

**SOUTHERN BAPTIST FAITH IN BLACK AND WHITE AFTER
WORLD WAR II: AN EXAMINATION OF RECENT
MONOGRAPHIC LITERATURE**

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“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” So wrote the Apostle Paul to the Galatians and for over two millennia, communities of faithful Christian believers have struggled to define, internalize, and to live up to his seeming message of unity.¹ Baptists in the American South, where race and religion have historically shaped beliefs and ideals, have struggled with applying this claim of the faith in their world. Theologically, falling short of the behavior mark can be ascribed to sin. Historians, however, tend to look for empirical explanations for behavior in the tapestry of race and faith in the American South.

Scholarly studies of white and black Baptists and their spiritual strivings in a social context provide keys to understanding the power and limits of religion and its ability to shape, sanctify, critique, and reflect the larger social order. In the past decade, a variety of scholars have added new insights into this task to understand the ongoing quest to be Baptist in the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights eras. These studies highlight the racial distinctiveness in the understanding of religion, scripture, and race, especially during and after the Civil Rights movement. African Americans sought to use scripture and a faith in a personal, living God to buttress their claims for social justice; some whites agreed, but other whites believed that the purpose of religion was to elucidate the path to salvation, not effect temporal social justice. These operational boundaries in their approach to religion seemed to secure their hegemonic position in the South’s social order.

Determining a defensible conceptual framework poses an important first hurdle in this effort to comprehend the evolving and protean story of race and religion in the recent South. Andrew W. Manis of Macon State College has spent the past twenty five years at this task. His *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict* places the race/religious declension in racially divergent views of civil religion. Applying the term first articulated by Robert Bellah in 1967, Manis operationally defines civil religion as “that cluster of mytho-cultural meanings (or symbols) by which Americans represent and communicate the significance and purpose of their national experience . . . and to a lesser degree about the South’s role in [fulfilling and defining] that national purpose in religious language.”² As believers, church members, and citizens, African-American and white southerners insisted that the United States “live out the true meaning of its creed” but differed widely on just what that creed was. In Manis’ view, Southern Baptists were part of the post-World War II liberal consensus in opposing Communism abroad and

¹ Galatians 3:28, King James Version.

² Andrew W. Manis, *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict: Civil Rights and the Culture Wars* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), 2.

particularistic in their opposition to Catholicism at home. These whites saw the United States “as a Christian democracy” fulfilling its task “as the guardian of freedom and individual rights. For them, this constituted the ultimate meaning of the nation.”³

African-American Baptists, whom Manis studies denominationally through the prism of the National Baptist Convention, considered neither the Kremlin nor the papacy to be the core impediment to fulfilling the national destiny. Instead, Manis argues “National Baptists . . . carried an image of an America intimidated by national dilemma,” its unwillingness to confront race and socio-economic inequality. That original sin kept the United States from attaining its potential as a godly nation. Hence, National Baptists hailed the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision, while white Baptist were divided between a hesitant denominational leadership who urged patience and compliance and a laity too often engaged in massive resistance to its implementation.⁴

Southern Baptists melded their concerns about the changing racial landscape, and its overtones of loss of racial privilege, with alarm about the apparent secularization and decline of morality in popular culture, and creeping theological liberalism that seemed to underlay a too-permissive society. Hence, more theologically conservative Southern Baptists assumed control over the Southern Baptist Convention denominational-level structure and lent their support to the larger “Religious Right . . . Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party, . . . and [to the conservative elements] in the culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s.⁵

For Manis, the African American quest for social justice challenged the mental foundations, which Southern Baptists often considered rooted in scripture, that gave legitimacy to the social order. In his magisterial *A Stone of Hope*, historian David Chappell depicts African Americans relying on their own biblical traditions to undergird their quest to find justice in the post-World War II United States. In Chappell’s treatment, the racial declension rests on racially-distinctive views about post-war liberalism and social reform. As posited by both Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Vital Center*, and Gunnar Myrdal, in *An American Dilemma*, racial justice would inexorably follow explanations of the existence of racial inequality, especially in the political process, and its inconsistency with the perceived mission of the United States. African Americans, however, believed that both a prophetic voice declaiming and direct engagement challenging the Jim Crow social order was necessary before positive change would ensue. Relying on religion as an animating force, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s rejected whiggish notions of progress and looked to remake the moral landscape of the South, in part by being willing to suffer even more temporary barbarisms to effect long term change.⁶

A welter of activists—Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, Modjeska Simkins, James Lawson, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Lewis, and Robert Moses—spoke in a prophetic voice, a term perhaps best understood with an augmented cliché of speaking religiously-based moral truth to power. Injustice did not result from structural flaws, so much as from the fallen condition of humanity. Injustice came from evil and could be fundamentally corrected only with moral and

³ Ibid., 71, 67 (quotes).

⁴ Ibid., 92–103.

⁵ Ibid., 168.

⁶ David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8, 26–27, 83.

spiritual regeneration that would prod legal and cultural change. Hence, for many of its supporters the Civil Rights Movement was not a political movement with religious overtones, it was foremost a religious revival with important social and political implications.⁷

The moral language of condemnation and direct challenge to the social and political structures of Jim Crow by African American activists and their white supporters met rejection from virtually all southern white churches. Chappell highlights the confused and divided responses within the white ranks. Denominational level officials and some ministers consistently articulated a more progressive stance toward racial change than did the rank and file, and even the more vocal segregationists themselves did not agree on a common course of action to resist racial change.⁸ He notes that “the historically significant thing about white religion in the 1950s–60s is not the failure to join the Civil Rights movement. The significant thing, given that the church was probably as racist as the rest of the white South, is that it failed in any meaningful way to join the anti-civil rights movement,” although some individual communicants did.⁹ Put another way, Chappell contrasts the tepid response of southern religious denominations to the threats to the Jim Crow social order to the great vitriol and near unanimity in support of slavery against immediate abolitionism a century earlier.

Chappell’s explanation of the halting and divided response from Southern white Christendom is engaging and provocative. In part, religious differences did not require the same degree of defensiveness as the struggle to maintain slavery. White denominations actively sought to convert Africans on the mission fields and, hence, denominations were already engaged in the mental struggle to accommodate evangelical practices abroad with strict segregation at home. Secondly, segregated worship practices resulted in large part from African Americans’ choosing to fashion their own denominations after the Civil War that in turn caused a white backlash of racially restrictive membership. Therefore, racially distinct religious structures did not arise from the same positive law that created legal segregation between 1880 and 1915. Much segregation appeared, therefore, out of reach of state action. This fact, ironically, led to the realization among white southerners that a defense of societal segregation through vigorous exercises of states’ rights was insufficient, but could not agree on a composite strategy to defend their race-based mores. At the same time, however, whites assumed that African Americans preferred segregation; strong evidence to the contrary was unsettling, leaving many whites—ministers and laity alike—in a quandary about what to do. As anyone versed in the history of the movement can recall, individually and collectively, whites did many things to stop the Civil Rights Movement, but their degree of unanimity was not sufficient.¹⁰ Many whites, in Chappell’s apt metaphor, were like Gamaliel, the Pharisee, observing Jesus and his followers, adopting a wait and see attitude, while looking to Providence for guidance.¹¹

Chappell in no way intends to minimize the degree of violent opposition, often under the color of law, which African Americans had to endure. Similarly, Andrew Manis’s *Macon Black*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 53, 67–86, 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 122, 123, 125–130.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 155ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

and White: An Unutterable Separation in the American Century illustrates the complex mix of prophetic activism and continuing accommodation on the part of African Americans with the bigoted but bifurcated responses by whites in the Georgia Black Belt community of Macon, Georgia, home to a large “middle” class of African Americans and Georgia’s preeminent Southern Baptist school, Mercer University. It provides a nuanced case study of much of what Chappell and Manis have discussed elsewhere.

Two examples serve to illustrate the power of racism and the challenge of Christianity in turbulent times. Sam Oni, an African from Ghana, had converted to Christianity under the ministrations of a Mercer University trained missionary. He began to attend Mercer as a ministerial student in 1963. His presence invited a wide variety of responses from those who accepted him as a Christian brother to those who refused to permit him to become a member of Macon’s Vineville Baptist Church. In the following years, Mercer increasingly admitted African students, at one point enrolling three times more African and African American students than the much larger University of Georgia. By 1966, several of these students, along with white supporters, began to visit the Tattnall Square Baptist Church, the unofficial college church at Mercer. Many of its members refused to worship with blacks and, in the following weeks, the pastor, who supported Oni, had been fired, Oni was arrested by police for attempting to attend church, and the membership split, with the largest portion affirming a segregationist stance. At the same time, many Mercer students and other Georgia Baptists found the actions of Tattnall Square’s parishioners to be contrary to Christian principles. The solution for Tattnall Square’s membership was to relocate their church edifice to white North Macon, achieving through relocation and voluntary residential segregation a white-only congregation, in a location less likely to be infiltrated by black worshippers.¹²

Two important books that examine white Southern Baptists provide further illustration of the confused and tragic responses to the African American challenge to Jim Crow and the tradition of acceptance of the social order. Mark Newman’s *Getting Right With God* and Alan Scot Willis’ *All According to God’s Plan* paint in broad strokes how a socialization to racism and a commitment to Christianity vexed Southern Baptists. Newman contends that “the vast majority of Southern Baptists . . . favored Jim Crow” at the end of World War II.¹³ The tempest of racial change produced three distinct responses among Southern Baptists between 1945 and 1971: an espousal of equal opportunity within a segregated environment down to the articulation of the *Brown* decision; “incremental” acceptance of change from 1954 through 1964; and finally an abandonment of legal segregation because such “racism . . . [was] unchristian.”¹⁴ At no point, however, did Southern Baptists endorse racial integration. Willis’ study of missionary efforts develops similar themes, but shows how the genuine missionary impulse to convert Africans in Africa produced tensions between missionaries and convention level personnel on one hand and Baptist congregants on the other to temper societal racism in the United States, lest it threaten attempts to “make disciples” abroad. Willis employs H. Richard Niebuhr’s “Christ Transforming

¹² Andrew W. Manis, *Macon Black and White: An Unutterable Separation in the American Century* (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 2004), 224–232.

¹³ Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945–1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

Culture” to describe the missionaries and “Christ of Culture” to depict the local congregants.¹⁵ Over time, however, prodded by progressive convention level leaders and missionaries, the congregants came to accept the view that “segregation was a sin in the eyes of God.”¹⁶

Despite the increased affiliation of African American congregations with the Southern Baptist Convention, some 600 by 1980, the distance between reluctantly accepting the end of legal segregation and endorsing an integrated society remained vast. Like Chappell, Newman identifies confused and conflicting responses of Southern Baptists to social change. Even those willing to endorse *Brown* acquiesced only to its being the law of the land; when the era of “all deliberate speed” ended in 1969, many Baptists moved to the white suburbs or opted for private schools, rather than being compelled to comply with court-ordered busing to achieve desegregation of more urbanized school districts.¹⁷ Upon hearing of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968, Baptist state paper editors “condemned his murder, but many Baptists remained critical of his methods.”¹⁸ Some denominational leaders, seminary professors, prominent pastors, and Baptist Student Unions became increasingly sympathetic with the aims of the Civil Rights movement, but other Baptists formed Laymen’s Associations, which Newman describes as the “religious equivalent of the citizen’s councils,” to fight against desegregation.¹⁹

After 1971, Baptists continued their ambivalent responses to integration, with “apathy” becoming the apt description of the Southern Baptist Convention’s engagement with civil rights and race.²⁰ Although there remained a “remnant of segregationist sentiment” among church members, more churches had open membership policies, but few had black members. Neither state-level conventions nor the Southern Baptist Convention issued statements concerning secular public issues such as busing and affirmative action, although the demographic movement of whites to the suburbs and private schools continued, presumably involving Southern Baptists and others hoping to find racially homogenous communities²¹

In the late 1970s social and theological conservatives took control of the Southern Baptist Convention. And there can be no doubt that racial issues played some indeterminate role. Newman writes: “Motivation and support for the fundamentalist drive for power, had in part, derived from objection to the tolerant positions advocated by the Christian Life Commission, the HMB, and some denominational leaders regarding social issues, including race.”²² However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that this successful insurgency was solely or even primarily due to race. Indeed, some fundamentalists’ belief in biblical inerrancy led them to endorse racial

¹⁵ Alan Scot Willis, *All According to God’s Plan: Southern Baptists Missions and Race, 1945–1970* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁷ Newman, *Getting Right*, 110, 121, 161.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

²² *Ibid.*, 200.

desegregation of worship on scriptural grounds. In short, says Newman, “it was simplistic and misleading to assume that the conservative economic and social views of fundamentalists . . . were necessarily and always code words for race.”²³ Indeed, in 1995, the SBC officially apologized “for Baptists’ complicity in slavery and for ‘condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systematic racism in our life time’” and called upon African Americans for forgiveness.²⁴

Newman’s account is sound, but more focused study on the links between social issues, including those with racial overtones, may elucidate the nuances on motives and outlooks by Baptists in the age of the culture wars. As used by James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia, the “culture war” serves as a metaphor to explain the role that moral values play in creating polar positions around complex social issues like affirmative action, busing, homosexuality, and abortion. Although some scholars have hinted at the possible existence and meaning of a connection, the complicated task remains to determine whether and how the progression of attitudes among many Southern Baptists moved more-or-less linearly from frustration with racial changes to a more direct rhetorical and political confrontation with other social changes—school prayer, abortion, homosexuality, and reproductive freedom.²⁵

Paul Harvey, a history professor at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs, recently authored a moving tome titled *Freedom’s Coming*, which illustrates how competing attitudes about race and religion interacted to give shape to southern society. Paralleling Newman’s account, he notes that by the 1970s race no longer mattered much as a policy issue in Southern Baptist life. This fact liberated conservatives from any need to uphold “the standard biblical argument against racial equality, now looked upon as an embarrassment from a bygone era.”²⁶ Thus freed, conservatives focus on cultural issues, especially the defense of “patriarchy, [which] has supplanted race as the defining first principle of God-ordained order,” as well as denouncing other socially convenient beliefs and practices as departures from scriptural mandate.²⁷ Yet, among the earliest convention level agencies targeted for change were the Christian Life Commission and the WMU. Called to task for their culturally accommodating trends in popular culture, these were the same entities who had often been well ahead of Southern Baptist opinion on race and desegregation. Certainly, these conservatives “in the southern culture wars had shifted . . . from race to gender,” because race was no longer perceived as a direct threat to traditional values in the home or in worship. Apparently, the fact that some denominational agencies had appeared complicit in support of unpopular racial change may have made them especially suspect to represent mainstream church members concerns about morally-laden

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 202, 203.

²⁵ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

²⁶ Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 246.

²⁷ Ibid.

cultural issues like the proper role of women in the home, in the ministry, or with reproductive freedom.²⁸

But Baptist ambiguities about race remain. Despite a common commitment to the Baptist faith, writes Newman, from the 1970s onward, “most African American and white lay Baptists had little contact with each other. . . . Southern Baptist churches, like those of the other major denominations both North and South, mostly remained wholly white or wholly African American, with little mixture of the races.”²⁹ This segregated condition reflects so many things including what might be termed different liturgical styles, which may reflect racial comfort with particular cadences of worship, but it also reflects the important history of and role played by separate, African-American administered religious denominations.³⁰

Out of multiple strand—the Brush Arbors, bi-racial fellowships, and plantation missions—African Americans fashioned new and separate denominational structures and congregations after the Civil War. Wilson Fallin Jr., provides a compelling narrative of the experience of African American Baptists in Alabama from the Civil War to the present. A professor and former state and National Baptist Convention officeholder, Fallin is especially well-situated to analyze the critical role of African American Baptist institutions, congregations, leaders, and laity in moving through and out of Jim Crow. Like Manis, he notes that blacks and whites tended to differ about the application of religious beliefs to contemporary social conditions, and that this distinction outweighed a common commitment to theological conservatism among black and white Baptists. African American “Baptists demanded a broader social ethic grounded in their gospel of liberation. Whites developed a limited social ethic. . . . As a result, white and blacks grew apart with little cooperation throughout most of Alabama’s [postbellum] history.”³¹

In the atmosphere of denominational segregation, the African American Baptists formed a state convention, developed Selma University for training ministers, affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, developed and patronized African American owned businesses, and fought against disenfranchisement. Prominent leaders like William R. Pettiford preached a gospel of divine salvation and economic self-help, and David V. Jemison provided sage leadership for the Baptist State Convention. At the end of World War II, a new militancy manifested itself among Alabama’s African American Baptists. Powerful ministers like Vernon Johns and James Lowell Ware challenged Jim Crow and preached a message of racial equality. Congregations and ministers, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., then began to engage in more direct confrontation with Jim Crow, often in the face of physical violence. And even after legal changes led to the election of African Americans to public office, Fallin notes that, “Blacks tended to think that whites wanted to overturn the advances that had been made. These divergent

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 248–49.

²⁹ Newman, *Getting Right*, 203.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

³¹ Wilson Fallin Jr., *Uplifting the People: Three Centuries of Black Baptists in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), xiii.

attitudes were exacerbated because most whites knew almost nothing about the history of black oppression in the state.”³²

Although many black churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention and “Inter-Baptist committees were formed,” Fallin contends that “a dark undercurrent of racism still prevails in many local Southern Baptist congregations. Many churches refuse to accept black members or allow them to preach. In 1994 and again in 2001, African American and African students from Samford University and Beeson Divinity School were prevented from preaching in local Southern Baptist Churches.”³³ Despite having similar social and theological values best described as conservative, black and white Baptists beliefs “have not translated into the same political orientation.” Echoing Manis and Chappell, Fallin notes that that a collectivist and prophetic stance typifies black Baptists, while white Baptists are more individualistic. In an odd racial declension to the white conservative focus on gender, Fallin lists it as the most “troubling” issue for African American Baptists, but he seems to favor liberalizing gender roles in churches, especially deacon and pastor.³⁴

Fred Shuttlesworth was one pastor who played a vital role in the Civil Rights Movement, helping to form the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, when Alabama outlawed the NAACP, and more recently as an “unsung hero and icon of the civil rights movement.” Singing the song of Shuttlesworth, Andrew Manis brings out his charisma and courage in a telling biography, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out*. Manis’ Shuttlesworth “represents many important themes in civil rights and African American history, not the least of which is his role as pastor,” in which he typified the melding of the gospel of conversion with the message of civil rights.³⁵ It was Shuttlesworth who brought Martin Luther King, Jr., to Birmingham for the critical showdown with Eugene “Bull” Connor, and it was Shuttlesworth’s “tenacity” that helped make the Birmingham movement so transformative in the history of the Civil Rights movement. The title for Manis’ excellent biography comes from Shuttlesworth’s confrontation with a fire chief who came to a 1959 mass meeting at St. James Baptist Church in Birmingham hoping the use the “report” of a fire to stampede the African American meeting, thus breaking it up. Shuttlesworth told the chief, ““You know there ain’t no fire here. The kind of fire we have in here you can’t put out with hoses and axes.””³⁶

A fiery personality himself, Shuttlesworth was nonetheless committed to the non-violent tactics of the Civil Rights movement and his approach to Christian living involved direct confrontation with adversaries, as well as allies, with a reliance on a personal God, whom he believed would deliver Birmingham’s African Americans from Jim Crow. Taking quite literally the message of the biblical cross on the eve of the movement in Birmingham in the spring of 1963, Shuttlesworth shocked a group of entertainers and activists at Harry Belafonte’s apartment

³² Ibid., 256.

³³ Ibid., 258.

³⁴ Ibid., 260.

³⁵ Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 2 (quote), 3–8.

³⁶ Ibid., 440–41.

in New York, “You have to be prepared to die before you can begin to live.”³⁷ Clearly, in the manner in which he applied the prophetic voices of scripture to the need to pursue personal salvation and social justice, Shuttlesworth typified an African American approach to religion that differed from most of his white Baptist counterparts.³⁸

Shuttlesworth, indeed, used the terms “priestly” and “prophetic” to describe the differences in the religions of those who focus on salvation and personal regeneration alone and those who find implications for reforming society in the teachings of Jesus. Manis quotes Shuttlesworth thus:

[Religion] ought to have the same thrust that John the Baptist had when went to tell Herod he was wrong . . . and when Elijah went to Jezebel . . . or Elijah when he challenged the 450 prophets [of Baal]. It’s both/and. It has to do with your prayer life and your living life and it also has to do with how you live, whether you live under oppression. . . . For it was never God’s will, in my estimation, though he permitted it, for oppression to be the order of the day anywhere.³⁹

For Shuttlesworth, the Bible provided a plethora of examples of committed believers confronting immoral individual and collective behavior.

In recent memory, no other prophetic voice echoes as resoundingly as that of Martin Luther King Jr. A Baptist minister, King called for a radical regeneration of society, even as he struggled with his own personal moral challenges. Harvard Sitkoff’s *King* reveals a man motivated by a biblical faith, one whose deep appreciation for Ghandi rested on an appreciation for the efficacy of non-violence as a tactic, but not on his internalization of soul-force or *satyagraha*. He remained moored in his Baptist faith. Indeed, his persistence came from a powerful experience with a personal God who told King: “Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.”⁴⁰

Armed with this assurance from a personal God, King exemplified and led a powerful movement for social justice and personal transformation, wrought through a willingness to endure suffering. As King’s *I Have A Dream* exhortation in August 1963 describes it: “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. . . . With this faith, we well be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that one day we will all be free.”⁴¹ King’s prophetic voice raised hackles not just among the committed racists of the Deep South, but among those erstwhile Liberal allies, for whom his religiosity was uncomfortable, especially when his message challenged not just Jim Crow, but materialism and imperialism which strongly connected with the dominant view of Civil Religion. Lamenting a “white society more concerned

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 342.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 252, 287–88.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁰ Harvard Sitkoff, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 38 (quote), 43–47, 66–67.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 124–25.

with tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity,”⁴² King rankled the Johnson Administration, and more nationalistic supporters by attacking the Vietnam War, and he persisted in the course, because “we are so wrong in this country and the time has come for a real prophecy and I’m willing to go down that road”⁴³ Indeed, Sitkoff’s King moved beyond the redemptive model of civil religion, which often typifies the difference between white and black Christianity, toward something much more global and ecumenical. Notes Sitkoff, “[King’s] Christian ministerial role and convictions required him to adopt a broad world perspective, rather than an American one.”⁴⁴ King continued his prophetic role to the end of his life, described in Sitkoff’s phrase, “For America . . . this meant coming home from racism, war, and poverty amid plenty.”⁴⁵ And King, ever the minister and struggling Baptist, told his final audience in Memphis: “I just want to do God’s will.”⁴⁶

A trek through the many biographies of King and Manis’ study of Shuttlesworth reveals not just the struggle between passionate parsons and racists over social justice. King’s and Shuttlesworth’s beliefs and tactics sometimes invited the ire of their own congregants and other African American ministers over the proper practice of religious conviction. Nothing as rich as human history reduces accurately to melodrama. Historians like social scientists, struggle with coding and classifying data and behaviors into understandable and meaningful groupings. In something as personal and protean as religion, even well-coded studies produce generalizations and impressions that, however well-founded, elucidate only part of the story. In the main, white Baptists really struggled with race and denominationally at least preferred to avoid moral and spiritual issues arising from race, once schools and congregations seemed secure. But that story downplays the contingency and counter-forces that also tried to channel the stream of history in other directions. Certainly, there exists an understandable tendency to focus on the prophetic voices of African Americans and the socially-conformist voices of white Baptists. But as Andrew Manis’ portrait of the complex racial tapestry of Mercer University shows, “individual professors, made important contributions, challenging conservative ideas and practices, influencing succeeding generations of students toward more human views on race.” He describes their teaching as “prophetic.”⁴⁷ Similarly, David Stricklin’s *A Genealogy of Dissent* depicts a powerful Baptist counterpoint to social conformity and culture-based Christianity in the first half of the 20th century. His work echoes the pioneering work of Wayne Flynt and more recently Paul Harvey and Keith Harper in illustrating important alternatives to a supposed monolith of theologically based socially conservative white Baptist faith.⁴⁸

⁴² Ibid., 207.

⁴³ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 233

⁴⁷ Manis, *Macon*, 13.

⁴⁸ David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999); Keith Harper, *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890–1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*; J. Wayne

The Baptist saga with race after World War II as it is reflected in the monographic scholarship permits some tentative conclusions. The desire to protect racial privilege tended to erode other more reformist traditions among white Baptists, including what scholar David Stricklin has termed “Southern Baptist progressivism,” leaving a conservative mainstream largely with little challenge from within the denomination.⁴⁹ In many ways, the interracial exchange permitted by bi-racial religious encounters in the Jim Crow era, so eloquently described by historian Paul Harvey, and the recognition of incongruity between African missions abroad and Jim Crow at home depicted by Alan Scot Willis and Mark Newman led mostly to irresolution in race and religion. State action to desegregate schools left residential segregation and church membership rosters intact and African American Baptists had long-cherished and separate institutions to maintain. Integration in the public sphere, tenuously accepted at first, and a gradual formal renunciation of biblically-sanctioned racism represent significant change since World War II. But they came only at the price of direct confrontation, animated by powerful prophetic voices, suggesting that social change requires agitation. Further historical investigation may produce a more detailed portrait of how and to what degree persistent racial concerns animated the cultural conservatives at the congregational and convention levels to take formal control of the Southern Baptist Convention and to become more openly engaged with electoral politics. Current scholarship reveals a connection, but suggests that many issues, not just race, played a role. And new studies may more fully illuminate the cultural and theological reasons that some African American Baptists were hesitant to embrace non-violent direct action during the Civil Rights movement. As historians continue to take seriously the complex nature and powerful driver that individual and collective religious expression consistently plays among Baptists in the South, a more complete image of the intersection of race and religion emerges. The excellent monographs and biographies examined above add much to the evolving understanding of social and religious issues in the South after World War II and suggest research questions for future scholars.

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Flynt, “Dissent in Zion: Alabama Baptists and Social Issues, 1900--1914,” *Journal of Southern History* 35 (November 1969): 523–42.

⁴⁹ Stricklin, *Genealogy of Dissent*, 6.