
TELLING THE TRUTH

White Presbyterians and Race in the 20th Century

SOUTHERN (PRESBYTERIAN) CONSERVATISM

- Southern Presbyterian conservatives—those who would eventually form the PCA—linked together anti-Communism, anti-integration, and anti-centralization, utilizing religious beliefs and language to bind these together into a coherent worldview.
 - These three values animated modern political conservatism in the 1950s and 1960s; hence, the founders of the PCA were central to the rising political American conservative movement
 - In this, they stood as bedrock for the new Religious Right and helped to shift the South to the Republican Party in the 1980s and beyond.
 - For our purposes, the tragedy came as their commitment to racial separation trumped their commitment to the Gospel.
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DEFENDING THE SOUTHERN (SEGREGATED) WAY OF LIFE

- ❖ Barring African Americans from worship services
 - ❖ After *Brown v. Board* in 1954, churches and church courts announced that they would maintain themselves on a segregated basis (Lucas, 122).
 - ❖ During the 1960s kneel-ins, churches patrolled their doorways to prevent blacks from worshipping/sitting intermixed with whites (Lucas, 196-7; Strong, “Holy Week”).
 - ❖ In the 1969, during the Black Manifesto crisis, churches gave specific instructions on what to do in case a black person tried to enter.
 - ❖ The presumption was that any group of blacks or mixed race group was there for “sociological” purposes and thus should not be admitted.
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DEFENDING THE SOUTHERN (SEGREGATED) WAY OF LIFE

- ❖ Misusing and twisting the Bible to support segregation
 - ❖ Repeatedly from the 1950s through the early 1970s, southern Presbyterian conservatives attempt to craft “biblical” defenses of segregation (Lucas, 115-6; Richards, 55-57; Smith).
 - ❖ Even after a younger generation came to lead the creation of the PCA, these “biblical” arguments were never repudiated—and have continued to linger in the PCA (e.g. Kinism; Christian Identity).
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DEFENDING THE SOUTHERN (SEGREGATED) WAY OF LIFE

- ❖ Participating in and defending white supremacist organizations
 - ❖ Presbyterian leaders were involved in the Citizen's Councils and on the executive committee of these organizations. While Presbyterian leaders reprobated the Klan, they tended to be involved with these councils instead.
 - ❖ One session defended participation in these organizations (Lucas, 120).
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DEFENDING THE SOUTHERN (SEGREGATED) WAY OF LIFE

- ❖ Failing to speak out against state-supported segregation and to support efforts to secure access to basic human and civil rights
 - ❖ Actually, Presbyterians leaders often worked against such efforts and supported state-sponsored segregation.
 - ❖ Opposed the FEPC's attempts to level the playing field for African American employment
 - ❖ Opposed school desegregation, both local schools and state universities (Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*).
 - ❖ Opposed advancement on voting rights (Lucas, 195; Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*)
 - ❖ The typical tactic was to relate integration with Communism and/or interracial marriage.
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RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCES AND CHANGE OVERTIME

- ❖ Of course, not everyone who was part of the Continuing Church movement was in the same place. In addition, there were developing generational differences that started to play out in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the PCA would begin.
 - ❖ Segregationists
 - ❖ W.A. Gamble, stated clerk of Central Mississippi Presbytery, represented hardline racial intransigence.
 - ❖ Regularly featured in Citizen's Council events in the Jackson, MS, area, and defended Jim Crow laws: "It cannot be forgotten that the removal of segregation laws, and the consequent mingling fo the races more and more, will inevitably result in miscegenation."
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 - ❖ Moderates
 - ❖ L. Nelson Bell, long-time associate editor of the Presbyterian Journal, founder of Christianity Today, and Billy Graham's father-in-law.
 - ❖ He argued that "forced segregation is un-Christian because it denies the rights which are inheritance in American citizenship." To demand continued legal segregation would also undercut the preaching of the Gospel in America and abroad.
 - ❖ But he also argued that forced integration would open the door to the possibility of race-mixing (and racial intermarriage) which was unthinkable.
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RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCES AND CHANGE OVER TIME

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 - ❖ Integrationists
 - ❖ Bill Hill, who pastored West End and First Presbyterian churches in Hopewell, VA, simultaneously, worked toward racially inclusive evangelistic meetings in the 1940s and 1950s (before Billy Graham famously took down the ropes in Chattanooga in 1953).
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 - ❖ Generational differences
 - ❖ Donald Patterson, Jim Baird, and Kennedy Smartt—all members of the steering committee that would birth the PCA in 1973—all worked toward racial inclusion in their respective ministries.
 - ❖ These PCA founders, along with Frank Barker and D. James Kennedy, made it plain that the PCA would not be a “white man’s church” nor stand for racial solidarity.
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RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCES AND CHANGE OVERTIME

- ❖ The influence of Billy Graham on this younger generation was significant:
 - ❖ When Graham believed that he could no longer preach to segregated meetings because that would represent a betrayal of the Gospel itself, the younger generation nodded their heads in agreement.
 - ❖ Graham also modeled the preferred approach to cultural engagement. Younger southern Presbyterian leaders, committed to the spiritual mission of the church, believed that the way to effect cultural change was through preaching the Gospel, as modeled by Graham.
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CONFESSION, REPENTANCE, AND THE WAY FORWARD

- The PCA has wrestled with this long history of racial sin and failure.
 - In 2002, we confessed “our covenantal involvement in” the “heinous sins attendant with unbiblical forms of servitude—including oppression, racism, exploitation, man stealing, and chattel slavery.”
 - In 2004, we adopted a “Pastoral Letter on the Gospel and Race” which identified racism as a sin, noted the Continuing Church movement’s connection with sins of racism, and urged further corporate repentance.
 - In 2016, we did “recognize, confess, condemn, and repent of corporate and historical sins, including those committed during the Civil Rights era, and continuing racial sins of ourselves and our fathers...”
 - In 2018, we adopted a report on “racial and ethnic reconciliation,” in which we surveyed over 2,000 elders about their views of race, racism, and the way forward for our church.
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CONFESSION, REPENTANCE, AND THE WAY FORWARD

- And yet, there seems to be a backlash against continuing mortification of sins of racism and toward those who urge further intentionality in engaging this work.
 - Accusations of “cultural marxism” and embrace of “critical race theory”
 - The tight nexus of conservative religion, race, and politics proves difficult to undo
 - Deep polarization and alienation from people of color
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CONFESSION, REPENTANCE, AND THE WAY FORWARD

- The way forward is to continue to do the work: both speaking honestly about our selves and listening well to one another
 - The Gospel alone can free us to speak about ourselves and our pasts honestly—not just as individuals but also as corporate entities.
 - Gospel confession actually promotes healing—for both whites and blacks—and joy.
 - For whites: to take our guilt and shame about our pasts to Jesus, the one who bled for us; to seek reconciliation with our brothers and sisters “through the cross” (Eph 2:16); “through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:20).
 - For blacks: to hear the sins against us named and forgiveness sought promotes healing and reconciliation (Matt 5:23-24)
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CONFESSION, REPENTANCE, AND THE WAY FORWARD

- The way forward is to continue to do the work: both speaking honestly about our selves and listening well to one another
 - Intentional listening allows us to see blind spots where our commitments to race, class, or region are shaping and overriding the biblical witness and our theological commitments (e.g., justice).
 - Intentional action and partnership—even if it is more “federated” than “integrated”—is a step towards the “beloved community.”
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