of the Convention’s membership. Today, according to Andrew Manis, “virtually no Southern Baptists disagree with the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ruled racial segregation unconstitutional. Others will say that segregation was unchristian, something their forebears from the 1950s and ‘60s would have been loath to admit...the liberals won

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<sup>134</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention,” Southern Baptist Convention, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=899>.

the war, though at the time they lost most of the battles.”<sup>135</sup> There is a sense that we have entered a “post-racial” age and that the SBC has broken the cycle of violence that its intense allegiance to the South and the Lost Cause condoned.

While such thinking may be idealistic given that the majority of Southern Baptist Churches remain predominately white, it does reflect a trend that began following WWII. One would be hard put to find a church willing to withhold membership from someone based on race. The Biblically-based arguments of black Civil Rights leaders placed the problem of racism and segregation on the doorsteps of white churches, requiring Southern Christians to reevaluate their interpretation of the church’s role in society. Most Southern Baptist churches did not get involved in Civil Rights, but the theological arguments of southern Blacks penetrated the Baptist consciousness, creating an uncertainty that the commitment to White Supremacy was morally right. Gunnar Myrdal, author of *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, wrote in 1944, “The conservative southerner is not so certain as he sometimes sounds. He is a split personality. Part of his heart belongs to the American Creed.”<sup>136</sup> The Civil Rights Movement succeeded because it forced the white south to acknowledge and justify the double consciousness. Over time, the American and Christian creed won out.

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<sup>135</sup> Manis, “Dying From the Neck Up,” 34.

<sup>136</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 461-62.



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