

Jim Crow Ordained: White and Black Christianity in the Civil Rights South

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"God wanted white people to live alone," urged the official newspaper of the White Citizens' Councils of America, instructing children of the late-1950s South. "And He wanted colored people to live alone.... The white men built America for you," the newspaper continued. "White men built the United States so they could make their rules.... God has made us different. And God knows best."¹ Religion held a dual role in Southern society. While churches maintained a vested interest in the status quo and traditional values, Christians in the South generally believed in divine justice, and the fundamental goodness of man carried influence among social reformers and activists. Religion remained the most significant organizing principle of the Civil Rights Movement, and Southern civil rights leaders constantly cited biblical mandates for equality to justify their cause and to convince their oppressors of wrongdoing. The oppressors, however, steeped their segregationist message and policy with quotes from the very same Bible.²

Morality could be used as a rationalization for discrimination, but also as a motivating force for organizing action. Robert N. Bellah argued that

¹ Anonymous, "A Manual for Southerners," *The Citizens' Council*, February 1957, 1, 4; James Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," *Journal of Southern History* 30/1 (February 1964): 12.

² The true role of religion in activist politics has been widely debated, with social theorists such as Gunnar Myrdal arguing that religion pacified black protest and focused black attention on otherworldly rather than immediate issues, while scholars such as Daniel Thompson emphasize the use of the black church as a vehicle of organization and social protest. Gary T. Marx, "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy Among Negroes?" *American Sociological Review* 32/1 (February 1967): 64–65; Jane Cassels Record and Wilson Record, "Ideological Forces and the Negro Protest," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 357/1 (January 1965): 92; Frank S. Loesch, *The Protestant Church and the Negro: A Pattern of Segregation* (1948; reprint, Westport CT: Negro Universities Press, 1971) 50; Rodney Stark, "Class, Radicalism, and Religious Involvement," *American Sociological Review* 29/5 (October 1964): 698; Richard Rose, "On the Priorities of Citizenship in the Deep South and Northern Ireland," *Journal of Politics* 38/2 (May 1976): 258–59; Christopher Beckham, "The Paradox of Religious Segregation: White and Black Baptists in Western Kentucky, 1855–1900," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 97/3 (Summer 1999): 322.

social tradition and practice created a de facto American civil religion that existed concurrently with, but apart from, actual religious communities. This civil religion set societal mores and gave Americans an idea of correct behavior. While the white and black religious communities diverged at the issue of race equality, for instance, both communities could acknowledge a correlation between church membership and community standing, or that general adherence to biblical principles generally kept a proponent in line with American legal principles.³

The religious and social beliefs of US churchgoers, however, were not uniform. A 1963 survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center demonstrated that white integrationist attitudes were most prominent in the moderate religionists, while opposition to the integration manifested itself most plainly in the polar extremes of religious dedication.⁴ There has never been a consistent American ethic. Civil rights activists and members of the White Citizens' Councils, for instance, certainly had different "American Dreams," and both groups extracted vindication from similar faiths, causing each other to fully perceive the "dark side" of its belief system.⁵ Any vindication of one position was necessarily a denunciation of the other. In such instances, the Bible was essentially battling itself. Religion was a multipurpose weapon in those ideological struggles and lent legiti-

³ Record, "Ideological Forces and the Negro Protest," 90; and Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96/1 (Winter 1967): 5. In this atmosphere, the church became the original and primary societal stratifier in post-bellum America. Beckham, "The Paradox of Religious Segregation," 321–22.

⁴ In 1964, approximately 90 percent of African Americans and 65 percent of whites were Protestant. Paul B. Sheatsley, "White Attitudes Toward the Negro," *Daedalus* 93/1 (Winter 1966): 228–29. Also see the chart on p. 226; Norval Glenn, "Negro Religion and Negro Status in the United States," in *Religion, Culture and Society*, ed. Louis Schneider (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964) 623. Also see the table on p. 624. Also see, <http://norc.uchicago.edu>.

macy to a pervasive Protestant Americanism. The ability of the Bible to justify Jim Crow as well as to encourage full equality demonstrated the problem of using such a malleable and cryptic document as a foundation for argument, but the collective faith of both races was not radically erased when shown through the looking glass.

Inherently, religious groups participating in the American civil rights debate clung to their Bibles as written documentation that God was on their side. The most common biblical defense used by segregationists involved the story of Ham, cursed son of Noah, whose descendants settled in modern-day Ethiopia. Segregationists argued that since God cursed Ham, and Ham's descendants were black, then that curse became generationally and biologically adaptable to all proceeding manifestations of the black bloodline. Southern preachers such as Carey Daniel, of the First Baptist Church of West Dallas, Texas, proclaimed from the pulpit that the "nations" formed from these different tribes were actually "races" to be kept separate and distinct. Anti-segregationists argued that biblical mandates for the restoration of world unity mitigated any claims to the story of Ham. Leviticus 19:18 required biblical adherents to "Love your neighbor as yourself," and integrationist thinkers such as Daisuke Kitagawa, executive secretary of the Protestant Episcopal Church's Domestic Mission, argued that this mandate included both strangers and acquaintances.⁶

Segregationists also posed arguments based on the idea that God deemed the Hebrews his "chosen people," emphasizing the demonstration

⁵ The Citizens' Councils, though statistical minorities throughout the South, served as both mainstream symbols of white resistance and active defenders of the anti-integration ideology. Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1944–64* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971) 159; Record, "Ideological Forces and the Negro Protest," 90–91.

⁶ In actuality the original story of Canaan did not even include a father named Ham. Ham's presence was a later editorial addition, which gave the false impression that the sons of Ham were born to be slaves. Andrew M. Manis, "Dying From the Neck Up: Southern Baptist Resistance to the Civil Rights Movement," *Baptist History and Heritage* 34/1 (Winter 1999) Informac pdf file. Article A94160905, 1–10, http://web2.infotrac-custom.com/pdfserve/get_item/1/S1d1829w6_1/SB729_01.pdf, accessed 24 March 2003: 3 [page numbers refer to pdf pages, rather than original bound journal pages.]; anonymous, "Pastor Says 'Bible Orders Color Line,'" *The Citizens' Council*, May 1956, 4; R. Tandy McConnell, "Religion, Segregation, and the Ideology of Cooperation: A Southern Baptist Church Responds to the Brown Decision," *Southern Studies* 4/1 (Spring 1993): 22; I. A. Newby, "Epilogue: A Rebuttal to Segregationists," in *The Development of Segregationist Thought* (Homewood IL: The Dorsey Press, 1968) 171; David L. Chappell, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," *Journal of American Studies* 32/1 (April 1998): 241, 244–45; Mother Kathryn Sullivan, "Sacred Scripture and Race," *Religious Education* 59/1 (January–February 1964): 11; Daisuke Kitagawa, "The Church and Race Relations in Biblical Perspective," *Religious Education* 59/1 (January–February 1964): 7, 8–9.

of a creational favoritism. The Apostle Paul, however, refuted any calls to Hebrew superiority or divine partisanship by claiming that his God was the God of everyone. "He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth," wrote Paul. Liberal integrationists understandably stressed this passage. The Bible's dual mandates allowed each group to ground its case in scripture and emphasized the inability of the book to support reasoned arguments for or against segregation. Paul's work often became the backbone of segregationist versus integrationist argument. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul stated that all were God's children, but in his letter to the Ephesians, he encouraged slaves to serve their human masters as if they were serving Christ. Statements such as "watch out for those who create dissensions and obstacles, in opposition to the teaching that you learned" offered fodder for segregationists in the White Citizens' Council journal *The Citizen*, but could also theoretically represent the other side. God "is not the author of disorder, but of peace" offered additional, seemingly innocuous advice that both groups, particularly the segregationists, recruited for their cause. These arguments and others stemmed from the same book, which ostensibly stemmed from the same author, but were inconsistent in their respective uses and reuses for various ends. When God asked, "Are ye not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?" America awkwardly answered with contradictory responses.⁷

Sociological studies conducted in the 1940s and 1950s generally described church-attending communities more opposed to integration than their non-church-attending counterparts. Thomas F. Pettigrew's 1959 analysis demonstrated a proportional relationship between church attendance and racial intolerance, but most sociologists concluded that the greatest level of tolerance existed at polar extremes—avid church attenders as well as non-attenders formed a faction of racial acceptance, while the

majority of churchgoers tended toward segregationist attitudes.⁸ The church developed an ideology based around the desires and feelings of the people committed to membership. The white Southern Protestant church was an agent of Southern society at large, tied as much to community fellowship and social stability as it was to spiritual endeavor. That church's rejection of integration was not simple hypocrisy, but a conscious choice of the civil religion.⁹

Religion was both a reason for and product of the prevailing culture. "Despite assertions in favor of compulsory integration," stated William Workman in his 1960 defense of segregated society, *The Case for the South*, "a massive wall of resistance has arisen within the framework of many of the churches themselves." Historian David L. Chappell has demonstrated in the book *A Stone of Hope* that Workman's claim was largely bluster, but the Southern Baptist majority did prefer and work for segregation. A 1964 study demonstrated that a minister's social activism, or lack thereof, remained fundamentally proportional to the activity of his college-aged congregants. The biblical literalism of conservative Protestantism promoted obedience and submission to religious as well as to secular authority figures, thereby placing any thought of rejecting the established societal norms out of the realm of possibility. Therefore, among Protestant Christians, belief in the Bible as the final word of the Lord had an inversely proportional relationship with the likelihood of their becoming involved in any form of social protest. Southern Baptist Pastor Wallie Amos Criswell, at a 1956 South Carolina Baptist Convention, referred to integrationist reformers as "infidels," and this conservatism in local church life trumped any progressive liberal leanings within groups such as the Southern Baptist

⁷ Deuteronomy 7:7, 10:14–15; Ezekiel 16:3–14; Acts 17:26–27; Galatians 3:26–28; Amos 9:7; Ephesians 6:5 NAB. Romans 16:17 NIV; Medford Evans, "A Methodist Declaration of Conscience on Racial Segregation," *The Citizen* 7/4 (January 1963): 12–13; Albert S. Thomas, "A Defense of the Christian South," in *Essays on Segregation*, ed. T. Robert Ingram (Houston: St. Thomas Press, 1960) 70–71; Henry T. Egger, "What Meaneth This: There Is No Difference," in *Essays on Segregation*, 27–29; John H. Knight, "The NCC's Delta Project—An Experiment in Revolution," *The Citizen* 8/9 (June 1964): 9; anonymous, "Pastor Says 'Bible Orders Color Line,'" 4.

⁸ Elizabeth M. Eddy, "Student Perspectives on the Southern Church," *Phylon* 25/4 (Fourth Quarter 1964): 369. For examples of various American sociological studies, see Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Regional Differences in Anti-Negro Prejudice," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59/1 (July 1959): 28–36; Bruno Bettelheim and Morris Janowitz, "Ethnic Tolerance: A Function of Social and Personal Control," *American Journal of Sociology* 55/2 (September 1949): 137–45; Robert W. Friedrichs, "Christians and Residential Exclusion: An Empirical Study of a Northern Dilemma," *Journal of Social Issues* 15/4 (1959): 14–23.

⁹ Samuel S. Hill, "Southern Protestantism and Racial Integration," *Religion in Life* 33/2 (Summer 1964): 426–27; David Edwin Harrell, *White Sects and Black Men in the Recent South* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971) ix–x, 3–4, 18, 47; Manis, "Dying From the Neck Up," 2, 7; Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 162, 164–65.

Convention. As the Civil Rights Movement grew, white Southern churches at national conferences replaced rigid demands for strict segregation with vague references to abstract concepts of an integrated society.¹⁰

D. M. Nelson, president of the Southern Baptist-affiliated Mississippi College, argued in 1955 for segregation's Christian foundation against integration's communistic tendencies, declaring the latter position "is untenable and cannot be sustained either by the Word or the works of God." Eight years later, delegates to the 1963 Mississippi Baptist Convention refused to ratify a statement favoring universal good will. In response, a Nigerian missionary living in Mississippi, frustrated by domestic action, wrote the Convention a letter arguing that, "Communists do not need to work against the preaching of the Gospel here; you are doing it quite adequately."¹¹

The religious activism moving through American society in the late 1950s and early 1960s was not the religion familiar to conservative critics. Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal argued that there existed a significant "American Dilemma," in which the practice of democracy did not match the commonly assumed ethic of equality and justice—the "ever-raging conflict" between the traditionally understood "American Creed, where the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts," and the reality of "personal and local interests," "group prejudice against particular persons or types of people," and "all sorts of

¹⁰ Joseph H. Fichter, "American Religion and the Negro," *Daedalus* 94/4 (Fall 1965): 1094; William D. Workman, Jr., *The Case for the South* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1960) 101; David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Liberalism and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); James F. Findlay, "Religion and Politics in the Sixties: The Churches and the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *The Journal of American History* 77/1 (June 1990): 66; Senate, "Civil Rights Act of 1964," Richard Russell, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, 110, pt. 11 (18 June 1964): 14300; Gordon F. DeJong and Joseph E. Faulkner, "The Church, Individual Religiosity, and Social Justice," *Sociological Analysis* 28/1 (Spring 1967): 35–36. Also see the charts on pp. 40 and 41; Darren E. Sherkat and T. Jean Blocker, "The Political Development of Sixties' Activists: Identifying the Influence of Class, Gender and Socialization on Protest Participation," *Social Forces* 72/3 (March 1994): 823, 833; Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 188; David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999) 164–65, 168–69; Charles W. Eagles, "The Closing of Mississippi Society: Will Campbell, *The \$64,000 Question*, and Religious Emphasis Week at the University of Mississippi," *Journal of Southern History* 67/2 (May 2001): 335.

¹¹ Anonymous, "Conflicting Views On Segregation," *The Citizens' Council*, October 1955, 4; Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," 9; anonymous, "Christian Love and Segregation," *The Citizens' Council*, August 1956, 1–2; anonymous, "Pinks in the Pulpit," *The Citizens' Council*, December 1956, 2; anonymous, "Methodist Patriots Expose Pinks," *The Citizens' Council*, August 1957, 1; Thomas R. Waring, "Aroused Churchmen Are Studying Leftist Trends," *The Citizen* 6/7 (April 1962): 11.

miscellaneous wants, impulses, and habits." White religious communities that failed to respond to civil rights imperatives could deflect guilt and take solace in the shared ideals of fellow congregants and the relative inaction of the ministerial community. "The moral struggle," wrote Myrdal, "goes on within people and not only between them." Meanwhile, segregationists went relatively unchecked, arguing that the North had more racial problems than the South, and warning against "pseudo-Christian panaceas which produce only trouble." "Our neighbor's sin always looks larger than ours," declared Alabama Presbyterian minister John H. Knight in 1964, "especially if our neighbor lives in the South."¹²

White ministerial trepidation empowered black ministers to increased militancy, a point made plainly clear in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "Letter from Birmingham Jail": "In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro," wrote King, "I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities." Civil rights leaders and segregation defenders shared the common belief that God supported them and fully backed and encompassed their worldview, but the groups held differing conceptions of the religious endgame. Civil rights leaders saw a pluralistic society of communal equality as a viable Christian desire, while the religion of segregation defenders dictated the desirability of individual liberty and traditional values. Integration, then, became friend or foe dependent on the offering plate into which one dropped his or her donations.¹³

The leaders of the Civil Rights Movement did not emerge unanimously, and being a black minister did not automatically qualify one as a civil rights leader. Many preachers, such as Reverend W. J. Winston of

¹² Homer H. Hyde, "By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them," *American Mercury* 94/459–461 (Summer 1962): 35–36; Homer H. Hyde, "By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them," *American Mercury* 94/462 (August 1962): 22; David L. Chappell, "The Divided Mind of the Southern Segregationists," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 82/1 (Spring 1998): 50; Henry Clark, "Churchmen and Residential Desegregation," *Review of Religious Research* 5/3 (Spring 1964): 158, 161–62; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, twentieth anniversary ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) lxvii; Ernest Q. Campbell, "Moral Discomfort and Racial Segregation—An Example of the Myrdal Hypothesis," *Social Forces* 39/3 (March 1961): 228–29; Knight, "The NCC's Delta Project," 8.

¹³ Chappell, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," 240, 251; S. Jonathan Bass, ed., "A Documentary Edition of the 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" in *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; Andrew Michael Manis, *Black and White Baptists and Civil Rights, 1947–1957* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987) 106.

Baltimore's New Metropolitan Baptist Church, continued to support doctrines of patience, focusing their calls on heavenly equality and divine justice. Activist black theology, however, argued that equality could probably be attained on Earth and that the unequal sector of society had a duty to fight for that equality. More reticent ministers responded by claiming that activist preachers in protests and jails did more harm to religious institutions than good. Martin Luther King, Jr., however, proved that ministers could make a successful transition into political activism, and that political issues could be cast in a moral and religious light. "First and foremost we are American citizens, and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its means," said King in his first major civil rights address, delivered in December 1955, at Montgomery's Holt Street Baptist Church. As the oratory evolved and the speech progressed, King's message began to shift. "I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are a Christian people," said King. "We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest." King moved focus from legality to conscience. Of course, a declaration of principles by a minister did not necessarily come with a requirement that his congregation agree with him. African-American churchgoers responded by making decisions influenced by the clergy, but not solely with their mandate.¹⁴

"Any religion," argued King in 1958, "that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion." Liberation, in King's view, could only be achieved through suffering. "Unmerited suffering," wrote King in 1958, "is redemptive." Suffering would not only lead to black equality, subsequently erasing the inherent inferiority complex present in a dispossessed

¹⁴ David Milobaky, "Power from the Pulpit: Baltimore's African-American Clergy, 1950-1970," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 89/3 (Fall 1994): 279-81; Joseph L. Scott, "Social Class Factors Underlying the Civil Rights Movement," *Phylon* 27/2 (second quarter 1966): 140. Also see the chart on page 140; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., at Holt Street Baptist Church," in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle, 1954-1990*, ed. Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Hill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 48-49.

people, but it would attack the conscience of the white populace. King understood the necessity of self-respect often promoted by the black power movement, but maintained that bitterness only begat bitterness and would lead to unnecessary confrontation rather than to beneficial negotiation.¹⁵

The 1956 Religious Emphasis Week, an annual University of Mississippi event that featured speakers on religious topics from throughout the nation, uninvited Alvin Kershaw after the preacher at a separate function noted his support for the NAACP and for the principle of desegregation. The lack of pluralism in Mississippi created a closed society that required religious organizations and representatives to accept, if not openly endorse, segregation. The crisis generated many editorials from local newspapers, reprinted in the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, arguing that only truly Christian ministers merited a place on the dais at Religious Emphasis Week and that such ministers understood segregation was the product of biblical mandate. One such editorial urged that only ministers "who know that segregation is of God" should be invited to the annual program, while another editorial compared inviting NAACP supporters to Ole Miss to "coddling a viper in your own bosom." Morton King, Jr., chair of the Ole Miss Sociology and Anthropology Department, resigned in protest, and Duncan Gray, Jr., an Episcopal reverend in Oxford, acknowledged that silent religious communities were playing a role in propagating segregationist policy. Interpreting a direct threat, Ole Miss never held Religious Emphasis Week again.¹⁶

Two years prior, in 1954, the Supreme Court desegregated America's schools with its *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, and the Southern Baptist Convention responded with a recognition of the "Christian principles of equal justice and love for all men," along with a declaration of tacit support. Vigorous debate and much opposition ensued, and the majority of

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) 28; William Augustus Banner, "An Ethical Basis for Racial Understanding," *Religious Education* 59/1 (January-February 1964): 18; Marc H. Imenbaum, "The American Negro: Myths and Realities," *Religious Education* 59/1 (January-February 1964): 34.

¹⁶ Bagley, "The Closing of Mississippi Society," 348; Ernest M. Limbo, "Religion and the Closed Society: Religious Emphasis Week, 1956, at the University of Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History* 64/1 (Spring 2002): 2, 10, 15; Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," 3, 7, 32.

letters-to-the-editor in the various state Baptist newspapers, such as the *Alabama Baptist* and the *Mississippi Baptist*, clearly described a local Christianity that did not recognize that legal decision as legitimate. The 1954 Georgia Baptist Convention adopted a resolution endorsing the necessity of peace and a generic form of justice, but only after an extended floor fight. The year of the *Brown* decision also witnessed the Southern branch of the Presbyterian Church and its Northern counterpart fail in an attempted merger. Racial politics hovered over the stalled negotiations. The debates over segregation never congealed into one unified defense or damnation of the practice. In the face of an active black religious community arguing desperately that the Bible mandated equality, white Southern denominations reacted with either combative hyperbole or deafening silence.¹⁷

The white Southern churches, as institutions, attempted to balance a devotion to principles and a budget that required local contributions. In the end, the financial perpetuation of the physical organization won the day. Of course, formal segregation of Southern Protestant churches was never enacted because there was no need for it. Each congregation was unrecognizable to the other. Segregation in housing only exacerbated the segregation in churches, because church attendance normally revolved around neighborhoods and social circles. Residential patterns formed not only along color lines, but, as a 1961 Canadian study demonstrated, along religious lines within that broader color category. Churches formed in neighborhoods, from groups of like-minded believers who sustained the church's existence through attendance and financial support. White Southern ministers often turned from civil rights activism due to job security concerns, or they abandoned their pulpits in the face of a congregation hostile to integration. White civil rights activist Will Campbell quit his job

¹⁷ Manis, "Dying From the Neck Up," 2; David M. Reimers, "The Race Problem and Presbyterian Union," *Church History* 31/2 (June 1962): 203; Benton Johnson, "Do Holiness Sects Socialize in Dominant Values?" *Social Forces* 39/4 (May 1961): 309-10; Joseph A. Tomberlin, "Florida Whites and the *Brown* Decision of 1954," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 51/1 (July 1972): 31; Chappell, "The Divided Mind of Southern Segregationists," 47-48.

as pastor of the Taylor Baptist Church in Taylor, Louisiana, in 1954, when faced with a congregation vehemently opposed to integration.¹⁸

During the 1957 crisis over the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, local Protestant preachers acknowledged the right of Christians to disagree over the policy of integration, and those ministers also made public pleas for prayer. "Good Christians can honestly disagree on the question of segregation and integration," said one participant in a community-wide prayer service held in response to the Little Rock crisis. "But we can all join together in prayers for guidance, that peace may return to our city." In April 1961, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, invited Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak. Many churches throughout the South publicly disagreed with the seminary's actions, the loudest denunciations emanating from Alabama. Later, following the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963, the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee proposed a sympathy resolution encouraging Christian unity, but the Convention's participants soundly defeated the measure. The politics of endorsing such a proposal were simply untenable. Each convention member represented a white congregation, most in the South, and for many of those congregants back home, an activist black

¹⁸ The historical social situation of Southern whites and blacks necessarily influenced the tendency of social reticence from white congregations and social activism from their black counterparts. Church segregation originally manifested itself through social mores, but as the twentieth century progressed, both white and black congregants began to recognize value in the operation of an independent religious body that offered the opportunity for free expression and a "home base" for organization and community activities. Glenn, "Negro Religion and Negro Status in the United States," 630; Hill, "Southern Protestantism and Racial Integration," 423; Ernest Q. Campbell and Thomas Pettigrew, "Racial and Moral Crisis: The Role of Little Rock Ministers," *American Journal of Sociology* 64/5 (March 1959): 509; David M. Reimers, *White Protestantism and the Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 158; James Reston, "The Churches, the Synagogues, and the March on Washington," *Religious Education* 59/1 (January-February 1964): 5; Fichter, "American Religion and the Negro," 1087, 1089; Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Wherein the Church Has Failed in Race," *Religious Education* 59/1 (January-February 1964): 64, 72-73; Liston Pope, "The Negro and Religion in America," *Review of Religious Research* 5/3 (Spring 1964): 148, 149; Peter Smith, "Anglo-American Religion and Hegemonic Change in the World System, c. 1870-1980," *The British Journal of Sociology* 37/1 (March 1986): 99; Roland Gammon, "Why Are We Changing Our Churches?" *American Mercury* 86/412 (May 1958): 66; Gordon Darroch and Wilfred Marston, "Ethnic Differentiation: Ecological Aspects of a Multidimensional Concept," *International Migration Review* 4/1 (Autumn 1969): 79, 80, 90; Mark Newman, "Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1980," in *Southern Landscapes*, ed. Tony Badger, Walter Edgar, and Jan Nordby Gretlund (Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verlag, 1996) 186, 188-89.

church like Sixteenth Street was practicing something that they could no longer recognize as viable religion.¹⁹

After the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee drafted a "Statement Concerning the National Crisis," which, in part, acknowledged "our share of the responsibility" for the creation of the hostile environment that fostered the murder. No states in the Deep South reaffirmed the "Statement." Black churches were able to use the incident to draw the black community in and mitigate prior differences among factions and groups, whereas white church membership fluctuated throughout the period as the different sects continued to waffle on support or denial of segregation. This phenomenon led to a fundamental inability among white churches to muster support equal to their black counterparts, sustaining the devotional divide between the competing versions of religion and religious purpose.²⁰

A study by the National Opinion Research Center published in 1954 indicated that white support for integration generally hovered between 40 and 50 percent, with younger adults (aged 21 to 24) revealing the greatest acceptance of the practice and the elderly (age 65 and older) exhibiting the least. When support for integration was divided regionally, however, the results indicated no white Southern response rate above 20 percent. New findings by the National Opinion Research Center ten years later demonstrated an increase in both Northern and Southern support for integration, with Southern numbers reaching as high as 35 percent approval in the 25 to 45-year age range.²¹ Progress, it seemed, was slow but evident. An analysis of the findings of that organization and of a series of corresponding Gallup Polls by sociologist Paul Sheatsley demonstrated that, as of 1963, a younger generation of whites, whose formative years had witnessed *Brown*

¹⁹ Campbell and Pettigrew, "Racial and Moral Crisis," 510-11; Mark Newman, "The Arkansas Baptist State Convention and Desegregation, 1954-1968," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 56/3 (Autumn 1997): 300-301; Bill J. Leonard, "A Theology for Racism: Southern Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement," in *Southern Landscapes* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verlag, 1996) 168; Fichter, "American Religion and the Negro," 1089; Manis, "Dying From the Neck Up," 5.

²⁰ Manis, "Dying From the Neck Up," 5-6; Milboosky, "Power from the Pulpit," 285; Chappell, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," 259.

²¹ Herbert Hyman and Paul Sheatsley, "Attitudes Toward Desegregation," *Scientific American* 195/6 (December 1956): 38; Herbert Hyman and Paul Sheatsley, "Attitudes Toward Desegregation," *Scientific American* 211/1 (July 1964): 23.

and its aftermath, comprised the majority of white civil rights proponents in the South. A growing media in the 1950s and 1960s ensured that civil rights gains and losses would reach a wide scope of the population, offering each American the opportunity to evaluate the merits of segregation and integration arguments on his/her own. In essence, the white newspapers accomplished what the white churches could not—or would not.²²

Nancy Tatom Ammerman noted that many church membership lists dropped significantly during the Civil Rights Movement because of dissension among congregants and clergy. Some church members accepted that the movement as a viable religious action, while others saw traditional Southern religion as clear in advancing integration. White Southerners tried to squeeze everything possible from the old Southern civil religion, while black Southerners attempted to create a new civil religion within the black community to rally and organize adherents. Accordingly, both religions dictated acceptable feelings and behavior to congregants increasingly wary of the religion being practiced on the other side of the railroad tracks.²³ When one group did not recognize the values infusing an otherwise familiar biblical source as used by another group, the exchange was not unlike a believer's encounter with a non-believer. Each value system was unrecognizable to the other, yet the coexistence of the two groups in the South posed a fundamental threat to the existence of both. No biblical analysis would ever allow the activist, equalitarian relativism of, say, Martin Luther King, Jr., to accept that, "God wanted white people to live alone."

²² Sheatsley, "White Attitudes Toward the Negro," 223. Also see the tables on pages 222 and 224; Ammerman, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Clergy in a Southern Community," 339.

²³ Ammerman, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Clergy in a Southern Community," 339-40; Fichter, "American Religion and the Negro," 1086.