RACE AND RESTORATION:
CHURCHES OF CHRIST AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

By

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For the Keys to my life: Sonya, Langston, DeWayne, Donna, and Logan
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How inadequate these pages are in expressing my profound gratitude for the service of those whom I can never repay! Sonya, my life partner and partner in crime, has made countless sacrifices of time and energy that have enabled me to work on this project, feed my addiction to college sports, and lament the sundry social injustices that explain my melancholy. I am hopeful that I can return the favors when she chooses her career(s). On occasion, Sonya has shared her keen insights into the faithful souls who compose Churches of Christ. More often, she has lightened my mood with twangy performances of gospel hymns common to our religious heritage. I cannot match her vociferous appetite for books, and I relish her insights into worlds of literature that I will never have time to know. Our common experiences in Churches of Christ have both scarred and inspired us, and I am thankful that we now share a faith that transcends parochial concerns and challenges the commonplace among believers of all stripes.

Our son, Langston, was born shortly before I began working on the dissertation in earnest, and he chose to wait until the second draft was underway to begin sleeping through the night. I never envisioned the distractions of fatherhood when I entered graduate school, but Langston’s antics and laughter have often refreshed my spirit after long days of reading and writing. We have traversed hundreds of miles with his jogger, and he has developed into a fabulous running coach and companion during our excursions through Gainesville and Ames. Perhaps one day he will be proud of his dad, as I am immensely proud of him.

My parents, DeWayne and Donna, have made immeasurable contributions to my education. My formative years included countless books; vacations to Montgomery, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC; and tireless attention. A preoccupation with basketball during high school did not temper their expectations for my education, and although my
academic endeavors have included several twists and turns, they have never failed to offer unequivocal support, even when I could not adequately answer pressing questions ("What are you going to do with a history degree?"). DeWayne even made the time to read and edit countless seminar papers, and he undoubtedly deserves some of the blame for my interest in southern race relations. Four degrees later, I am thankful that my parents seem to appreciate my academic experiences and accomplishments more than ever. Despite our protests, they continue to provide financial assistance that helps suppress my guilt for not maintaining a real job.

As a capable research assistant and fellow history major, Logan, my younger brother, has also shared in my education. In addition to sharing a few research adventures, Logan has a knack for discovering unlikely sources that have enriched this project. Now that he has begun his quest through graduate school, I hope that I can provide the same support and interest that he has given me. Among many other friends and family who have shared encouragement throughout my life, I also wish to single out John Hardin. Although he is five years older, I have considered him a friend since my childhood. Our relationship began in pick-up basketball and football games during the 1980s when I was the little runt who insisted on playing with the big kids. No one could have guessed that Court Street in tiny Moulton, Alabama would produce two Ph.D.s in history. John and I have discussed history, theology, politics, and college sports for hours on end; we have watched a live performance of To Kill a Mockingbird in Monroeville and walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma; and we have shared many hotel rooms during conferences and research trips. He also deserves some of the blame for my interests in history and religion.

In addition to family and friends, I have many people to thank at the University of Florida. Brian Ward must be the most patient graduate advisor in the history of history. I am embarrassed
at the thought of my immaturity and ignorance when I first arrived in Gainesville, but Brian has consistently served as a source of encouragement when derision might have been more appropriate. He has never failed to offer honest advice, and he has worked diligently to ensure that I complete my doctorate in a timely manner. The obstacles of his own deadlines, knee injuries, the Atlantic ocean, or West Ham matches have never proven insurmountable when I have needed an editor or letters of recommendation. I continue to be intrigued at the interest the British Isles have shown in the United States’ “race question,” and there is a short story waiting to be written about a kid from Alabama learning about the civil rights movement from one of the queen’s subjects. Meanwhile, Brian’s hospitality is unsurpassed. He and Jen and Katie have been constant reminders that life involves much more than business.

While numerous classmates have enhanced my experience at the University of Florida, I am most grateful for my friendships with fellow Wardites, Ben Houston, Craig Dosher, and Mike Bowen. Ben was one of the first people that I met in Gainesville, and he has been a wonderful source of advice. Given our mutual interests in race relations, the South, and college sports, we have shared both business and leisure. In a driving rain, Ben, Sonya, and I even shared a harrowing automobile accident on I-10 during a journey to Nashville where, in spite of our misfortune, we were thrilled to hear James Lawson, Diane Nash, C.T. Vivian, John Lewis, and Will Campbell share their experiences in the civil rights movement. I could make similar remarks about Craig, although one of my fondest memories of graduate school will be our overnight bus trips to and from Washington, DC. On 24 September 2005, we joined about 100,000 others in one of the largest antiwar protests in recent years. And, appropriate to my particular interests, I met an African American gentleman from South Carolina after the march whose last trip to Washington was on 28 August 1963. I admire Craig’s compassion and service
to others and hope that I can incorporate these traits into my own life to the extent that he does. Mike would probably not be caught dead at an antiwar protest, but my relationship with him offers evidence that people with differing political perspectives can still be friends. Indeed, some would be more surprised to learn that a fan of the Tennessee Volunteers could happily coexist with a Florida Gator convert who once supported the Alabama Crimson Tide. Mike’s propensity for detail has made him a better source of information than graduate catalogs and office secretaries, and our forays into softball and tennis have reminded me of the world outside of the library.

In addition to these immediate influences, I have learned much through seminars with each person on my committee: Jack Davis (who graciously accepted the role of chair after Brian’s departure to the University of Manchester), Sheryl Kroen, Jon Sensbach, and Zoharah Simmons. Jack’s seminar on environmental history, while largely foreign to the scope of this project, forced me to grapple with several historiographical questions that warranted close attention from a would-be historian and teacher. He has graciously provided countless letters of recommendation during my foray onto the job market. Sheryl’s seminar in European history was one of my favorites, and her enthusiasm and creativity were contagious. With material largely foreign to my expertise, she rekindled my excitement for being a historian at a time when graduate school was most frustrating and parenthood was looming. Jon was forced to witness my first semester in the program, and his seminar made me quickly realize the depth of commitment required to complete graduate work in American history. He later sponsored a delightful field trip to Silver Bluff, South Carolina, site of the first African American Baptist Church in North America. Zoharah is a special person. Both Sonya and I enjoyed classes under the guidance of a fellow southerner who appreciates the complexities of race and religion, but we were most inspired by
her personal stories of triumph. Each of these professors have influenced my education in ways that I have yet to comprehend.

Outside of my teachers and colleagues at the University of Florida, I wish to thank Don Haymes who is currently a librarian at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. In many ways, Don was an eyewitness to the stories that follow, although he might well have been the only white person from Churches of Christ to embrace any semblance of political radicalism during the 1960s. Don was a self-proclaimed radical who found himself working among New York City’s dispossessed during the 1960s, after brief stints at two Christian colleges proved much too confining, if not confounding. A profound faith instigated his work among the poor, and on their behalf, he was not beyond using the threat of violence to ensure that the powers-that-be gave timely support to his efforts. Like others of his generation, Don was, as he once admitted in an e-mail, “an angry mothafucker.” If his rhetoric has softened since those years, his passion for social justice has not subsided, and I suspect that “the soft side” was there all along, as Don was a stay-at-home father before anyone had heard of “Mr. Mom.” Long before we met in person, Don encouraged me to pursue this project and suggested numerous resources to aid my endeavor. In countless e-mails, he has offered critiques of ideas, editorial advice, and a host of article citations that have broadened my perspectives on religion and race. On 1 June 2006 and in the middle of a librarians’ conference in Temple Terrace, Florida, Don gave about six or seven hours of his time to share his own life story.

Don was not the only one to share his story, and I am certainly appreciative of those kind souls who were willing to give a few hours of their time to relate their experiences with race relations in Churches of Christ. These stories were filled with both laughter and tears, joy and regret. In addition to putting faces with the names that I uncovered in letters and periodicals,
they often breathed new life into my research and writing. Several participants welcomed me into their homes or offices and kindly treated me to lunch. Given the nature of studying the history of a peculiarly nonhierarchical institution, these oral histories were a significant component of my research, and I look forward to collecting more of them for whatever publication can be crafted out of this dissertation. I also wish to extend a special thanks to Clifton Ganus Jr., former president of Harding University, who not only granted an interview but also permitted me to rummage through some of his old files that were pertinent to my research. Fred Gray, whose name is undoubtedly the most prominent in discussions of race relations and Churches of Christ, insisted on keeping an appointment with me despite the untimely death of his brother-in-law. Likewise, I thank journalist Ernest Holsendolph, whose career included lengthy stints with the *New York Times* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, for patiently answering questions from a novice interviewer. He also shared an essay that he wrote about the historic West End Church of Christ in Atlanta and arranged an interview for me with that church’s longtime minister.

I also wish to acknowledge the tireless efforts of archivists and librarians whose thankless tasks enabled me to survive graduate school and complete this project. I regret that Smathers Library West was closed during much of my time in Gainesville; we moved to Ames, Iowa as it reopened. Nevertheless, I was always able to secure a cubicle in Marston Science Library where much of my dissertation was written, and I also frequented libraries at the law and medical schools. The staff members at each site were always helpful whenever questions arose, and I have nothing but praise for the university’s interlibrary loan department. Likewise, I enjoyed warm receptions during research trips to the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Abilene Christian University, David Lipscomb University, the Disciples of Christ Historical
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Finally, I would like to recognize the inspiration that I received from two former students, Griff Alexander and Alex Blankenship, whose untimely deaths often pressed me to take advantage of opportunities that they were never able to enjoy. In particular, Griff’s passion for history was unsurpassed during my three years at Lawrence County (AL) High School (LCHS). Likewise, my paternal grandparents, an uncle, a godmother, and a coworker from LCHS all passed away during the course of my studies at Florida. They would have each been amused at the prospect of calling me “Doctor,” as would my now deceased maternal grandfather who worked his way into the introduction. I share their smiles and laughter. Memories of them remind me that the number of people who have molded my perspectives on the world are countless.
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My dissertation examines a biracial Christian denomination, the Churches of Christ, and its relationship to the African American freedom struggle during the twentieth century. Churches of Christ trace their history to two religious reformers, Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, who formally united their respective followers in 1832. Churches that affiliated with Stone and Campbell championed Christian unity and primitivism, but over the next seventy-five years, tensions between these ideas, combined with a variety of social forces, precipitated division. Among some congregants, primitivism gradually fostered an exclusivist disposition toward other denominations. Churches of Christ were increasingly characterized by this exclusivism, and their congregations were primarily centered in the South, where they attracted both black and white adherents.

When racial identities were subordinated under the guise of Christian unity, black and white members of Churches of Christ interacted with surprising frequency, based upon their belief that they composed the “true church.” This exclusivist disposition usually prohibited church members from associating with other denominations, so when the civil rights movement was assigned religious significance by leading activists, including many clergymen and devout
women, Churches of Christ generally refused to participate. My dissertation also extends historical knowledge of the interplay between race and religion with respect to the Bible, which served as a significant battleground in the construction of racial identities and attitudes. Generational conflicts among both black and white congregants further illustrate how racial and religious identities evolved during the 1960s.

Finally, my dissertation uncovers the variety of tactics that Churches of Christ utilized in the late 1960s to facilitate some measure of racial reconciliation. While legalized segregation faced a slow and uneven death, the biracial Churches of Christ were uniquely positioned to address the fears that many black and white members maintained about integration. Church members aired their misgivings in forums and workshops designed to bridge racial divides. A few Churches of Christ made conscious efforts to integrate individual congregations, although these practices were not widespread.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Historians often tell as much about themselves as their subjects. In many respects, this observation proves true in what follows. A person born and raised in Alabama cannot help but grapple with issues relating to race, and from an early age, I began asking “black and white” questions. Like most communities in the South, my hometown of Moulton (pop. 3000) had numerous black and white churches, including two Churches of Christ (COCs)—one black and one white. COCs trace their history to the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening and to two religious reformers of this era, Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell. Stone and Campbell shared a disdain for religious pluralism and the constraints of denominational creeds and authorities. With their shared desire to restore primitive Christianity, their two movements formally united in 1832. This merger never led to the adoption of an exclusive name, but affiliated churches were variously known as Disciples of Christ, COCs, or Christian Churches, names recognized and accepted among all of the movement’s adherents. Over the next seventy-five years, however, inherent tensions between the Stone-Campbell movement’s ideals of restoration and unity precipitated division. Primitivism eventually fostered sectarianism, particularly when some movement supporters believed that they practiced “authentic” Christianity. Thus, the goal of unity diminished for churches that claimed to have restored the church. In their estimation, if one could not agree with them regarding the principles and ecclesiastical trappings of the New Testament, then he or she must be misinterpreting the

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1 The author understands that concepts like “race,” “black,” “white,” and “African American” are social constructs, but they will henceforth be employed without quotations because they communicate a common, popular means of identifying people.

2 The following abbreviations will be used throughout the dissertation. COC, or Church of Christ, will be used as an adjective or singular noun. COCs will be used as a plural noun for Churches of Christ. Abbreviations will not be used in direct quotations.
scriptural guidelines for the church. Churches known as COCs were increasingly characterized by this exclusivism, and by 1906, the religious census of the United States government recognized a formal division between Christian Churches or Disciples of Christ and COCs, with the latter being centered mainly in the Upper South, especially eastern Texas and Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, and north Alabama.3

Despite the presence of a black COC and a white COC in my hometown, I cannot recall a time when our white church of about three hundred members did not have several black congregants. They were regular and active members, fully accepted (at least from my observation) by the church. For years, an interracial family—white husband, black wife, and their child—attended our church. The husband, like all other men in the church, was occasionally called upon to lead prayers or to read from the scriptures. I also recall several occasions when I visited the local black church, usually in conjunction with a special youth day or homecoming celebration.

These circumstances, however, should not imply that our church was free from the specter of racism. On the contrary, my maternal grandfather, a COC deacon, privately used the term “nigger” on numerous occasions. I learned the term from him and later asked my mother what “nigger” meant. She explained how it was wholly inappropriate, alongside “cuss” words like damn and shit. But for my grandfather, “nigger town” was the section of our town where African Americans resided; “nigger toes” were chocolate-covered candies. And when a first cousin, a girl one year my elder whom my grandfather had helped raise, began dating a young African

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3 Figures vary for the membership of COCs, although in the mid 1960s, an estimate of 2 million was commonly accepted. This number might have been slightly exaggerated, as recent studies have suggested that COCs now have approximately 1.7 million adherents, with black people composing over 13% of this figure. Whether COC membership numbered closer to one or two million at mid century, at least 10% of its membership was African American. See Mac Lynn, Churches of Christ in the United States (Nashville, Tennessee: 21st Century Christian, 2003), 14, 17.
American man, my grandfather evicted her from his house. Once she married him, she was completely ostracized from the family. Their children—my grandparents’ first great grandchildren—were hardly acknowledged.

Otherwise, my grandfather—whose racial attitudes were certainly typical of many white southerners—was an honorable, hard working man and lifelong Democrat. In addition to overseeing the church building and grounds as part of his assignment as a deacon, he constantly helped elderly women around town with maintenance to their cars and homes. He got along well with other people, including African Americans, and his affiliation with the Democratic Party never waned after the 1960s as it did for so many white southerners. As a high school student, when I was postulating my own political philosophies and flirting with an affiliation with the Republican Party during the early 1990s, my grandfather sternly lectured me about the need to protect Social Security and welfare programs in order to protect the elderly and poor. His use of my first name in one conversation suggested the urgency of his message. “Barclay,” he said, “what about those people who can’t take care of themselves?!” Given the debates at the time about welfare reform and the propaganda issued by conservatives, my grandfather was undoubtedly thinking of both black and white people. This dissertation reflects these personal experiences, even as it seeks to answer questions about race and religion within one Protestant denomination.

Throughout the twentieth century, and especially after World War II, many black and white southerners reexamined Jim Crow laws and customs in light of their Christian faiths, and this dissertation focuses upon the racial and religious dispositions of black and white COCs. While most denominations were functionally, if not statutorily, segregated, COCs were biracial and had firm roots in the South, a unique perspective from which to examine race relations. The church’s
identity was not exclusively southern, however, as migration and evangelism slowly spread the church’s presence and influence outside of the South over the course of the twentieth century. Focusing on the decades between the 1940s and the early 1970s, this dissertation explores both the racial attitudes among individual churches and their members and how they responded to the critical issues raised by the African American freedom struggle. COCs present historians with fresh perspectives for observing how issues of Christian fellowship and human equality played out among both black and white members within one denomination that took pride in its primitivism and radical autonomy from any denominational structure.4

This research expands historical knowledge of race and religion during this era in five main ways. First, Christian primitivism facilitated interracial cooperation and interaction. When racial identities were subordinated under the guise of Christian unity, black and white members interacted with surprising frequency in the segregated South, based on their perception of COCs as the “true church” vis-à-vis “the denominations.” While other Protestant churches formed what amounted to racially exclusive denominations or administrative districts, COCs did not because they understood themselves as the only authentic expression of Christianity. Such arrangements proved most beneficial to white members because their privileged social status went largely unchallenged. They could claim to abhor racial prejudice and offer support to black churches, preachers, and schools, even while maintaining segregated colleges in the South and generally ignoring racial discrimination in economics, education, law, politics, and social customs.

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4 Church governance did not extend beyond an individual congregation. Most (though not all) local COCs had “elders,” an indeterminate number of male church members who were appointed by their fellow congregants as “overseers” of the church. Elders and congregants might also appoint men to serve as “deacons,” though this assignment typically came with a charge to coordinate a specific ministry or service. Church ministers had no special authority within COCs outside of maintaining general leadership qualities, and they were usually chosen by the elders with input from the entire congregation. Due in large part to several Pauline texts in the New Testament, women were summarily excluded from all of these positions.
Second, the exclusivist disposition that resulted from COCs’ primitivism cultivated hesitancy toward civil rights activism among both black and white congregants. Church members were generally unwilling to associate with other denominations in a common cause, so when the civil rights movement was assigned religious significance by some leading activists—including many clergymen and devout women—COCs already had an aversion to their denominations and their faiths. Given this perspective, COCs had little trouble developing further antipathy toward social activism. The urgency with which COCs pursued evangelistic endeavors also undermined the significance of any sympathy that might have existed for civil rights activism. In the minds of many congregants and ministers, securing eternal salvation deserved greater attention than correcting contemporary social injustices. From this perspective, preachers who gave so much time and energy to the civil rights movement were neglecting their primary responsibility of saving souls. For many white congregants, the civil rights movement was an anathema, and faith was another means to oppose the African American freedom struggle. However, many black congregants within COCs remained wary of the civil rights movement in general and Martin Luther King Jr. in particular. The hesitancy with which African American members supported the movement is significant on a number of levels. It confirms one of the major themes of civil rights movement scholarship, which stresses that African Americans were not a homogenous group, nor were they always united in their pursuit of equality. Moreover, it suggests that white people who proffered similar faith-based rationales for opposing the civil rights movement warrant more careful consideration. Some white members undoubtedly used faith as a cover for their racism and as a justification for segregation, but given that some black members within COCs also opposed social activism on religious grounds, such assertions by white members should not be easily dismissed.
The third key area in which this research extends our understanding of the interplay of race and religion concerns the role of the Bible. For COCs, the Bible served as a significant battleground in the construction of racial identities and in the formation of racial attitudes about integration, particularly interracial marriage. In a denomination that took pride in its biblical literalism and its quest to “restore New Testament Christianity,” the Bible was the final and ultimate authority in all matters. Thus, both black and white members found explanations for racial origins within its pages. The Bible was also utilized by church members whose vision of Christian fellowship included all people, irrespective of color, as well as those who believed that racial segregation was divinely ordained; it was a touchstone both for those who participated in civil rights protests and those who viewed activists with contempt. Opinions about activism and integration were buttressed with biblical support, as debates raged over the church’s and a Christian’s role in bringing about racial harmony. “Racial prejudice” was unequivocally viewed as sin, so debates hinged upon the meaning of “racial prejudice,” as members wrestled with the often contradictory demands of faith and culture.

Fourth, my dissertation highlights the generational tensions that developed within COCs among both black and white members. Relationships between young and old members were often strained over the topic of race relations. Young white members, for example, pressured administrators to desegregate COC colleges and struggled to accept the excuses proffered in favor of segregation. Meanwhile, young black members could not easily comprehend their black elders’ criticism of the civil rights movement. Participation in civil rights demonstrations was strictly forbidden, even as the discriminatory practices of white COCs were roundly criticized. By the 1970s, generational differences often served an underlying role in fostering divisions that ostensibly involved disparate application of biblical principles.
Finally, this dissertation uncovers the variety of tactics that COCs utilized in the late 1960s to facilitate some measure of racial reconciliation. While legalized segregation faced a slow and uneven death, the biracial COCs were uniquely positioned to address the fears that many members maintained about the integration of public facilities or the increasing frequency of riots in urban areas. Black and white church members aired their misgivings in forums and workshops designed to bridge racial divides. These occasions, while offering important insights into the minds of congregants who gradually adjusted to the dramatic legal and social changes of the 1960s, revealed the limits of changes within the church.

These five points provide the foundation for this dissertation, but they also indicate the broader significance of this study. First, COCs defy common notions about racial segregation, particularly in the South. While they did practice segregation, the moments of contact between black and white members complicate the proverb popularized by Martin Luther King Jr., that Sunday morning was the most segregated hour of the week. The interaction between black and white churches and members illustrates how racial attitudes and practices elude the simple categorizations often employed by historians. Also, the dispositions of young church members often differed with the perspectives of their elders, regardless of race, thus showing that age could be as significant as race in determining attitudes about integration or activism.

This dissertation additionally shows that Christian faith could be both an inspiration for and a hindrance to civil rights activism. One can hardly find a book about Martin Luther King Jr., for example, that does not have a title with religious connotations. However, until recently, historians have largely neglected the role that faith played for those people who expressed opposition to the means, if not always the ends, of civil rights activists. This dissertation helps fill that void.
Finally, my research gives greater attention to average congregants and local ministers whose influence was often confined to one church or one locale. Convention votes or edicts from councils and bishops have no bearing on this study because they simply did not exist for COCs. If, as many histories do, this project begins with questions from the author’s past, its focus differs from other denominational studies in the field of civil rights, religion, and southern race relations. This work begins to explain people like my grandfather and countless others whose voices cannot be readily discerned through the decisions of denominational hierarchies or votes in a convention. What follows largely eliminates common distinctions between pulpit and pew. Since one only needed to be a baptized male to become a COC preacher, education and divine calling have always been optional. Each local congregation chose its own minister, specifying qualifications that might vary from Bible knowledge to speaking ability to personality. On some occasions, preachers have been fired on Monday for the sermon that they preached on Sunday. This level of lay control blurred the lines between clergy and laity in COCs. Therefore, more than any other denominational study, this research focuses attention on the racial attitudes of local church members, their ministers, and the actions—or ofttimes, the inaction—that their faiths inspired.

This study exists at the intersection of several historiographical fields: religion and race, religion and the civil rights movement, COCs, and the South. Historians from each of these fields have informed my work. Two historians of COCs have influenced my work. David Edwin Harrell Jr. has written several books devoted to the denomination or its origins in the Disciples of Christ. *A Social History of the Disciples of Christ* includes two volumes that broadly examine the Stone-Campbell movement and describe the COCs’ roots as a primitivist sect among the Disciples in the nineteenth century. Harrell contends that social forces emanating from the Civil
War divided the movement into two groups, the Christian Churches, found in the North and Midwest, and COCs, principally located in the South. In the first volume, he also describes the racial attitudes of many white Disciples who subscribed to that era’s popular racial theories.

“The idea that the races of men were the descendants of the three sons of Noah and that their destiny had been prophetically determined by God was a part of the intellectual equipment of a large majority of early nineteenth-century Disciples,” Harrell writes. In the years preceding the Civil War, many Disciples sought to maintain strict neutrality, especially with regard to the issue of slavery, but the denomination was marked by sectional conflict. “Most of the moderate preachers of the South,” Harrell states in reference to those white ministers who would soon lead COCs, “believed that slavery was a scriptural institution; many of them owned slaves and contended that when the relationship between masters and slaves was humanely regulated, it was a benevolent social system.” However, denominational periodicals in the South increasingly chose not to discuss slavery. For example, an 1849 editorial stated, “It comes not within the scope of our design, to discuss the subject of slavery, as to whether it is right or wrong. Slavery is a political institution; and we find it and leave it just where the New Testament does. It belongs to the civil government . . . to say whether it shall be retained or abolished.” These same sentiments would later resonate among church members who expressed opposition to civil rights activism.5

The second volume dedicates a chapter to African Americans within the denomination and emphasizes the Disciples similarity to other churches that gave measured assistance to former slaves. Several factors worked against the Disciples’ commitment to political and social reforms,

including distrust among black and white leaders. “Organizationally the church was weak, financially it was poor, and other problems seemed more pressing,” Harrell also noted. “Church leaders in North and South felt compassion, but few were personally committed to reform.”

Black and white church members could agree on the importance of evangelism, however, and the conversion of lost souls would later form the basis for most black and white relationships in COCs.6

Harrell’s White Sects and Black Men in the Recent South, written in 1971 during the heart of the black power era, is devoted exclusively to race relations but not to COCs. In this book, he notes that COCs “appeared more genuinely interracial than any other major southern sect, though only by comparison.” Harrell also suggests that the “sectarian doctrine of separation from the world often was interpreted to mean that the church, as opposed to an individual, cannot become actively involved in social reform.” Many southern churches, including and perhaps especially COCs, maintained this position during the civil rights movement. Three decades later, Harrell wrote a volume titled The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey’s Personal Journey of Faith. This work functions as both a biography of Hailey and an institutional history of COCs, though it gives very little attention to African Americans.7

The second historian, Richard Hughes, authored Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America. This book helpfully explains the origins of COCs’ primitivism and shows how the denomination evolved from its origins as a “sect” in the nineteenth century to

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a “denomination” in the twentieth. The volume includes one chapter about “the struggle for social justice in the 1960s” that does more than any other work to examine how COCs responded to the African American freedom struggle. Hughes notes that a book about the African American heritage in COCs has not been written, and his intent for this chapter was only to assess the dominant responses of the white churches to the civil rights movement. Both Harrell and Hughes encouraged a project devoted to COCs and race relations.8

A host of other books have been written about COCs and published by organizations associated with the denomination. A Distinct People by Robert Hooper, for example, traces the history of the denomination over the course of the twentieth century. Hooper includes one chapter devoted to black COCs that focuses almost exclusively on two influential preachers, Marshall Keeble and G. P. Bowser. A lengthy work by Leroy Garrett, titled The Stone-Campbell Movement, includes only one and a half pages about black COCs, even though it acknowledges that they compose 10% of the denomination’s membership. These studies and others largely emphasize the doctrinal disputes that characterized and defined the fellowship during the course of the twentieth century.9

While COCs have not received substantive attention with regard to race relations, several other denominations have. My work makes a significant contribution to this vibrant sub-field within civil rights movement history. Mark Newman’s Getting Right with God covered the Southern Baptist Convention from 1945 to 1995, and in Religion and Race, Joel Alvis studied southern Presbyterians over roughly the same time period, 1946 to 1983. In addition to these,

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Gardiner Shattuck Jr. wrote *Episcopalian & Race*, a book that examines how that denomination dealt with race relations over a period of one hundred fifty years. *When the Church Bell Rang Racist* by Donald Collins is a regional study of Methodists in Alabama and north Florida from 1950 to 1997, and more recently, Peter Murray published a broader overview of this denomination in *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930-1975.*

These studies primarily focus on the perspectives of white congregants and church officers who sought to negotiate the ambiguities between their faiths and racial discrimination. Newman and Alvis, for example, organize the whites in their study into categories that reflect levels of commitment to the preservation of Jim Crow practices. Newman labels his groups as “militant segregationists,” “moderate segregationists,” and “progressives,” while Alvis opted for the formulaic “conservative” and “liberal” distinction. Alvis does examine some of the relationships between black and white Presbyterians, especially as they related to the Negro Work Program, an agency by which the denomination made concerted, though paternalistic, efforts to foster education and evangelism for African Americans, who composed only a slight percentage of that church’s membership. Murray performs similar work by examining how the Central Jurisdiction, a segregated district which defied geographic bounds by including all black churches within that denomination, functioned within the organization of the predominantly white Methodist Church. Meanwhile, Newman devotes almost exclusive attention to whites,

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11 Murray argues that the Methodists “had the largest number of African Americans and white southerners in the same church.” Although the exact number of members within COCs cannot be precisely known, his contention is probably correct due to the fact that the Methodist Church claimed over 7 million members in 1940. However, black
noting that African Americans had formed a separate denomination, the National Baptist
Convention, before 1900.

Aside from denominational studies, several other historians have given serious
consideration to the religious dimensions of white resistance to the civil rights movement. In *A
Stone of Hope*, David Chappell argues that Christian segregationists failed in their attempts to
rally congregants to their cause, even as they claimed divine sanction for their message.
Chappell actually features a preacher from COCs named Leon C. Burns Sr. among his collection
of segregationists. Burns’s 1954 sermon titled “Why Desegregation Will Fail” represents a
typical response from southern preachers who found biblical sanction for their racist views. In an
essay titled “A Theology of Racism,” Bill Leonard also emphasizes the place of faith and the
Bible in the racist teachings of southern fundamentalists. In like manner, a 2004 article by Jane
Dailey, titled “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*,” analyzes the theology behind white
southerners’ fears over interracial romance.¹²

In *Freedom’s Coming*, a 2005 study much broader in scope than many of the books
mentioned already, Paul Harvey examines the theological convictions of both black and white
southerners, giving some attention to Christian primitivism. He also traces the demise of
theological racism in the South and the ascendance of a more inclusive faith popularized by the
African American freedom struggle. Harvey does not mention COCs but does discuss the
primitivism of some Pentecostal churches that abandoned their interracialism early in the

twentieth century. In one section, he writes that “white Pentecostals gradually dissociated themselves from the racial interchange of their earlier origins. The early biracial Pentecostal services produced some genuine sentiments of Christian interracialism, but by the 1920s black and white believers had settled into racially distinct and separate organizations.”

While this dissertation generally follows and expands these precedents, my work with COCs also complicates the stories told by these scholars and sometimes offers significant qualifications and corrections to their conclusions about the relationship between religion and race in the modern South. For example, my dissertation builds upon Harvey’s work, particularly his notion of “racial interchange,” by examining a denomination that never formally separated into two, segregated denominations. I also challenge aspects of Chappell’s work. He contends that segregationists as a whole did not find biblical justification for their racism, although he even acknowledges a sizable collection of white southerners who were exceptions to his assertion. Chappell also admits that on “the fringes of the segregation movement, a few clergymen made more out of the curse of Ham, attempting to claim that God created and intended to maintain racial distinctions. But literate ministers either avoided biblical references or . . . qualified them into uselessness.” This point raises the possibility that less educated ministers, such as those in COCs, may have been more prone to find biblical support for segregation. Indeed, COCs show that literacy was not the determining factor in segregationist interpretations of the Bible. Chappell’s broader point that segregationist clergy were unable to rally the mass of church-going white southerners to active participation in their cause is definitely

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convincing, but his insistence on the irrelevancy of the Bible in this discourse on race needs revision.\textsuperscript{14}

The confluence of religious belief and political activism continues to challenge historians from a variety of fields. For example, outside of the aforementioned works on the United States, there are clear parallels between this dissertation and Suzanne Desan’s \textit{Reclaiming the Sacred}. Desan aims to “analyze lay religious change in the context of political and cultural turmoil and probe the long-term effects of revolutionary religious activism.” She notes that historians of the French Revolution have “exaggerated and reified the opposition between the Revolution and Catholicism,” while they have also tended to understand Catholicism “as a static, single entity.” Desan complicates these notions by describing changes in the laity and noting the ways in which revolutionary ideology impacted their religious practices. Many Catholic villagers, she writes, “sought to reconcile loyalty to their religion with loyalty to the Revolution.” Her emphasis on “the striking flexibility of culture and politics” during the 1790s parallels some of the main objectives of this dissertation. Court rulings and federal legislation facilitated the gradual death of Jim Crow during the 1960s and 1970s, and many black and white southerners faced a crisis of faith. Some were compelled to courageous acts that openly defied traditional racial customs, while others retreated to the scriptures in attempts to maintain the status quo. But the social upheavals of the 1960s forced many people to reassess their religious practices, and congregants from numerous denominations often determined the responses of their local religious bodies in light of their experiences and interpretations of the events of this era. Indeed, the current factions

\textsuperscript{14} Chappell, 113, 249n.11, 253n.25, 254n.30.
within many major Protestant denominations have their origins in the civil rights and antiwar movements.¹⁵

While acknowledging this dissertation’s intellectual debts and substantive antecedents, in terms of methodology and evidential base, it differs from previous literature in several ways. Historians who have researched the complexities of religion and racial mores have generally relied heavily upon printed materials. Denominational periodicals, decrees from annual conventions, and other written documents such as sermons and personal letters provided the bulk of primary sources. These approaches illuminated the perspectives of ministers or ranking officials in denominational hierarchies, but they rarely revealed the sentiments of the mass of church members. Newman argues that the resolutions passed by the Southern Baptist Convention are more indicative of popular opinion because they required votes from representatives of individual, nominally autonomous churches. But even these votes can be problematic, especially since individuals were not bound by their congregations to vote a certain way. In contrast, the evidentiary base used in this dissertation allows greater, if far from comprehensive, access to racial attitudes within local congregations of COCs.

A variety of manuscript sources provide the primary basis for my research, analysis, and conclusions. As with most denominational histories, this dissertation utilizes periodicals and sermons to gain insight into what some of the most prominent members wanted their fellow communicants to hear or read. However, without the hierarchy that characterizes many denominations, research into the COCs poses several challenges. There are no official

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publications; there is no official repository archived materials. While each local church maintains autonomy, historians generally agree that denominational periodicals and COC colleges have served a normative function within COCs. Journal editors often served as de facto bishops on matters of doctrine within the denomination. In his assessment of COCs during the civil rights movement, Richard Hughes wrote, “Though the events of those years were surely the most revolutionary to transpire in America since the Civil War, one scarcely would have known of them at all if one’s only source of information during the period had been the Firm Foundation, the Gospel Advocate, or almost any other media outlet related to mainstream Churches of Christ.” While this assessment slightly overstates the reality, it does suggest the limits of research within church periodicals. Yet the general silence within those publications also heightens the importance of the infrequent references to race relations or the civil rights movement. I mined several periodicals affiliated with COCs, especially the Christian Echo which was owned and operated by African Americans. Although the journal was founded in 1902, the oldest copies only date back to the 1930s. Many issues are also missing for the period after the 1930s, including some from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Echo was published bimonthly until the early 1950s when production was cut back to once per month.

Sermons proved especially helpful in acquiring specific information relating to race relations. Since preachers were beholden to their local elders and congregants, sermons were typically moderate, and they communicated the general sentiments of members; otherwise a preacher would not be able to keep his job. On at least one occasion, a white preacher in Mississippi was fired on the Monday following a Sunday sermon that complimented Martin Luther King Jr. Thus, homilies delivered to COCs, more than other denominations, are
indicative of popular thought within a local congregation. Radio and television addresses further highlighted the messages that COCs wanted broadcast to general audiences.

Personal letters gave insight into the more intimate thoughts of preachers, members, or students and faculty at denominational colleges. They were probably the best source for describing specific incidents and personal sentiments about race relations or how to pursue racial reconciliation. Non-traditional sources such as weekly church newsletters, student newspapers, and Sunday school materials were rarely used by the aforementioned historians, but this study incorporates these to provide a better assessment of popular opinion. In particular, newspapers from several COC colleges permitted insights into the racial attitudes of white students, while Sunday school lessons illustrated how churches were discussing and defining racial prejudice.

In addition to these sources, my work is informed by the oral histories that I have conducted. The interviewees included both black and white church members, ministers, and college administrators. These interviews have proven to be especially useful for describing race relations workshops and clarifying attitudes, particularly among college students, that cannot always be discerned from printed sources. I also discovered a collection of interviews with Marshall Keeble that were conducted shortly before his death in 1968.

The Center for Restoration Studies (Abilene, Texas), Harding University Graduate School of Religion (Memphis, Tennessee), and the University of Arkansas provided the bulk of my primary sources. The Center is located on the campus of Abilene Christian University and houses the largest collection of materials related exclusively to COCs. The collection includes preachers’ papers, denominational periodicals, the weekly bulletins of many churches, as well as sermon transcripts and letters from listeners of the Herald of Truth radio program. The Center maintains a vertical file, labeled “Race Issues,” containing miscellaneous items such as speeches,
articles, or pamphlets that address race relations. Finally, the papers of James Bales, one of Harding College’s most renown professors, are housed at the University of Arkansas.16

The library at the Harding University Graduate School of Religion holds the papers belonging to John Allen Chalk, a popular preacher among COCs beginning in the 1960s. This collection provided an abundance of sources pertaining to the late 1960s and to the Herald of Truth radio program. The papers of other prominent figures are housed at various locations. The Disciples of Christ Historical Society (Nashville, Tennessee) is another popular depository for materials relating to COCs. The papers of B. C. Goodpasture, longtime editor of the Gospel Advocate, are here, and this collection includes numerous letters from Marshall Keeble, arguably the most popular COC preacher in the twentieth century. Harding University (Searcy, Arkansas) holds what remains from the papers of its former president, George Benson, a staunch conservative who made several appearances before Congress as an advocate of balanced federal budgets and curtailed expenditures on social programs. A small collection of Bales’s materials is also at Harding.

Several other archives provided useful materials. Documents pertaining to race relations and COCs were also located at the Alabama Department of Archives and History (Montgomery, Alabama), Ouachita Baptist University (Arkadelphia, Arkansas), Tennessee Tech University (Cookeville, Tennessee), and the University of Rochester (Rochester, New York). Among COC colleges, Abilene and Harding were most helpful, while smaller collections at Florida College (Temple Terrace, Florida), Freed-Hardeman University (Henderson, Tennessee) and David Lipscomb University (Nashville, Tennessee) also contributed to my sources.

16 Several items from the Center of Restoration Studies are available online at http://www.bible.acu.edu/crs/.
The dissertation is structured in a broadly chronological fashion, though several chapters are more thematic. Chapters Two and Three are devoted to black and white churches within the denomination. Each chapter assesses their racial attitudes by considering what members were studying in Sunday school classes, hearing from their pulpits, and reading in weekly church bulletins. These chapters also evaluate the interactions between black and white churches. The chapter devoted to black churches further examines how some rebelled against the racial mores of society, while others negotiated these mores toward a variety of personal objectives.

Chapter Four is devoted to the desegregation of colleges affiliated with COCs. Special attention is given both to students and administrators, as debates about desegregation were played out in administration buildings, classrooms, cafeterias, dormitories, and student newspapers. While many students favored the desegregation of their colleges, specific answers to the “race question” depended on the question. If desegregation was acceptable, the inclusion of African Americans into social clubs faced stiffer opposition. The chapter focuses on the desegregation of two COC colleges, Harding College in Searcy, Arkansas, and Abilene Christian College (ACC) in Texas. These two schools were chosen primarily because of the availability of sources, although three other southern colleges—David Lipscomb College (Lipscomb) in Nashville; Freed-Hardeman College (Freed) in Henderson, Tennessee; and Alabama Christian College (now Faulkner University) in Montgomery—are briefly mentioned.

The subsequent chapter on church media expands on some of these themes by noting what journal editors and contributors were writing about race relations. This chapter primarily concerns itself with media that were owned and operated by whites, as the black-owned periodical, the Christian Echo, appears prominently in the chapters about black preachers and congregants and the civil rights movement. Church periodicals were the most public face of
COCs, and their subscription lists were easily affected by content. The chapter also discusses the *Herald of Truth* radio program.

Chapter Six examines the reactions of church members and preachers to several notable events from the civil rights movement. COCs included members who actively resisted and others who fervently participated in the freedom struggle. In finding biblical justification for segregation or opposition to social activism, some preachers were comparable to Leon C. Burns Sr. Conversely, the actions of church members like Fred Gray, lawyer for both Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, show how a few COC members did find inspiration for activism in their faiths. These diverse responses show the ambiguous nature of religious zeal as it pertains to the African American freedom struggle.

The next two chapters assess the last years of the 1960s and their legacy within the church. In particular, 1968—the focus of Chapter Seven—was a year of reckoning within COCs. The untimely death of Martin Luther King Jr. was a catalyst for heated debates about civil rights and the role of churches amid social unrest. During these years, lines were drawn between black and white members that, in many circumstances, have still not been crossed. Nevertheless, Chapter Eight notes some fascinating exceptions, such as the merger of a few black and white churches. These examples were atypical, however, as most black and white churches became more distant after the 1960s than they were before the decade began. The dissertation concludes with Chapter Nine which briefly summarizes the legacy of the momentous events analyzed in the heart of the dissertation by describing the relationships of black and white churches in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Traditional narratives about the civil rights movement that focus primarily on civil rights organizations, white resistance, or their leaders do not adequately address the lives of the vast
majority of people who frequently negotiated the ambiguities between law, custom, and their own sense of decency. Most black people did not march in the streets, even if they usually affirmed the aims of civil rights demonstrations. Most white people did not violently resist integration and black enfranchisement, even if there were serious reservations about what they might entail. My work illuminates these huge segments of the population by focusing upon a biracial church whose members, in many respects, represent the wide variety of black and white perspectives on race and faith. There is little room for simple binaries such as black or white, for civil rights or against civil rights. My research uncovers the gradations of racial attitudes that permeated both black and white churches. Subsequent narratives about race relations in this era must grapple with the complexities that arise when labels such as “segregationist” or “integrationist” do not capture the nuances that exist at the intersection of faith and race.
CHAPTER 2
WHITE CHURCHES OF CHRIST

This chapter examines the racial attitudes of white church members and preachers from the Great Depression to the 1960s. During this time, most white congregants occupied that amorphous middle ground between militant racism and support for racial equality. Rather than classify the variety of opinions within this middle ground, this chapter notes the cacophony of voices that spoke about race. Among these voices, a range of acceptable practices emerged, one that defied categorization but demonstrates competing racial attitudes among whites. For example, one white person might have no objection to including black students in Christian colleges, but he or she would be appalled at the prospect of interracial romance. Another might favor the abolition of legal segregation while opposing organized resistance to Jim Crow laws. At the level of individuals, common categorizations (“segregationist,” et al.) often fail to capture the warring ideas about race and religion that jostled for ascendancy in the minds of many church members.

To be certain, a few whites simply disliked blacks, but most whites favored the maintenance of cordial relationships, even if they felt no need to advocate social changes that would upend Jim Crow laws. Spiritual equality, in the opinions of most whites, did not necessitate social, political, and economic equality. Within COCs, for example, there were Bible classes devoted to racial harmony long before the modern civil rights movement brought race relations to the forefront of national attention. Worship assemblies that included black and white members were typically segregated with a rope down the center aisle, even though there were occasional exceptions to this practice. Black and white churches cooperated in evangelism, even while maintaining separate churches within the same locales. At the same time, white members exhibited casual racism in the form of quips about black preachers that appeared in church
bulletins or were told during a sermon’s introduction. Comments intended to bring smiles to audiences reflected common racial stereotypes and assumptions and, in this regard, white COCs were virtually indistinguishable from any other social group.

Meanwhile, many whites were seemingly unaware of the disparities that existed in the form of educational and economic inequalities. Those few who were aware might support improved conditions for blacks, but they were often unprepared or unwilling to be outspoken about social and political matters because these concerns fell outside the bounds of spirituality, daily routines, or personal business. Finally, the truism about Jim Crow laws passed down to generations of whites since the civil rights movement—“That’s just the way things were”—helps illustrate the powerlessness that many people felt. Even if they knew blacks were mistreated, what could common whites do, so some thought, to correct the grossest injustices? In the minds of many whites in COCs, the best one could do was to treat all people, and all laws, with respect and dignity.

While white congregants were generally supportive of civil government and local customs, many church members, both black and white, fully embraced the notion that primitive Christianity was an end unto itself. The restorationist impulse was so strong that many members came to believe that New Testament Christianity was not just something to be restored; it had been restored in the “church of Christ.” On many signs and publications, COCs used the lower case c as evidence that this group of believers was not just another denomination. The COC was “the church,” to be carefully distinguished from “the denominations,” a classification that included all nominally Christian groups outside of COCs. Thus, most white members, who might otherwise have been even more condescending in their attitudes toward African
emphasis on church attendance persists. A Gallup poll released in 2006 found that members of COCs were more likely than any other Christian group in the United States to attend a worship service each week. Sixty-eight percent of COC respondents reported that they “attend worship services at least once a week or almost every week.” Mormons were second at 67%, followed by Pentecostals at 65%. See Bobby Ross Jr., “Poll: Church of Christ Tops in Weekly Worship Attendance,” *Christian Chronicle* 63 (1 May 2006), available online at http://www.christianchronicle.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=271.

Sunday school lessons offer compelling insight into the thinking of many white members. COCs have never failed to emphasize the necessity of attending church regularly, including the Sunday school classes that preceded the worship hour for many churches.† Bible classes were typically divided between children and adults, and the latter often used publications such as *Elam’s Notes on Bible School Lessons* to guide them through a careful study of the scriptures. These lessons, published by the Gospel Advocate Publishing Company in Nashville, were helpful in several respects. First, no strenuous preparation was required of the teacher since a general outline was already prescribed, complete with brief commentary about the appropriate biblical passages. Second, churches took comfort in knowing that these lessons were prepared by well-respected preachers.

The *Gospel Advocate* periodical was almost synonymous with its long-time editor, David Lipscomb, one of the most revered church leaders in COC history, and the Gospel Advocate Publishing Company developed out of the popularity of the periodical. While the lessons in these books reflect the values of their authors, they can also provide insight into what many churches were reading and discussing about racial issues and their relationship to faith. The Gospel Advocate Company was a business, and it undoubtedly marketed a product designed to appeal to many churches. Controversial topics, specifically those that might jeopardize future sales, were generally ignored or handled with extreme care. Certainly when racial prejudice was

† The emphasis on church attendance persists. A Gallup poll released in 2006 found that members of COCs were more likely than any other Christian group in the United States to attend a worship service each week. Sixty-eight percent of COC respondents reported that they “attend worship services at least once a week or almost every week.” Mormons were second at 67%, followed by Pentecostals at 65%. See Bobby Ross Jr., “Poll: Church of Christ Tops in Weekly Worship Attendance,” *Christian Chronicle* 63 (1 May 2006), available online at http://www.christianchronicle.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=271.
discussed, it was mentioned in a way that would have been amenable to most of the publisher’s customers.²

A lesson was included in Elam’s Notes for every Sunday of the calendar year, and members could prepare for the lessons in advance by studiously following the daily Bible readings that accompanied every lesson. The most diligent churchgoers set aside time each day to read their Bibles, while many must have done their best to catch up on Saturday night and Sunday morning, if they followed the readings at all. Such was the case in the week prior to Sunday, 17 November 1929. The week’s scheduled readings included three sections from Acts, two Pauline passages, and brief narratives from both the Gospel of John and the book of Ruth. The study for that Sunday was Lesson VII, titled “LIVING WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER RACES.”³

When Sunday school classes assembled that November morning, many began with an opening prayer that invoked divine blessing on the nation’s economic woes. The infamous stock market crash had occurred less than three weeks prior, signaling the onset of what would become known as the Great Depression. Though the crash itself had little direct effect on most members of COCs, it fell within the purview of their supplications to God. After an opening prayer, congregants read the main texts for the week’s lesson, Galatians 3:28-29, and excerpts from Acts 10. Two verses from the latter served as the “golden text,” the one that summarized the main point of the lesson: “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every

² Hughes, 150, 273.

nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him.”⁴ In reading and
discussing the lesson’s expository notes, each class encountered several statements, almost all
supplemented by other scriptures, that taught “how to live without friction or trouble among
people who are of different nationalities.” On that Sunday, members also considered the apostle
Peter’s struggles. “It was hard for Peter to understand that he should go to another race and
preach the gospel; it was difficult for him to lay aside racial prejudices,” the lesson stated.
Though clearly implied throughout the text, the authors resolutely declared, “Two things are
essential—namely, to fear God and to work righteousness. To fear God is to obey him, and to
work righteousness is to discharge all duties to our fellow men. As God is ‘no respecter of
persons,’ God’s people should not be. As the gospel is for all—‘every creature,’ ‘the whole
creation’—then we should carry the gospel to all.” In the lesson’s final section, readers were
reminded that “there can be no distinction between members of different races or nationalities in
the church . . . As all distinctions are done away with in Christ, then we should not let any
nationality, race, or color separate us as the children of God.”⁵

The lessons appeared unequivocal, yet they were qualified in ways that revealed the tension
between racial progressivism in COC theology and the denomination’s more conservative
approach to racial practices. After making statements that echoed some of the Bible’s most
egalitarian passages, the authors concluded, “This does not mean that we are to associate with
those of another race in such a way as to break down customs and make common with them
socially. We can treat all as the children of God; we can be kind and courteous and helpful to all

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⁴ Galatians 3:28-29 states, “There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no
male and female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus. And if ye are Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, heirs
according to promise” (ASV).

⁵ Elam and Boles, 280-285.
with whom we have to do. This we must do if we are faithful to the Lord.” The implications of these remarks could not have been missed. On this Sunday, readers were reminded that while God might not be a respecter of persons, God also does not require white southerners to “make common” with blacks. Yet, under the heading “PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS,” the authors again emphasized that the church should have “no racial or national distinctions . . . All are admitted into the church on the same conditions and receive the same blessings.” Another suggestion acknowledges the presence of modern racial prejudice. “Some have even taught,” the expository notes state with shock, “that the negro is a beast—that the negro has no soul. Christianity will destroy this racial prejudice and will make the servant of God a minister of righteousness to all.” This mention of “the negro” is the only such reference in the entire lesson, and a final suggestion instructs readers to “be as ready to help one of another race as we are to help one of our own race.” For these authors, there seemed to be no contradiction between the spiritual equality among races and the economic, political, and social subordination of African Americans, especially in the South. Sunday school classes closed that day by discussing the list of questions posed in the lesson’s conclusion. The list included, “To what extent may we associate with other races?” and “Does the negro have a right to the gospel?” While the first likely precipitated some debate, the second was intended to be answered in the affirmative. Most Sunday school classes closed their study with prayers seeking divine guidance in dealing with racial prejudice, though this prejudice was undoubtedly defined in numerous ways.6

Such lessons were not common fare in Sunday school classes, but the lesson from 1929 was not unique. Under a different editor, this same annual series broached the subject again in the lesson for 4 December 1932, titled “LIVING WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER RACES.” In the

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6 Ibid.
daily readings leading up to this Sunday, congregants were supposed to read verses that taught
“The Unity of the Nations” and “All Belong to God.” No explicit qualifications about social
interaction were mentioned, except for the statement “That God expected the races to remain
within their bounds—preserve their own existence—seems to be the import of Paul’s words.”
The lesson also contended that the “ignoring of racial distinctions to enjoy common blessings in
Christ . . . was plainly stated by the Lord. . . . [and] was actually realized in the apostolic church.”
These words left no doubt about what members of COCs should believe about the inclusion of
all people in the church. In another section, the author even described Jesus’s association with a
Samaritan who was of “a mixed race with a mixed religion.” Modern race relations were never
specifically addressed, and the only ethnic labels used in the lesson were common to any study of
the New Testament: Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans.7

In 1944, the Annual Lesson Commentary, as it was then known, again examined race
relations with a November lesson titled, “THE CHRISTIAN AND THE RACE PROBLEM.”
Like the studies that preceded it, this one expounded on familiar Bible stories to stress that in
“preaching the gospel and extending the kingdom of God, there should be no race problem—the
gospel is for all men.” In subsequent weeks, however, church members tackled lessons titled,
“THE CHURCH DURING WAR AND PEACE” and “CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY,”
topics that were especially pertinent during the harrowing years of World War II. Although one
cannot be sure of the motivation behind these two lessons, the language in them foreshadowed
the language of white resistance to the civil rights movement in the following decades. While
acknowledging that civil governments “do not always function as God intended,” the lessons
used strong language in urging readers to obey and respect their government. “If therefore a man

7 John T. Hinds, Annual Lesson Commentary on Improved Uniform Series of International Bible Lessons: 1932
disobeys the laws of the land,” the former lesson stated, “he disobeys the law of God, unless the laws of the land are contrary to the laws of God.” And later, “A Christian cannot afford to be rude and disrespectful in his bearing toward others; he should especially be respectful to the officers of his government.” This particular lesson concluded that the “Christian should be the most law-abiding citizen of his community. He must not become a law unto himself and disobey a law because he thinks it interferes with some of his natural rights.” The author went so far as to criticize Christians, “even some preachers and church leaders,” for disobeying motor vehicle laws. Thus, while the war and its aftermath often strengthened the resolve of African Americans to fight for equality at home, many whites developed a renewed sense of patriotism and national loyalty, especially as people of faith lent religious significance to the fight against fascism and communism.8

Even more striking in light of segregationist complaints against civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s is the language in the next lesson for 1944. Under the section heading, “A Christian and His Government,” the author states, “Sometimes a member of the church will disobey a law because he thinks it is useless, or because he thinks it interferes with some of his fancied natural rights. He becomes therefore a law unto himself; that attitude toward his government is the essence of anarchy. . . . Sometimes certain laws do seem to be useless, but so long as such laws are in existence they should be obeyed.” Although the lessons acknowledged that Christianity could flourish under a variety of governments, the general affirmation of civil

governments reflected the era in which these lessons were produced. Loyalty was important. However, the language here suggests a precedent for what was to come with regard to race relations. The desire expressed by many whites to preserve law and order at the height of the civil rights movement may not have always been an excuse to maintain segregation; some whites felt that respect for the law and preservation of order were Christian dispositions that should have been maintained even in the face of hostility and oppression. Thus, black protestors were easily characterized as “lawless.” The point here is not to suggest that “law and order” rhetoric was free of segregationist motives but simply to observe that this rhetoric had a history of its own, a lineage that predated the most momentous events of the modern civil rights movement.9

A few years later, racial concerns were becoming more pressing, both in the broader society and inside COCs. In 1947, President Harry Truman’s Civil Rights Commission issued its conclusions in To Secure These Rights, noting the discrimination faced by African Americans in the United States. The following year was significant in that Truman ordered the desegregation of the military and faced formidable obstacles to his reelection when members of his own party, incensed by the President’s acceptance of a strong civil rights platform, rebelled and formed the Dixiecrat Party. Amid these circumstances, the Annual Lesson Commentary again resorted to a disclaimer in its 1949 lesson on “JESUS AND OTHER RACES.” Author Roy Lanier Sr. did not want readers to misunderstand his teaching. While citing many of the same texts and coming to the same conclusions as previous lessons, Lanier acknowledged escalating problems in the introduction, while still carefully avoiding any advocacy of social reform.

And we have a race problem today which is gradually coming to a head. Our national leaders are using it to get votes. Each party wants the negro vote, and to get it they are offering advantages to the negro which violate customs and distinctions of long standing.

9 [Whitesides], 269-270.
All races are entitled to every blessing to be had in Christ. (Gal 3:28, 29.) Furthermore all races are entitled to an education, to take a part in their government as their ability will permit, and they are entitled to an opportunity to improved living conditions. But this is far from saying that the races should intermarry, or even that their children should be thrown together in the schoolroom and on the playground. There are differences in ideas and moral standards which cannot be disregarded without injury to those who are holding the standards as high as possible. (1 Cor. 15:33.)

The final citation, from the apostle Paul’s first Corinthian epistle, states, “Be not deceived: Evil companionships corrupt good morals.” Lanier clearly believed that the gospel was for all, but this belief had no bearing on his views of segregation and his understanding that African Americans were somehow less moral than whites.

In a 1951 lesson, Lanier again explored the subject of race relations in a study titled, “THE CHRISTIAN AND OTHER RACES.” In this instance, perhaps reflecting more maturity or the evolution of his ideas about race, Lanier’s remarks were more ambiguous. There was no overt disclaimer regarding social mixing. Instead, he addressed contemporary discussions about race while expressing a more subtle disdain for associating with people of other races. For example, in explaining the “golden text,” Acts 17:26, Lanier stated, “Until recent years there were many people who would argue that the Negro does not have a soul, that he is a lower class of being than the white race. A few can still be found who believe this vicious doctrine, and many more who act as if they believe it.”

Lanier was clearly perturbed at this situation. “Why the various families of the earth have different physical features is a problem which the Bible does not propose to settle,” he wrote. “The thing we need to do is to recognize every human being as our


11 This quotation relies on the American Standard Version because it was consistently employed by the Teacher’s Annual Lesson Commentary in 1949.

12 Acts 17:26 states, “and he made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation” (ASV).
brother or sister, and do our best to carry the gospel of salvation to every nation and every individual in every nation. It is not our duty to live with nor like them, but it is our duty to preach Christ to them.”

What is most ironic in this lesson is Lanier’s use of a story from the apostle Paul’s epistle to the Galatians. Paul described a hostile encounter between himself and the apostle Peter. According to the letter, Peter shared meals with Gentile Christians, but when some Jewish Christians came to see him, he “drew back and separated himself” from the Gentiles for fear of upsetting his Jewish brothers. Paul took exception to Peter’s actions and “resisted him to the face.” The sharing of a meal, an intimate form of fellowship in ancient Palestine and in the American South, is at the heart of this story. In Peter’s unwillingness to openly associate with Gentiles, Lanier observed “race prejudice, race distinction, and race pressure brought by a man who knew better. We need to exercise care today lest we be guilty of the same thing.” In this lesson, no comments about playgrounds or loose morals followed. Instead, the third item under “Topics for Discussion” asked, “Does racial equality in Christ demand free and unlimited social intercourse between any two races such as whites and negroes? Can we practice racial equality in Christ as taught by Jesus and his apostles, and still maintain our practice of segregation as it is known in the South? These questions should be discussed calmly and intelligently. They are live issues.” Indeed they were, and one can rightly imagine that on Sunday morning, 30 September 1951, most white members of COCs who posed these questions to their classes and to themselves answered “no” and “yes,” respectively. Nevertheless, the fact that these statements were posed as questions rather than strict admonitions suggests that they were open for discussion and could be answered in a variety of ways. As the decades of the 1950s and 1960s

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unfolded, these questions would be the source of much concern among a people who sought strict adherence to the New Testament.  

Weekly church bulletins offer another compelling source for discerning racial attitudes among whites. While larger churches needed to publish a newsletter to facilitate communication among their members, even small churches often produced weekly or at least monthly bulletins. These publications served several purposes. First, they kept members abreast of the latest news within their church: upcoming events, who was sick, and who had requested prayers. Second, bulletins also served a spiritual purpose in the minds of many preachers and congregants in that they often contained edifying stories or scriptures that were intended to encourage members to maintain a strong faith throughout the week. To this end, preachers frequently included humorous stories, designed to bring smiles or a bit of joy to members drained by long hours of work. Some churches even used bulletins as evangelistic tools by placing interested parties on their mailing lists. While information and edification were the two primary aims of these publications, their handling of racial matters betrayed both white insensitivities and nonchalance toward blacks.

The Center Street church in Fayetteville, Arkansas, provides several such examples. In one bulletin from 1952, situated between an announcement about upcoming gospel radio programs and a list of “TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR A LIVELY CHURCH,” the following quip appeared: “An old colored preacher said that his favorite verse was where they loafs and fishes.” This comment, a play on words from the story in the gospels about Jesus feeding thousands with just a few loaves of bread and some fish, relied on a stereotype of the lazy African American to make a joke. Such “humor” was not uncommon in the bulletins of white churches, or in the

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14 [Lanier Sr.], 1951, 234-235.
remarks of preachers who wanted to win easy favor with their white audiences. Seven years later, the Center Street bulletin included a prayer supposedly spoken by an “old Negro preacher of the deep south, who never had to worry about empty pews.” The prayer was written in dialect: “Oh, Lawd, give thy servant dis mowin’ de eye of de eagle and de wisdom of de owl: connect his soul wid de gospel-telfome in de central skies . . . turpentime his ‘magination; grease his lips wid possum oil . . . ‘noint him all over wid de kerosene oil of salvation and set him on fire all over! amen!!!” The inclusion of such material presumably did not violate admonitions of Bible class teachers and preachers that Christians should make practical the maxim that “God is no respecter of persons.” This manifestation of racial prejudice differed from that of the irreligious or unchurched only in the sense of being christened with religious jargon to make it appear harmless.  

Even as the civil rights movement gained momentum and began to prick the consciences of many white Christians in the South, parables that condemned racism and racial practices could be awkward. In the spring of 1961, the Center Street church printed a story about an “old colored man” who entered “a Nashville church and sat unobtrusively in the back row.” The reader must assume that this was a white church because at the conclusion of the service, the preacher approached the man and said, “Tom, I suppose you know that you caused all sorts of commotion when you came in here.” The parable indicates that Tom did not realize his presence had caused a stir, so the preacher suggested that he “go and talk this over with God and see if he wants you to come back here next Sunday.” The two met later in the week, and the preacher asked Tom if he had prayed about the matter. “Yessuh,” Tom replied. “I done talked de matter ovah wid de

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15 Center Street Church of Christ bulletins, February 17, 1952; and December 6, 1959. Center Street Church of Christ Records, 1897-1986 (MC873), series 6, box 4, files 6 and 12. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
Lord . . . an’ he told me, ‘Tom, doan yo’ worry about dat at all. Ah’ve been trying to get in dat church myself, evah since . . . it was built.’” Although continuing to rely on a story about a “colored man,” the parable was clearly intended to teach readers that all people should be welcomed in church assemblies including, presumably, African Americans. While it is the case that this parable includes a black man who sits in the back and answers “Yessuh” to whites, the church was communicating its openness to integration at a time when the freedom rides were illustrating the recalcitrance of some white southerners.16

For the most part, however, COCs were diligent in maintaining separate churches for black and white members. Such a practice was obviously customary, but for people belonging to a fellowship that, in the minds of many members at least, considered itself the only manifestation of authentic Christianity in the world, black and white members of COCs sometimes went to extremes to ensure their good standing in the local community. For example, in the early 1950s, white members of the Hatcher Street church in Dallas were growing increasingly wary of the numbers of African Americans moving into the community. Like many other churches, this one decided to follow the white flight out of the city and move to a location more suitable for its socioeconomic tastes. However, during the process of relocating, the church hired Alvertice Bowdre Sr., “a colored minister who has had good success among his people.” On Sundays, the white members gathered for worship and a sermon from their white minister, and then Bowdre conducted services for black church members. The two groups used the same building but essentially maintained two churches. The Dallas Morning News spoke favorably of this arrangement that would “continue for perhaps a year or until Brother Bowdre can assemble about

him a flock to carry on a church of their own. Then the present white congregation will go over to [another community] and build themselves a new church house."^{17}

While formal segregation might have been the rule in the South, such practices were not limited to the region. In the late 1940s, a new church organized in Racine, Wisconsin. Seven white members had been meeting with two other churches, including a black church that had been created in 1947. By the summer of 1948, white members began meeting together and sought to form a new congregation. The new church grew enough to purchase a building in 1952 but was eager to relocate six years later. In seeking financial support, the church composed a letter that explained why. “The neighborhood is almost completely filled with colored people, or with people who are of some sort of foreign extraction. We have been unable to reach them at all with the gospel. For our own membership, they do not hurt the environment, but many people will not attend services in the neighborhood, thinking we are all colored, Mexican, etc. That is true even here in the north in very many instances.” This church seems to have tried to include the variety of people collectively known as “them,” but discontent over community demographics eventually led white members to move elsewhere. Both northern and southern whites within COCs sought to locate church buildings in areas that would not be stigmatized by white outsiders.\(^18\)

Despite these examples, some black and white members of COCs, especially preachers, interacted with surprising frequency. Revivals, or gospel meetings as they were often called by

\(^{17}\) *Newport (RI) Report*, January 10, 1954. James Bales Papers. Unprocessed. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The column from the *Dallas Morning News* was quoted by a church bulletin from a Church of Christ in Newport. After quoting the article, the bulletin concluded by noting, “As sincere Christians, we should be ever conscious of meeting the approval of God. The word of God plainly states, ‘But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin.’ (James 2:9)."

\(^{18}\) Ray Ferris to John Allen Chalk, January 10, 1958. John Allen Chalk Papers, Personal Correspondence, volume 1, folder R. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
COCs, would sometimes include both black and white church members. If a black guest preacher came at the behest of a white church in the South, then a rope strung down the middle aisle of the auditorium or tent usually divided the races. White members rarely attended functions sponsored exclusively by black churches. A few black preachers received invitations to speak to predominantly white audiences and, conversely, white preachers spoke in the pulpits of black churches. For example, Richard Nathaniel (R. N.) Hogan, a black preacher and longtime editor of the *Christian Echo* (the periodical associated with black COCs) was well-acquainted with both black and white churches. On numerous occasions, he received invitations to speak from white churches like the Center Street church in Fayetteville which sought his services for a gospel meeting that was conducted in concert with a youth camp in 1953. As one of the most popular preachers among COCs, black minister Marshall Keeble also received countless invitations to speak at college lectureships or gospel meetings sponsored by white churches. In fact, many white churches invited Keeble to preach as a way to start a new church for local blacks. His general unwillingness to broach the subject of race relations made him safe for white churches who sought his services, even as several of his students became stalwarts of civil rights causes. Nevertheless, black preachers were typically welcome to attend college lectureships, even if they were not invited to speak. In a 1945 edition of the *Babbler*, the David Lipscomb College student newspaper, attendees at a lectureship were pictured on the front page in a group photo that included both black and white men.\(^{19}\)

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By January 1963, the Center Street church was evangelizing the African American population of Fayetteville through support of a new church, the Combs Street Church of Christ. Rather than make efforts to include black members into a church that already existed, the Center Street church chose to help establish a new congregation. “Isn’t it thrilling to see this new work among our Negro brethren doing so well?” a church bulletin asked. “Let us strive to give more that we might be able to do more!” Of the many paths that led away from the overt racism and Jim Crow laws of the past, COCs often chose the easiest route, one that included the practice of investing money in black churches and paying their ministers instead of integrating churches already in existence. This practice was customary for many years before the modern civil rights movement. However, given the gradual changes in the state of southern race relations that were occurring in the wake of the African American freedom struggle, approaches that had once looked somewhat progressive began to seem increasingly anachronistic, if not hostile, to black aspirations and notions of full equality. On the one hand, churches could criticize the apostle Peter for his inconsistency in associating with Gentile Christians and teach that worship assemblies should be open to all people, but on the other hand, white churches attempted to keep their black brothers and sisters out of sight, segregated in churches that struggled to maintain facilities and clergy, during an era when segregation was under sustained attack. In an informational booklet published by the Center Street church in 1966, the ministry of the Combs Street church is mentioned alongside efforts to minister to college students at the University of Arkansas. “A part of our work in spreading the borders of the kingdom is the support of Riley West as he work [sic] among his people in our city.” The brief account continues by noting that
“the brethren at Combs Street are assuming more and more of the support of the work. . . . [They] work with us . . . at all times and they are grateful for the support of this church.”

Some integration occasionally occurred outside the context of formal church activities, notably in COC educational institutions. In the early 1950s, a music teacher named Ann Sewell from Harding College accepted two black teenagers into her classes. The students, both girls, studied alongside the white pupils. They also participated in piano recitals that were held on campus. Sewell once recalled a recital when the girls had invited family and friends to attend. Upon arrival, the visitors asked where they should be seated, and Sewell told them to “Sit just anywhere you would like to.” Sewell was pregnant during the following school year, but she continued teaching the girls in her home where subsequent recitals and parties were held. Sewell considered these experiences examples “of quiet, peaceful integration in Searcy among Christians.”

She also remembered an occasion in the mid-1950s when the student choir from the historically black Southwestern Christian College performed at Harding. When the choir director could not find lodging for his singers, he turned to Sewell and her husband. Together they called several faculty members about the possibility of opening their homes to the visitors. “[W]ithout exception,” she insisted, “the answer was a quick unequivicable [sic] ‘Yes’.” More than a decade later, she assessed that occasion as “probably a first experience of this type around here.” Thus, in her estimation, “it was remarkable then that it all happened so easily and naturally.”

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22 Ibid.
While Abilene Christian College was not formally integrated until an action by the board of trustees in 1961, it accepted a Bermudan student of African descent in the late 1950s. Professor Carl Spain recalled that the young lady “was negro by her own admission. She stayed in the girls’ dormitory with white girls who knew she was negro.” The student also attended church where Spain preached and taught a Bible class for children. In Spain’s recollection, she “was graciously received by faculty, administration, and student body. Some said she was not a ‘negro’. But her ancestral lineage was identical with other negros [sic] who were imported during the days of slavery. Some tried to cover the matter over by calling her ‘Bermudan’ [sic].”

To clinch his point about the girl’s racial identity, Spain finally pointed out that when she left Abilene, she married “one of her own people” in an AME church in Bermuda.23

These sources illustrate the complexities of racial mores among white members of COCs in the years preceding the 1960s. Admonishments against racial prejudice could serve as the basis for a Sunday school lesson, but jokes that depended on crude racial stereotypes might appear in church bulletins or sermon outlines. Black preachers could preach to predominantly white audiences, and white preachers could speak in black churches. But most communities, in the South and elsewhere, usually maintained separate facilities for black and white members. Even in this paradoxical context, personal and interracial relationships were sometimes established.

And all along, most white members would affirm without equivocation that all people were equal in Christ and that God was “no respecter of persons.” The primary objective, however, for both black and white COCs was practicing their conception of New Testament Christianity. The goal of being the church and of maintaining an identity as the restorers of the primitive church took precedence above all else, including (and sometimes especially) race relations.

23 Carl Spain to J. D. Bales, 4 March 1960. Unprocessed. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
As the civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s, these perspectives changed very little. Like much, if never all, of the dominant culture, church members gradually refrained from unseemly racial humor. White churches often increased their patronage of black churches in the name of evangelism; black churches typically accepted whatever was offered, even as they sought to establish their own independence separate from their white counterparts. Together they continued to forge their identities as “the first century church.” Personal correspondence from members and preachers show how ideas about race were interpreted through their religious primitivism. On occasion, hostile words from a white person might be indicative of deep seated hatred toward black people. The aunt of one prominent white minister left little to the imagination when she described going home to find “her colored help in a ‘delicate condition’ and quite indisposed. Some day I’ll take that nigger just across the line into you know what state [Mississippi] and dispose of her. There, it seems one uses ones [sic] discretion in such matters with impunity.” Such threatening language was clearly an exception however. For the most part, white correspondence illuminates a naivete about the plight of many blacks and the mental and spiritual struggles of a people who advocated a primitivist faith, preached against racial prejudice, valorized the law, questioned the efficacies and appropriateness of social activism, and maintained what they considered to be a healthy distance from their black brothers and sisters.24

James Bales, a prolific writer, preacher, and popular professor at Harding College, provides an example of the ambiguities and tensions within the minds of many whites. When racial tensions mounted at mid-century, he fondly recalled how his first sermon and later his first revival were conducted in black churches. In a 1943 letter published “To My Colored Brother,” Bales assured his “colored brother in Christ that the love which binds us together as members of

24 Betty [Brumley] to Johnny and Sue [Chalk], [c. 1960]. John Allen Chalk Papers, Personal Correspondence, volume 2, folder B. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
the same body . . . will not be disturbed by the hate and conflict which those of the world manifest toward men of another race or color.” His poignant note warned that “the racial prejudices which are abroad in our land today are un-Christian . . . Thus I do not share or contribute to the animosities which are growing today in many hearts.” But later, as the civil rights movement raised significant questions about equality and political rights, Bales became increasingly defensive, even offended, when complaints were lodged against the American government. His personal correspondence and private musings demonstrate the difficulty of categorizing whites according to their beliefs about segregation. Bales persistently affirmed that Christian principles should be applied to the treatment of all people, a contention that separated him from those segregationists, some of them equally “devout,” who showed complete disdain for African Americans, their humanity, and their rights. However, his inability to perceive the pervasive effects of structural racism upon black opportunity left him indifferent to the social hardships faced by African Americans and alienated him from racially progressive whites and civil rights activists who understood the need for substantial reforms. This myopia, coupled with the perceived threats posed by communism at the height of the Cold War, accentuated in Bales a desire for order, stability, and a commitment to only the most gradual changes in southern racial customs.25

More clues to his attitudes emerge from his personal papers. On a cryptic, typewritten page, he conveyed his feelings with less inhibition. In answering his own question, “When is it time [to integrate]?” he candidly stated, “I do not know. I think we should be happy that our brethren of various races, except the Negro, have been welcomed here [at Harding College] and

without disturbance from Community or parents. I doubt now is the time with all the excitement about Little Rock.” These thoughts indicate greater concern for peace than contempt for integration, and the final line clearly shows his deference to administrators: “I leave it with [the] board.”

In addition to this note, Bales conveyed some concern over blatant mistreatment of African Americans. His concern for victims of police brutality is evident in a letter sent in October 1957. It was addressed to Brother Essin, a native African who was visiting Southwestern Christian College. The letter referred to an incident in which Essin was struck by a policeman’s blackjack. Bales shared his “deep sorrow” and hope that the unfortunate encounter would not taint Essin’s assessment of the country. “It is too bad that there are prejudices and customs in various parts of the world which lead to unfortunate incidents,” Bales continued. “No country, of course, is free from such prejudices. Although great changes do not come overnight I am confident that the record will show that a great deal of progress has been made in the past half century in the question of race relationships in this country.” After this rather defensive disclaimer, Bales again apologized to Essin, but a postscript offers a revealing statement that points out Bales’s homage to custom. “All of us, of course, should take into consideration the customs and prejudices of a community, state or nation and try to avoid unnecessarily arousing antagonism.” At the conclusion of an otherwise polite letter, Bales could not resist sharing this unsolicited advice, demeaning the person whose feelings he was attempting to assuage.

26 [James Bales], “Harding College When is it time?,” (photocopy of unpublished manuscript in possession of the author). James Bales Papers. Unprocessed. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

Nevertheless, Bales consistently lamented outbreaks of violence against African Americans. When riots erupted at the University of Mississippi after James Meredith enrolled in 1962, Bales penned a letter deploring “the mess in Mississippi.” In another privately drafted paper, Bales wrote about the Christian’s obligation “to manifest good will toward people of all races.” During his travels, he would sometimes stay with African American friends, a courtesy that he returned when visitors came to his home in Searcy, Arkansas. Although he always deflected the harshest criticism against the United States’s social record at the height of the Cold War, Bales observed how racism plagued all societies, but “the fact that racial prejudice is universal has not been pointed out in order to justify it, or to imply that Christians ought to share the prejudices of the world.” On one occasion, he mused over the possibility of starting and maintaining integrated churches. He claimed that his primary interest was the feasibility of evangelism. Bales surmised that African Americans “should be welcomed in the assembly,” but he doubted that “the best way to evangelize the colored race would be by eliminating colored congregations.”

One of the most opportune times for Bales to share his thoughts on integration came shortly after Carl Spain, a professor at Abilene Christian College, delivered a landmark sermon at the 1960 college lectureship that summarily criticized COCs and their colleges for practicing racial segregation. Several days after his remarks, Spain composed a cordial letter to Bales in which he reiterated his sermon’s main points and addressed percolating rumors about the two men. According to Spain, an overzealous editor from a COC periodical attempted to arrange a debate between Bales and Spain over the issue of school integration. The editor declared that

Bales had agreed to defend segregation, and news of this possible debate soon appeared in the school newspaper at ACC. However, Spain refused to accept the editor’s proposition. In his letter to Bales, Spain wrote, “I had refused the ‘challenge’ because I felt that you and I were agreed on the aspects of the problem which I had emphasized in my lecture.” Spain’s letter expressed a desire to hear Bales articulate his point of view on the “integration issue.”

Bales replied immediately, greeting Spain as an “Old friend.” In his response, Bales delicately forged a position that illustrates the sentiments that were weighing on the minds of many whites. He claimed that he was “neither for nor against segregation” and insisted “that one without prejudice can, and should, take into consideration the attitude, customs and laws in the surrounding community.” Yet in the very next sentence, he commented how there was a “definite lack of spiritual growth of any Christian who would refuse [communion] with another Christian.” Bales sought to ground his opinion on the basis of what might prove most expedient to evangelism. Thus, an integrated church “in many, many places is [not] the way to reach either the white or the black race.” He went on to claim “that the integrationist who maintains that we must integrate ‘regardless’ . . . [and] the extremist who maintains that segregation is the Biblical position” were both wrong. Toward the end of his letter, Bales reemphasized the need to “teach and practice good will toward all people,” but he insisted that churches should not “become centers of agitation for or against segregation.” Bales’s final paragraph disclosed feelings pertaining to his own situation and his habitual deference to the university president. “Although I shall be glad to have qualified negro students in my classes, I am willing to abide by the decision

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of the administration. In time undoubtedly they will be admitted; as to the time I leave it to the judgment of the administration.”

Several themes appear in Bales’s letter that prove instructive for understanding his own subsequent positions on the civil rights movement, as well as the conflicted nature of many white southerners’ opinions on race relations. First, Bales did affirm a basic unity among all Christians, regardless of skin color, even if this professed unity did not necessitate integrating churches and schools. Second, Bales’s preeminent concern with social order can be observed in his recommendation that churches refrain from political activism that might lead to civil unrest (even when equal treatment was at stake) and in his deference to the will of the Harding administration. Finally, Bales made evangelism a significant priority. Thus, his otherworldly perspective gave him little reason to advocate social reforms and every reason to mold his opinions of desegregation around the urgency with which he viewed spreading the gospel. Many whites shared similar beliefs.

When Harding College finally accepted a few black students in 1963, Rena Chaney of Vicksburg, Mississippi, contacted Bales to learn about the details and to share her objections. In a five-page, handwritten letter, Chaney’s comments exemplify an extreme expression of racism. Among other claims, she suggested that a black man who wanted to marry a white woman should be sterilized “so that he’d not be passing the stigma of negro blood on to untold generations who would resent it, and yet were powerless in the matter.” Should this procedure be followed, then “God might not consider [miscegenation] a sin.” Chaney later included another curious idea, writing, “Sometimes I wonder if God held the black race in store to cover the world as a black flood, when it should become so wicked as to forget him, as he held back the waters before the

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flood, to destroy wicked, rebellious man.” Drawing on a perverse combination of current events and theology, she argued against “integration on any social level.” By the close of the letter, she seems to have even begun scaring herself by exclaiming, “If the white race is destroyed, civilization, and Christianity with it are lost to the world.”31

Bales responded promptly but failed to address her wild claims. In fact, his reply attempted to peddle his books more than explain Harding’s decision to integrate. In a brief letter, Bales recited the basic facts regarding the admission of the school’s new black students, although his tone indicated his general approval. “The students are all members of the church . . . They want an education. They are not agitators,” he wrote, encapsulating the importance of faith, education, and social order in his approach to racial matters.32

As the tumultuous 1960s continued, conservative whites such as Bales were bombarded with challenges to their most fundamental assumptions about government, power, and religion. As the civil rights movement and the peace movement launched unprecedented protests against oppressive institutions within American society, people of Bales’s ilk felt increasingly alarmed and threatened by the constant turmoil and civil unrest. Bales observed the chaos from the safe distance of Harding College, but he could not help detecting the ways in which social activism seemed to entail disorder. Wherever there were protests, hostilities seemed to erupt. Without giving close attention to who or what instigated violence, rioting, or other breakdowns in civil society, Bales began to perceive all forms of protest as threats to domestic tranquility. He became increasingly defensive about the opportunities allotted to all Americans regardless of


race, especially in comparison to possibilities available in other nations. Even legitimate grievances in the United States held no sense of urgency for Bales because in his mind, his country was better than any other. These patriotic sentiments became especially intense during the Cold War as the superpowers sought the allegiance of neutral nations, many of them newly independent countries populated by peoples of color. His concerns were typical, rather than idiosyncratic among white COCs, as noted by Richard Hughes, who wrote that “the civil rights movement revealed the extent to which most mainstream Churches of Christ championed law-and-order values of conservative politics in the face of the civil unrest associated with racial tensions and growing opposition to the country’s involvement in Vietnam.”

As evidenced by his prolific writing and numerous speaking engagements in the U.S. and overseas, Bales was an eminent figure within and, to a limited degree, outside of COCs. His status as a public figure relied in part on his willingness to take firm positions on political or theological issues, and he rarely displayed inhibitions about sharing his opinions. Over the course of his career, Bales wrote countless letters to newspaper and journal editors across the nation. After 1964, however, these letters expressed a new urgency against “mob pressure” and demonstrated his inability to distinguish the variety of demands made by African Americans involved in social struggle or the range of methods by which different groups sought to effect change. Shortly after the Harlem riots in July 1964, Bales wrote to the Atlanta Constitution and derided those people who “don’t associate extremism with those who have for several years advocated the violation of certain laws which they did not want to obey.” To the Arkansas Gazette, he criticized “Civil Rights agitators” who used religion to push for reforms, while

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33 Hughes, Reviving the Ancient Faith, 297. Similar observations have also been made about Southern Baptists in Mark Newman, Getting Right With God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995, Religion and American Culture (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 110-128.
acknowledging that “Christians should be interested in reforms and in a thoughtful consideration of the means which bring about true reforms.” Unlike many activists, Bales believed that society’s faults could be attributed to people rather than institutions. In this same letter to the Gazette, Bales reverted to his understanding of primitive Christianity in criticizing civil rights activists. “The first Christian missionaries did not make it their goal in life to free the slaves, although through freeing men from slavery to sin the spiritual values preached by Christianity did undermine slavery ultimately.” Here again, he acknowledged that Christianity stood against social evil, but Bales insisted that the church should not take upon itself the responsibility of correcting institutional racism. “So many today,” he continued, “do not give emphasis to the development of character, but think that the fault lies in social institutions and not in persons. They think that by changing social institutions, without changing people, that people will thereby be changed.” In maintaining this position, however, he was dismissive of the plight of many African Americans. In an August 1964 letter to the Arkansas Democrat, Bales urged “Americans of all colors to listen to the words of Herbert Hoover. ‘Deeply as I feel the lag in certain areas which denies equal chance to our Negro population, I cannot refrain from saying that our 19 million Negroes probably own more automobiles than all the 220 million Russians and the 200 million African Negroes put together.’” In this respect, Bales was gradualism personified.34

The ambiguity (and perhaps even paradoxes) in Bales’s thinking can also be observed in a 1964 article that he published in the Gospel Advocate. The piece was titled, “Neither Race, Rank Nor Sex,” and it revisited the ongoing discussion of how Galatians 3:28 received a wide array of interpretations. His most perplexing comment stated how there was a sense in which “a

34 James D. Bales to Editor of the Arkansas (Little Rock) Democrat, 19 May 1964; James D. Bales to Editor of the Atlanta Constitution, 20 July 1964; James D. Bales to Editor of the Arkansas (Little Rock) Gazette, 30 August 1964; and James D. Bales to Editor of the Arkansas (Little Rock) Gazette, 31 August 1964. James Bales Papers. Unprocessed. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
Christian should be color blind, but there are other senses in which the Bible does not require that he be color blind.” Bales contended that adhering to Christian faith “does not mean that one therefore has the duty to ignore all of the laws and customs of society which he does not like. . . . He may not feel that others are practicing the Golden Rule as they ought, but does that give him the right to ignore all of the attitudes, customs and even prejudices of others?” Once again, Bales showed his desire to establish a position that acknowledged Christian unity while slighting the injustices highlighted by social activists. The apparent contradiction in Bales’s former comment may be partially explained by other private writings that take note of the continuance of slave-master relationships in the Pauline epistles or the existence of Jewish and Gentile churches during Christianity’s formative years. In other words, Bales believed that Christian unity did not necessitate erasure of all social distinctions within society, even those distinctions that reflected or were vehicles for inequality.35

Other publications illustrate Bales’s efforts to maintain a critical disposition toward civil rights demonstrations while not wholly dismissing the legitimacy of some black grievances. In *Communism and Race in America*, a book that he coauthored with renowned spy Herbert Philbrick, the first sentence openly confessed that “America has problems which are not due to communism and this is true with reference to racial problems.” The authors later asserted “that improvements, by lawful means and in accordance with the basic principles on which this country was founded, need to be made in our society.” Yet the need for further improvement, they argued, must be tempered by a realization that communists prey upon America’s social ills.

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35 James D. Bales, Neither Race, Rank Nor Sex,” *Gospel Advocate* 106 (27 August 1964): 551-553. Quoted in Robert Christy Douglas, “Power, Its Locus and Function in Defining Social Commentary in the Church of Christ, Illustrated by a Case Study of Black Civil Rights,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1980), 146-147. Douglas suggests that this article was heavily influenced by President George Benson of Harding College and B. C. Goodpasture, the popular editor of the *Gospel Advocate*. 
to further divide and disrupt the nation. While a preoccupation with communist infiltration into reform movements, government, and churches dominated most of the text, their final paragraph also included a qualification of sorts. “The authors do not in any way oppose or protest lawful struggle for Civil Rights.” However, in their estimation, solutions to social ills would be found “when a person is changed within himself.” In the 1960s, there was certainly no shortage of people who believed that civil rights activists were nothing more than tools of the Communist Party. But the book’s tone and almost exclusive focus on communism rather than race indicates the authors’ foremost concern with combating communist influences.36

A similar concern was voiced by Mr. and Mrs. H. E. Jackson, a couple from Mississippi. In a letter to Bales, they vehemently complained that the state was “literally crawling with communists” and that efforts of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to hold parallel elections were “a farce” because of the presence of many black voters at the polls in their precinct near Gulfport. “They voted,” the Jacksons reported, “and were treated most cordially.” Meanwhile, the couple surmised that “the decent Negroes refused to have anything to do with the mess [MFDP election].” In a refrain familiar to many southern whites who felt besieged and misrepresented, they concluded, “There is much talk of the ‘left’ and the ‘right’, but we have decided that it is simply the Right and Wrong. Anyone who is against God is wrong, and we believe that Mississippi will lead the fight.” Here again, the assumption prevailed that communists—presumably atheists who were “against God”—were influencing civil rights

36 Herbert A. Philbrick and James D. Bales, Communism and Race in America (Searcy, Arkansas: Bales Bookstore, 1965), vii, 17, 67-68.
activists. Therefore, the Jacksons concluded, faith in God required a person to oppose communism, and in turn, civil rights activists.\textsuperscript{37}

By 1965, Bales also aimed his verbal assaults at leaders of the civil rights movement such as Martin Luther King. On March 18, three days after Bloody Sunday in Selma, Bales penned a letter that denounced King for importing “lawlessness” to Alabama but also subtly reprimanded the state and local governments. Bales believed that there was a parallel between the two sides.

“The parallel is that both of them believe that they have the right to violate the law of the land if they do not like the law. . . . Thus there is imported lawlessness in Alabama, as well as home grown lawlessness.” Before the Selma to Montgomery march began in earnest, he composed another letter complaining about “a spirit of lawlessness” that King manifested. This particular letter closed with a striking remark about the need for “a prayer circle” to be formed around the demonstrators in hopes that they might stand still, an indication that Bales believed “proper” religious observance would restrain civil rights activities.\textsuperscript{38}

Later that year, Bales produced another article for a church periodical that referred to recent race riots in several cities, notably Watts. The essay was directed to “those who give many rationalizations to account for such lawlessness.” One at a time, Bales constructed several specious arguments that supposedly accounted for the civil disturbances and denounced each one. The first explanation given was the idea that “the lawlessness takes place because the Negroes are segregated in these communities.” Bales especially impugned the motives of the whites who made this assertion and then did not voluntarily move into Harlem or another

\textsuperscript{37} Mr. and Mrs. H. E. Jackson to Mr. Bales, 7 January 1965. James Bales Papers. Unprocessed. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

\textsuperscript{38} James D. Bales to Editor of the \textit{Arkansas (Little Rock) Democrat}, 10 March 1965; and James D. Bales to Editor of the \textit{Nashville Banner}, 18 March 1965. James Bales Papers. Unprocessed. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
community predominantly inhabited by African Americans. “Do these leaders,” he asked rhetorically, “accept a vicious type of racism which says that the Negro when he lives with other Negroes will become vicious; that the Negro needs the presence of white man in order to enable him to be civilized?” For Bales, the fault of urban rioting was a “matter of character not of color.” He proceeded to rebuke anyone who thought that discrimination or poor economic conditions provided rationalization for “lawlessness.” Bales concluded by emphasizing the need for personal responsibility and more evangelistic efforts in cities throughout the country.39

Editor Edwin Hayden commended Bales for this essay and described how he and his staff had recently mused that the material circumstances of their youth “would have persuaded modern sociologists to expect the worst.” In other words, Hayden surmised that his own life experiences were comparable with the discrimination and poverty faced by many African Americans in the nation’s cities, and if he could make something of himself, so could they. He went on to theorize that “the one who has least will [always] consider himself bitterly deprived, no matter how much he has. He will do so . . . until he learns the lesson of 1 Timothy 6:6-11, which brings us back to your plea for evangelism.” The first verse in this citation states that “godliness with contentment is great gain.” This cold assessment of the situation, by both Bales and Hayden, demonstrates the ignorance of many whites in confronting injustices that had been perpetuated against blacks. While many poor whites faced hardships attributable to an unjust economic system or lack of educational opportunities, Bales and Hayden seemed to ignore how blacks faced additional discrimination because of the color of their skin and the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow.40


Operating on the assumption that the preponderance of civil strife simply could not be a result of systemic injustice, Bales now found it easy to associate social protests of all kinds with communist influences. In the wake of the Brown decision, the early civil rights movement had elicited little response from Bales. He realized the need for some changes to be made, especially in people’s hearts, and his attitude about racial prejudice was unchanged since his 1943 letter “To My Colored Brother.” Meanwhile, for several decades, Bales had spent much of his time researching and combating communism around the world through speeches and publications. In many respects, he was under the tutelage of an archetypical anticommmunist, President George Benson of Harding College, whose National Education Program, according to a disgruntled alumnus, became “nationally known as a propaganda mill for far-right political groups.” Thus, when racial agitation persisted after legal reforms in the mid 1960s, Bales concluded that communists were at least partly responsible for precipitating further conflict. This paranoia characterized many whites across the nation, including many government officials.41

In communities where interracial relationships among church members were rare, change evolved slowly. Churches in cities known for racial violence seemed especially paranoid about altering deep-seated racial customs. In 1967, for example, two black ministers were turned away when they sought admission to a religious debate organized by a white Montgomery church. But away from the heated environs of cities like Montgomery, other developments suggest the ways that whites came to terms with the changing times. Evans McMullen, a white minister from Griffin, Georgia, some forty miles south of Atlanta, penned a bulletin article describing a meal

that he shared with a black church family, identified as Brother and Sister Jackson. Under the headline “A Wonderful First Experience,” McMullen wrote, “. . . for the first time in my life I ate a meal with a Negro family. . . . I have never in all my life found any more zealous, joyful, loving Christians.” He also shared how the Jacksons were especially active in evangelizing, having distributed COC tracts to three hundred people over the previous ten months. McMullen urged his congregants to understand how the scriptures emphasized equality, and he specifically cited Acts 10:34-35 and Galatians 3:26-28, two of the very passages that had been mentioned in Sunday school literature in previous years. Indeed, he paraphrased the latter by noting that “in Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, Negro or white, red or yellow.”

William Young, minister for the Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas, acknowledged that his congregation was “somewhat shielded from the more real drama of race antagonisms going on in . . . major populated areas.” Nevertheless, with its considerable resources, the church initiated a children’s educational program in an effort to reach out to “the disadvantaged areas of this city.” African Americans and Hispanics were included in the effort, but in a bulletin editorial that seemed to respond to criticism from within the Broadway church, Young all but apologized for their presence. He insisted, “The stress, we believe, has been properly placed on improved learning rather than the more combustive immediate integration of mixed races. . . . Indiscriminate [sic] and careless integration is not the aim of this program” (emph. in original). Long accustomed to abiding by the racial customs of their local environs, ministers like McMullen and Young were awakening to new possibilities in interracial relationships, but these possibilities were often carefully circumscribed. McMullen was thrilled

42 Dwain Evans, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92Ra-Ch; and Evans McMullen, “A Wonderful First Experience.” John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-PR-Ch. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
to meet with a black couple within COCs whose Christian commitment and dedication to evangelism inspired him; Young’s church initiated a program for minority children. White COCs seemed less enthusiastic about addressing the problems of systemic racial injustice, issues that would undoubtedly entail conflict with adults outside of COCs.\(^{43}\)

Interracial romance proved to be another obstacle for white church members. Like most white southerners (and not a few blacks), white members of COCs generally disapproved of interracial relationships between the sexes. For example, Carl Spain—remembered within the denomination as the preacher who had first sounded the call for integrating the church colleges—broached the subject with James Bales in 1960. “I am not an advocate of marriage between these two races,” he wrote. “I believe that there are many moral and sociological problems connected with marriage.” While “moral and sociological problems” hardly pinpoints a specific reason against interracial marriage, this phrase might best summarize what many whites would have said if asked about the topic. A few whites continued to cite scriptures in support of their argument that blacks and whites should not marry, but for the most part, whites simply opposed interracial romance for vague reasons or out of concern for how the children produced by interracial sex would be treated in southern communities.\(^{44}\)

Correspondence sent to Clifton Ganus Jr., who succeeded Benson as president at Harding, illustrates the hesitancy with which some whites raised the subject and the vague generalities used to explain opposition. The Harding administration had adopted a policy of informing a student’s parents if he or she began dating a person of another race. In the spring of 1969, a few

\(^{43}\) William E. Young, “A Plea for Understanding.” John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-BR. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.

\(^{44}\) Carl Spain to J. D. Bales, 4 March 1960. Unprocessed. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
students had requested that this policy be abandoned, but Ganus insisted that the practice would continue. However, in remarks that appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette*, he also admitted that he did not personally object to interracial dating. “I see no biblical injunction against it,” the quotation read. The article included a host of further disclaimers from Ganus. “There are certain problems, not only with black students but with forcing races to mix and it can even be dangerous.” Although he would not forbid his own daughter from marrying a black man, he would “sure warn her—I’d warn her about a fourth grade dropout, too.” However demeaning these remarks might have been taken by a black student, Ganus did not fully extricate himself from personal criticism, much less the students who proposed that he stop updating parents on their children’s romantic endeavors with people outside their own race.45

Two parents from Little Rock wrote a letter to Ganus that stated, “As we have young daughters, the request of the committee for interracial dating without school interference was repulsive.” Another couple wrote, “We have grandchildren approaching their teens and the request that ‘the school not interfere in interracial dating’ is disgusting. If we can’t control policies in the church schools, where is there hope?” An observer from Louisiana opined, “Even in my most liberal moments I cannot accept [interracial dating].” And a mother whose daughter attended Harding also shared her opinions with Ganus. “I don’t believe I am guilty of racial prejudice one little bit,” she wrote. “But—I believe interracial mixing (dating and intermarriage) of any race is wrong—and I can’t see anything but wrong come out of it.” Ganus’s personal position on interracial relationships even threatened the enrollment of a few students, as evidenced by an anonymous letter that he received from Little Rock. The letter acknowledged

the newspaper article, though it perhaps overstated the case by noting “that Ganus condones interracial dating and marriage.” The letter continued,

We had planned to bring a car load or two of our young folks to your high school day on May 3 but have decided against it because we do not want our youth to be brainwashed and encouraged to socialize and then marry negroes. We are . . . sorry that the President of Harding College has such an attitude as this during these times when Christian people have enough trouble raising their children right and then to have this problem magnified by someone who poses as a wise man.

Harding College, . . . after the newspaper coverage of talk by Ganus[,] has certainly lowered its image in the minds of many people.46

Each of these letters show the depth of concern over interracial romance, but this final letter is especially provocative. Harding had been desegregated for six years and, although the percentage of racial minorities enrolled in the college remained minimal, this concerned group (likely a group of parents from a church) had planned to visit the college, presumably to encourage their children to enroll there. Desegregation, then, was not at issue. Instead, the idea of interracial romance, and the insinuation that Ganus wholly approved of it, provoked this indignant response. Of the letters that Ganus received during this debate, only one—a note from a student that was otherwise complimentary of Ganus’s recent conduct—expressed any dismay over the administration’s close monitoring of interracial dating.47

For his part, Ganus tried to placate parents and patrons who shared their disapproval. His response to one letter was typical. “I share with you the concern over interracial dating and marriage,” he wrote to a lady in Louisiana. “I cannot give any Biblical statement to indicate a

46 Mr. and Mrs. W. A. Ragon Jr. to Clifton L. Ganus, 22 March 1969; Mr. and Mrs. O. T. Branch to Clifton L. Ganus, 22 March 1969; William E. Stokes to Clifton L. Ganus Jr., 24 March 1969; Mrs. Rex Beard to Dr. Ganus, 26 March 1969; and A concerned group to Eddie R. Campbell, 27 March 1969. Clifton Ganus Jr. Papers. Unprocessed. Office of Clifton Ganus Jr., Administration Building, Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas.

man is inferior just because he is black or brown or yellow or white. Nevertheless, I know that there is a problem with regard to intermarriage of the races. I, therefore, try to warn students concerning it and write their parents if we see that they are trying to date.” The only exception to this standard explanation came when, after describing in a letter how interracial dating was “fraught with problems,” Ganus curiously noted, “In Brazil it would not be so since there has been interracial marriage there for three-hundred years.”

By the close of the decade, explicitly racist comments were increasingly rare within COCs, although a few did arrive in Ganus’s office. A fellow Arkansan wrote, “I trust and pray that I’m not prejudiced because of color, but I have dealt with colored people for many years. There is just no way to trust them as equals. There is no way to walk with them from day to day. All that they understand is firmness. Straight talk, hard action, and no intermingling. . . . Freedom to them means doing whatever they desire to a white and getting by with it. Test them if you don’t believe it.” Another letter asserted, “There are areas in which Negroes, as a race, excel. There are others where they fall considerably behind. Certainly the area of morality is one such area.”

On the whole, these examples were exceptions. Most congregants associated with the church-affiliated colleges had no problem accepting black students and faculty into their midst. However, even many of those whites who were willing to accept or simply tolerate the presence of a few black students, many felt that interracial dating and marriage crossed a line that threatened their conceptions of socially accepted behavior between blacks and whites.49


This distrust of interracial romance was the one constant among most white church members. Otherwise, ambiguous racial attitudes seemed to pervade. For example, in the spring of 1968, a well-known preacher named John Allen Chalk received an invitation to preach at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. Upon his return to his home in Texas, he received a letter from Nancy Ann Kirkham, a Los Angelino and church member who had heard Chalk’s recent sermon. As politely as possible, Kirkham shared her disappointment in Chalk. “I perhaps am somewhat [sic] spoiled by sitting, listening to Bro. R. N. Hogan for so long to his wonderful sermons.” Hogan’s sermons frequently included straightforward attacks on “the denominations,” a feature that Kirkham believed should characterize any good homily. “Now when a man will NOT get up and denounce the denominations he isn’t showing them where they are wrong,” she opined. “The day I heard you at the Shrine, there were perhaps people of many different denominations there and it was your God given duty to have told them right there and then that there IS but one church. But you didn’t even tell that they would be lost IF they died out of that ONE church.” Kirkham went on to admonish the young Chalk to be more like her favorite preachers, men like Hogan, Keeble, and three other black preachers whose names and styles she knew well. A letter from a partisan congregant, especially one well-acquainted with the finest black preachers in COCs, did not bother Chalk. His reply was brief and gracious. Yet even he must have been a bit surprised when Kirkham mentioned in closing that she was “not a colored person.”

While a white Californian might have been more informed about black preachers than a white Mississippian, Kirkham’s letter exemplifies the complexities of discerning racial values through the prism of denominational affiliation. Surveying white congregants and preachers in

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COCs reveals the diversity of perspectives that even southern whites within a single denomination maintained with regard to race relations. Such diversity defies the historian’s impulse to classify. With its firmest roots in the South, members of COCs typified a cross-section of white southerners. Categories commonly affixed to the nuances of racial attitudes overlook the complexities and variations in racial thought among whites. Certainly there were “militant segregationists” both inside and outside COCs, but these people hardly represented even a sizable minority. To assign the category of “moderate segregationist,” to someone like James Bales for example, overlooks his confessed belief that authentic Christian witness should make no distinction in a person’s race.\footnote{These three categories are indicative of the approach of several scholars but are borrowed specifically from Mark Newman, \textit{Getting Right With God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995}, Religion and American Culture (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001).}

As this chapter has shown, there were a variety of issues at stake for whites who were wrestling with the tensions between abiding by Christian ethics and living amid obvious racial injustice. Clearly, there were unresolved tensions between theological doctrine as embraced by COCs and established racial practices. Among COCs, the quest for primitive Christianity weighed heavily in the minds of many congregants and preachers. This identity as the New Testament church prevented some of the more violent or blatant expressions of racism that bore down heavily on southern race relations in the twentieth century. For the most part, white COCs acknowledged their black brothers and sisters. This recognition, often paternalistic in nature, did not translate into social equality, as members did their best to distinguish spiritual equality from integrated facilities or full political freedom. While they might have given lip service to the need for better conditions for blacks, white church members were unwilling to actively and publicly advance any sort of civil rights agenda. Indeed, whether from conviction or convenience, some
whites believed that political activism fell outside the bounds of Christian duty. The irony, however, is that many of their black counterparts in COCs felt the same way.
CHAPTER 3
BLACK CHURCHES OF CHRIST

This chapter assesses how and why African Americans joined and maintained ties to COCs during the first half of the twentieth century. While several denominations included both black and white members, the concentration of COCs in the South made their biracialism unusual. With no denominational administrators determining the boundaries between black and white members, relationships between churches and individual members sometimes operated apart from conventional racial customs both within and outside of the South. The expansion of COCs into African American communities was made possible by several African American ministers who, in diverse ways and with varying degrees of success, built alliances with whites in order to sustain their ministries. Their stories form the locus of this chapter, but letters from across the nation to the Christian Echo, the journal within COCs owned and operated by African Americans, offer compelling details about how racial and spiritual relationships worked among common church members. Both the preachers and this periodical illuminate how blacks and whites interacted as members of the same denomination and how black members constructed their spiritual identities alongside whites who advocated both Christian primitivism and white supremacy.

Black and white congregants in COCs generally shared the same theological convictions. Their sermons and writings indicate their resolve to restore New Testament Christianity. COCs embodied what, in their minds, was the “true church” described in the scriptures. But black members faced challenges beyond the experiences of their white counterparts. By the 1960s, African American members became increasingly strident in their insistence that COC institutions reflect the racial equality and justice that appeared self-evident in the scriptures. The tentative biracial relationships forged through faith began to dissolve after World War II, when African
Americans across the country began asserting their rights as American citizens with renewed vigor and resolve. Within COCs, the postwar economic boom gave African Americans new opportunities through increased economic independence. They no longer needed the benevolence of whites to construct churches or hire preachers. Although they shared much by way of theology, black and white churches gradually grew further apart, ironically, as the civil rights movement—with its integrationist agenda—peaked in the mid-1960s. This distance shows the limitations of interracialism within COCs. Interracial cooperation waned at the moment when contentious debates about racial equality in the general public empowered black people to challenge various forms of oppression and left well-meaning white people to explain how they were neither prejudiced nor responsible for institutional racism.

While the first leaders of the Stone-Campbell movement were white, from the outset, numerous churches associated with the movement included African Americans on their membership rolls. Their inclusion derived in part from the disdain for slavery among some influential leaders, including Barton Stone. Although some notable leaders owned slaves, strong antislavery sentiments pervaded elements of the movement shortly after the Second Great Awakening. In commenting upon Stone and his followers, one contemporary observer noted “that the christians [sic] of these parts abhor the idea of slavery, and some of them have almost tho’t that they who hold to slavery cannot be christian [sic].” As church historians David Edwin Harrell and Richard Hughes have noted, abolitionist sentiment within this movement may be attributed to the humanitarian zeal that sprang from the Second Great Awakening and the apocalyptic worldview that came to characterize the perspectives of some leaders. Whatever the motives, African Americans were listed as members of churches in Kentucky and Virginia as
early as the 1820s. Whites typically limited the roles that blacks could have within a given church, but some blacks did preach or serve their congregations as deacons.¹

Despite the general practice of creating separate churches for freed slaves after the Civil War, David Lipscomb, arguably the most prominent figure from COCs at the turn of the century, advocated the unity of all Christians, black and white. His position as editor of the Gospel Advocate (GA) and founder of the Nashville Bible School (now David Lipscomb University) elevated his influence and standing among COCs. Lipscomb’s opposition to the creation of racially segregated churches is significant, even if his advice in this matter was usually ignored. When he learned that a Texas church had refused membership to an African American Christian in 1878, he unequivocally denounced the decision in the pages of the GA. “We believe it sinful to have two congregations in the same community for persons of separate and distinct races,” he pointedly observed. “For our part,” he continued, “we would much prefer membership with an humble and despised band of ignorant negroes, than with a congregation of the [most] aristocratic and refined whites in the land, cherishing such a spirit of defiance of God and his law, and all the principles of his holy religion.” Lipscomb maintained this position throughout the course of his life. In 1901, he wrote that “white men need not fear the curse of God because of the presence of the Negro. We are suffering it [already]. This terrible crime and the constant dread of it is the penalty we are paying for keeping the Negro in our midst ignorant and depraved, and using them for selfish ends.” And again, in 1907, when the Bellwood Church of Christ in

Nashville bickered over the attendance of a black girl who had been adopted by a white couple from the church, Lipscomb again berated those people who wanted to maintain segregated churches. “To object to any child of God participating in the services on account of his race, social or civil state, his color or race, is to object to Jesus Christ and to cast him from our association. It is a fearful thing to do.” By staunchly maintaining this position, Lipscomb found allies among African Americans who chose to align themselves with COCs and their vision of primitive Christianity.²

The career and writings of an African American minister and Lipscomb contemporary named Samuel Robert Cassius offers compelling insights into primitive Christianity, the endeavors of African Americans to improve their lives in the wake of the Civil War, and the common theologies among black and white members of COCs. Cassius was born into slavery in 1853 and sold in 1860. After the war, he received an education at a public school in Washington, DC. By the mid-1870s, Cassius had become a member of COCs and chosen to pursue a career in ministry. These decisions eventually took him to Oklahoma where he established a church and an industrial school.³

Encouraged by the rhetoric and work of Booker T. Washington, Cassius sent his son, Amos Lincoln (A. L.), to school at Tuskegee Institute. The elder Cassius was also an outspoken critic of racism, especially within COCs, and he eventually advocated a complete separation between blacks and whites in America. He frequently published articles in COC periodicals, but his most compelling attack against racism came in the form of a 1920 book whose title, The Third Birth of

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a Nation, illustrates his desire to respond to D. W. Griffith’s cinematic breakthrough, The Birth of a Nation (1915). Cassius’s book also included the familiar harangues of many preachers of the day against new social habits and values in U.S. society. He criticized soft drinks, for example, because there “is only one step from the soft drink parlor to the opium den, and just one more step to the place of prostitution.”

The Third Birth of a Nation briefly outlined the history of the world, beginning with “the fall” of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, but the underlying purpose of the work was to propose the means for the liberation of African Americans. Cassius sought “to show that there is not now, nor ever has been, any superiority in race, or any difference in color; that God made man out of the earth and took woman out of the man, thus making them the same flesh, bones and blood.” When he described Noah, for example, he wrote, “You have . . . read the story of how, after one hundred and fifty days of floating in the midst of death, God brought that one family out of death into the life he had promised them, if they would obey him. So will God deliver the American Negro out from under the stigma of his present condition, if he will trust God and do His will.” Cassius emphasized the significant role of “the people that the American nation has dubbed as Negroes” in world history, particularly the ancient civilizations in Egypt and Ethiopia whose demise, according to Cassius, could be attributed to miscegenation and religious liberty, respectively. Ironically then, in terms remarkably similar to the language of some white segregationists, when Cassius began recounting American history, he voiced his concerns about living in a “mongrel nation” where “every kind of religious propaganda is allowed to flourish.”

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5 Ibid., 17-25.
Unlike many of his white counterparts in ministry who acknowledged that biblical literature accepted, if not sanctioned, slavery, Cassius believed that “the people of the United States broke the law of God by introducing slavery.” In considerable detail, he outlined how Africans were brought to America as slaves and left to fend for themselves after the Civil War. In spite of these obstacles, Cassius marveled at the tremendous strides that African Americans had made in the country since emancipation. Paradoxically, he suggested that these successes fueled the prejudice against them. The “real cause” for white racism could be found in the “fears that the black man will supplant [the white man] in the matters of trade, business and profession.”

While many of his criticisms were aimed at whites with political and economic clout in American history, Cassius also expressed dismay at blacks who seemed content to support white oppression and discrimination. For example, he was deeply disturbed at black-owned newspapers that publicized minstrel shows. “While these mirth producing pictures draw crowds,” he wrote, “they at the same time lower the standard of the race in the eyes of the people who pay to see them make fools of themselves.” He further regretted the fact that blacks would visit “white moving picture shows” and allow themselves to be “Jim Crowed’ to a dirty, unsanitary part of the theatre.” Abiding by these customs of segregation was “an admission on the part of those who attend . . . that they do not consider themselves as good as the white people and are not worthy to sit even in the same part of the house with them.”

The focus of this work boiled down to an assessment of the options facing blacks and whites on the “great race question.” Cassius contended that there were six solutions:

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6 Ibid., 30-38.

7 Ibid., 49-50.
amalgamation, miscegenation, assimilation, Christianization, separation, or extermination. He addressed each, beginning with amalgamation. Cassius argued that this option was forbidden by God. He quoted Acts 17:26 and retold the biblical story of the tower of Babel. “It is not then, and it is not now, the will of God that these nations shall mix or merge into one family again,” Cassius insisted, “and every attempt of man to undo what God has done will only bring upon the world the wrath of God.” For similar reasons, he dismissed miscegenation and assimilation. “I could not believe in [miscegenation] and believe in God at the same time,” he wrote. Here, Cassius retold the biblical story of Joseph, declaring once again that the Egyptian civilization declined because of intermarriage between Hebrews and Egyptians. Later, he stated that “God does not want the people to be one, as far as nationality is concerned, and no effort of man can overcome the will of God.”

Left with Christianization, extermination, and separation, Cassius chose the latter. Oddly enough, he did not lightly dismiss the idea of extermination. Although he did call it “barbarous,” Cassius actually wrote several paragraphs about extermination, in part because “God commanded the children of Israel to kill every one of the people of certain nations in the land of Canaan.” Once again, however, he emphasized that this commandment was based on a principle of nations—which he equated with races—needing to remain separate. Thus, he chose separation as the best answer to “the race question,” even though he acknowledged that “Christianity is the only force that can possibly bridge the chasm that separates man from man, because Christianity is the only means that so changes our minds that one man will not think himself better than another.” So while Christianity held the potential for “bridging the chasm,” Cassius did not

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8 Acts 17:26 states, “And [God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation” (KJV).

9 Cassius, 70-79, 86-88.
believe America was capable of being a Christian nation, in spite of what some claimed. He subsequently wrote that Christian primitivism offered the only viable solution to racial hostilities. “I contend that there would be no race problem to solve if the so-called Christian people of America would take the word of God as the man of their counsel and its teachings as their rule of faith and practice,” he opined. If people simply followed the Bible, he believed, “there would be no such thing as Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and the many other brands of religion; we would all speak the same thing, do the same thing, hope the same thing and expect the same reward,” presumably as members of COCs.\(^\text{10}\)

In proffering separation as the only acceptable solution to the nation’s race problems, Cassius cited reasons that were both practical and scriptural. “[N]o country has ever lived in peace with its former slaves,” he reminded his readers before exclaiming, “‘Get out from among them, saith the Lord, and I will make of you a nation.’” Cassius concluded that separation was also the only answer “that will not cause a revolution.” Since the country in general was not allowing blacks to exercise the same civil rights as whites, Cassius felt the best idea was simply for the two groups to separate permanently. From a practical standpoint, he advocated that the federal government purchase any property owned by whites in the states of Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico. Meanwhile, the government would also “compel the colored people all over this country to sell their property to the government, and move to these states and take the homes that the whites vacate, at the same price, plus expense of handling, and have a maximum of twenty years to pay the United States.” Thus, Cassius represents a strong separatist strain among African Americans in the postbellum era, although his ideas of complete separation do not seem to have garnered wide support. He is significant, however, as an African American voice within

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 80-86, 95-96.
COCs who spoke out boldly against racism and refused to rely upon white benevolence to accomplish his goals. While he acknowledged his primitivist faith, Cassius was also consumed with anger over the racial discrimination that characterized much of the country. While other more renowned preachers within COCs made their reputations by focusing primarily on doctrine or the work of the church, Cassius could not remain silent about social injustices.  

Cassius’s career and writings were exceptional, and most African Americans within COCs trace their intellectual and religious heritage to Nashville and the creation of the Jackson Street Church of Christ in 1900. An African American preacher named Alexander Campbell (whose namesake helped initiate the Stone-Campbell movement) withdrew from a Nashville church because of theological disputes involving “innovations” such as instrumental music and missionary societies. Campbell convinced Samuel Womack, an African American member of a Christian Church in Nashville, to join him in organizing the Jackson Street Church of Christ. Both Campbell and Womack had backgrounds in the Stone-Campbell movement. In 1915, Womack wrote about hearing his first gospel sermon and his subsequent baptism in Lynchburg, Tennessee. “I will never forget the grand privilege that the white church of Christ . . . gave the colored people during their first protracted meeting just after the Civil War. . . . A short time after that, in the fall of 1866, I was baptized by a white preacher.” By the time that he was an adult, Womack had become a noted preacher and organizer among Christian Churches throughout Tennessee, and he would continue such activities after 1900 when he served as an evangelist, reporter for the GA, and fundraiser for the Jackson Street church. By 1906, the young church

\[1\] Ibid., 88-94.
purchased a small building that had formerly served as a kitchen for a local estate and then as a student center for Fisk University. The facility was located on Jackson Street in Nashville.\textsuperscript{12}

The group that withdrew initially met inside Campbell’s home, where they were also joined by George Phillip (G. P.) Bowser and Marshall Keeble. The former was an African American convert from the Methodist Church who was rebaptized into the Christian Church in 1897 at the age of twenty-three; the latter grew up in a home beside Womack, was baptized at age fourteen, and married Womack’s daughter. Keeble turned twenty-two years old in 1900. Both he and Bowser were mentored by Campbell and Womack, and after settling on careers in ministry, Bowser and Keeble—through their evangelism and preaching, journalistic endeavors, and efforts to secure education for African Americans—became two of the most influential members within the denomination, especially among their black brothers and sisters in the faith.\textsuperscript{13}

Campbell’s and Womack’s reasons for affiliating with COCs were ostensibly theological, so they soon established close ties with prominent whites within the denomination. Womack developed a close relationship with David Lipscomb, in particular, visiting his Advocate office and discussing religious matters with him. In the process of becoming acquainted with their white brothers and sisters, African American preachers affirmed the exclusivism that came to be a distinctive feature of COCs. “Instead of seeing black Baptists and Methodists as fellow Christians,” historian Edward Robinson wrote, “African American preachers in Churches of Christ viewed them as enemies of God, who needed to be converted, corrected, or restored.”

African American preachers established themselves within COCs by confessing their belief in the


characteristics that distinguished COCs from “the denominations.” Thus, they developed a measure of camaraderie and trust by matching the restorationist zeal of whites. Indeed, by zealously affirming the particular theological nuances that made COCs unique and by establishing close ties with prominent figures like Lipscomb, African American preachers cultivated the admiration and trust of many whites.14

Perhaps more important to the survival of their churches and ministries was the relationships that Womack and Campbell established with white patrons. These relationships were closely related to the shared theology because, as Robinson has stated, “white philanthropy was contingent on black credibility,” and this credibility required espousal of the doctrines of “the New Testament church.” Yet, it also required African Americans to maintain meticulous records of their financial transactions in order to assure their paternalistic white patrons that donations were utilized wisely and responsibly. In the face of economic and educational discrimination, black churches sought the financial assistance of whites whose own generosity assuaged whatever concerns they might have about the plight of black southerners. The “paradox of white philanthropy and white racism” that came to characterize many white southerners was certainly evident among COCs throughout much of the twentieth century, and the precedent was established by the Jackson Street Church of Christ. Both Campbell and Womack solicited funds through denominational periodicals and their association with whites who shared their restorationist zeal.15

African American preachers never failed to show their appreciation for this patronage. Their reports to the Advocate often mentioned whites who helped purchase a revival tent or who

14 Robinson, “‘The Two Old Heroes’,,” 14.

15 Ibid., 7-10, 12.
attended revivals in support of the preachers. In the process, they confirmed for many whites the
good return on their investments in evangelistic endeavors among African Americans and opened
the door for more patronage in the future. Their ultimate goal, of course, was not simply to
placate whites. They were sincere in their zealous faith, but first and foremost, their faiths
required them to preach, to educate, and to evangelize. White patronage helped make these
activities possible, and therefore, Campbell, Womack, and other African American preachers
within COCs said and wrote the things that made it possible to realize their goals.\textsuperscript{16}

No one learned this lesson better than Marshall Keeble, an African American minister born
in 1878 who became arguably the most popular preacher, white or black, within the
denomination during the first half of the twentieth century. After performing menial labor in a
bucket factory and later in a soap factory, Keeble became enamored with the call to ministry and
learned the craft from Campbell and Womack. He referred to these mentors as “two old heroes”
and gave them credit for his unprecedented success and popularity as a preacher within COCs.
From his preaching style to his behavior around whites to his handling of money, Keeble
followed their examples. They cultivated Keeble’s talents, permitting him to preach on a few
occasions and appointing him church treasurer. In addition to these pastoral influences, Booker
T. Washington was another inspiration. According to one Keeble biographer, Washington was a
boyhood idol from whom Keeble learned how “to respect his race, to hold a high opinion of
himself, and especially how to get along with white people.” Thus, Keeble focused his ministry
on preaching and uplifting other African Americans, rather than focusing upon issues relating to
political and social discrimination. He relied heavily upon the financial support of whites within
the denomination, and he never publicly denounced the institutional racism that characterized

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 7-8.
both the nation and the church. Even though he sought to emulate Washington in many ways, Keeble still developed and maintained an exclusivist outlook that perceived Washington as a religious outsider. “He was my idol,” Keeble once said, “all he lacked was being a Christian.” The traits that Keeble learned from Campbell, Womack, and Washington stayed with him throughout his life. After 1914, when he decided to focus solely on a career in ministry, Keeble became one of the most successful preachers in his era by navigating racial customs and prejudices and using them to effect his desired result: growth of “the New Testament church” among African Americans throughout the country.17

During his early years as an evangelist, Keeble traveled from town to town conducting revivals. While his wife continued to operate a small grocery store to sustain their income, he accepted whatever payments his listeners could afford to give, including farm animals or food. On some Saturdays when towns would fill with people from the surrounding countryside, Keeble would find a platform and begin preaching, accepting whatever change that passersby could spare. He would also accompany Campbell during some of his preaching forays into middle Tennessee, and on these occasions Keeble was often given the opportunity to speak. Keeble later adopted this same practice with countless African American young men who were trained as preachers under his guidance. By 1916, when Keeble was submitting annual reports for publication in the GA, he was steadily gaining popularity for his skills as a preacher. In that year alone, he traveled over seven thousand miles, delivered over three hundred sermons, and baptized more than one hundred people.18

17 Ibid., 15-16; Boyd, Undying Dedication, 28; and Choate, 17, 21.
18 Choate, 33-36; and Goodpasture, 10.
By the 1920s, Keeble had caught the attention of some wealthier white church members who wished to support his evangelistic endeavors. In particular, A. M. Burton, a white member who made a fortune with his Life and Casualty Insurance Company in Nashville, began financing some of Keeble’s work. Burton once bragged to a friend about his longtime investment in Keeble who had “baptized over fifteen thousand people” in the first two and a half decades that Burton had helped him. “I certainly would like for you to know him. He is one of the most wonderful characters, white or black, that I have ever known,” Burton proclaimed. Herein lies the crux of the relationship between Keeble and several prominent whites within COCs. For whites, Keeble was a sound investment in their paternal hopes of improving the general well-being of African Americans while also advancing their evangelistic goals of recruiting more members to the true church. He was their contribution to domestic missions and their proof that whites in COCs were not racially prejudiced. And while many people undoubtedly learned something about the Bible and Christian primitivism from Keeble—he did convert thousands of blacks and whites over the course of his ministry—others viewed him as a source of entertainment, a black man of slight stature who could amuse people with his biblical knowledge, wit, and folk wisdom.19

Ironically, white resistance to Keeble most often came from local people in communities where he preached. When Keeble arrived in town, a sizable number of blacks and whites attended his revivals. Though these meetings were usually segregated with a rope down the center aisle of an auditorium or tent, those people not associated with COCs and unfamiliar with Keeble perceived a subtle attempt at “race mixing.” The Ku Klux Klan, which was enjoying a

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19 A. M. Burton to J. W. Akin, 19 December 1944. A. M. Burton Papers, Beaman Library, David Lipscomb University, Nashville; Rubel Shelly, interview by author, Nashville, Tennessee, 28 June 2005; Clifton Ganus Jr., interview by author, Searcy, Arkansas, 10 May 2005; and Choate, 48.
tremendous surge in membership across the country during the 1920s, made its presence known to Keeble on several occasions. Klansmen interrupted one of Keeble’s sermons during a 1926 revival in rural Georgia and forced him to read a note that stated, “The Ku Klux Klan stands for white supremacy. Be governed accordingly.” In Jacksonville, Florida, the Klan appeared at one of Keeble’s revivals and forced all of the whites in the audience to leave, and during visits to Alabama and Atlanta, Keeble received written threats of physical violence from the Klan. At the close of one sermon during a 1939 revival in Ridgely, Tennessee, Keeble was physically assaulted with brass knuckles by a white man who at first pretended to answer the invitation to the mourners’ bench. Keeble exhibited tremendous resolve in the face of such adversity. On this occasion, Keeble literally turned his other cheek, and his assailant was taken away before doing further damage. Keeble refused to press charges, despite attempts by local whites to persuade him otherwise. Likewise, conflicts with the Klan did not prevent him from returning to these same locations for future revivals and, despite being attacked in Ridgely, he continued preaching each night until the meeting’s scheduled close. Thus, it is worth noting that even if Keeble did not expressly condemn racial injustices, there was something about his ministry that threatened the values most cherished by the Klan of the interwar period. Keeble’s stoicism in the face of white intimidation and violence revealed his determination and discipline, traits that also characterized later civil rights activists who practiced nonviolent direct action. Had he belonged to another denomination, Keeble would have been an ideal soldier in a nonviolent army, but his affiliation with COCs largely prohibited such activism.20

Aside from financial considerations, Keeble’s resolute focus on preaching and converting souls to the cause of primitive Christianity further explains his close relationships with whites and their willingness to readily associate with him. On numerous occasions, Keeble preached alongside a white song leader. He was often invited into communities by white churches who wanted either to help their black brothers and sisters or to establish a COC for blacks in their communities. In some instances, Keeble even baptized white people, even though riots had resulted from “mixed swimming” in some parts of the country. In a 1931 letter written from Florida to Advocate editor Benton Cordell (B. C.) Goodpasture, Keeble stated, “I haven’t kept count of how many white people I have converted, but I am sure it would be around 800 or more, and some have demanded that I baptize them. . . . I would always ask the white brethren should I do it, and they have always said go ahead, if they want you to.” Keeble later reported on a meeting held in Cookeville, Tennessee, where his preaching provoked 31 responses, nearly two-thirds of which were white, including some who were baptized. The COCs’ version of restorationism was the binding force between Keeble and the whites who aided his ministry and effusively praised him. One white minister from Birmingham observed, “Those who come into the church under the preaching of Brother Keeble do not come in thinking that they are just swapping denominations, but they come in knowing and believing that the church of Christ is the only church that offers salvation to the world.”

Furthermore, Keeble’s wit and direct style of speaking to preachers from other denominations both charmed his audiences and won more people to his way of thinking. About one revival, Keeble wrote, “I intended to close here last night, but twenty-one came forward, and

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the white brethren begged me to remain . . . The brethren both white and colored are rejoicing, saying they [have] never seen it on this order . . . before the invitation was given a Methodist Presiding Elder attacked the Doctrine, and in five minutes I had him fixed. this [sic] great number came almost running over each other. God’s Kingdom is spreading, and he is being Glorified.” This disposition toward other Christian believers was characteristic of black and white COCs, as they were generally convinced that their biblical interpretations and worship practices were not only correct, but that the denominations were often wrong and therefore sinful and outside of God’s favor. This attitude sometimes loosened whatever inhibitions that black preachers might otherwise have had toward whites from other denominations. For example, some black members reported to the Echo that during a 1939 revival in Kansas City, a “white Pentecostal preacher raised up and rared [sic] a little, but we soon had him tied with the Word of God.” This perspective also precipitated cooperation between black and white preachers who felt that part of their calling as ministers was to defeat other denominational preachers in debates. When one black minister reported on his debate with two Church of God in Christ pastors over the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, he noted that the hostile audience included only “two church of Christ brethren[,] . . . one colored and one white.”

While Keeble was best known for his countless converts and homiletic prowess, G. P. Bowser made his reputation in COCs as a journalist and educator. Bowser’s educational background inspired his relentless drive for African American preachers and congregants to become well-versed in biblical and historical knowledge. He was born in 1874, and while growing up in Nashville, Bowser attended Walden University, a Freedmen’s Aid school

originally founded by the Methodist Church. In the course of his education, Bowser studied Greek, Hebrew, French, German, and Latin, as well as Methodist doctrine. At the age of eighteen, Bowser was licensed as an exhorter, and in 1895, he was appointed as pastor of a church in Cleveland, Tennessee.\(^{23}\)

The burdens of a meager income and pastoral duties overwhelmed the young Bowser, and he soon returned to Nashville. His interest in the Bible and spirituality never waned, and he soon came in contact with an old minister who was associated with the Christian Church. Through his further study of the scriptures and by way of the discouragement he encountered from Methodist church leaders, Bowser was baptized into the Christian Church in 1897, where he soon came under the influence of Campbell and Womack. A few years later, Bowser joined Campbell and Womack in their alignment with COCs, and shortly thereafter, Bowser also became heavily involved in evangelism. As he underwent this spiritual transformation and eagerly joined a movement devoted to restoring New Testament Christianity, Bowser became aware of the educational deficiencies of many congregants. On some occasions, he would be the only person in an assembly who could read. The paucity of teaching materials (in stark contrast to the Methodists) and means of communication among African American COCs convinced him of the need to create the *Echo*, and the illiteracy that plagued many churches inspired him to establish a new school.\(^{24}\)

Work on the latter proceeded unevenly during the first half of the twentieth century. Because Bowser’s relationships with whites were often more contentious than those enjoyed by Keeble, the former did not have the same access to white patronage. He was also strong willed

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\(^{24}\) Ibid., 22-29.
and self-reliant. When one of his young employees, Annie Tuggle, asked him if whites knew about the hardships they were facing at his fledgling school in Silver Point, Tennessee, Bowser replied, “I don’t like to complain to anyone concerning my condition. I always like to do all I can to help myself and then if I see that I can’t make it, I believe I would be justified in asking someone else to help me.” Efforts to establish schools in Silver Point; Fort Smith, Arkansas; and Detroit, Michigan, eventually faltered for lack of financial stability, a result of Bowser’s resolution to establish an institution independent of undue influence from whites.25

While he sometimes accepted the support of people like A. M. Burton, Bowser wanted to ensure that any institution of his creation did not subscribe to the racial mores that characterized the South. Shortly after leaving the school at Silver Point, Bowser was invited to Nashville to teach Bible and serve as principal of the new Southern Practical Institute, another Burton investment. C. E. W. Dorris, a popular white preacher and friend of Burton, was appointed superintendent. From the outset, Bowser and Dorris clashed, primarily over the latter’s requirement that black students enter the back door of the school. According to one Bowser biographer, “Dorris insisted that the support of whites demanded the practice, and he would be ashamed if his friends came and saw it otherwise. Bowser said it was a black school and he would not subject the pupils to such indignity in their own school.” Within one week, Bowser left the school, taking his protégé, Richard Nathaniel (R. N.) Hogan with him. Hogan was sixteen years old at the time, and the move undoubtedly left a strong impression on him. The exodus did not end with these two. Six weeks into the school term, the school was forced to close because other students also chose to quit rather than follow the back door custom. Annie

Tuggle had worked to help open the Southern Practical Institute, and she later wrote of this incident, “If this had been a material crash one could have heard it for miles and miles away, but it was deep and dreadful and crushed the souls and hearts of the ones who were concerned.”

Shortly after World War II, a collection of black and white ministers and congregants cooperated in the creation of the Southern Bible Institute in Fort Worth, Texas. J. S. Winston, a former Bowser student and minister in Fort Worth, became the school’s first president, and Bowser was asked to head the Bible Department. The institute opened in the fall of 1948 and enjoyed two successful years before relocating to Terrell, Texas. The move was precipitated by the opportunity to purchase the land and property of a military school in Terrell. After remaining closed for one year, the school reopened in the fall of 1950 as Southwestern Christian College (SWCC). By this time, Bowser was over seventy years old and suffering from cancer. He did manage to visit the site of the new school in Terrell before dying a short time later. “It was one of the happiest days of my life,” his daughter recalled, “when my father, though dying of cancer was able to see the buildings, although too weak to enter one of them.” Jack Evans, longtime president of SWCC, has called the college Bowser’s monument. Despite its association with Bowser, however, until 1967 each college president of SWCC was white, and through its first decade of operation, 80% of its financial resources came from whites.

Nevertheless, the college was a source of pride for African Americans within the denomination, even after the other church colleges in the South began desegregating. Prominent members of African American churches became fixtures on the college’s board of trustees. An annual lectureship hosted by the school was established, and it, like the national lectureship

26 Boyd, 64-67; and Tuggle, 66.

27 Evans, 12-20, 34, 51.
organized by African American churches, offered opportunities for African Americans within COCs to assemble without concern for racial etiquette. From the beginning, African Americans also boasted of the fact that SWCC had an integrated faculty and was open to students of all races. In many respects, the founding of the college served to further reinforce the theological exclusivism and primitivism among African Americans in COCs. Evans completed his master’s thesis on the history of the college in 1963 and included information about the school’s mission and theology. “The church of Christ does not consider itself a denomination, but firmly believes that it is the one church about which Christ spoke in the New Testament,” he wrote. “It dates its beginning as far back as 33 A.D. . . . The church of Christ believes that all other religious organizations are the results of the great apostasy that was imminent at the close of the apostolic era and predicted in the New Testament. They are, therefore, . . . instruments of Satan under the disguise of religion with the purpose of thwarting the objective of the ‘Lord’s Church’—to save all men.”

The zeal for restoring New Testament Christianity and the language of exclusion that ultimately served to demean and ostracize all other manifestations of the faith was characteristic of African Americans in COCs, too. Sermons from Marshall Keeble and G. P. Bowser, as well as articles from the Echo, clearly illustrate this point. Keeble spared no one in his attacks upon other Christian denominations, but he most often blasted Baptists, Methodists, or overly demonstrative preachers from any church, particularly those who reinforced the stereotype of black churches as emotionally hyper-charged but intellectually suspect. Indeed, he commonly attacked numerous groups within a single sermon.

28 Fred Gray, interview by author, Tuskegee, Alabama, 17 May 2005; [R. N. Hogan], “Should We Refuse to Support Our Christian Schools Because of the Integration Effort?,” Christian Echo 55, no. 9 (September 1956): 2; and Evans, 55-56.
In a message aptly titled “Been to Worship, But Wrong,” Keeble emphasized how well-meaning people might attend church every Sunday, but their actions might not be acceptable to God. “You have been taught to believe that you have got to go through some great excitement and emotionalism in order to become a child of God,” he proclaimed at a 1931 revival in Valdosta, Georgia. “But my friends I am of the opinion and belief that the more of the word of God you get in you, the less emotionalism, and the more of the word of God you get in you, the less excitement.” Keeble was relentless in his criticism of charismatic activities in worship assemblies. He urged his audience to “think of the person who claims to be in possession of the Holy Ghost such that it takes two or three members to hold him, and that that emotion shows that he is filled with the Holy Ghost. Has God got a wild Holy Ghost?” Keeble then asked.29

The same sermon also singled out Baptists and Methodists. After recalling the story of the conversion and baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch by the apostle Philip, Keeble said, “I know Philip wasn’t a Methodist preacher. If he had been, he would have asked the eunuch how he wanted to be baptized. He would have said ‘Yes Sir, Now we have got three kinds, what kind do you want?’ . . . Jesus never authorized three modes of baptism and the baptism my Bible talks about is found in Romans 6:4.” Keeble then turned his attention to Baptist doctrine. “Brother Baptist has been buried, but he is worse off than Brother Methodist because, after he got buried and wringing wet with water, he doesn’t know what it’s for. Went off and got wringing wet and don’t know what it was for. There is not a Baptist in this town, from the preachers on down, can tell you what he was baptized for, scripturally.” COCs taught that baptism was necessary for a person’s salvation, while Baptists taught that people are saved at the point when they believe that Jesus is the son of God and savior of the world. Keeble, in keeping with the established tradition

of countless COC preachers before and since, insisted that baptism was the culminating moment when a person was actually saved. Thus, he continued, “[a Baptist] will tell you lots of things, but . . . [t]he baptism I read about in my Bible, and it is in yours, tells me that baptism is for the remission of sin.” He told his audience that Philip was not Baptist either because otherwise, he would have had “to carry the man to the church, hear his testimony and let him be voted on.”

Other Keeble sermons included similar verbal attacks against “the denominations.” In these sermons, he secured his status as a “sound preacher” among COCs, and he also cemented the growing sense of uniqueness within the church. Even if he did not explicitly say it, the implication was always that if people from these other denominations did not strictly follow the Bible with regard to baptism, worship practices, or church polity, then they must be wrong. Keeble’s most pressing desire to proclaim the restoration of New Testament Christianity far outweighed any inclination that he might have had to preach against racial discrimination. He clearly perceived his spiritual identity as a member of the church to be of much greater significance than the identity placed upon him by contemporary whites: a Negro preacher whose folksy wit, charm, and sharp tongue could attract huge audiences and convert many souls to COCs. Keeble embraced the former because it was under his control and largely one of his own creation. He chose to become a gospel preacher and fashioned himself after two black mentors, Samuel Womack and Alexander Campbell. Meanwhile, he accepted the latter identity as a means to unparalleled success in a denomination seemingly bent on ignoring some of the most pressing social questions of the era.

30 Ibid., 46-48. In Romans 6:4, the apostle Paul states, “Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (KJV). In citing this verse, Keeble was insisting that baptism should be by immersion only.
Although Bowser sometimes rebelled against practices of racial discrimination, his sermons and writings indicate that his theological credentials as a minister for COCs matched Keeble’s. In a sermon titled “Which Way?,” for example, Bowser described various Christian denominations as forks in the road that a traveler must avoid. Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Adventists are all named, alongside one or two of their doctrines that Bowser found erroneous. Other denominations were listed, too, but Bowser noted that none “can prove their identity with the apostolic times.” In answer to the question in his sermon’s title, Bowser concluded that there was only one way, “only one safe course.” He urged, “Take the guide Book, the New Testament. Find out from it what Church the Lord built; How to become a member of it; How to worship acceptably therein.” Where some preachers left implications, Bowser was explicit: “Neighbor, Honestly, the Church of Christ is that True Church. If you will Repent and be baptized, God will forgive your sins and add you to that Church.” Like Keeble, the themes of primitivism and exclusivism pervaded many of Bowser’s sermons. On another occasion, Bowser exhorted his audience to understand that the “church of Christ is the only sanctified church, as we are the only people that have the whole truth, nothing but the Truth, so help me God.” Perhaps the most glaring example came in the form of a sermon titled “The Evils of Denominations.” In this homily, he asked listeners, “Does it not look reasonable that had God wanted all, or any of these denominations, He would have mentioned them in the book divine[?]” Bowser also preached a message titled “The Way That Is Right and Cannot Be Wrong,” wherein he detailed how COCs were the only group that closely followed the New Testament pattern for faith and practice.  

If Bowser and Keeble had different approaches in their ministerial efforts and interaction with whites, they certainly shared the same primitivist convictions. The rhetoric of restorationism was also the glue that held many black-white relationships together within the denomination, relationships that would have been otherwise inconceivable, especially in the South. While Keeble was exceedingly popular among whites as well as blacks, he was not the only black preacher who whites wanted to hear, nor was he the only one who sought their beneficence. The *Echo* provides the best source for examining the activities and beliefs of black churches and preachers across a broad geographical range. The pages of the *Echo* clearly indicate that blacks and whites regularly interacted within COCs; that blacks shared in the primitivism and exclusivism that characterized white churches; and that issues of political equality and social justice were generally ignored. Before the 1960s, writers for the *Echo* did speak out against racism more forcefully and persuasively than their white counterparts, and they made specific references to the practice of racial segregation. But like other prominent periodicals within COCs, the *Echo* was primarily occupied with indoctrinating its readers with the same restorationist thinking that characterized white publications.

Extensive evidence demonstrates the wide support that blacks and whites gave to their respective evangelistic efforts. Almost every issue of the *Echo* included a section titled “The Outlook” in which reporters at churches across the country were given space to share news from their local congregations. Numerous issues of the *Echo* include letters that describe whites attending the revivals of black churches and religious debates between black preachers. These letters often report how whites assisted black churches in their efforts to spread New Testament Christianity within their communities. Even in southern cities such as Montgomery, Alabama, a debate between a black COC minister and a black Church of God minister would be “well
attended by both colored and white,” according to the *Echo*. Likewise, black and white women might even share teaching responsibilities in a Bible class for women in Dallas, Texas.\(^{32}\)

Meanwhile, there are numerous examples of whites attending gospel meetings with black preachers. A. L. Cassius followed in his father’s footsteps and became a popular COC minister. His revivals in Texas were often sponsored and attended by white congregations. While much of R. N. Hogan’s ministry occurred outside of the South, he too drew the attention of whites. A white law student at Pepperdine was converted during a Hogan revival in 1938, whereupon he decided to become a preacher. The following year, black churches in Los Angeles invited him to hold a two-week revival, at which time two black people were converted and one white person was restored to fellowship. In that same year, a black preacher named F.A. Livingston held several revivals throughout Texas, including one in Vernon where he was specifically asked to come by a white congregation. His report to the *Echo* offered extensive praise for the assistance provided by whites in Abilene who provided a meeting place and helped lead the singing. While he preached in Lubbock, thirteen people were converted, eleven blacks and two whites. “We thank God for the great work that is being done throughout the state by the white disciples to help my race in this great work,” Livingston wrote. His efforts extended outside of the state, too, as evidenced by a revival in New Mexico where he baptized six people, including five whites. And in 1940, Hogan preached a revival in Bakersfield, California that resulted in seventy-eight responses to the call for repentance and baptism, nearly half of which were penitent whites. Even in a southern city like Montgomery, Alabama, a gospel meeting at a black church might include a white man who “also walked out and obeyed the gospel.” In fact, the *Echo* alone includes reports of revivals with numerous black preachers in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi,

Tennessee, Texas, and a host of locations outside of the South that were well attended by both blacks and whites.\textsuperscript{33}

Relationships between black and white churches sometimes included certain caveats, particularly when a white church provided financial assistance to a black church. For example, white churches in Oklahoma City sponsored a 1938 revival that featured R. N. Hogan and J. S. Winston. The purpose of the meeting was to establish a new church. Within two years, a vibrant congregation of over one hundred African Americans was meeting regularly on the 1400 block of 7\textsuperscript{th} street in downtown Oklahoma City. But the white churches who initiated the creation of this church chose the new preacher, a black man named Walter Weathers, and they convinced the white elder of another local church to work with Weathers. Hogan, who would later become one of the most outspoken critics of white racism within COCs, had only praise for these white churches. “The white congregations did not stop there,” Hogan wrote of Weathers’s hiring. “The Capitol Hill congregation (white) therefore, sacrificed one of their best Elders to help with the Colored work. . . . This is one of the finest Christian couples that I ever had the privilege of meeting. . . . [They] told me, and I quote: ‘We wouldn’t take anything for our work among the colored people here, they are a fine group of people.’” Hogan continued to support this church by holding revivals there in subsequent years, and according to one member there, “The white disciples manifested great interest by attending in large numbers.”\textsuperscript{34}

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\textsuperscript{34} “A Working Group in Oklahoma City,” Christian Echo 35, no. 15 (5 August 1940): 7; and Letter from Sister Reuben H. Harrison, Christian Echo 35, no. 16 (20 August 1940): 5.
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Just as the white churches made significant decisions on behalf of this new black church, the congregational autonomy characteristic of COCs was often supplanted by a paternalistic desire to ensure that the black churches and their ministers were meeting standards of acceptability for whites. For example, in the summer of 1943, when doubts arose concerning the reputation of a black preacher in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the elders of the Center Street Church of Christ—the local white church who helped support his congregation—met and discussed the situation. Some had alleged that the preacher, known only in church minutes as Brother Hall or H. Hall, drank alcohol (most COCs were teetotalers), incurred heavy debts, and spoke disparagingly of the white church. The Center Street church elders then invited him to their next meeting, at which time they questioned him about accusations of his drinking and personal finances. According to minutes from the meeting, Hall summarily denied the drinking charge, though he may have acknowledged personal debts or negative statements about the white church. The elders agreed “to notify Hall that he must satisfy the officers of this congregation relative to the accusations circulated against him and make some amends for the past. Otherwise the elders felt it just to notify the congregations in surrounding communities as to their attitude concerning him.” By the end of the summer, the white elders followed through with their threat. “Thought we should go ahead with the charges of drinking, bad debts, and false reports against the Fayetteville congregation by H. Hall, colored preacher,” the minutes state. “This letter [is] to be written and signed by the elders of the congregation.” Evidence does not reveal the veracity of their claims against Hall, although the minutes clearly indicate that the elders presumed some measure of guilt before meeting with him. But by simply monitoring his personal behavior, these white elders asserted their control over his church, their investment. And with letters like the one
written and circulated about Hall, whites in some areas practically commanded the authority to determine the bounds of a black preacher’s employment and livelihood.\textsuperscript{35}

This paternalistic relationship characterized many black and white churches, especially in the segregated South. Contrary to the writings of Lipscomb, no thought seems to have been given, at least not consistently, to maintaining one, integrated church in any given community, despite an ardent belief that only members of COCs were counted among the saved. Therefore, whites who wanted to evangelize among black people in their community invariably sought to create a new church for them. To some extent, black members from area churches were complicit because they often assisted such efforts by attending a revival designed to attract new converts and establish the new church. This strategy seemed to benefit everyone. Local whites felt that they were extending the gospel to the unsaved. Blacks from nearby areas felt a similar calling, and while they might not have always agreed with the creation of a new church, they cooperated in the name of saving souls. One could not waste time bickering over the particulars of church polity when so many people, including Baptists and Methodists, were in eternal jeopardy. Plus, assistance from whites was typically accepted because black members often did not have the financial means—especially in the South—to carry through a construction project or to hire a minister at a decent wage. Therefore, both theology and economics, along with racial stereotypes, explain why blacks and whites frequently interacted but still maintained segregated churches.

Skeptics might reasonably argue that theology and economics merely served as a cover for whites who simply did not want to associate with blacks. This argument undoubtedly holds true in many instances. But a few examples suggest that relationships between black and white

\textsuperscript{35} Minutes, [c. July 1943]. Center Street Church of Christ Records, 1897-1986 (MC873), series 1, box 1, file 1. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
churches sometimes defied this pattern. A preacher named R. E. Holt described his experiences with ministry in Springfield, Illinois, which he thought was “a hard field.” Holt found support from a local white church. “The white brethren help us some,” he wrote to the Echo. On one particular occasion, the “white minister came over with his congregation and we had a grand time.” A similar sentiment was expressed by a church member from California when she wrote, “We enjoyed immensely the presence of our white disciples . . . It is always encouraging to have our white disciples because it shows a step toward friendly racial relationship.” This same person also eulogized an elderly white woman who had recently died, and her remarks illustrate the complications of simply labeling certain relationships as “paternalistic.” She explained to readers of the Echo, “Our hearts are heavy because of the loss of our white Sister Larimore. She did much to make it possible for us to have this building in Oakland, in order that we might worship God. I trust that she will be one in that number we read about in Matt. 25:34.” An African American soldier stationed in Arkansas wrote to the Echo and explained how there were “no colored members within thirty miles of here. But there is a very nice white congregation here,” he continued. “I attend their services frequently.” The extension of white benevolence to matters of personal health, for example, also exerted influence upon the relationships between blacks and whites within the denomination. A gentleman from Nashville profusely thanked “the brethren, white and

Matthew 25:34 is a quotation from Jesus that states, “Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (KJV).
colored,” who helped pay for his wife’s operation, assistance more significant to him than any help that whites might give toward evangelism or church facilities.37

Smaller, struggling black churches might garner more attention from local white churches. In Stamford, Texas, for example, the black church was so small that members of the white church would also meet with the black church each week. “We are doing fine, have no regular minister but the whites are so nice to us,” one member wrote, before adding that “some of them meet with us each Lord’s day. Their minister preaches for us. They seem to be willing to do all they can for us.” G. P. Bowser once heaped similar praise upon a white church and its minister from Arkansas. “We were invited to Jonesboro, Ark. for a meeting sponsored by the Fisher Street church (white),” he explained. “I seldom meet a body of white disciples to cooperate more freely. Brother Gussie Lambert, their minister is a genuine Christian worker. Through him a piece of property was bought for the colored worship.” Bowser was so enamored with Lambert that he subsequently invited him to write articles for the Echo. The title of one Lambert essay, “Baptist Doctrine in the Light of Truth,” shows how Christian primitivism was a binding force among blacks and whites within COCs. Together, ministers like Bowser and Lambert found common ground in their restorationist theologies and their drive to expose the shortcomings of other denominations.38

In many instances, the creation of black churches resulted from the evangelistic objectives of whites, but black members also sought churches for themselves. Thus, the creation of


segregated churches sometimes had both black and white support. For example, a predominantly white COC in Manhattan, New York, counted about fifteen black people among its members in 1940. A black preacher named Paul English conferred with the leaders of the congregation who agreed that he could take these members and create a new church in Harlem. The Manhattan church shared its weekly collections with the new Harlem church as it stabilized itself, and two white congregations helped pay English’s salary. At the instigation of a black preacher and black members, an integrated church segregated into two churches for the purpose of attracting new converts from Harlem. Although this instance occurred in New York, it still demonstrates how the urgency of evangelism could dictate what members composed a church. These particular churches determined that the creation of a new church composed solely of black people would have a better chance of winning other souls to the cause of primitive Christianity. The presence and mission of a new church outweighed any theological significance that one, fully integrated church might represent.39

On another occasion and after receiving an invitation from a white church, G. P. Bowser visited a city on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Upon his arrival, he discovered only one African American member. She worshiped with the white church, but the situation soon changed. “Four others were soon found and lined up with the work,” Bowser wrote in the Echo. “Indications are that there will be a regular worship among the colored . . . after this meeting.” Sources do not indicate Bowser’s motivation, but attracting more African Americans to COCs was a primary aim. This line of reasoning was true in another situation when a black woman from Ohio spoke of the church situation in her hometown. “My husband is not a member of the body, but I believe he would be if there was a colored congregation here.

There is a small white congregation. I attend with them each Lord’s day, and also Bible study each Wednesday evening.\(^{40}\)

While these examples occurred outside of the South, a comparable scenario transpired in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. When an African American church member named Joanna Shackelford died in 1957, she was eulogized in the pages of the Echo by Nancy Arms, an acquaintance and sister in the faith who knew Shackelford when she lived in Montgomery. When Arms’s first husband died in 1932, she was left to provide for five children, the youngest of which was just two years old, and Shackelford had been especially helpful in assisting Arms with childcare.\(^{41}\)

Thus, Arms felt compelled to share with Echo readers some thoughts about Shackelford’s life. In doing so, she recounted the story of Shackelford’s move from Montgomery to Tuscaloosa in 1948. Due to failing health, Shackelford needed to live closer to her daughter who could help care for her. However, Shackelford discovered that “there was not a Church of Christ for the colored people there,” so she frequently attended the white church in Tuscaloosa, the Central Church of Christ. The people there “always made her feel welcome,” according to Arms, but Shackelford finally decided to approach that church’s elders about creating another church. “Her plea to them was to establish a congregation for her people because they needed to be saved too.”

A few years later and true to form, the Central church invited a black preacher named F. L. Thompson to conduct a revival. Fifteen people were baptized, and along with Shackelford, they formed the nucleus of what became known as the Westside Church of Christ. Arms further reported that the “white people aided them in building a very nice meeting house.” Shackelford’s


\(^{41}\) This youngest child was Fred Gray, whose life is discussed more fully in Chapter Seven. Arms later remarried after the death of her first husband, Abraham Gray.
eulogy in the *Echo* closed with a final paragraph describing remarks made at her funeral by the minister of the Central church. “He told the story of how Sis. Shackelford would visit their Church and ask for a Church for her people. . . . that had it not been for this faithful sister, maybe there would not have been a Church there yet. So, he concluded by saying that all the colored people that have been saved and that may be saved in the vicinity is a result of the effort and faithful work of this dear sister.”

Even though Shackelford regularly attended the services of the Central church, the possibility of incorporating black members in its fellowship seems to have been unlikely. And while one might expect whites to give praise to a black woman for initiating the process that eventually created a new church “for her people,” this story and the white preacher’s remarks were printed in the *Echo*. The eulogy was written by a black woman about a black woman. Thus, Shackelford’s efforts to establish a church in Tuscaloosa were deemed praiseworthy enough among African Americans to merit special attention upon her death.

While the measure of congeniality certainly varied among black and white churches in communities across the South and the rest of the nation, the theological claims of black and white COCs differed little, easing whatever tensions might have otherwise arisen when black and white members interacted. The same literature was often used to instill the primitivist faith in black and white congregants. Many African American Sunday schools utilized the quarterly series of lessons published by the Gospel Advocate, and the *Echo* frequently ran advertisements for books about church doctrine that were authored by prominent white ministers. For example, readers could purchase collections of sermons by white preachers or transcripts from religious debates from the *Echo* bookstore. The *Echo* occasionally included advertisements for other

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periodicals, including the *Christian Chronicle*, the primary news source within the denomination. A 1954 advertisement affirmed that the “Christian Echo recommend[s] that all Christians subscribe and read the Christian Chronicle.” Some books were also endorsed by *Echo* writers. A 1958 issue of the *Echo* urged readers to purchase *Power for Today*, a daily devotional guide edited by the president of Pepperdine College and his wife. A year later, the *Echo* published an article advancing the need for churches to develop their own libraries, and it closed by recommending books by several authors, including such disparate figures as David Lipscomb and Foy Wallace, the latter known in part for his staunch belief in racial segregation. Through these periodicals, Sunday school literature, and books by prominent COC preachers, black and white members participated in the same studies and imbibed the same ideas about restorationism.

The pages of the *Echo* are also replete with examples that illuminate the devotion to primitivism and exclusivism among African Americans in COCs. One issue includes an illustration of how denominations grew out of Satan. Below a bold title—“‘SECTS OF PERDITION’ 2 PET. 2:1”—a drawing of a devil appears. Tentacles extend from the devil’s body, and each one represents a different “sect”: Baptist, Methodist, etc. Five other scriptures were cited, and each one was intended to prove that these denominations were evil. For example, 2 Peter 2:1 states, “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction” (KJV). Another citation, John 8:44, is a quotation from Jesus: “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye

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will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it” (KJV). The implication that all other denominations were somehow demonic could not have been clearer.44

Many articles in the Echo contained similar messages and exclusivist claims. When a Baptist reader took exception to some of the Echo’s rhetoric and charged the Echo with acting as if COCs had a monopoly on God, a prominent minister named G. P. Holt composed a reply that gladly accepted the accusation.

Modern-day denominationalism is one of the greatest enemies to true christianity [sic]. . . . I am accused of saying that the Church of Christ has a monopoly on Christ and God. I accept this accusation as being true, for we read in II John, verse 9 that, ‘whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, HATH NOT GOD, but he that abideth in the teaching the same hath both the Father and Son.’ This, denominations are not doing, consequently they have neither God nor Christ. The Church of Christ . . . assembles by Christ’s authority and worships according to the New Testament pattern. And just so long as the church abides in the teaching of Christ it will keep that monopoly on God and Christ.45

R. N. Hogan, who edited the Echo after Bowser’s death, made similar statements. In an editorial published in May 1954, while much of the nation’s attention was turned toward the Supreme Court’s Brown decision, Hogan railed against denominationalism. He wrote, “People everywhere should know that the Lord has but ONE CHURCH . . . People should know that in order to be saved, they MUST be members of that one church.” Later he would write that “amid the many churches in our land today, the church of Christ stands unique. She has marks of

44 “Sects of Perdition,” Christian Echo 45, no. 18 (20 October 1949): 5. The following verses were also included. Romans 16:18, “For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” Matthew 15:13, “But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.” Quotations are from the KJV.

identity which distinguish her from any other church in the land.” In the spring of 1956, an entire issue of the *Echo* was dedicated to the “New Testament Church.” Hogan clearly stated the purpose for the special issue in his editorial. “It is the policy of the Echo to save souls for the Master’s work, for this reason we are dedicating this issue to The New Testament Church with the hope of causing some one who is not a member of the ‘True Church’ to read their Bibles.” The sermons and writings of Keeble, Bowser, Hogan, and Holt show how the primitivist ideal of restoring New Testament Christianity had given way to an exclusivism that not only discounted other expressions of Christianity, but also summarily dismissed them as fiendish ploys to distract believers from the one, true church.\footnote{R. N. Hogan, “My Personal Observations,” *Christian Echo* 50, no. 7 (May 1954): 2; Hogan, “The Identity of the True Church,” *Christian Echo* 50, no. 26 (January 1956): 2; and Hogan, [editorial], *Christian Echo* 51, no. 4 (April 1956): 2.}

These theological ideas and self-perceptions also served to subordinate racial identities, at least to the extent that one’s standing as a member of the New Testament church was more significant than one’s skin color. Another example, although it occurred outside of the South, further demonstrates this feature of COCs. In 1961, the *Echo* shared the story of M. Thomas Tune, a white California preacher who decided to become a missionary to Hong Kong. An African American church in Richmond, California, agreed to become his primary sponsor. When the story became public, the local Richmond newspaper’s headline blared, “NEGRO CHURCH WILL SUPPORT WHITE MINISTER IN HONG KONG.” The *Echo* urged its readers to join the effort by sending contributions to the Richmond church. “We know that we are not interested in the man’s color but that the gospel be preached . . . We trust that this will help to break down some of the prejudice in our own brotherhood that prevails among our caucasian [sic] brethren. May God help us all to look at a man for what he is rather than his nationality.” The elders of the
Richmond church had met with Tune on several occasions and deemed him to be worthy of their support. “Tune has proven to be a Christian and has done much to break down the racial prejudice that exists among churches,” the *Echo* noted. The periodical subsequently published Tune’s missionary reports from Hong Kong.⁴⁷

In addition to sharing the primitivism and exclusivism characteristic of white COCs, black members shared a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God. This perception, ironically, led black members to find in the Bible an explanation for racial origins, just like their white counterparts. In *The Third Birth of a Nation*, Samuel Cassius indicated his belief that people with “burnt faces” could trace their origins back to Mitzraim, a son of Ham who settled in the land that eventually became known as Egypt. Like other African American theologians of his era, Cassius sought to correct the theological racism that assigned biblical origins to racial stereotypes. “Even when diverging on specific points,” historian Paul Harvey has noted, “these race writers collectively disputed the racist notions of inferiority inherent in the Western idea of blackness. Whether to invert the standard biblical mythologies . . . or to put on display entirely new mythological constructs, or to insist that blackness and whiteness were simply not scriptural categories . . . African American religious thinkers responded vigorously to the creation of blackness as a synonym for inferiority and shame.” Cassius believed that the term Egypt could be literally translated as “burnt faces,” so he described the magnificence of a civilization built by nominally black people. Both blacks and whites discussed racial origins and wondered about possible theological significance to racial differences. Cassius repeatedly emphasized that “God made of one blood all nations of men,” a direct quotation from the Acts of the Apostles, but he also stressed, as did many whites, that God

⁴⁷ “Richmond, California Congregation Sends Missionary to Hong Kong! . . . An Open Appeal to the Brotherhood . . .,” *Christian Echo* 56, no. 6 (June 1961): 1.
did not intend for these “nations” to mix. A minister named E. L. Barnes expressed similar sentiments in an article for the *Echo*, titled “Miscegenation.” Barnes clearly stated his position. “Miscegenation means to mix nations or races. Do I believe in it? No! I could not believe in it and believe in God at the same time.” Barnes also traced the demise of Egyptian civilization to “the mixing of the Hebrew blood with the Egyptian blood.”

A reader of the *Echo* had previously posed a question in this regard in a 1945 issue. Readers would often mail their questions to the editor, and Bowser set aside a portion of many issues to answer these questions. Information was usually sought about specific passages of the Bible that were confusing or controversial. Others asked about specific COC practices that enabled the *Echo* to justify its primitivist outlook. The following questions appeared amid such inquiries: “What caused Colored people, where did they start from? Does the word niger [*sic*] in the Bible mean Negro or colored people[?]*” The answers, as always, were sure and concise. “All races come from the three sons of Noah: Ham, Shem and Japeth,” the *Echo* noted. “The Hammites settled in what is now known as Africa and is father of the Negro race. The white people came from Shem. The Chinese, Japanese and Indians from Japeth.” The second question referred to another passage from the Acts that mentioned a person named Simeon who was called “Niger.” About this verse, the *Echo* concluded that the term “simply means black, [and] this has no reference to the Negro as a race.”

In another article that tackled racial prejudice, E. L. Turner also stated that “Ham was the father of Canaan. He is the father of all the black race.” Yet the contention that the

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scriptures explained racial origins did not preclude black preachers from decrying the evils of racial discrimination. Whites also preached against racial prejudice, but black preachers perceived more practical applications within the scriptures. “Why is it that the people of different races cannot fellowship and associate in religion in this country[?]” Turner asked. He answered his own question by noting that people “are not filled with the knowledge of the truth.” In 1958, another writer asserted the same belief. “Africa is recognized as the land of Ham, a black man,” one article stated. “Ethiopians [sic] are Negroes, but all Christians are brethren and children of God.”

This article was certainly not the last of its kind, and future discussions of race relations in the *Echo* would become increasingly more direct in their criticisms of white churches and their general support of racial segregation within American society, particularly in the South. In doing so, however, authors never advocated any type of social activism that might precipitate changes. They criticized the practice of segregation and their brothers and sisters in the faith for abiding by Jim Crow laws, but they did not urge readers to organize themselves for protests or to associate with the NAACP, SCLC, or other advocacy groups who were pressing for racial justice. Doing so would have distracted from the ultimate mission of the church: saving souls.

While there is no way to quantify the impact that World War II had on African Americans in COCs, they seemed to share the growing expectations characterized by the resolve among many returning veterans to secure the same rights in the United States that they sought for others through military struggles. Critiques of white racism from African American COCs became more frequent and urgent in the postwar period. Meanwhile, references to white churches and members in letters to the *Echo* during the 1950s and 1960s gradually decreased, a stark change.

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from many earlier issues. One contributing factor for the change was that black churches were becoming more economically independent, so reliance upon white benevolence became less necessary. This fiscal independence undermined a significant aspect of the relationships between many black and white churches. Black churches increasingly embraced this independence, and white churches turned their attention to other endeavors while remaining wary of their black brothers and sisters who might join the growing number of voices that were demanding social changes.

The growing rift between black and white COCs was evident at a number of levels. Through the pages of the *Echo*, African Americans in COCs were informed of church-related news. The journal was a medium through which African Americans affirmed their identity as New Testament Christians and found fellowship with their spiritual brothers and sisters across the country. A church directory that included a few African American churches in major U.S. cities was often printed in the pages of the *Echo*. But outside of the *Echo*, the Nashville Christian Institute (a grade school founded in 1940), and Bowser’s repeated attempts to establish schools, there was no institutional entity that allowed African Americans to freely gather for the purpose of mutual edification, exchanging ideas, and networking with other churches and preachers. The numerous lectureships sponsored by white churches and colleges were usually conducted in the Jim Crow South, where the laws of segregation slighted the spirit of the proceedings. Black ministers were usually welcome and often attended in good numbers, but they also suffered the stigma of having to sit in the balcony at David Lipscomb College, for example. They could not easily board or dine with the whites in attendance. With the exception of Marshall Keeble, black ministers were rarely invited to speak at these functions. Keeble,
however, was a regular fixture at all of the major lectureships sponsored by the denomination’s colleges.51

By the mid-1940s, when integration was the primary aim of many civil rights organizations, black ministers began establishing lectureships separate from their white counterparts. The *Echo* heralded the first such lectureship, held in 1945 in Oklahoma City, with a large photograph on its front page that included all of the participants. Bowser was seated in the middle of the first row. “First Lectureship Meeting of the Colored Brethren” was scrawled across the bottom of the picture. The *Echo* deemed the event a huge success, and the lectureship became an annual event. In 1952, African American COCs initiated a youth lectureship that often included topics ranging from church doctrine to courtship and marriage. By the late 1950s, hundreds of young people were attending the conferences which lasted several days. These activities were compelled by necessity more than separatism, but they again illustrate how COCs were largely aloof from the broader aim of mainline civil rights organizations, especially with regard to integration.52

A preoccupation with primitivism did not prevent black ministers from admonishing whites about their racial discrimination, but it did keep blacks from overtly endorsing the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Black ministers did not mince words in their criticism of whites, but for the most part, they also refused to associate themselves with ministers from other denominations, the “instruments of Satan,” according to Evans. For example, some

51 A picture in a 1945 issue of the *Babbler*, Lipscomb’s student newspaper, shows a group photograph of black and white ministers who attended a lectureship there. See *Babbler*, 10 February 1945, 1. There are numerous examples of Keeble’s participation in lectureships. For example, see “Keeble, Pullias Close Lectures Here Tomorrow,” *Babbler*, 2 February 1939, 1.

criticism directed at whites questioned the validity of their salvation, the main preoccupation of most fundamentalist Christians. G. P. Holt described his encounter with a white minister who claimed that “the members of the church of Christ would not stand for” school integration. Holt pointed out that he did not speak for COCs, a point that the white preacher conceded before clarifying that the church where he preached would not accept it. “Now is it not clear,” Holt inquired, “where the trouble is where he preaches? It is not the church, but him, and he is trying to speak for everyone.” He went on to observe how racial hate and prejudice were learned behaviors that conversion to Christianity should change. “It is therefore not a question of the time being right, or that we are not ready, the plain truth is WE ARE NOT COMPLETELY CONVERTED” [emph. in original]. In a similar manner and with vocabulary that echoed Martin Luther King Jr.’s rhetoric, Alonza Rose conjectured that a dearth of true love explained perpetual racial animosities. He believed that the “contumacious attitude on the part of races, the prejudice and egotistical vanity which characterize some would all be illiminated [sic], if only every one everywhere possessed True Love. Civil rights, equal rights, fair employment, integration in public schools would not be subjects of debate, if all had True Love.” In the same issue of the *Echo*, A. L. Cassius asked, “Are we to allow the denominational churches of the world to prove their belief in and acceptance of the love and tolerance of Christ by the dropping of racial barriers within their churches, while we, ensnarled by apathy and indolence, do nothing? . . . Time is far spent and the day of reckoning draws near,” he warned.53

Other *Echo* writers dropped subtle criticisms into their articles. In an article about the second coming of Christ and the final judgment, Holt noted that “God will do some segregating

[presumably between the saved and unsaved] and this should make a member of the Church both black and white feel right at home as they have practiced it [racial segregation] all along which is one of the most damnable curses of the church today.” An article about the annual youth conference of 1957 included a paragraph about integration. That year, young people had discussed “Young Christians Facing the Problem of Integration” during one session, and one teenage girl reported on events to the *Echo*. “Don’t you know that the color of our skin has no bearing on the condition of our souls?” she asked. “Let us therefore take the stand the Bible takes and not be content to be pushed to the back because our skin is a little dark.”

While several writers broached the subject of race through their articles, the most prolonged attacks on racial discrimination came from *Echo* editor R. N. Hogan. In a series of editorials published in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hogan’s consternation and disgust was immutable. The biblical literalism and primitivism that characterized the denomination as a whole also informed his writing on race. He began one 1959 editorial by observing that “most of our Brethren who are in high places in the church of our Lord, are going to lose their souls because they are respecters of persons. That being a respecter is a sin is without question, for the Bible plainly says that it is a sin.” Hogan was angered that some white churches would prevent blacks from attending or would relegate them to “the basement, balcony or a dressing room.” Hogan was especially appalled that racial discrimination persisted at the “so-called christian [sic] schools,” despite court rulings to the contrary. Administrators had previously hidden behind the law, Hogan noted, “but our government has informed the entire country that the practice of segregation because of race or color is unconstitutional. But christians [sic] shouldn’t have to be told that.” As he discussed the church colleges, Hogan would insert question marks into the text.

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after the term “Christian,” suggesting that he questioned the credentials of a nominally Christian college that practiced racial exclusion. “The fact that Negroes are not allowed in these churches and schools is proof that God is not there; for where God is, no man is barred because of the color of his skin. Brethren, you may fallout with me because of this article, but you know that I am telling the truth and those guilty will do well to repent.”

Later in the summer, Hogan reported to Echo readers that “there was a so-called christian College President’s [sic] meeting” where the administrators agreed to continue preventing African Americans from enrolling in church colleges in the South. Colleges outside of the South did accept African Americans, he admitted, “but the Presidents of these western and northern schools failed to do as Paul did the sorcerer,” Hogan lamented. “They failed to point out the sin of the decision of the Presidents of the other schools.” Hogan had grown weary of excuses and platitudes from whites who sought above all else to maintain segregation. “Surely these people will not contend that they love the Negro when they refuse him admittance into their schools that are supposed to be christian [sic].” To those whites who counseled gradual change, Hogan opined that the “Negro has taken his time for a hundren [sic] years and I think it is a terrible thing to tell people to take their time in obeying God. Take their time in repenting of their sins. Just as well to tell a man who has been in the Baptist, Methodist or other denominational churches all of his life to take his time in coming out of that human institution.”


56 R. N. Hogan, “Enemies of Righteousness,” Christian Echo 54, no. 8 (August 1959): 2. The title of this essay derives from Hogan’s reference to the apostle Paul and the sorcerer. In the thirteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul encounters a sorcerer who tries to prohibit him from sharing the gospel with a Roman proconsul. Acts 13:9-12 states, “Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him. And said, O full of all subtily and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand. Then the deputy, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord” (KJV).
C. A. Cannon, one of the Echo’s white readers, responded to Hogan’s harangue. Cannon also used the Bible, noting especially Acts 17:26, “[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation,” and particularly the latter half of the verse. Hogan responded in kind to Cannon’s “ridiculous arguments,” emphasizing the hypocrisy of some blacks having to drive to another town to attend church because of the bigotry of local white churches. “I have a letter in my files now of a sister who lives in a town that [has] in it two congregations of so-called White churches of Christ, but she is not welcome at either,” Hogan wrote. With Cannon, Hogan acknowledged that whites had helped blacks in a variety of ways, but this help was “nothing to brag about, for God told him to do it,” Hogan contended. He also questioned how Cannon could speak of “their churches,” a misnomer among the exclusivist, primitivist COCs. Hogan concluded this essay with an appeal: “I sincerely pray that my brethren, both White and Colored, will soon rid their hearts of hate, prejudice and pride and be satisfied with being simple New Testament christians [sic], for regardless of the color of the skin, we are in the same kingdom, subject to the same King. Let’s stop referring to other races as your brethren and to our own race as my brethren. Regardless of the race, if we are in Christ, we are all brethren.”

Writing about the momentous changes of the 1960s, church historian Richard Hughes has noted that “one scarcely would have known of them at all if one’s only source of information during the period had been the Firm Foundation, the Gospel Advocate, or almost any other media outlet related to mainstream Churches of Christ.” This same observation applies to the Echo.

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57 Cannon’s reply apparently appeared in the December 1959 issue of the Echo, but there are no extant copies of this issue.

Hogan’s barrage of attacks continued throughout the 1960s, but he never made a specific reference to the civil rights movement or to prominent leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. In April 1960, Hogan reprinted the same comments that David Lipscomb had penned in 1878 and that Will Campbell, one of the few southern white ministers who was an advocate for racial equality in the 1950s and 1960s, rediscovered for use in numerous speeches and his 1962 book, *Race and Renewal of the Church*. Two months later, Hogan penned another editorial praising Lipscomb and other white ministers who took similar positions, including Abilene professor Carl Spain, *Herald of Truth* speaker James Willeford, and missionary Tune. “There is no such thing in the Bible as a white church of Christ and a Colored church of Christ. I hope the time will soon come when my brethren will not allow the sign, ‘church of Christ (Colored)’ to be erected on their buildings, for God has no church of Christ, Colored. Neither does he have a church of Christ, white.” Hogan also correctly predicted that Abilene would be the first COC college in the South to desegregate, though he did not relent in his condemnation of cautious whites. “Talking christianity [*sic*] is one thing and living it is still another. Prejudice, hate and segregation have no place in the true church of Christ. I hope that God will hasten the day when all church of Christ preachers will preach the whole truth and stop leaving off part of God’s truth because of the people.” The fact that African Americans could attend Christian colleges that were not affiliated with COCs did not affect Hogan’s commitment to the “true church.” “My Race can attend the denominational colleges, but not certain so-called Christian Colleges. What a shame!” he exclaimed. In this same issue of the *Echo*, another preacher addressed the primitivist faith shared between blacks and whites. “The Church of Christ appeals to go back to the Bible. . . . It further emphasizes that in everything religious there must be a ‘Thus saith the Lord’ for all that is done [emph. in original].” Then he asked, “Where is the ‘Thus saith the Lord’ to practice the
principles of racial discrimination in the Church of Christ?” The primitivist faith that gave blacks and whites in COCs so much in common eventually became the means by which blacks questioned the racism that pervaded so many churches. Whites like Cannon also relied on the Bible to buttress their prejudices, but as other Christian denominations and the federal government began showing signs of change, Hogan and other blacks became even more astounded at the obstinacy of many of their white brothers and sisters.59

In the early 1960s, Hogan occasionally found room in the Echo to vent his frustrations. In a 1961 editorial, he addressed the concern among many whites that interracial romance would follow integration. The “Negro man in the church of our Lord is not interested in becoming the white man’s brother-in-law, he just wants to be his brother in Christ because that is the way the Lord wants it.” A few years later, he addressed the topic again. “In the first place,” he wrote, “the Negro isn’t interested in marrying the white man’s daughter any more than the white man is interested in marrying the Negro’s daughter and the second place is the fact that the white man doesn’t seem to have any confidence in his daughter being able to take care of herself.” Hogan also decried the invisibility of COCs when racial strife overwhelmed cities such as Birmingham, Alabama and Jackson, Mississippi. “Where are the Churches of Christ . . . during all of those disgraceful racial struggles in these places?” He must have been thinking of such areas when he wrote that “not a congregation of the Church of Christ has admitted a single Negro.” His acerbic verbiage reached a crescendo when he further instructed blacks “to love all white people, for you will go to hell if you hate them, like some of them are going to hell for hating you.” But amid all

of these editorials and articles, the organized protests that had become the most conspicuous aspect of the civil rights movement were never mentioned. The most political statement of this era appeared in 1960 and was not concerned with race but with religious orthodoxy. G. P. Holt, writing from Indianapolis, urged *Christian Echo* readers to vote against John Kennedy for President.

“Friends,” Holt wrote, “it is impossible for any man to uphold the constitution of the U.S.A. and the constitution of the Catholic church at the same time.” When asked about other nominal Christians who were running for office, Holt noted first that they were not “New Testament Christians,” before emphasizing that other churches were “not trying to unite the Church and State.” Holt voiced many of the same concerns expressed by white southerners who wondered about the efficacy of electing a Catholic president.\(^6^0\)

Ironically, by the mid 1960s, black and white COCs began forging paths more separate from each other than ever before. While they shared almost identical theologies, the growing economic independence of black churches enabled them to operate independently of whites, and whites were rarely interested in sustaining relationships with blacks, especially on terms that asserted black equality and power. And even when integration finally arrived at COC colleges in the South, token efforts ensured that schools would remain almost the exclusive domain of whites. But the damage of decades past was too much for whites to acknowledge and too much for blacks to forget.

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CHAPTER 4
DESEGREGATING THE COLLEGES

The events such as those surrounding Autherine Lucy’s enrollment at the University of Alabama in 1956 or James Meredith’s admission to the University of Mississippi in 1962 are forever etched into the popular memory and the historiography of the civil rights movement. The desegregation of private colleges, particularly Christian colleges in the South, has received less attention. This chapter highlights three significant points about the desegregation of these Christian colleges. First, generational tensions characterized discussions about desegregation among whites who were affiliated with the colleges as students or administrators. As early as the 1940s, some students were publicly advocating the desegregation of their colleges. Administrators were not so enthusiastic, and student efforts to bring about change were sometimes met with hostility. Second, the chapter shows that fiscal needs ultimately led to the desegregation of COC colleges. While moral overtones pervade the commemoration of civil rights victories like the desegregation of educational institutions, the driving force behind the desegregation of COC colleges was money, not ethics. However, the third point emphasizes how the Christian primitivism characteristic of COCs informed the students’ desire to desegregate. Their reading of scripture and primitivist faith led them to conclusions that directly contradicted the discriminatory practices of their elders. Through their newspapers, petitions, and speeches, the students were the ones who first spoke of the moral implications involved in maintaining segregated institutions. Ironically, once the colleges began to enroll African Americans, administrators also began to speak of desegregation as the only choice for a Christian college.

Along with offering a regular reprieve from the daily grind of studies, chapel services at COC colleges have long served as proving grounds for young men honing their skills at preaching or song leading. The opportunity to speak was a privilege not taken lightly. From the
chapel pulpit, an aspiring preacher might envision his future as a beloved minister with many congregants in churches yet to be constructed and with a constant flood of invitations to conduct revivals across the country. In the moment, however, speaking at chapel often entailed attempts to impress Bible professors with new anecdotes to illustrate the efficacy of Christian primitivism. It was a chance to outperform peers and perhaps even attract a young lady who knew well the Pauline passages about wives submitting to their husbands. Rarely would one waste his appearance on a social issue, much less one dealing with people who had nothing to do with the Christian college experience or career aspirations.

Young Everett Ferguson, a student at ACC, broke with this custom when he tackled the topic of race relations one morning in 1953. One could certainly discuss race relations within the confines of a dormitory room or around a cafeteria table. The topic might even come up during a government class, since it was, after all, of political rather than ethical significance to many white southerners. But the pulpit was no place to expound on such social and political concerns.

Ferguson had slowly begun to believe otherwise. As a product of a small, southeast Texas town, he was familiar with the racial prejudice that characterized most white southerners. So it was with no small degree of trepidation that he walked to the pulpit at the appointed time to give a brief talk simply titled, “Race Relations.” With the knot in his stomach characteristic of all young preachers, he nervously began, “If there are two things I hate, it’s Niggers and race prejudice.” A few of his colleagues smiled with amusement, but Ferguson was not trying to be funny. “This expression,” he continued, “which has made the rounds on the campus in the past few weeks, is, I’m sorry to say, typical of the attitude of many.” With that introduction, Ferguson proceeded to chastise those listeners who had blindly succumbed to the racism and discriminatory practices of their parents, their college, and their country. With his reputation at
stake, he was careful not to go too far, including remarks that legislation alone could not improve race relations. But he did offer some practical advice, admonishing his audience that their Christian duty required a certain response to racial prejudice. “[A]s Christians we should be in the lead in constructive programs for Negro welfare. We can treat them as equals; we can work to see that they receive equal treatment from others; and we can teach our less enlightened parents and friends.”

A few of his classmates doubtlessly disagreed with these assertions, but for the most part, everyone there that morning would have affirmed that all people, regardless of color, should be treated with the dignity and respect becoming of a Christian. Yet Ferguson’s closing remarks were not so agreeable. “I look forward to the day,” he concluded, “when ACC will admit Negro students—when they will sit with us in the classrooms, participate with us in extra-curricular activities, eat with us in the cafeteria, and live with us in the dormitories—not because they are forced upon us, but because we as students, faculty, and trustees have matured in outlook to the point where we can voluntarily accept them on their own merit.”

As repulsive as the quip used by Ferguson may now be, it illuminates an important point about white members of COCs and many white southerners of that era. They could express disdain for racial prejudice while honoring traditional racial boundaries. Very few perceived any contradictions. While the most abusive forms of racism, such as violence or verbal assaults, might be abhorred, a milder prejudice that accepted segregation in both principle and practice was more typical for white church members. Thus, due to various understandings of what prejudice might entail, whites could claim to dislike racial prejudice, while their actions indicated

\[1\] Everett Ferguson, “Race Relations” (speech delivered at ACC chapel in 1953), Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.
that they did not actually want to associate with blacks, unless perhaps the relationship was one of employer to employee.

White college administrators who opposed the desegregation of COC colleges personify this perspective because they claimed to be supportive of education for blacks. Many made heavy financial investments in Southwestern Christian College (SWCC) and the Nashville Christian Institute (NCI), two schools founded by COCs for black students; gave time and resources to evangelizing predominantly black communities in the United States and Africa; and participated in benevolent programs to assist in the care of black orphans and senior citizens. These actions gave credence to the claims of many that they were not prejudiced, even though the methods utilized were at times demeaning to those people who they were trying to help. The effects of institutional racism were rarely, if ever, addressed. In contrast, when the desegregation of schools became an issue of national concern, white students at COC colleges heartily embraced the concept. Indeed, before the 1950s, some white students had already voiced their wishes to offer black students the opportunity to attend their colleges. As the postwar college boom set attendance records at many institutions for higher learning, students developed a sensitivity to the educational inequalities that pervaded the South, in particular, and their training in Bible knowledge led them to believe that racial segregation was wrong. COC college administrators felt otherwise, and it was only when desegregation became the best fiscal option that they allowed the first black students to enroll in their colleges.

As bold as his personal and public stand was that day in 1953, Ferguson was not alone in his sentiments. In the years following World War II, ACC students had become increasingly vocal about the hypocrisy that they perceived in a Christian college that practiced racial
discrimination. Their critiques were largely grounded in their reading of scripture and their application of the COC hermeneutic of command, example, and necessary inference.

As early as 1924, the *Optimist* voiced alarm at what one editor perceived as an increase in racial prejudice. Perhaps these concerns resulted from the observations of a growing Ku Klux Klan or the violence that occurred when black servicemen returned home from World War I and asserted their rights as U.S. citizens. Whatever the case, an editorial assessed the problem in theological terms. “The man who comes to believe that he is superior to any other men, by reasons of conditions of birth or place of residence or citizenship under a certain government, is sadly deluded. . . . A man is a man in God’s sight for his Almighty hand created every man equal. Every man has a soul to be saved . . .” The writer of this essay closed with a stern warning. “Germany once believed that she was the only government on earth, and that her’s [sic] was the only people on earth who deserved the joys of life. She has fallen. America shows signs of becoming, someday, a victim to the same sort of bigotry.”

Likewise, following World War II, a war that included an even stronger African American presence in a cause that pitted Americans against Hitler’s genocide, students at ACC registered concerns over the nation’s claims of freedom and liberty and the practices of racial discrimination that characterized the South. To be sure, opinions were not unanimous. In the fall of 1945, an editorial in the *Optimist* granted that African Americans should have rights but that those rights, both spiritually and politically, did not necessitate social equality or full integration of public facilities. But this editorial would be the last at ACC to espouse any form

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of racial segregation or gradualist approaches to ensuring legal equality. In fact, one month later, the editor was criticized for making any qualifications to Jim Crow customs. A letter to the *Optimist* argued that “[s]piritual equality, if practiced, results in equal social, economic and political liberties. To say that ‘all men were created equal’ and then to deny equal liberties in any of life’s relationships is to admit ourselves to be either tyrannical or unthinking.” The writer concluded that the enrollment of black students “in the regular classes of ACC would seem to be a step forward in the fulfilling of the high and lofty purposes for which ACC stands.” Like many others to follow, this letter supported its arguments through citation of biblical passages, in this case, the willingness of Jesus to associate with a Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John and his sharing meals with social outcasts in the Gospel of Luke. Ironically, the hermeneutic principles and tools that were stressed so adamantly by COC preachers and educators often became the means by which students questioned the status quo.4

In the fifteen years following World War II, students at ACC became more strident in their challenges to the administration’s maintenance of a policy that appeared both unchristian and undemocratic. In 1946, a group of seventeen students signed a letter to the editor of the *Optimist* that spoke of desegregation with certainty. “Despite all of our preaching of Christianity, we have yet to practice it. We loudly cry at the injustices of other nations. Yet, here in America, we have granted freedom to the Negro—then dared him to use it.” Tired of excuses, particularly those that warned of a possible exodus of white students should blacks be allowed to enter ACC, these students asked, “If any students were to withdraw from this Christian school because of the entrance of colored students into the classes, would it be a division in the school, or merely a

4 “Colored Should Have Rights But . . .,” *Optimist*, 16 November 1945, 2; and “Letter to the Editor,” *Optimist*, 14 December 1945, 2.
weeding-out process? How can we teach Christianity in this Christian school unless we practice it?"\(^5\)

The following year, another letter to the editor criticized those Christians for whom “public opinion [had] usurped the place of the Scriptures.” The writer even invoked the names of heralded leaders of the restoration movement from the previous century, names that were revered in COC circles as the ones who had restored New Testament Christianity. “The power of [Alexander] Campbell, [Walter] Scott, [Barton] Stone, and all other great Christians has lain in their disdain for ‘What is the customary thing,’ or, ‘What will folks think about us,’ and n [sic] a complete trust in truth.” Even more damning was this student’s assertion that denominations like the Baptists were leading the way in making necessary reforms. His letter concluded by sarcastically noting, “Maybe all we need now is for SMU [Southern Methodist University], TCU [Texas Christian University] and Baylor to admit a few negroes, and then it will be safe for ‘Us Christians’ to do the same.” By citing three “denominational” colleges, the author hoped to highlight the irony in maintaining an exclusivist position toward other Christian churches while practicing discrimination, which the Christian scriptures clearly identified as sin. Perhaps the author believed that provoking denominational and doctrinal loyalty might precipitate change.\(^6\)

Students at ACC were not the only ones among COC colleges pondering the dilemmas of conscience and faith that resulted from southern racial mores. In response to “much talk on the Harding campus . . . about the subject of race distinctions,” a series of editorials appeared during the spring of 1949 in the *Bison*, Harding College’s student newspaper. The first one established that geneticists could not determine distinct dividing lines between racial groups and dispelled


the notion “that God caused the racial groups to appear” based on a “careful scrutiny” of the Bible. The writer determined that the presence of races “quite probably occurred merely through the transmission of certain hereditary tendencies.” The essay concluded by questioning discrimination based on racial groups and noting the presence of such discrimination in various regions of the country.7

A more compelling editorial appeared on the heels of a controversy at the University of Mississippi. In September of 1950, Albin Krebs, editor for the student newspaper in Oxford, set off a firestorm of protest when he wrote that “[p]igment of skin must have nothing to do with measure of ability.” Shortly thereafter, students in Oxford held demonstrations that included calls for Krebs’s resignation and the burning of a cross. After the Bison editorial described these events, as well as a Mississippi Congressman’s criticism of Krebs, it concluded, “We do not intend to pass judgment on this affair—it speaks for itself.” The essay also challenged Harding students and faculty by asking what kind of reception a similar editorial might receive if written in the Bison. “Here at a Christian college, founded on the beliefs of New Testament teachings,” the editor wrote, “what would student-faculty reaction be to permitting Negro students to enroll?” The column closed with an expression of unequivocal support for Krebs and “his stand for freedom, toleration, and anti-discrimination.” While passing judgment may not have been the editor’s intention, he clearly sided with Krebs and his call for open enrollment. Together with the Optimist, these editorials from the Bison indicate that a number of students at COC colleges

7 “Is It a Great Day for the Race?,” Bison, 1 February 1949, 2.
were sympathetic to the idea of welcoming black students to campus as a series of Supreme Court rulings began to undermine school segregation.8

Following judicial desegregation orders for public schools or the voluntary desegregation of some private institutions, students at ACC and Harding questioned the persistent inaction of their administrators. When Wayland College in Plainview, Texas, a city some two hundred miles northwest of Abilene, enrolled its first black student in 1951, the Optimist took note. “Now if Wayland can take such a step,” one columnist wryly observed, “surely a lot of other schools in Texas and the rest of the South can, too.” This particular article hastened to correct those people who asserted that blacks were already granted equal opportunities. “If you think that this is so,” the author opined, “visit some Negro public schools sometimes . . . and you will have to change your mind.” After emphasizing the disparities in educational opportunities for blacks and whites in the both public and private institutions and admitting that some problems might arise with the desegregation of ACC, the article expressed bewilderment over the college’s obstinance in allowing students “from every race under heaven except the Negro race.” Likewise, in the fall of 1953, an editorial from the Bison noted that a black student had enrolled at Louisiana State University. “Just how far are you willing to go to lower your prejudices? Are you willing to have a Negro for a roommate? Are you willing to extend membership in your social club?” the editor asked, before poignantly concluding, “Surely our sins have found us out.”9

In the spring of 1954, with the Supreme Court overdue for a decision in the famous Brown case, the student newspapers at both ACC and Harding continued to put the issue before their

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8 “What Would You Have Done?,” Bison, 11 November 1950, 2. Three Supreme Court cases were most applicable to higher education: Sipuel v. Board of Regents of Oklahoma (1948), McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents (1950), and Sweatt v. Painter (1950).

9 Ed Broadus, “Informal Informer,” Optimist, 30 November 1951, 3; and “How Do We See Segregation?,” Bison, 24 October 1953, 2.
readers. The *Optimist* ran a series of letters to the editor, each one calling for ACC to desegregate. Ten students signed one letter that cited a collection of Bible verses to support their arguments and to address some excuses that had been proffered against enrolling African Americans. “When we gather at the throne of God to sing praises to His name,” the letter finally asked, “will God want us any closer to His throne than the Negro? Every race on the face of the earth is permitted to attend ACC except the Negro? [sic] Why?” In Searcy, the *Bison* printed an editorial that complimented the students on recent interactions with black visitors to campus. At the lectureship hosted by the college during the previous November, black evangelist Marshall Keeble “spoke to a mixed crowd of Negroes and whites.” A chapel speech by a member of the Bible faculty had further challenged the status quo, and a young man from SWCC had led the singing during a daily chapel service. The editor felt assured that positive changes were underway. “Perhaps there is still much progress to be made, but nonetheless, we believe that the students of Harding College are fast approaching that enlightened state of mind when we can accept the Negro as a full equal, no reservations retained.” In the months before the *Brown* decision, only one item appeared in the *Optimist* that criticized those students who were advocates of desegregation, and this criticism came in the context of urging people to integrate churches first because “worship to the Almighty is far superior to the educational aspects of life.”

A few days after the Supreme Court handed down its decision on 17 May 1954, an editorial in the *Optimist* emphatically stated, “This ‘let’s let Negroes in ACC’ isn’t just a glorious theoretical gesture on our part to lift up the ‘underdog.’ But it is a very practical and practicable way to help our fellow Christians get a *Christian* education” [emph. in original]. With state and private institutions opening to black students, the *Optimist* and the *Bison* suggest that a sizable number of students at ACC and Harding were eager to desegregate their schools as an act of
faith. Yet their administrators were not so eager. When Keeble sent a personal letter to one college president that requested the admission of black students, the letter was returned to him with “ABSOLUTELY NOT” written across it in red ink.\(^\text{10}\)

However, one should not mistake this desire for desegregation as indicative of progressive racial ideas or civil rights activism. Like many of their counterparts in public universities, students at COC colleges frequently participated in activities or communicated in language that showed their racial sensitivities reflected the dominant white culture. For example, at Freed, the student newspaper, the *Skyrocket*, frequently included jokes with explicitly racist overtones. Along with Lipscomb, students at all the aforementioned colleges enjoyed minstrel shows complete with student performances in black face. They seemed to be most popular at Freed, where they received prominent coverage in the *Skyrocket* and remained annual events through the spring semester of 1964, just before the first black students arrived on campus. Freed did occasionally have a black preacher such as Marshall Keeble visit campus, but newspaper editors apparently perceived no tension between his appearance and the annual minstrel show. One issue of the *Skyrocket* even described a Keeble visit on the front page before detailing preliminary plans for the celebrated minstrel show on the third page.\(^\text{11}\)

In like manner, social clubs (the equivalent of fraternities and sororities at COC colleges) hosted banquets with “Old South” themes well into the 1960s. These events might include illustrations of black mammys on programs and menus, activities that celebrated Confederate


heritage, or guest speakers who recounted the Civil War from a white southerner’s point of view. For a time at least, the term “nigger” was used frequently and loosely, too, as the name assigned by students to a local mule at Lipscomb in the 1930s or as Ferguson remarked in chapel service at ACC, in jokes or quips that circulated around campus. The sports page of the Bison once suggested that some intramural teams were “discriminated against like an Alabama Nigger after [an] election.” And while ACC could sermonize against racial prejudice in a 1924 editorial, four years later, minstrel caricatures decorated the college yearbook, complete with slang racial terms and poetic verses that highlighted racial stereotypes.12

Certainly, when the civil rights movement began in earnest in the mid-1950s, few white students, if any, from COC colleges participated. In fact, following the lead of administrators and some faculty and foreshadowing attitudes toward civil rights campaigns in the 1960s, students gradually came to frown upon demonstrations because of the turmoil that they seemed to precipitate. Editorials depicted the NAACP and Citizens’ Councils as representative of two poles on the same spectrum. Southern governors such as Leroy Collins of Florida won admiration because he was perceived as moderate, even though he was only moderate in comparison to his counterparts in Alabama and Mississippi. Thus, on the one hand, students sought the desegregation of their schools. They even voiced consternation toward those who would deny that blacks were equal to whites. Yet, on the other hand, they fully imbibed some aspects of the South’s racial bigotry. White students seemingly felt no tensions between

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12 For examples of theme banquets, see “Down South In Dixie Scene of Annual Fete,” Skyrocket, May 1946, 1; “‘Southern’ Evening Spent By Ju Go Ju’s,” Bison, 13 February 1954; and “Old South Theme for Mohican Club Social,” Bison, 16 April 1964, 4. For examples of how “nigger” was used, see “‘Uncle Bill’ Spends 31st Year as ‘Handy-Man’ on D. L. C. Campus,” Babbler, 21 February 1935, 2; “One Man’s Opinion,” Bison, 2 December 1950, 4; and Ferguson, “Race Relations.” The yearbook is mentioned in Richard T. Hughes, Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 288.
sympathetic views of southern white culture, condescending attitudes toward blacks, and general support of desegregation.\textsuperscript{13}

Nevertheless, if integration had solely been left to the students, the first black students would have enrolled in most COC colleges long before the summer of 1961, when President Don Morris and the Board of Trustees at ACC finally relented.\textsuperscript{14} While many students might have recognized segregation as sin, their elders were not quite convinced of any institutional or personal culpability in the discriminatory policies and laws that characterized the South. Before desegregation, students found themselves in an awkward position. They were fiercely loyal to COCs and to their educational institutions. After all, these colleges were sponsored and largely sanctioned by the New Testament church. In the minds of many students, well-versed in their restoration theology, the COC colleges were the only truly Christian colleges. Plus, their administrators and faculty were respected Christian leaders, many also serving as elders, deacons, or preachers in local congregations. But the schools were still segregated, and this fact seemed to contradict many of the most basic principles of Christianity. In the face of such a psychological and moral dilemma, students initially accepted that college administrators were wise men, aware of all pertinent circumstances, and eager to do the right thing. While desegregation might not happen immediately, many thought, it would happen in short order.

Throughout the 1950s, student newspapers continued to instruct their readers, both implicitly and explicitly, that racial prejudice was wrong and that by implication, so was

\textsuperscript{13} J.W. Campbell, “When No Authority Speaks . . . There Is No Right, Wrong,” Optimist, 4 May 1956, 3; and “Integration Ideas,” Optimist, 14 February 1958, 2.

\textsuperscript{14} Within the South, where most COC colleges and churches were located, ACC was the first to integrate when Washington Harris entered the graduate school in the spring semester of 1962. Pepperdine College, initially located in Los Angeles and later moved to Malibu, California, never had a policy excluding blacks, though the school was certainly not immune to racial discrimination and strife.
segregation. For example, on the front page of an April 1955 issue, the *Optimist* celebrated the Texas Intercollegiate Press Association’s decision to invite black colleges into the organization, a step made during an annual conference that was directed by ACC’s press club and held on its campus. Not only was the three-day event a success, but the *Optimist* radiated with pride in reporting that the momentous decision was made at ACC. An editorial included details of the delegates’ discussions and the near unanimous vote. “A small agate-type page in the solving of one of the nation’s greatest social problems had fluttered and turned,” the editor wrote. This piece appeared below a cartoon depicting two people—one black, the other white—with newspaper print for bodies shaking hands and smiling broadly. In all capital letters, the caption read, “NO RESPECTOR [*sic*] OF PERSONS.”

In Searcy, the *Bison* began implementing a pedagogical approach to its comments about race relations. Two pieces from October 1955 demonstrate the point. First, one student began a column by describing the slave trade and slavery, “one of the worst blots in the history of our country.” He briefly mentioned the Emancipation Proclamation, “a job uncompleted,” before acknowledging the legitimacy of the *Brown* decision and the court’s subsequent instructions to desegregate “with all deliberate speed.” “To accept these decisions and to take necessary steps to put them into force,” he believed, “would be to exhibit the truly American spirit of cooperation and understanding.” Knowing that Harding was the proud home of an American studies program and the primary impetus behind annual Freedom Forums held on COC college campuses, readers of the column could not have missed the point. The author went on to castigate opponents of desegregation, especially those people who associated it with communism, and to one such proponent, he asked, “Shouldn’t you, as an American citizen, be decent enough to accept the

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15 “TIPA Votes to Admit Negro College Press” and “TIPA Takes Step Forward,” *Optimist*, 28 April 1955, 1, 2.
decision of a court which was established to make such decisions?” Not only was integration a Christian duty, but to readers enamored by the patriotism and anti-communism preached at Harding, this writer sought to make obedience to the courts, and therefore, integration, the duty of a responsible American.16

Following Emmett Till’s death and his murderers’ acquittal in 1955, an editorial called upon Harding students to take personal responsibility with regard to race relations. The essay acknowledged that no court ruling or legislation could ameliorate problems. Solutions would only come “when every individual examines his own reasoning, rids his mind of prejudice and casts aside his faulty convictions that our racial problems will end.” In language that now evokes thoughts of some of the most famous speeches from the 1960s, the author expressed a desire to see Harding integrated.

We seem to think that perhaps if we will forget about the Negro he will go away and leave us alone. But he will not go away, and our problems will never end as long as people have that attitude.

Almost one hundred years ago President Abraham Lincoln declared that the slaves should be freed. Although a century has passed, the Negro is still held in bondage in many ways. . . .

. . . Let us all look forward to the day when human beings are judged by something other than the color of the skin.17

Simple eloquence and noble aims notwithstanding, students were met with excuses from administrators who feared the financial and social implications of a decision to desegregate their colleges. Almost eight years would pass between the writing of this editorial and the admission of black students at Harding.

If, as a whole, a student body spoke favorably of desegregation, why was each college president so reticent to provide the leadership necessary for change? Answers to this question

17 “Segregation: A Personal Problem,” Bison, 26 October 1955, 2.
would no doubt vary between individuals, but three factors seem especially relevant. First, the ideology of white supremacy, buttressed by a theology of racism, still maintained a formidable degree of influence among COC clergy and educators. George Benson, president of Harding until 1965, for example, maintained that segregation was providential, a natural order of divine creation. In lectures to students, he would observe that the “redbirds, the bluebirds, the blackbirds, they don’t mix and mingle together, young people!” In addition, he believed that black people were under the biblical curse of Ham. The momentous changes that occurred through black activism, Supreme Court decisions, and federal legislation did little to alter his opinion. In a 1966 sermon, Benson asked what the proper Christian attitude toward race problems should be. “Before God, all men are equal,” he stated. But “in like manner there is no reason to think the Lord wants a mixing of the races and the creating of just one mongrel race.”

For many years, this belief, confirmed through his study of scripture and his extensive travels around the world, prevented Benson from entertaining the idea that Harding should be integrated. With good reason, a skeptic could claim that Benson and others who subscribed to similar racist assumptions simply used theology to substantiate their bigotry. One cannot doubt that this practice was common. A church member once wrote that a college president privately told him that “many Negroes have venereal disease” and that the students need to be protected. Yet this

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notion fails to adequately explain Benson, who seemed to genuinely believe that providence had ordained racial hierarchies. One year after resigning from the presidency, he delivered a sermon in which he explained that segregation was divinely sanctioned. Benson’s global humanitarian and evangelistic interests also suggest that he did not harbor racial animosities. Indeed, Benson provides an example of how theology continued to inform the positions of some people whose racism and faith in God and scripture had become so entwined that maintenance of a segregated society was equated with seeking God’s will.19

In addition to theological predilections, political expediency also molded segregationist posturing. Benson, for example, enjoyed a good relationship with Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, but he was especially close to Senator John McClellan. Although the former’s antics during the Little Rock crisis of September 1957 are better known to historians, the senator was no less defiant of the Supreme Court and of President Eisenhower’s use of federal troops to quell the disturbances at Central High School. By signing the Southern Manifesto in 1956, McClellan had already registered his complaint about the Brown decision, and events at Little Rock did nothing to change his mind. In the context of the Little Rock crisis, McClellan sent a memo typed in all capital letters to U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower. It stated, “THE MISTAKEN BELIEF THAT THE PRESENCE AND USE OF FEDERAL TROOPS OFFER EITHER HOPE OR PROSPECT OF A RATIONAL OR PERMANENT SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM IS, IN MY BELIEF, A GRAVE ERROR OF JUDGMENT.” The following year, McClellan informed a constituent that he had “without hesitation or reservation severely criticized the Supreme Court for its school integration decision and others.”

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Like other southern politicians, McClellan had drawn his line clearly in the sand, and doing so made him a hero to Benson. Shortly after the Little Rock crisis, Benson telephoned the senator with an invitation to be the guest speaker at the 1959 Freedom Forum. While this particular forum was held in Los Angeles at Pepperdine College, it was directed by Benson’s National Education Program (NEP), a small, fiercely conservative think-tank that complemented the college’s American Studies program. Benson and McClellan definitely saw eye to eye on most policy matters, and Benson never ran short on flattery for the senator. “Senator McClellan,” Benson once wrote, “you are rendering a great service to your country and your many, many Arkansas friends are very proud of you and of your record.” Norvel Young, the president of Pepperdine was equally enthralled with McClellan and his appearance on campus, later writing the senator to make sure his speech at the forum would be included in the Congressional Record. In 1963, the year that Harding accepted its first black students, Benson arranged for Harding to award an honorary doctorate to McClellan.20

These two college presidents were not the only ones who carefully courted prominent politicians. Two congressmen, Omar Burleson of Texas and Joe Evins of Tennessee, were members of COCs and frequent donors and visitors to ACC and Lipscomb. Evins, for example, gave thousands of dollars to Lipscomb, offered the commencement address in 1952, and became a member of its board of trustees in 1967. He also sent his daughters to ACC. Of the two congressmen, only Evins signed the infamous Southern Manifesto of 1956, but Burleson was by no means progressive on racial matters. When constituents raised questions about the strength of

20 Ganus interview; John L. McClellan to The President, 30 September 1957; John L. McClellan to E.H. Brown, 1 October 1958; Glenn A. Green to Honorable John L. McClellan, 21 March 1959; Geo. S. Benson to Senator John L. McClellan, 3 July 1959; and M. Norvel Young to Senator John L. McClellan, 30 June 1959, John McClellan Papers, box 25-A, Speech - Pepperdine College folder, Special Collections, X Library, Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas; and Honorary Doctorates Granted folder, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas.
Burleson’s opposition to integration, he explained that he did not sign the Manifesto for two reasons. First, Burleson often noted that he did not need to make a statement through a group. He could speak for himself. Second, the Texas Congressmen were disgruntled with several of the lawmakers who were collecting signatures for the Manifesto, and Burleson shared their misgivings. To one constituent, he wrote, “Senator Byrd and a few others who have been shouting ‘states rights’ all along voted against us on the natural gas bill, which was fundamentally a states rights issue, and I do not appreciate such inconsistency. If a man is for states rights in one thing, he should be for that all the way through - and that I am.” Less than a week before the manifesto was made public, Burleson informed a local Democratic party chairman, “I can unequivocally assure you that I am wholly in sympathy with the theory of interposition. . . . personally I would be willing to try the method, since it apparently offers the best recourse available to those of us who believe in the fundamentals of States’ rights.” And despite not signing the manifesto, Burleson repeatedly stressed that he opposed school integration, an idea he characterized as “foolishness.” As historian Tony Badger correctly observed, “Texans as a whole endorsed segregation and elected segregationist state officials,” but “[n]ational and local imperatives drove the majority of Texas congressmen safely to ignore segregationist constituency sentiment.” With two COC Congressmen who basically supported segregation along with a host of other southern politicians, college presidents also had political reasons to exclude blacks from their colleges.\footnote{21}

President Athens Clay Pullias of Lipscomb was even on a first name basis with Congressman Evins, and the two men often discussed policy issues. In 1963, when Congress

was debating what would later become the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pullias sent a letter to Evins to apologize for missing the representative’s telephone call. The letter also commented on current legislation. “I know it is highly complicated,” Pullias wrote, “and there are many conflicting interests involved, yet I also believe that some of the fundamentals for which this republic was originally established are threatened.” Pullias was unapologetically racist, even complaining in a meeting once about having to shake hands with Marshall Keeble. While Evins probably did not maintain such an extreme disposition, he certainly cultivated a relationship with Pullias and knew of his strong opinions. And while some people such as Benson maintained a theology of racism, belligerently maintaining a segregated institution was also politically advantageous for college presidents such as Pullias who hoped to remain cozy with southern political powers and attract financial resources for their schools.22

While theological and political reasons might be proffered as reasons to maintain segregated colleges, administrators most feared losing donors and students should if African Americans were admitted. As early as 1946, letters to the Optimist recognized the possibility and even likelihood that having a desegregated college would cause some white students to enroll elsewhere. In his personal musings, James Bales, a popular professor at Harding and one of Benson’s close associates, worried about what parents might think. He was proud that other races had been accepted at Harding with no disturbance, but he worried that accepting black students might deter parents from sending their children to Harding and that doing so “might cut

22 Athens Clay Pullias to Joe L. Evins, 1 July 1955, box 860, folder 2; Athens Clay Pullias to Joe L. Evins, 2 January 1962, and Don H. Morris to Joe L. Evins, 13 April 1962, box 716, folder 1; Athens Clay Pullias to Joe, n.d., and Eunice B. Bradley to Secretary of Joe L. Evins, 23 June 1967, box 857, folder 6; Joe L. Evins to Athens Clay Pullias, 2 May 1952, box 701, folder 5; and Athens Clay Pullias to Honorable Joe L. Evins, 22 July 1963, box 369, folder 2. Joe L. Evins Papers, Special Collections, Tennessee Tech University, Cookeville; Floyd Rose, interview by author, tape recording, Valdosta, Georgia, 20 June 2005; and Jack Evans Sr., interview by author, tape recording, Terrell, Texas, 22 June 2005.
off other means of support.” In private, one college president admitted to a church member that if desegregation occurred, “the school might lose monetary support and not be able to teach ‘Christian principles’ to as many students.” And in his famous sermon at the 1960 ACC lectures, Carl Spain made reference to “people with money who will back us in our last ditch stand for white supremacy in a world of pigmented people.” While students were more resigned to such departures and the potential loss of revenue, administrators were never quite so sure. By the time COC colleges desegregated, the threat of any exodus over the decision was not nearly as great as the damage being incurred by the bad publicity of operating a segregated college. By the early 1960s, federal funds were also jeopardized if college applicants were turned away because of race. Thus, when the president of Freed finally announced in 1964 that black students would be accepted in the upcoming academic year, he said the change in policy was due “to the mistake of accepting federal funds.” These comments represented the views of other college presidents like Benson, and as many had claimed all along, the colleges accepted black students when the time was right. But the time became right only when desegregation was the most fiscally prudent course of action.23

Even though students at COC colleges generally favored desegregating their schools, the decision to remain segregated received reluctant support. While some students performed individual acts of protest, the general acquiescence to the decisions of college administrators was amply illustrated in three editorials, one from the Optimist when ACC was still segregated and two from the Bison, from both before and after Harding integrated in 1963. In the spring of

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1956, students at ACC learned that their college would remain segregated. The editorial page reflected a desire to support the policies of the administration. “Under the present circumstances, it is the only decision that could have been made. The circumstances may change, and I feel sure that they will. When they do, the progress shall take its course. . . . Still we must remember that the students and their opinions will never dictate nor formulate the school’s policy, but since they will be the ones most directly affected, their ideas will always be considered.” While many students at ACC supported desegregation, they were not ready to take any steps to voice sustained opposition to administrative policy. Ultimately, the decision did not affect them. Students may have been supportive of desegregation as an ethical idea, but it was nothing upon which they wanted to risk their educations, careers, or reputations. Meanwhile, college presidents, as this piece suggests, rarely, if ever, made decisions based on thoughtful consideration of student opinions.24

Under the leadership of Benson, Harding’s administration enjoyed similar compliance from its students. He, too, was the type of president who made decisions on his terms, with little regard to student input. President Benson’s vice president during these years later recalled how “Dr. Benson called the shots, not the students. And even though there were many students that might want to be integrated, and even though there were some of us faculty members that were all for it, until he was ready for it, it didn’t happen.” Despite this stifling leadership style, or perhaps in fear of it, editorials in the Bison rarely leveled personal criticisms against Benson. One editorial even blamed the students for the college’s segregated status. “Probably the administration would be glad to [integrate] if all the students favored it,” this writer insisted, “but some of the Harding students wouldn’t return to school if Negroes were admitted. Before any

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24 “Staff Deserves Thanks, Credit; Segregation Needs Discussion,” Optimist, 20 April 1956, 3.
school can have successful integration, the individual prejudices of every student must be broken down.” However, since most students at Harding seemed to favor desegregation, leadership from administrators would have easily prevented any type of mass exodus, which was highly unlikely anyway. Instead, they chose an option, a segregated admissions policy, that might upset some students but not to the point of causing them to leave school or mount sustained protests.25

In spite of this willingness to follow segregationist policies of college administrations, a few students who were uneasy at the slow pace of change decided to level more strident criticism. After a decade or more of classroom or cafeteria discussions and occasional essays in the student newspaper, a small cadre of students decided to be more assertive. Before students left for the summer in 1957, the *Bison* urged its readers to go into the world and “manifest an attitude that will bring peace and harmony between races.” The integration issue became more pressing in September. In Little Rock, just fifty miles away, efforts to desegregate Central High School brought chaos and the unwanted attention of the world. A few weeks later and doubtlessly moved by the white mobs that had harassed and threatened the “Little Rock Nine,” students at Harding circulated a petition where signers affirmed “that they are ready to accept as members of the Harding community all academically and morally qualified applicants, without regard to arbitrary distinctions such as color or social level; that they will treat such individuals with the consideration and dignity appropriate to human beings created in the image of God; and that they will at all times face quietly, calmly, patiently, and sympathetically any social pressures intensified by this action.” Over 85% of the student body signed the petition, as did almost one hundred faculty, staff, and administrators. Bill Floyd, student body president at the time, assisted in its circulation, only after convincing the student council that signatures be collected for a

25 Ganus interview; and “Segregation: A Personal Problem,” *Bison*, 26 October 1955, 2.
“statement of attitude” rather than a document “demanding an end” to the school’s policy of racial segregation. He knew that students were in no position to make demands, and while the wording of the petition was tempered by the final’s paragraph’s insistence that it represented “an expression of the internal readiness of the Harding community to end discrimination” and not “an attempt to precipitate action by the Administration,” the message could not have been clearer. The majority of the people at Harding wanted their campus to be desegregated.26

Harding administrators were not amused. They received word of the petition before a single signature had been obtained, and they immediately requested that the student council put an end to this course of action. In defiance of this request, the student body assembled and voted to continue with the circulation of the petition as planned. On the following day, even a chapel announcement that discouraged students from circulating and signing the statement could not deter the effort, and after procuring close to a thousand signatures, Floyd sent them and the statement to each member of the board of trustees.

During a chapel speech, President Benson made disparaging remarks about the statement and its signatures. Not only did this zealous, anti-communist, American patriot call the petition improper, but he inexplicably claimed that the signatures did not accurately reflect students’ feelings. “They didn’t understand what they were signing,” he said. This same address included a recitation of the tried and true excuses for maintaining a segregated college. Floyd later recalled how Benson “explained to us that God made some blue birds and some black birds and that they were not intended to mix,” before noting that black people in America are better off than people in Russia and that the college would stand to lose financial support and students if it integrated. That night, under the cover of darkness, one student made his way to the

26 “Then, How Will You React?,” Bison, 24 April 1957, 2; and “Results Of Recent Poll On Racial Integration Show Student Attitudes,” Bison, 14 November 1957, 1.
administration building and the lily pond that still adorns its front lawn. Around the birdbath located at the center of the pond, the student hung a sign that read, “WHITE ONLY.”

Benson also responded by commissioning one of Harding’s most popular and respected professors, James Bales, to deliver a speech on segregation during a weekly discussion group. Benson often exchanged news items with Bales, including inflammatory literature such as that written to associate the NAACP with communism. But most students loved Bales and valued his opinion, perhaps even more than that of the college president. As with other opportunities and in typical Bales fashion, he argued that segregation should be viewed in the context of what is expedient with local customs and that racial strife is a centuries old phenomenon that spans the globe. Following this line of reasoning, Bales could remove segregation from the realm of moral discourse and place it within a context of cultural traditions in which Christians supposedly had little influence. The apostle Paul, for example, might have abhorred slavery, but Pauline texts in the New Testament instruct slaves to obey their masters. Likewise, Bales emphasized that the scriptures did not necessitate integration. According to Bales, God simply accepted all people regardless of their station in life but did not, in the New Testament, dismantle social hierarchies. He also pointed the students toward the apostle Paul’s instructions about eating food sacrificed to idols. There was nothing inherently wrong with it, but one should not partake if other church members might be offended. Bales viewed integration in much the same way. On another occasion, he told students that Peter’s visit to the house of a Roman centurion, an occasion where he proclaims that “God is no respecter of persons,” was not a story applicable to race relations.

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27 Floyd, 166-168; and Don Haymes, “Race & the Church of Christ.”

Once again, students were not impressed with these arguments. While conceding that his reasoning was “as usual . . . very masterful,” one student challenged Bales in a personal letter by noting that “association with other races does not leave the wrong impression as eating meats sacrificed to idols might . . . but rather association with other races teaches the truth of the gospel of Christ, helping others see and know the principle we of all people in the world preach: the unity of all believers.” A year passed without a reply. The student wrote back, asking and hoping for a response, but Bales never mustered one. Another student questioned Bales’s reading of the Petrine story. “May I suggest that you read the entire account,” he implored. “As to our choosing the time and place in our association with Negroes,” the letter concluded, “the principle taught in Gal. 2:11-14 suffices. Let’s not quibble; let’s walk by faith.” The students at Harding might conform to admissions policies, but zealous in their fresh theological training, they were not about to concede biblical arguments to anyone who sought to justify segregation, no matter how benign someone like Bales could make it seem.29

Discussions along these lines continued into the spring at Harding, fed in part by the appearance of actor Hal Holbrook on campus and columns in the Bison. Holbrook’s act, “Mark Twain Tonight,” was performed around the country; part of the routine challenged audiences to rethink their attitudes about race relations. Meanwhile, the paper included columns that incited comments on the topic, both positive and negative. One humorously described the habits of the ministerius bigotus and its companion, the homakus bigotus. During the academic year, according to the writer, these creatures “gather in four large coveys, one in Texas, one in

Arkansas, and two in Tennessee. Here they repress their instincts, and improve their techniques of feather ruffling and redundant trilling.”

The newspaper also included poems and essays that evoked images of intellectual and spiritual stagnation. A few readers might have missed some of the oblique criticisms of the college administration, but a close reading suggests that students were growing weary of President Benson and his stranglehold on the college. One poem, titled “Reign, Reign, Go Away,” stated, “Thought was drowned in/The sea of time./‘Death!’ ‘Death!’ cried/The reign.” Another essay told of “a small man [who] was pleased with himself and with his great faculty, his magnificent ability to utter words.” While comments explicitly directed at Benson would not have been tolerated, these artistic voices point to the growing frustrations that students felt toward the powers that controlled the college.

Benson constantly brought guest speakers to Harding who vindicated his positions on segregation and most other political concerns. For example, Leon Burns, a segregationist preacher from Columbia, Tennessee, made several appearances at Harding’s annual lectureship and was also invited to speak in chapel. But if Benson could not be directly criticized, anyone who Benson invited to campus became the object of students’ ire. Just as Bales had earlier been confronted by dissenting students, when a guest speaker at the college criticized the Supreme Court over its recent rulings against segregation, a student responded with a blistering attack in a letter to the *Bison* editor. The student closed by questioning the speaker’s motives. “I wonder if . . . seeing our proximity to Little Rock and knowing that feeling has been high against integration, [he] was not trying to scratch ‘itching’ ears. . . . He has misjudged his audience.” On

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30 “Mark Twain Proved Treat to Audience; Petty Also Approves,” *Bison*, 20 March 1958, 2; “Assignment Harding,” *Bison*, 10 April 1958, 2.

31 “Reign, Reign, Go Away” and “From Under The Editor’s Door,” *Bison*, 1 May 1958, 2.
those occasions when Benson did speak on the subject of race, he stuck to his theology of racism. In classes on the Pentateuch, for example, Benson emphatically stated that “the nigra race, young people, is under the curse of Ham.” The college’s racial discrimination was certainly not the only concern among those students critical of their president. Indeed, regulations about curfews and dating were always open to debate in the minds of all students. Yet the issue of desegregation fit alongside a growing number of concerns that cast doubt upon the capabilities of and faith in the Benson administration.32

Students at ACC also remained frustrated in the spring of 1958. The Optimist ran a series of five editorials that addressed desegregation, each one urging readers to maintain a Christlike disposition toward people of all races and at least implicitly suggesting that ACC should accept African American students. The first simply contained three quotations from the local Abilene Reporter-News. Each one described the enrollment policies at the three private colleges in Abilene, Texas. ACC had made no arrangements to accommodate any black students, and the Optimist editor closed by noting how “[s]uch attitudes toward integration indicate our lack of progress toward solving the problem. Let’s begin to pray about it.” The next editorial was slightly more discreet in its disapproval of the administration, as it simply noted the schools in Texas that had integrated and how successful the black students had been. But the essay still closed by observing that “Texas schools are beginning to break the pattern that makes the segregated South the nearest thing we have to Nazi Germany.” The final editorial in the series emphasized how Christianity should inspire unity among all people. In bold print, the editor

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passionately argued that segregation “denies this oneness . . . is based on prejudice . . . [and] breeds barriers of hate and fear and suspicion.” The staff of the Optimist could not have made the point with more certainty. ACC should be desegregated.33

During the 1958-59 academic year, both the Bison and the Optimist toned down their rhetoric under the heavy hand of administrations that refused to accept ongoing criticism from their own students. President Pullias of Lipscomb had already stymied potential discussions of race in Lipscomb’s Babbler after the results of a student poll from the early 1950s showed that most favored desegregation. By comparison, the Bison and the Optimist enjoyed fewer restrictions, but even this freedom could be quickly curtailed with a directive from the college president. In November 1958, a Bison editorial lashed out at the administration and even threatened revolt. “If the administration does not become sympathetic to the attitudes and problems of faculty and students, unrest and dissatisfaction will undoubtedly increase. . . . It has been often observed that Christian and American ideals are continually preached here, but rarely practiced.” An apology, likely ordered from the president’s office, appeared in the next issue, and subsequent complaints about the college were issued in generalizations that could be interpreted as widely applicable. Admonitions “to keep pace with the accompanying transitions of our society” and to preserve “what is good in the old system” now replaced direct calls for desegregation or straightforward critiques of Harding policies. But even these should not be dismissed lightly. Through their mention of works such as Richard Wright’s Native Son and their logical arguments against closed-mindedness, prejudice, and provincialism, several members of the Bison staff found a prophetic voice, heard by readers who were well aware of the growing changes in southern race relations. If direct confrontations with Jesus and Paul could

not convince administrators to change admissions policy, perhaps Bigger Thomas or deductive logic could.34

At the close of the decade, desegregation was rarely addressed in the *Bison*. The results of an opinion poll were included in a November 1959 issue. Once again, it indicated that students were favorably disposed toward having black students at Harding, although opinions were split about their inclusion in social clubs. One columnist used his space to publish the text of Carl Spain’s speech at the 1960 ACC lectures that sharply criticized the COC for not acting decisively with regard to desegregating its southern schools. This same writer would occasionally insert comments about race relations into more general discussions about Christian morality. In one column, after a reference to troubles experienced by the Baptists over the Civil War in the recently-released cinematic version of Sinclair Lewis’s *Elmer Gantry*, he simply noted, “Our attitudes toward the Negro are often determined by tradition more than by religious convictions. Christian colleges in the north accept students of all races while those in the south [sic] do not.” Aside from a page-three article announcing the desegregation of ACC and an article deploiring the ignorance and unrest at the University of Mississippi in 1962, the *Bison* would not broach the subject of race relations again until it announced the admission of Harding’s first African American students. Either interest waned in some of the most momentous events of the students’ young lives, or President Benson determined that discussions of discriminatory policies were inappropriate for a student newspaper. But one day in chapel during the spring of 1963, when the announcement finally came that Harding would be accepting black students for the fall, the students gave a standing ovation. With no sense of irony, the *Bison* would dubiously proclaim

34 “Innovation,” *Bison*, 13 November 1958, 2; and “Dear Readers:,” *Bison*, 20 November 1958, 2. For comments written after the apology, see columns on page two by Gary Acker and Bob Silvey titled, “Innovation,” *Bison*, 4 December 1958, 13 March 1959, 9 April 1959, and 16 April 1959.
that “Dr. Benson’s leadership in the movement for equal opportunity makes us proud, even boastful; it makes us happy, even ecstatic.”

The situation at ACC differed in several respects. First, the college’s proximity to SWCC, only two hundred miles east of Abilene, meant that some black students, especially ministers in training, would some day want to complete a bachelor’s degree at a COC institution. Because of the cost and distance, Pepperdine was usually not an option, so black preachers could either discontinue formal studies or attend a college affiliated with another denomination. This latter option was especially difficult to accept because it would require one to study denominational doctrine instead of the teachings of “the New Testament church.”

Black students affected by COC colleges’ racial discrimination were unequivocal in their protests, even though they maintained their denominational loyalty. One such student was Ernest Holsendolph. When he was ready for college in 1953, ACC was an unlikely possibility, so he entered Columbia University, graduated in four years, and tried to enter ACC as a graduate student. Upon receiving this request, President Morris replied with a letter that stated ACC had no plans to desegregate and that Holsendolph should try Pepperdine. Holsendolph did enter Pepperdine but not before berating Morris for maintaining his position. “I feel a deep sense of shame,” wrote Holsendolph, “that an institution which bears the name of our Lord, should be an overt proponent of such an un-Christ-like practice as segregation–even as secular colleges and

institutions of the South, which are ignorant of God’s truth, have finally yielded to the force of moral truth!”

Floyd Rose was another African American student who could not fathom the contradiction. He had followed the path prescribed for him by his mentors in graduating from both NCI and SWCC. He had close connections to Marshall Keeble and had thoroughly imbibed the denomination’s restorationist theology. Rose was simply determined to learn more Bible and to become a better preacher, so he submitted an application to ACC. When he received his letter of rejection, Rose went straight to President Morris’s office for an explanation. Rose later recalled telling Morris, “If my application was rejected because I’m poor, Billie Sol Estes has already made arrangements for my tuition. If it’s because I’m dirty, I can wash. But if it’s because I’m black, there’s nothing I can do about that. God made me the way I am.” Morris fidgeted in his chair, made uncomfortable now by the presence of a live person whose life was being affected by ACC’s policy of racial discrimination. “Floyd, I’m sorry,” were about the only words that Morris could offer in response, as he stammered through an explanation of how he was operating under the constraints of the board of trustees. Rose left that meeting hating the fact that he was black more than the circumstances that resulted from racist admissions policies, but he soon changed his attitude. While many white students had been resigned to wait for desegregation to occur at the discretion of college administrators, Rose became representative of a younger generation of black students in COCs who were unwilling to accept the contradictions that came with claiming to be the New Testament church and practicing racial discrimination. Rose, however, was ready to confront the problem immediately. He enrolled at McMurry College in Abilene, an institution

36 Ernest Holsendolph to President Don H. Morris, 2 August 1957. John C. Stevens Papers, box 222, Special Collections, Brown Library, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas; and Ernest Holsendolph, interview by author, tape recording, Stone Mountain, Georgia, 19 July 2006.
affiliated with the Methodists. Until 1960, Morris continued to refer black students to SWCC and Pepperdine, even after a committee had been formed to pursue desegregation at ACC.\footnote{Rose interview; and Don H. Morris to G. W. Cox, 8 January 1960, John C. Stevens Papers, box 219, Cox Proposal folder, Special Collections, Brown Library, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.}

Morris not only had the pressure of students like Rose from SWCC, but he also faced the pressure of events that occurred on ACC’s campus. As mentioned earlier, students took pride in the fact that ACC hosted the Texas Intercollegiate Press Association when it voted to integrate in 1955. That same year, the annual lectureship at ACC included four sermons aimed at improving race relations. In a collective sense, these sermons were simply the recitation of the maxims familiar to many southern whites who took their faiths seriously. The Golden Rule was standard fare, and all speakers emphasized that Christianity required love for all people because Christ died for all. To minimize any doubt, lines about Christ’s apostles not becoming preoccupied with immediate social change or the Bible not necessitating integration were also included. Yet even within this cautionary rhetoric, some challenging thoughts, at least by southern standards, were brought before the audience. One speaker suggested that where segregation was not practiced, local congregations should be integrated. Another cited fifteen passages from the Bible that teach the unity of humanity. And the final speaker made his remarks even more practical. “Is it possible for me to practice the Golden Rule and refuse to allow a person created in the image of God to sit beside me on a bus, or in a restaurant, or in the worship of God?” he asked. “Is Christ living in us when we refuse to use our influence to secure for minority groups the rights of education and suffrage and those other privileges which we have come to consider
as inalienable to ourselves? . . . We cannot excuse ourselves by a geographical accident of birth.”

But the public pressure on Morris increased dramatically when Carl Spain delivered his sermon “Modern Challenges to Christian Morals” in 1960. Not only was Spain on the ACC faculty, but his eldest daughter was then a sophomore at the college. His comments included a blistering attack on COCs in general for some of its racist practices. But he specifically referred to the segregated colleges, and in doing so, Spain placed a glaring spotlight on his own institution, and in the process, his remarks vividly illustrate how primitivism was a significant factor in segregation’s demise in the denomination’s colleges. Spain declared, “I feel certain that Jesus would say: ‘Ye hypocrites! You say you are the only true Christians, and make up the only true church, and have the only Christian schools. Yet, you drive one of your own preachers to denominational schools where he can get credit for his work and refuse to let him take Bible for credit in your own school because the color of his skin is dark!’ Our moral attitudes are so mixed up,” Spain continued, “that we use the story of Philemon and Onesimus to justify refusing a Negro admission to study Bible.” At the time of this speech, the board of trustees was already studying the logistics of desegregating, but Spain touched a nerve that brought unwanted attention to the COC colleges in general and ACC in particular.

In coming months and in various ways, other faculty members and several of the schools patrons voiced their agreement with Spain, especially when the activities of the integration committee began to lag. When a 1941 alumnus sent a contribution of ten dollars, he included a


39 Spain, “Modern Challenges to Christian Morals.”
note that said, “There could be more, but - I am ashamed to hear that ACC is tainted with . . . race prejudice. What kind of light to the world is this?” Others stopped contributing altogether. One person sent a letter to the board of trustees to explain the reason why she and her husband ceased their monthly contributions. “When the policy is changed, if it is,” she frankly stated, “we shall plan to resume on contributions to it.” The Christian Echo also registered a complaint with ACC’s public information office. “Very often we receive news for ‘immediate release’,” the letter stated. “Since the most of our readers are negroes, we are wondering why you would want us to run it in our Periodical.” A growing number of people outside of Abilene were now expressing their discontent over ACC’s racial discrimination, and they were soon joined by other members of the faculty.40

LeMoine Lewis, for example, was a professor of Bible and one of the most admired and respected scholars on campus. Not only had Lewis earned his doctorate at Harvard in 1949, but he also sent several students from ACC to study there. When the dean asked Lewis to give his input to the integration committee, he sent a lengthy letter expressing his consternation over ACC’s refusal to integrate. While he had once cautioned students about moving too fast with integration, by 1961, Lewis was finally convinced that racial discrimination was wrong. Along with articulating his personal embarrassment over ACC’s unwillingness to accept black students, he too shared that some people had told him about their reticence to contribute money to a college that practiced racial discrimination. Lewis was grieved to belong to a Bible department which was “most guilty, because we have kept quiet rather than following in the steps of prophets, apostles, and our Lord who preached boldly and courageously against the evils of their

40 Robert D. Hunter to President Morris, 21 April 1960; Mrs. Paul McClung to Otis Garner, 30 March 1961; and Bethel Smith to Charlie Marler, 3 October 1960, John C. Stevens Papers, box 222, folder Integration, Special Collections, Brown Library, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas. The donor’s name was Robert E. Kelly.
day.” In his estimation, not only was segregation wrong and contrary to divine will, but it jeopardized the soul of a black preacher who chose to attend a denominational school and the “conscientious little colored girl of Abilene [who] went to Boston University because she could not enroll in Abilene Christian College, and while in Boston quit the church and was lost forever.” While his terminology had not caught up with the times, his stark language indicates that segregation posed not only a problem for restorationist theology and the fiscal health of ACC, but also the spiritual well-being of people directly affected by the admissions policy of excluding African Americans. For a preacher in the Bible department at ACC, the latter concern could not be overstated. Four months later and in a one-sentence memorandum, the integration committee recommended that “any applicant who meets the admission requirements to graduate school be admitted.”

When the first African Americans student enrolled in the graduate school at ACC in the spring of 1962, the news was anticlimactic. In a brief article relegated to page three, the Optimist simply observed, “After more than half a century of segregation, the first Negro student is enrolled at Abilene Christian.” The article closed by noting that the undergraduate school was still segregated, but by May, the newspaper could report that the junior and senior classes would be desegregated in the fall. In another article gauging students’ reaction to this news, the Optimist revealed how most students at ACC welcomed the idea of having an integrated college


42 All qualified applicants were finally accepted to the freshman and sophomore classes in the fall of 1964. Administrators indicated that this additional delay was due to a desire to protect SWCC which was struggling to draw students. See Hughes, 290-291, and “Recommendation to the Board of Trustees,” 23 May 1964, John C. Stevens Papers, box 6, Special Collections, Brown Library, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.
but retained some reservations about what integration might entail. When asked how they felt about desegregation at ACC, student opinions showed that old racial stereotypes would not die with the admission of a few black students, and at least one person admitted that they disagreed with the decision. Even those who agreed with the decision expressed a variety of reasons for their assent. Believing that black people were inherently gifted athletes, some white students could not contain their excitement over the possibilities for successful teams. “A few outstanding and qualified Negro athletes could make ACC the leading track team in the nation,” some remarked, “since Negroes excel in the sprints, hurdles and jumping events.” More than one person conveyed mixed feelings about living arrangements. One junior said, “I wouldn’t want to live with one but I wouldn’t mind living down the hall from one.” For the better part of two decades, the student body of ACC had voiced a general willingness to have black students attend their college. When a sophomore in 1962 noted, “It’s the only Christian thing to do,” she was echoing the words of many of her predecessors. In fact, the Optimist claimed the moral high ground in subsequent observations on race relations, commending cross-town college Hardin-Simmons for finally integrating and asking, “What’s the matter with Mississippi?” when mobs instigated a riot over the arrival of James Meredith on the Oxford campus. At the same time, however, desegregating caused some ACC students to pause and wonder how an integrated college would operate. It was one thing to share a class with a black student, some clearly thought, but it was something different to share a dorm room. These reactions exemplify the hierarchies of acceptance that characterized many white southerners. Racial stereotypes often persisted, and even whites who believed that schools should be desegregated might not agree to
more intimate levels of interaction, such as sharing a dorm room or belonging to the same social club.43

Unfortunately, the reluctance shown by both ACC and Harding to desegregate was characteristic of COC colleges in the South. In fact, these two were the first to accept African Americans. Lipscomb and Freed finally accepted black students in 1964. Alabama Christian College desegregated a few years later. As the remainder of the 1960s unfolded, COC colleges took pride in the fact that their facilities had desegregated peacefully, even if the decisive factor was financial, rather than a moral commitment to racial justice. By and large, student newspapers became disenchanted with the civil rights movement, either ignoring it altogether or remaining skeptical of the value of nonviolent civil disobedience. Race relations across the nation and at ACC gained little attention in the Optimist. While the college was formally desegregated, African American students did not rush to enroll where they were not wanted for decades, and initial efforts to recruit them were not zealous. When student enrollment at ACC topped three thousand for the first time in 1965, only ten were African Americans.

Throughout the decade, administrators maintained diligent watch over the few black students at ACC, compiling reports every semester that detailed each student’s address, classification, grade point average, total hours earned, and hours pursued for the semester. But in 1969, the installment of John Stevens as the new president of ACC helped facilitate measurable progress toward integrating black students more fully into campus life. Although Stevens was vice president during the latter years of Morris’s tenure and held some responsibility for ACC’s initial resistance to desegregation, the Stevens presidency marked a stark contrast to the previous
administration. One of his first actions was to approve the creation of an Ethnic Studies Forum, a student organization whose purpose, in part, was to promote “a dedication to the actualization of Christian brotherhood on the campus of Abilene Christian College.” Each officer in the new organization was African American. Stevens and his wife also sponsored social events where all of the African American students were guests of honor, and he made sure that ACC made special efforts to recruit minority students, including the hiring of African American admissions counselors. And when ACC decided to start granting honorary doctorates, Stevens wrote his vice president, “I do not see how now I couldn’t recommend anybody for an honorary degree if I couldn’t include my good friend and esteemed colleague Jack Evans,” the first black president of SWCC.44

Individuals would occasionally share their concerns with Stevens, and his responses suggest a desire to atone for ACC’s past mistakes. Interracial dating still proved problematic for Stevens, but even when such a relationship came to his attention, he was a calming influence for worried, white parents. In 1972, one frustrated mother wrote to Stevens when she learned that her daughter was dating a black student. “We are all for the colored people,” she stated, “but not to that extent.” Stevens responded with two letters. The first acknowledged “the problem involving [the daughter] and her dating” and promised to have the dean of women explore the situation. His second letter informed the meddling mother that her daughter had indeed been

with a black student but “only in groups. . . . She has sincere respect for him. . . . She plans to finish ACC before thinking about marriage with anybody.”

While monitoring romantic relationships should have fallen outside of the purview of presidential responsibilities, Stevens responded more admirably in other situations. When an occasional letter came to his desk that criticized the presence of African American students, Stevens did not hesitate to offer a rebuttal. In 1974, one parent complained about desegregation at ACC and suggested that the college could receive more money by reestablishing itself as racially segregated institution. Stevens replied, “The fact is that all students, regardless of race or color, are welcome here. We believe this is what the Bible teaches and we would not want to go contrary to the Bible in order to gain a contribution from any human being.” Likewise, as president, Stevens was not above apologizing for ACC’s past discrimination. When an alumnus turned minister told him about the lingering anger of one black applicant who was rejected before ACC integrated, Stevens wrote a personal letter of apology. “I must say that I do not blame you for having these feelings,” he admitted. “A number of years ago we changed our policy on admission. It is regrettable that for so many colleges and universities, as well as for a great part of society, it took so long to come to this point of maturity. Nevertheless, that is the truth, and there is nothing for us to do but to confess our wrongs and endeavor to make things right from this point forward.” The letter closed by inviting the would-be alumnus to campus. It is impossible to determine the sincerity of Stevens’s gesture. In some respects, the wording represents the assumption of many whites that once facilities were integrated, people should simply try to forget past injustices and wait for political and social equality to suddenly become a

reality. But the very act of sending such a letter represents a dramatic change in the administration’s disposition toward African Americans. In some respects, this small act foreshadowed a formal, public apology for past racism and discrimination that a subsequent ACC president would issue as the twentieth century came to a close.46

Race relations were not as cordial at other COC colleges, and the 1960s closed with small but significant student demonstrations at both Harding and Oklahoma Christian College (OCC) in Oklahoma City. Harding, unlike ACC, took greater notice of events outside of college life. White students, once strong proponents of integration, became increasingly frustrated with civil rights demonstrations across the country and with complaints of discrimination aimed at Harding. A *Bison* editorial written two months after the August 1963 March on Washington and shortly after a large march in Chicago warned, “Unless integration leaders realize their mistakes and change their tactics, they will continue to lose support and sympathy.” The comment was directed toward “the traditionally pro-integration North” which, like much of the white South, seemed disinclined to lend widespread support to civil rights demonstrations. Another article admonished its readers to beware of racial prejudice, but it offered little practical advice, whereas past essays could point toward integration as a positive step that the Harding community could take. The *Bison* suggests that the students felt a sense of finality with regard to the civil rights movement. With an integrated college and sermons against racial prejudice, white students were comfortable that they, like their counterparts at ACC, had reached a moral high ground. In early 1964, a cartoon appeared on the opinion page that illustrated the desire among white students to

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look forward without regard to past injustices. Two male figures, one black and one white, are shaking hands. They are standing atop a map of the states in the former Confederacy. To the left of this image is a trash can containing four signs. The signs read “DISCRIMINATION,” “VIOLENCE,” “RACE,” and “GROUPS.” The caption says, “We can do it.” Apparently naïve at both the extent of institutional racism and the desire among many people to seek amends for centuries of racial oppression, the students simply wanted to dispose of the past, one in which they seemingly bore little, if any, responsibility.  

In their defense, the students still had Benson as their president until 1965, when Clifton Ganus Jr., the vice president since 1956, took the reins. At mid-decade, black students at Harding, by way of an unspoken rule, still did not live in the dormitories on campus, and Benson had never been truly supportive of desegregation. Even as late as 1967, when students were given cards to indicate their preference among local churches, the predominantly black COC in Searcy was not included as an option. While Ganus’s perspectives on race relations were an improvement over Benson, he still failed to appreciate the scope of institutional racism and made improvements only after facing pressure from faculty and students. As president, he continued the policy of monitoring interracial relationships, even taking the initiative to contact parents should their children become romantically involved with someone from another race. In a 1969 letter to one concerned alumna, Ganus wrote, “It has been the policy of the institution to write home to parents if there is interracial dating because we want the parents to know of problems and dangers involved in this type of activity. This is still our policy and we have not changed it.” Likewise, Professor Bales never attempted to hide his disdain for civil rights demonstrations that

flouted local laws and customs. In a letter to a person alarmed at Harding’s integration, Bales consoled, “The [black] students are all members of the church and they live in town. . . . They want an education. They are not agitators.” It seems that Bales found the new black students tolerable, in part, because they were church members and accepted living arrangements away from Harding’s main campus. A person who might challenge the Harding administration or the school’s discriminatory policies—an “agitator”—would have received a less cordial welcome. In 1966, Bales would also make headlines by debating representatives from SNCC and SDS, further cementing his reputation as a stalwart of political conservativism and the status quo.48

With advocacy of desegregation no longer necessary, similar critiques of social activism were frequently expressed by students when civil rights protests made national headlines. After publishing an article that rebuked the state of Alabama for its inconsistency in using literacy tests to grant voting rights, the *Bison* received two letters that summarily rejected the article’s claims. The first sympathized with the local government in Selma and roundly criticized the demonstrators who made their way to the courthouse to brave the assaults of Sheriff Jim Clark and his officers. The second letter closed by asking, “Is the disrespect shown by the civil rights demonstrators for law and order (symbolized by the numerous encouraged arrests) contributing to racial peace?” This exchange showed the rising tensions within the student body over racially charged issues such as housing discrimination, interracial relationships, Black studies programs, or subtle forms of racism that fell outside the scope of what many whites considered racial prejudice. Along with these attitudes, it is significant to note that Harding, like ACC, did not

enjoy a deluge of African Americans once segregation was no longer policy. In the fall of 1968, for example, only twenty-eight black students enrolled at Harding out of a student body of over 1,750. Finding roommates for these few black students continued to be a tenuous process, as a number of white students might simply refuse to share a dorm room with a black student.49

To be sure, several columnists reminded Bison readers of the evils of racism and spoke favorably of some civil rights activities. In a 1965 editorial, Ken Starr—later infamous for his investigation of President Bill Clinton’s romantic dalliances—remarked, “Only through dissatisfaction and a desire to better society have come the great advances of this nation—even its founding was based on outright rebellion to recognized authority.” The following March, another student wrote an essay that described COCs as “two brotherhoods divided on a merely racial basis, backed up possibly by economic considerations.” This author’s solution was to integrate churches, starting with those in Searcy. And an editorial from 1967 responded to comments made by some black students in chapel about their difficulty in finding apartments, being accepted by white neighbors, and being shunned by white churches. In the editor’s opinion, these comments “should have made us very ashamed of our white society.” When two black students shared similar comments in chapel a year later, the Bison again noted the message’s relevance for the Harding community. These three authors are representative of students who cultivated a sensitivity to the plight of black people in the South and the nation as a

whole, but their perspectives became increasingly marginalized as most white students grew weary of verbal assaults on their school, the South, and even the nation.\(^{50}\)

Jim Wilson, the same student who suggested that churches should integrate, later wrote an essay that sought to rehabilitate unpopular images of the South. “WE HAVE ALLOWED,” he emphatically stated, “one often irresponsible segment [segregationists] to kidnap those things in Southern culture which represent generations of development of an impulsive but basically Zionwards-striving people and have let those symbols [such as Confederate flags and “Dixie’] be turned into representations of hate, reaction and the unbeautiful.” This particular column also pointed out that one does not have to embrace every aspect of his or her culture, and the author recounted a collection of southerners that should bring pride, including Thomas Jefferson, Robert E. Lee, and Martin Luther King. The choice of such disparate figures offers insight into the tensions felt by many whites who struggled with reconciling new and old ways of thinking, acting, and self-identifying. In keeping with these sentiments, the Harding pep band regularly played “Dixie” at athletic events, a score which was always met with “clapping hands and loud whistles.”\(^{51}\)

The issue of the \textit{Bison} that struggled with the assassination of Martin Luther King offers poignant insights into the thinking of many white students. While Harding did fly its American flag at half mast for three days, not all students expressed grief, and some even found humor on this somber occasion. Apart from a black student’s eulogy of King and a poem decrying

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\(^{51}\) Jim Wilson, “‘The South Shall Rise Again’,” \textit{Bison}, 20 April 1966, 2; and Jean Flippin, “‘Dixie’ Incites More Participation Than Playing of National Anthem,” \textit{Bison}, 15 February 1968, 2.
ignorance, prejudice, hatred, and pride, two of the three essays written about King’s death by white students in the *Bison* scolded classmates for laughing at the assassination. An editorial lamented, “This laughter came from the basest kind of humanity, if indeed it did come from human thought. . . . It might be surprising to some that ‘Christians’ laughed; ‘Christians’ said he got what was coming; ‘Christians’ said ‘I’d like to pin a medal on the guy who did it.’ Yes, ‘Christians’ laughed.” The other two essays, while expressing grief over King’s death, were careful to qualify their praise for his life. One author wrote, “Although this writer has doubted the wisdom of King’s application of the principle of non-violence at times, he is in complete sympathy with the goals and aspirations which King so admirably strove to attain.” This particular article closed by stressing, “Rather than elation, dejection should have been the response to the news of Dr. King’s death.” The third piece traced racial inequality back to the curse of Ham and to the institution of slavery in the United States. After documenting key points in the history of race relations from the antebellum era to the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965, this article turned its attention to a collection of problems that exacerbated racial tensions. The author contended that “if the Negro sits back and demands the fruits of equality without preparing himself educationally, economically and morally to shoulder to [*sic*] concurrent responsibilities it entails, he neither deserves nor should he expect equality. . . . Mass reactions of violence to King’s death only emphasize the white racist’s claim that the Negro is only one step removed from the black jungles of Africa, barely better than his cannibal ancestors.” While admitting that “the Negro has been given a wrong deal,” the writer further argued that “even peaceful marches, will not provide the answer” in promoting and establishing racial equality. These last two essays show that even among whites sympathetic to some of the aims of the civil rights movement, there were feelings of suspicion, impatience, and even disgust at events that
seemingly had their origins in the demands for equality by King and other movement leaders. And while one could not possibly quantify how many people at Harding found humor in King’s death, the fact that *Bison* articles expressed such alarm suggests that expressions of joy could be found among a sizable minority.

White COC students had proffered a prophetic, racially progressive voice while their colleges were still segregated, yet they seemed either unwilling to recognize or unable to accept the implications of pursuing full social and political equality for African Americans. Moreover, within the confines of colleges such as ACC and Harding, the seeds of a new political conservatism were sown. Desegregated colleges were acceptable; persistent demonstrations aimed at overturning institutional racism were not. While administrators adopted the language of equality that students had used in espousing desegregation, the students imbibed the wariness of their elders toward civil rights activism. Together, they honed the rhetoric and articulated the values that would come to characterize the ascendancy of political conservatism in the final decades of the twentieth century.
In the opening pages of his 1962 volume, *Race and the Renewal of the Church*, Will Campbell—a rare figure as a Baptist minister, white southerner, and social progressive—lamented the growing irrelevance of Christendom in solving social ills, particularly problems arising from racial discrimination. “If [the church] ever was or should have been, it is no longer the initiator or prime mover of social reform,” he bluntly stated. Instead, the church had permitted the government to become the primary impetus behind improving human relations, thereby failing in its calling to “be the redeemed community.” According to Campbell, the ultimate failure of the church was not so much its inability or unwillingness to enact social reform but its disinclination to repent. The church “has not realized self-renewal,” he opined. “Without repentance there cannot be renewal.” He even conjectured that “the health of our own souls” might have been better had the government not acted to curtail racial discrimination through court rulings and executive orders. In this manner, “We would have been required to say, Thus saith the Lord! Not, Thus saith the law!”

As the opening pages suggest, Campbell’s volume was aimed at the consciences of people who espoused the Christian faith and yet were apparently apathetic about gross injustices that resulted from racial discrimination in both law and custom. In the course of making his pleas for repentance and renewal, Campbell included an extensive quotation from the most prominent periodical within COCs: “We believe it is sinful to have two congregations in the same community for persons of separate and distinct races. That race prejudice would cause trouble in the churches we know. It did this in apostolic days. Not once did the apostles suggest that they

should form separate congregations for the different races. But they always admonished them to unity, forbearance, love, and brotherhood in Jesus Christ.” Before revealing the source of the quotation, Campbell observed that his readers would no doubt assume that this statement was the product of a liberal church body, another resolution among countless others that had been issued in recent years. Contrary to such assumptions, he revealed that the statement was actually written by David Lipscomb, a “Church of Christ evangelist” who was “far from notorious for his social liberalism.” The statement originally appeared in the pages of the *Gospel Advocate*; the date was February 1878.

Campbell included these comments to expose the common misconception that race relations had improved steadily over the previous century. “Yet in 1878,” Campbell declared, “a spokesman for the most conservative group called it a sin to have separate congregations because of race, while almost a hundred years later in the most liberal groups we still have, not only racial congregations, but . . . separate judicatories in almost every communion, and a racial ministry in all.” Campbell also noted that the Nashville college bearing Lipscomb’s name was still segregated.²

A 1962 reference to Lipscomb by a Baptist minister provides an appropriate introduction to a chapter that examines COC media. In addition to the persistence of racial segregation at the college that bore Lipscomb’s name, there are several ironies in a southern, white liberal such as Campbell invoking the words of a COC evangelist. Another one is that the *Advocate* rarely addressed race relations again after Lipscomb’s death. Even during the civil rights movement, the *Advocate* and other COC periodicals remained relatively quiet on the topic. Nevertheless, church media outlets communicate a lot, even if through their silence on particular issues. This

² Ibid., 29-30.
relative silence only adds importance to those instances when race relations were discussed. The authors and editors of these pieces were the closest that COCs came to having denominational leaders issue pronouncements for churches to follow. Despite efforts to ignore or dismiss urgent questions raised by civil rights activism, journal editors were finally compelled to articulate positions that outlined the “proper” response for “New Testament Christians” to questions regarding integration, interracial sex, and social activism. Their words represented the most public positions of COC members on such issues. Editors and ministers illuminated the thoughts of both church members and many southerners who, by the 1960s, were obligated to have answers to the ever-present “race question.” COC periodicals also provide more examples of the complex interaction between black and white members and preachers and how all employed Christian primitivism to justify their perspectives on civil rights activism and the boundaries of all interracial relationships.

This chapter shows that issues arising from race relations were in the minds of important editors and preachers. Outside of the pages the Christian Echo, the primary mode of communication and publication among black churches, race relations rarely received attention because pursuing social justice fell beyond the scope of acceptable Christian behavior. Even the Echo railed against segregated churches and COC colleges rather than focus upon broader issues relating to disfranchisement and social inequalities. For black and white members, there was much greater urgency in bringing people into the church and championing Christian primitivism.

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3 For a brief time in the 1940s, B. C. Goodpasture, longtime editor of the Advocate and close friend of Marshall Keeble, published the Christian Counselor with Keeble serving as editor. This publication never rivaled the Echo in popularity. According to Don Haymes, the Gospel Advocate Company “saw in this project an opportunity to extend the influence of the GA directly into the black churches—at the immediate expense of G. P. Bowser and the Christian Echo. Perhaps Keeble saw an opportunity to employ the considerable resources of the GA in the service of the black churches—an account that only he could draw on; power that Bowser and his colleagues could not muster.” See Don Haymes, “The ‘Colored Page’,” available at www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/race/haymes10.html (last accessed 13 April 2007).
Thus, evangelism, both domestic and foreign, received much more attention than the most pressing social questions of the day. Doctrinal purity weighed more heavily on the minds of church leaders. Race relations were also of secondary concern among many blacks, and when race was the topic of discussion, it was always in the context of what was most prudent for the well-being of established churches or what was most effective for bringing new members into the fold. One could even interpret the relative silence of the periodicals as a means of marginalizing social activism in general. By giving little attention, at least in print, to the social revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, COCs communicated their belief that issues outside of church growth were ultimately irrelevant.

This perspective served whites who wanted to maintain segregation and their paternal disposition toward blacks. While COCs generally maintained segregated churches, they did not waiver in their evangelistic commitments, even as the nation experienced the turmoil of the 1960s. In fact, the social unrest that arose as a result of civil rights activities vindicated for many church members their evangelistic emphases. The gospel was the antidote for racial injustices, not direct confrontation. For this reason, black minister Marshall Keeble, with his apparent lack of concern over segregation and discrimination, became the focus of much praise from whites. He was symbolic of how whites thought blacks should act to overcome the racial prejudice of the prevailing culture. Thus, during the momentous changes precipitated by the civil rights movement, church publications were typically filled with articles about COC doctrine and the need for greater evangelistic efforts. African Americans were only discussed within an evangelistic context.

If the Advocate rarely addressed race relations specifically, it did purport to provide news regarding black churches and preachers. An “Among the Colored Brethren” column appeared
Among the Colored Brethren, "Gospel Advocate" 106, 49 (3 December 1964): 782; Hughes, 145-147; and Don Haymes, "Race & the Church of Christ." About the change from pacifism to militarism, Hughes notes, "Popular and government pressure on Americans to support the war was intense, and those who refused support became the objects of scorn, ridicule, and harassment. Their division from the Disciples [of Christ], costing them both members and property, already had relegated Churches of Christ to a degree of social marginality. Retention of their historic commitment to pacifism would have marginalized them yet further. Facing that prospect, many members of Churches of Christ elected to support the American involvement in the war." A similar description might be appropriate for the increasing rigidity with which church members applied racial segregation in the first half of the twentieth century. They did so in an effort to accommodate their surrounding culture, especially in the South where COCs were numerically strongest.

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of the country. These legalistic reasons ignored any moral implications in Klan membership, although Boles categorized the organization as “a menace to our civilization” and suggested that “what good it may have can be enjoyed by the child of God as a Christian in the church of Christ.” He also admitted knowing “gospel preachers who were led into the Klan, but they have seen the error of their way and turned from it.” Boles closed by urging any readers who were members to do the same.⁵

More typically, if blacks were mentioned outside the confines of their designated column, it was in the context of an admonition to white churches toward more evangelism. At the start of 1931, the Advocate published an essay by a missionary to Africa about evangelizing the “American negro.” The author insisted that those whites “who have only seen [the American negro] housed in a dirty shack in ignorance and poverty in the one-crop (cotton) sections of our Southern States do not have the right perspective from which to view the people who represent one-tenth of the population of our country.” After proceeding to evaluate the business and educational accomplishments of blacks in the United States, the writer urged churches to do more work in sharing the gospel with them. “Our churches can do a great work in encouraging worthy colored preachers in establishing and strengthening churches. Our colored churches are generally poor and unable to support the preachers as they need. If one of our white churches can arrange to support a colored preacher in a meeting with his brethren, let that church pay the negro preacher as much for his time as they would pay a white man to hold a meeting for them.” Many white churches heeded this advice.⁶

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In fact, this plea summarized the most common relationship between black and white churches in the COCs: a white church decided to evangelize among local black residents; it hired a black minister to hold a revival and establish a church for blacks; and the white church continued to patronize its black counterpart through finances or used equipment such as hymnals. This paternal note sounded even more clearly when David Lipscomb’s nephew published an essay that praised the success of a 1931 Marshall Keeble revival in Valdosta, Georgia. After remarking that the “work among the colored people” was financed by whites, the younger Lipscomb gleefully stated, “We have never made a better investment for the Lord nor any which brought such quick and happy results. Such preaching has not only created a new religious and moral status for the Negro element but it has brought to this community a new citizenry capable of thinking in terms of the Bible.” He continued in a manner that wedded COC doctrine to clearly established conceptions of where black church members belonged in the social hierarchy. “This means that we now have better farm hands, better porters, better cooks, better housemaids than ever before,” he remarked.7

One of the most remarkable exchanges in the interwar period came in the pages of the Bible Banner, a periodical established in 1939 and edited by Foy Wallace Jr., a white Texan described by church historian Richard Hughes as a “major transitional figure in the history of Churches of Christ” and “perhaps the most pivotal and influential figure in the Churches of Christ throughout the 1930s and 1940s.” Wallace began preaching at the age of fifteen and enjoyed a wide following throughout much of his career. As further evidence of the theological distance that COCs had moved from the days of Lipscomb, he founded his journal to combat premillennialism and pacifism, two doctrines that Lipscomb had espoused. In a 1941 essay

7 [A.B. Lipscomb], “‘It’s Not Keeble, but the Bible Is Right.’,” Christian Leader 45 (25 August 1931): 6.
titled, “Negro Meetings for White People,” Wallace took a shot at elements within the
denomination that were flouting the color line. His remarks reveal much, both about his
disposition on matters of race and the activities of some people within the church that seemed to
ignore racial customs.  

Wallace’s harangue was aimed at several individuals, both black and white, as well as
some churches with which he had contact. “The manner in which the brethren in some quarters
are going in for the negro meetings leads one to wonder whether they are trying to make white
folks out of the negroes or negroes out of the white folks,” he lamented. Wallace specifically
mentioned reports that he had received of “white women, members of the church, becoming so
animated over a certain colored preacher as to go up to him after a sermon and shake hands with
him _holding his hand in both of theirs_” [emph. in original]. This behavior was “pitiable” to
Wallace, who was astounded over the thought of a white woman who would “forget her dignity”
and “lower herself” in this manner. He went on to complain about a black husband and wife who
operated a home for orphans and espoused “social equality” and about the whites who were
“apparently encouraging them.” Wallace told of visiting a predominantly white church where the
black janitor, who was also a preacher, would frequently attend services and shake hands with
members as they exited the building. “When I insisted that it be discontinued some of the white
brethren were offended,” Wallace wrote. “Such as this proves that the white brethren are ruining
the negroes and defeating the very work that they should be sent to do, that is, preach the gospel
to the negroes, their own people.”

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8 Hughes, 160, 183; Haymes, “Introduction to the Text,” available at
www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/race/haymes8.html (last accessed 13 April 2007); and Foy E. Wallace, “Negro
Meetings for White People,” _Bible Banner_ (March 1941): 7.

Wallace was also appalled that a young white preacher and journal editor named Ira Rice Jr. had recently boarded for two nights with a prominent black minister, R. N. Hogan. Rice and Hogan even shared the same bed, and Rice, exclaimed Wallace, “seemed to be proud of it!” Wallace labeled the practice “an infringement on the Jim Crow law, . . . a violation of Christianity itself, and of all common decency.” His criticism was directed toward both Rice and Hogan, who in Wallace’s view “has been too much inclined to mix with the white people and to favor, in attitude, a social equality.” Much to Wallace’s chagrin, Hogan was even known to preach gospel meetings for white churches if few blacks lived wherever he happened to be traveling. Wallace further sought to incite his readers by writing that “the colored preacher Hogan has been too much inclined to mix with the white people and to favor, in attitude, a social equality.”

This essay yields two important insights. First, some members of COCs clearly violated southern racial mores in their interactions with people of like faith. One cannot estimate how widespread such practices were, but they were common enough that a man of Wallace’s status and disposition felt inclined to address them in print. Whether it was simply shaking a black preacher’s hand, sharing a place to sleep, or participating in a worship assembly, some whites acted outside of the bounds of both law and custom by associating themselves so openly and freely with blacks. Their shared faith, particularly their common vision of restoring New Testament Christianity, served as an impetus for such intermingling. These examples in no way mark COCs as a bastion of black and white social progressives, but they do suggest the flexibility of Jim Crow customs, particularly when the assembly of the saints was at stake.

10 Ibid.
Second, Wallace’s essay reveals both his own prejudices and those of some white members of the denomination. While the Bible Banner never rivaled the Advocate’s influence, Wallace was a former editor of the Advocate, and his popularity as a writer and preacher left an indelible mark on COCs, reaching churches and people that had once been within Lipscomb’s sphere of influence. Wallace undoubtedly won many white followers who were all too ready to abandon those teachings of Lipscomb that placed them at odds with their surrounding culture. If one was already overtly racist or at least inclined to support racial segregation, then Wallace’s perspective on race would only vindicate those beliefs. “I am very much in favor of negro meetings for the negroes, but I am just as much opposed to negro meetings for white people, and I am against white brethren taking the meetings away from the negroes and the general mixing that has become entirely too much of a practice in these negro meetings,” Wallace concluded his essay. “Such a thing not only lowers the church in the eyes of the world but it is definitely against the interest of the negroes.” Lipscomb’s own Advocate even abandoned many of the positions that he had once embraced. By the 1940s, Advocate editors had come to reject pacifism and claim that Lipscomb had never taught premillennialism. Their silence on race relations represents another way that they discarded their famous predecessor. “When the Advocate had done its work,” Hughes marveled, “the real Lipscomb of history, like Alice’s Cheshire cat, had disappeared, leaving only an optimistic, disembodied smile.”

In the subsequent issue of the Bible Banner, Wallace printed a letter from Marshall Keeble. In a manner that came to characterize his deference to whites’ wishes, Keeble complimented the previous month’s article as “instructive and encouraging” and expressed hope that his conduct would not bring regret to Wallace or any of Keeble’s friends. Keeble’s note lends itself to a

11 Ibid.; and Hughes, 160, 165.
variety of readings. Wallace called it “characteristic of the humility of M. Keeble.” Given the fact that Keeble was in his early sixties, almost twenty years older than Wallace, and had been interacting with whites for decades, including baptizing many of them, one may also detect in Keeble’s language a parental patience, a wisdom that realizes the futility of arguing with a man like Wallace, or as Haymes wrote of Keeble’s words, “coals of fire’ from the crucible of faith.” While this note has become part of the lore of Keeble’s ambiguous relationship with whites, Wallace’s interpretation of Keeble certainly became the standard perspective. “[This letter] is the reason why he is the greatest colored preacher that has ever lived,” Wallace wrote. In describing Keeble and another black preacher, Wallace concluded, “These men know their work and do it. They know their place and stay in it, even when some white brethren try to take them out of it.” If this exchange points out some occasional exceptions to strict adherence to Jim Crow, it also highlights the segregationist attitude, personified by Wallace, that exemplified many white congregants and preachers over the next two decades.12

Keeble’s overture toward peace betrayed the fact that he, too, was concerned first and foremost with evangelism. Though private and less cordial, the gist of Hogan’s reply differed very little. In a letter to one of his good friends, a white Californian named James Lovell, Hogan expressed no surprise at Wallace’s attack “because he sent an appointment to the churches in the Valley during my [gospel] meeting in Weslaco [Texas] and because the white people wouldn’t stop attending my meeting to come and hear him he was provoked to the extent that he decided to give them a raking over through the columns of his paper.” Hogan continued his letter by defending himself against Wallace’s charges. “He is the first person . . . who has accused me of

12 Haymes, “Introduction to the Text”; and [Foy Wallace], “From M. Keeble,” Bible Banner (April 1941): 5. Also see Noble Patterson and Terry J. Gardner, eds., Foy E. Wallace, Jr.: Soldier of the Cross (Fort Worth, Texas: Wallace Memorial Fund, 1999), 64-65.
conducting myself in a way that shows that I am interested in ‘mixing with the white people’ or ‘social equality’. Such has NEVER intered [sic] my mind and is no part of the truth” [emph. in original]. These comments are particularly interesting in light of Hogan’s later essays on segregation, but like Keeble, he seemed resigned to focus his attention on evangelism in 1941. Indeed, most of Hogan’s letter shares church and ministry news, and his final paragraph about Wallace was written in response to a direct inquiry from Lovell. “I trust that God will forgive brother Wallace and the like of him,” Hogan concluded, “but I know that before God will forgive him he MUST repent. Your letter was an encouragement to me and you may rest ssured [sic] that I’ll press on. A number of the white people who saw that article have informed me that his paper shall enter their home no more” [emph. in original].

While the Advocate and leaders like Wallace had abandoned crucial elements of Lipscomb’s theology, another periodical, founded in 1938, sought to reclaim some of it, including perspectives on race. “Of all the literature of Churches of Christ through this period,” Hughes wrote, “the 20th Century Christian perhaps most graphically depicts the fusion of conservative twentieth-century Protestant values with a commitment to primitive Christianity.” To this end, one of the journal’s founders, James Bales, published “To My Colored Brother” in 1943. In this brief essay, he stated unequivocally, “You are my brother in Christ, and no doctrine that denies that is Christian.” Bales advised his readers to see racial bigots “as Christ sees them[,] as misguided or lost individuals whom you must regard as subjects of conversion. . . . You are a free man in Christ and as a free man you must work for the freedom of those slaves to passions, prejudices and ignorance.” Finally, in a prescient phrase that would point toward his

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14 Hughes, 210.
later criticisms of social activists, Bales suggested that “the only victories which you should attempt to win over such prejudices are those which can be won through the employment of the sword of the spirit in the service of humility and Christian love.” To be sure, he did not address the specific issues that had troubled Wallace only two years earlier. Bales made no mention of integration or of social equality. But his statement at least reflected his spiritual solidarity with his black brothers in Christ. And while Wallace might also claim a similar comradery in the name of faith, the two statements were clearly dissimilar in tone and empathy. When James Bales published “To My Colored Brother” in 1943, he was articulating a standard that many COCs, black and white, followed for the next twenty-five years.15

After church periodicals generally shunned issues relating to race for the next decade, Woodrow Whitten, another founder of the 20th Century Christian, broached the subject in a two-part series on Christianity and race relationships that was published in the California Christian in 1953. In part one, Whitten addressed scientific racism, concluding that the “concept of a ‘pure’ race is a pure myth” and “that while individuals and groups may and do evidence wide variance in cultural attainments, this variance has cultural and environmental rather than biological roots.” He acknowledged the difficulty of needing to meet demands on both a cultural level and “the level of the Kingdom of God” in part two. “This means difficulty and it may involve pain for the Christian lives in a real world where sin has left its real blemishes,” he warned. Whitten recognized that a person can take a theoretical position much more readily “than to take a forthright stand against race covenants or Jim Crow segregation in his own community!” And while he by no means advocated social activism, he affirmed the presence of the divine in all human beings and the need for love to “triumph over the disruptive forces of racial prejudice.”

Whitten recalled the lyrics of a children’s song in closing. “The Christian cannot forget that ‘red and yellow, black and white’—all are precious in his sight.” Here again, the author neither makes an explicit call for integration on any level, nor does he propose immediate action for correcting racial injustice. But he clearly associates racial discrimination with sin. Readers, some of whom lived in the South, certainly understood Whitten’s disdain for Jim Crow laws and anything else that smacked of favoring members of one race over another, though his views were perhaps easier to espouse in California than in the South where most COCs were located.16

In the 1940s and 1950s, Bales and Whitten represented for whites an alternative to the abrasiveness and the overt racism of Wallace. Their theology, especially as it related to primitivism, differed very little from Wallace. Indeed, on the same page that part one of Whitten’s series appeared, there was also a letter from a Presbyterian minister in West Virginia. The minister was complimenting the California Christian and ordering a subscription. Below his remarks, the editor wrote, “I would be unworthy as a Christian if I failed in this very first issue to say that I believe you are in error and that the Presbyterian Church is not the church of the Bible. If it is I want in it and soon.” In the mid-1950s, other white voices were raised that echoed Bales and Whitten on the topic of race relations, and their righteous surety briefly obscured the lingering sentiments of many whites who subscribed to Wallace’s views. In addition to some fundamental differences over the meaning of race and the nature of “appropriate” race relations, disagreements would soon erupt over the proper response of Christians to the increasing efforts of social activists to bring about dramatic changes in American society.17


In the wake of the 1954 *Brown* decision, the *Christian Chronicle*, a periodical devoted to news as much as doctrine, addressed the issue of segregation in an editorial. After noting how the court determined that segregation was “definitely unconstitutional” [emph. in original], the editor lambasted those people who might oppose integration. In typical COC fashion, he noted that questions about segregation should be approached “as any other . . . through the eyes of a Christian and through the light of New Testament teachings.” His essay was filled with rhetorical questions. “Where are the Negro names upon the lists of students in the Christian schools? Where are their names in our church directories? . . . Christ, 2000 years ago, opened the door for the Negro into the church along with everyone else. Why can not we, mere mortals, have the strength to open our class-rooms, dormitories and church pews to them?” Furthermore, the editorial addressed the excuses most frequently proffered against integration and argued that “tradition” or pressure from local citizens were hardly good explanations to maintain segregation. “What childishness!” the editor exclaimed. “Christ opened the door of the church to the Negro,” he concluded. “Why don’t we open the school doors? When will we fully fellowship [with] them in our worship?” While such calls for integrated churches and schools were generally ignored, they were significant in that they illustrated the presence of urgent, white voices lamenting racial discrimination in addition to the pockets of white racial liberalism within organizations such as the Southern Regional Council.18

James Willeford, a founder and preacher for the *Herald of Truth* radio program, expressed similar thoughts in a sermon broadcast on 29 January 1956 and titled, “Call No Man Common.” By the close of the 1960s, the *Herald of Truth* radio program enjoyed widespread popularity across the nation, but even by the mid 1950s, the program was carried by more than thirty

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American Broadcast Company network stations. While speakers wrote their own material, each sermon had to be approved by the elders of the Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, the congregation responsible for the program. This particular sermon exemplified a stock approach that preachers commonly used to voice their opposition to racial discrimination. Willeford began his sermon by stressing that racial problems were both historically and culturally common. He proved his points by citing examples of racial prejudice in ancient Egypt and Palestine and in modern nations such as Poland, South Africa, and finally Nazi Germany, the ultimate example of racism. By noting how common racial prejudice was across the ages, preachers deflected direct criticism which, in this instance and many others, were aimed primarily at an audience largely composed of white southerners. This homiletic technique almost invariably included “the North” in its critique, too. In Willeford’s sermon, he referred to some people who claimed that their customs forbade “inviting the colored man into our houses of worship. I have heard this excuse offered in both the North and the South,” he stated.19

Otherwise, Willeford’s sermon contains the familiar exposition of biblical texts that by command or example oppose racial prejudice. He also addressed common misconceptions about racial differences by noting that the “evidence shows that with equal opportunities any two racial groups would be equal in intelligence” and by citing biologists from Abilene Christian College who wrote an article about the superficial physical differences among the races. Like the Chronicle editorial, Willeford employed a series of rhetorical questions to emphasize his main points. “Do we have a right to demand that because we are white we must have a white God? . . .

19 James D. Willeford, “Call No Man Common,” (sermon preached on 29 January 1956), Herald of Truth Papers, box 6, folder: Radio Scripts, 205-265, Radio Sermon No. 209. Special Collections, Brown Library, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas. The transcript of the sermon is misdated as 1955. This particular sermon, however, is found in a booklet containing a report of the program’s activities for December 1955 and the program’s sermons for January 1956. Information regarding the program’s history is available at http://www.heraldoftruth.org/.
Can you imagine the Lord Jesus dying for a man and then discriminating against him? Or allowing His disciples to either? . . . When we shun others, and make light of them because they belong to another race, are we obeying the golden rule of the Bible? . . . Or did the Lord mean that we should preach the gospel to the Indian, baptize him into Christ, and then shun him by ‘putting him in his place’? he asked. Using “Indian” instead of “Negro” diffused white listeners who felt threatened by sermons directed toward their prejudices against African Americans, and Willeford offered little by way of any practical advice for overcoming racial prejudice. But he did mention the integration (though he did not use the term) of churches. Toward the end of his sermon, he observed, “We are all glad for [whites] to take a front seat in our church buildings, but some of us bar the colored man. We will visit his services when we please . . . We send our white preachers to Africa, and there the whites and blacks worship together. What hinders our having such fellowship in America? Most of us will let negroes cook our food, take care of our babies, and play ball with our sons, but some of us bar them from worshiping God with us!”

Like the aforementioned editorial, Willeford recognized that many of his listeners justified their segregated assemblies because of custom, but he reminded them of a question that Jesus once posed to the Pharisees: “Why do ye transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?” Such traditions, in Willeford’s estimation, “lead us into open rebellion against God.”

Few members of COCs would have disagreed with the Chronicle or Willeford’s exegesis. However, many likely winced at the notion that churches and schools should be integrated. In their minds, segregation was not necessarily related to discrimination but was rather a political question without biblical or moral ramifications. This perspective was apparent in the spring of 1956, when the Firm Foundation published a column that posed the question, “What Does the

20 Ibid.

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Church of Christ Teach on Segregation?” The timing of the column is significant. It was published during the Montgomery bus boycott and a few months after Atherine Lucy had enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Alabama. Southern whites were being confronted over their Jim Crow customs, and they wanted answers from their churches about how to respond. According to author Ross Dye, the question about segregation had arisen as “several religious bodies” (i.e., other denominations) had made official pronouncements regarding “the issue of segregation of the races in the publicly owned institutions.” Dye was responding to this question because some people were curious to know, “and a few overly zealous and misguided brethren think that we must now mount the ramparts and man the battlements to the bitter end.” He refused to answer the question, “What does the church of Christ teach on segregation?” because such an inquiry implied “that the church is a body invested with authority to legislate and impose its will upon all dissenters.” In his idyllic perspective, “The church has not authority to teach anything except what the Bible teaches.” Therefore, he endeavored to address what the ancient scriptures stated about racial segregation in the twentieth century. In doing so, he concluded that issues “with respect to publicly owned institutions and other functions of government” were “political” and “outside the scope of the New Testament.” In Dye’s opinion, “The church had just as well take a position for or against flexible price supports or the highway bill as to take a position on segregation of the races in the public schools.”

While it is true that the Chronicle editorial and Willeford’s sermon had not specifically addressed public institutions, the tone of Dye’s remarks starkly contrasts with their sentiments. The Chronicle editorial had pointed out that the church should catch up to the federal

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government’s ruling that segregated schools were unconstitutional. Dye’s comments reformulated the issue of desegregation so as to make it explicitly political and therefore a matter of opinion. In closing, he did mention that the Bible “does teach Christians how to conduct themselves in their individual and congregational dealings with men of other races.” He even quoted Galatians 3:28, which included the apostle Paul’s famous declaration, “ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” But Dye gave no advice about integration on any level, even while acknowledging, “We are either saints or sinners. If we are saints, then we are all brethren.”

As the 1960s approached, the question of what was biblical and what was political became crucial for members of COCs. Most blacks and at least a few whites extrapolated from biblical principles the need to integrate their churches and schools. They increasingly understood Jim Crow laws as evil, as a product of the very racial prejudice that the New Testament condemned. Meanwhile, many church members came to perceive questions relating to race relations as political and wholly unrelated to the work of the church. These two contradictory streams of thought would compete for followers as the civil rights movement gained momentum.

While the topic of racial discrimination had occasionally been discussed through Sunday school lessons, church periodicals, student newspapers, or sermons, questions over the church’s complicity in perpetuating racism were most forcefully raised by Carl Spain in his speech at the 1960 ACC lectures. At least two student newspapers quoted lengthy excerpts from the speech, and the Chronicle ran a front page story with headlines blaring, “Segregation in Colleges Denounced” and “ACC Teacher Asks: ‘Are We Moral Cowards?’” Subsequent issues of the Chronicle would illustrate the divergent positions taken by church members, as some viewed

22 Ibid.
segregation with the utmost concern, while others felt that the issue was foreign to church interests.  

Three weeks later, the opinion page of the Chronicle contained an editorial and two letters from readers that typified positions taken by white members toward Spain’s speech and the Chronicle’s coverage of it. For its part, the editorial referred to Spain as “one of the most respected preachers and teachers in the church today” whose lecture “has caused considerable thought in an area which we have tended to minimize and overlook.” However, the essay completely ignored the issue of segregation itself, noting only that “other brethren have long been guiding lights in pointing up the fact that God can use a black man as an efficient and effective tool in spreading his kingdom.” For the Chronicle, a discussion of race was subsumed by a preoccupation with evangelism, although an editorial only six years earlier had directly challenged white COC colleges to desegregate.

The 1960 essay also praised the work of Marshall Keeble, who “has been quietly sowing the seeds that will eventually break down the barriers that cause mistrust among Negro and White.” The Chronicle, once adamant for integration, softened its previous demands by focusing on Keeble and contrasted, at least implicitly, the popular preacher with civil rights activists. Keeble worked “quietly,” in a manner that would “eventually” result in better race relations. His style differed starkly with recent bus boycotts, marches, and especially sit-ins, the latest method of defiance and protest that became popular in the weeks prior to this issue of the Chronicle. The

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23 “ACC Teacher Asks: ‘Are We Moral Cowards?’” Christian Chronicle (8 March 1960): 1, 4. On the bottom of the same front page, the death of a Nigerian minister named C.A.O. Essien was announced. The article eulogized Essien, offering awkward, paternalistic compliments. “His skin was coal black. But the God of Heaven looked down and made of him a 20th Century Paul, a Martin Luther. . . . With the help of those he converted, there were established 60 congregations of the Lord’s church before the first two white men disembarked on that shore in 1952.” See Lane Cubstead, “C.A.O. Essien—Modern Day Paul,” Christian Chronicle 17 (8 March 1960): 1.

The final third of the editorial did not come from the pen of the *Chronicle*. Instead, it quoted extensively from an Iowa newspaper that had covered one of Keeble’s revivals. The Iowa paper observed, and the *Chronicle* apparently affirmed, that Keeble had “no racial agitation nor hate in his path. He is typical of those Negro Moderates who understand and sympathize with the error and sins of the whites. His message is so much more inspiring than that of such Negro leaders as the Rev. [Martin] Luther King, the Alabama boycott expert, who has spoken in Iowa.” Thus, the *Chronicle* acknowledged, even if indirectly, that racial problems existed, that whites were largely to blame, and that racial barriers should be broken down. Yet the preferred method for dismantling segregation was to emulate Keeble, who converted thousands but never publicly spoke against racial discrimination.25

The two letters that were printed in this issue were also revealing of the attitudes among church members. One letter lauded Spain’s speech and expressed outrage over the continued segregation of most COC colleges. “How can the Board of Directors of ACC discriminate between races when it comes to Christian education?” the reader asked. The other letter, written by a reader from Searcy, Arkansas, was much more reserved in its assessment of Spain but was most perturbed that the *Chronicle*—traditionally known for dispensing news about COCs—was giving the speech so much attention. “I was certainly very disappointed when I picked up the last issue to see your feature article consist of different type of material,” the letter opined. “Regardless of the merit or demerit of Brother Spain’s lecture, it would seem far better to me for you to continue with your original purpose rather than take part in items of this nature. . . . Why not . . . leave other areas to other publishers.” The “original purpose” of the *Chronicle*, according to this reader, should not include coverage of events pertaining to race relations. Each

25 Ibid.
of the subsequent letters to the editor that mentioned Spain’s speech commended the *Chronicle* for its coverage, but there was a strong undercurrent within COCs of people who insisted that racial problems were political questions and therefore secondary to the work of the church.  

Spain’s speech also caught the attention of Ira Rice Jr., who had become a church missionary to East Asia where he published his own periodical, the *Singapore-Far East Newsletter*, whose letterhead included a Dallas address and whose readership was substantially fewer than that of the *Advocate, Chronicle*, and *Foundation*. In the 28 June 1960 issue of his publication, Rice explained how he returned to the United States after a four-year stint as a missionary on the Malay Peninsula and entered into several conversations about race relations with prominent figures from COCs, including his long-time friend and editor of the *Echo*, R. N. Hogan. Rice recalled asking Hogan why there were “so few well-trained preachers among the colored brethren,” a question to which Hogan “almost exploded” before answering, “Simply because our white brethren refuse to open the doors to most of our senior colleges! . . . our white colleges among ‘us’ slam the door in their faces and the only places they can get advanced training within reach of where they live are denominational colleges” [emph. in original]. Rice was prepared to eliminate Christian colleges altogether. “If we are but duplicating training which could just as easily be obtained in our state-supported schools, then how foolish we are to waste all the time and money to provide education we call Christian but which is not!” Rice continued his newsletter by describing someone who he had recently come to admire, Finnis Petty Jr., author of a tract titled “Christian Attitude Toward Other Races.” Rice was so enamored with

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Petty’s essay that after reading it, he purchased two thousand copies for distribution his subscribers. As a consequence, nearly four hundred people ceased their support of his work.\footnote{Ira Y. Rice Jr., “Dear Brethren:,” \textit{Singapore-Far East Newsletter} (28 June 1960): 1-2.}

As the civil rights movement blossomed in the early 1960s, only the \textit{Chronicle} gave any extensive coverage to the widening efforts to integrate all public facilities in the South. Several letters to the editor appeared, and most of them were supportive of integration as the proper Christian position. There were a few exceptions, but even these did not express the kind of vituperative racism that might be found in some quarters. Alton Howard, famous in church circles for his publishing company in Louisiana, penned a letter in 1961 that noted how slavery was wrong, “yet the great apostle Paul lived during a time when such was the custom of the day. He did not spearhead the church into a war against such, on the contrary. He showed how one should conduct himself if he were slave or master.” With good reason, one could easily argue that this line of reasoning was simply another excuse to justify the status quo. Such was almost certainly the case for some whites. But in closing, Howard urged, “Let not the church become a center of strife over this problem, but let us preach the gospel to a world full of sin and hatred so that men might be led to the kingdom of God where there is neither male or female, rich or poor, bond or free, black or white, but one in our Lord.”\footnote{“New Orleans Segregation Issue Aroused Response,” \textit{Christian Chronicle} (3 February 1961): 4-5.}

A similar letter was signed jointly by several ministers from the New Orleans area who were sensitive to criticisms recently leveled at their city and their churches’ response to racial strife there. Like Howard, their letter contained evidence of the paternalistic attitude that many whites maintained toward blacks. They outlined their assistance to black churches in some detail and proffered another interpretation of the news stories about race relations in New Orleans.
However, they also noted that “Colored people have never been asked to leave the buildings owned by white brethren, and have never been treated unkindly at the services which they have attended. If you feel that we should be on a soap-box defending by voice the rights of the colored, we simply and kindly disagree with you.” These letters suggest that some members, while ignorant or too dismissive of state-sponsored or institutional racism, were open to the idea of integration in a controlled environment like their churches. They further suggest a lack of urgency in dealing with issues raised by the modern civil rights movement, as if African Americans—despite their oppression and marginalization—should have limitless patience. Given white benevolence toward blacks and their interaction with them in church functions, whites felt wrongly attacked for the unrest that had characterized parts of the South.29

A year later, the Chronicle’s editorial page responded to the charge that the paper was inappropriately judging southern churches. The letter, which was printed in full within the editorial essay, also expressed disbelief that “not one letter has been printed in defending social segregation” [emph. in original]. The editor insisted that his paper was attempting to remain impartial, and he also explained the absence of a letter defending southern racial mores. “The reason that the letters have been predominantly pro-integration has been that most of the letters we have received have been of this persuasion, both from northerners and southerners.” He also admitted that a few “‘crank’ letters were received on both sides of the question,” but these were “promptly filed in the waste-basket” because they “were not written in any kind of a Christian spirit.”30

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29 Ibid.

With increasing frequency in the early 1960s, national headlines included news of civil
rights activities. The sit-in movement that started at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North
Carolina, on 1 February 1960 spread to many cities throughout the South. In the spring of 1961,
freedom riders were met with violence in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery when they
tested the new regulations that desegregated interstate transportation facilities. Riots followed
James Meredith’s admission to the University of Mississippi in 1962. Activists were jailed and
often abused by the very authorities that were supposed to protect citizens. Yet the most popular
COC periodicals remained relatively quiet on the topic of race relations. Such silence might be
interpreted in countless ways, yet several reasons seem most logical. First, several COC media
outlets had addressed racial prejudice. Though people obviously had different ideas about what
prejudice might entail, there was a general consensus, at least in print and on the airwaves, that
“showing respect of persons” was sinful. Lessons opposing prejudice were not given any more
prominence than general admonitions to love one’s neighbor. Second, the silence of some
periodicals might be explained as an effort to avoid controversy, especially one that might come
at the cost of subscribers. While printing religious literature was ostensibly about teaching the
saints and converting the lost, it was also a business. Much like their administrative counterparts
in the denomination’s colleges, publishers and editors within the COCs had to consider the
bottom line if they wished to continue their publishing endeavors. Internecine squabbles had
recently taken their toll, and some leaders definitely preferred to avoid controversy over
something that, in their minds, had little bearing on their churches or their salvation. Finally, one
must also consider the possibility that the issues raised by the civil rights movement were
purposely ignored. Acknowledging activists and their messages would have been tantamount to
admitting the legitimacy of their claims and might have given credence to a movement that many
whites in the COCs, for various reasons, including base racial prejudice, condemned. Some might have simply hoped that if the “negro problem” was ignored long enough, it would finally go away.

By 1963, however, as the civil rights movement gained significant momentum, church leaders were finding it increasingly difficult to ignore. They could no longer speak in vague generalities against racial prejudice when many communities, especially in the South where COCs were strongest, were struggling with the practical effects of sustained protest and tentative desegregation. On 19 February 1963, a preacher from Dyersburg, Tennessee, named Franklin Puckett appeared on the program of the Florida Christian College lectures. His sermon, titled “The Messiah and Racial Problems,” exemplified the attitudes of many white COC members at this time, and Truth magazine, a relatively new COC periodical that was growing in popularity among the most theologically conservative churches, requested permission to reprint the full text of Puckett’s remarks. Puckett was not unknown in COC circles, though he had sided with the minority on the recent cooperation controversy. His articles had appeared in other COC periodicals, including the Echo. In a brief introduction to the sermon, Truth’s editor called it “a masterpiece” because it voiced the thoughts of many southern whites regarding recent racial turmoil.31

Puckett’s remarks followed COC precedent by addressing biblical questions that many people had about the origin of the races, asserting that racial tensions had existed in all cultures since time immemorial, and then proposing the proper Christian response to current crises. A

number of people, including some blacks in COCs, believed that the curse of Ham accounted for
darker skinned peoples: “Some think they find the origin of the negro in the Hamitic curse of
Genesis 9:25,” Puckett stated. “I must confess that I have been unable to so account for their
origin. . . . Of course many of them [Ham’s descendants] were dark, but there is nothing to
indicate that they were negroid [sic].” The only certainty was that “all races are of common
parentage and common blood.” Puckett then reminded his listeners and readers that history “is
filled with the conflicts of races and nations and tribes. . . . The problem is general and all races
are to some extent responsible for the difficulty.”

Puckett then proceeded to address race relations in the United States. In one paragraph
about the South, he acknowledged “that in some instances the negroes have been restricted and
exploited to serve the greed and arrogance of certain whites.” But he was also an apologist for
the South, insisting “that as a whole the white people of the South have been the best friends and
the greatest benefactors the negroes have found anywhere.” Subsequent paragraphs lambasted
northerners for unduly criticizing southern racial mores. “The North should sweep the trash off
of its own door step before it complains about the debris on the portals of the South,” he wryly
noted. His harangue against the North included an attack on the NAACP, the members of which,
in his estimation, “no longer desire equal treatment; they demand preferential treatment” [emph.
in original]. After recounting the racial strife that had been felt in various northern cities, Puckett
observed that “segregation is not the cause of these conflicts and integration is not the cure for
them. . . . The trouble stems from a wrong attitude of heart toward one another, and the cure lies
in correcting that attitude.” Puckett then set about to articulate his thoughts on the cure.


33 Puckett, 185-187.
Once again, Puckett emphasized that “Christians must show no respect of persons,” and he cited the applicable passages from the Bible to validate his message. But Puckett carefully demarcated the spiritual realm from the civil realm, both in scripture and in contemporary life. “The practice of righteousness does not require, as some have erroneously concluded, the abolition of social and political distinctions in the civil realm. . . . There have always been—and always will be—social distinctions in the civil realm which do not exist in the spiritual; nor is their existence out of harmony with New Testament Christianity.” Puckett followed these remarks by describing how the New Testament maintained distinctions between men and women, parents and children, and finally, masters and slaves. In his understanding of the New Testament, “Neither social distinction nor civil relation was to be regarded as a hindrance, or a matter of concern, to a Christian.” He even went so far as to quote extensively a passage from the apostle Paul’s first Corinthian epistle where the evangelist was addressing concerns among Jewish and Gentile Christians. Puckett reworded the passage to read, “Is any called being black? let him not become white. Is any called being white? let him not become black. Being black is nothing, and being white is nothing, but the doing of the commandments of God. Let every man abide in the calling wherein he was called.”

Later in his remarks, Puckett again returned to the same Pauline passage. This time he paraphrased another section by substituting segregation for servanthood. He stated, “Were you called in segregation? Do not be concerned about it. No, even if you may be integrated, use your

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34 The Pauline text reads, “Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God. Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.” (1 Corinthians 7:18-20, KJV).
seggregation rather to demonstrate your obedience to God.” 35 This particular passage proved conclusively for Puckett and others within the denomination that civil rights activism was wrong. Even if social injustices and inequalities existed, according to this line of thinking, they were to be accepted and used as an instrument of evangelism. Puckett concluded his exegesis by emphasizing how the “passage certainly prohibits any Christian, white or black, from becoming an agitator in any movement to overthrow established relations though they may be discriminatory. The influence of Christianity is to be wielded, not by pressure politics or active rebellion, but by faithful, consecrated obedience to God.” 36

Puckett closed by anticipating and answering certain questions from his audience. First, he insisted that a Christian has no business belonging to white resistance organizations, and he specifically named the KKK and the White Citizens’ Council. He criticized the Klan for its “abuse and intimidation,” the Citizens’ Council for its “political pressures and discriminatory judgments.” Second, he also condemned the NAACP and any Christian who associated with it. Puckett expressed disdain for the NAACP’s willingness, so he claimed, “to increase racial tension” in order to reach its goals. He further lamented that members of the NAACP “were now demanding not equal but preferential rights,” and he associated some of the organization’s members with the Communist Party. In Puckett’s mind, and in the minds of many white southerners, the activities of these three organizations were unacceptable. This line of reasoning failed to distinguish, for example, the objectives of the NAACP from those white resistance

35 The Pauline text reads, “Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord’s freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ’s servant” (1 Corinthians 7:21-22, KJV).

36 Puckett, 190.
organizations who spawned economic, social, or even violent retribution against people who combated racial injustice.\footnote{Ibid., 191.}

Third, while Puckett managed to find more wrong with the NAACP than the KKK or Citizens’ Council, he exhorted people to submit to the government, even if they disagreed. For example, he expressed opposition to “forced integration,” but he urged obedience of the federal law. The “civil authorities have decreed that the public schools should be desegregated, and Christians are required by the Messiah to be submissive to the powers that be. No Christian can rebel against an order handed down by the courts requiring a school to integrate.” And finally, he addressed the topic of integrated worship assemblies at a time when some civil rights activists had taken their quest for integration to all-white churches on Sunday mornings. Like his insistence that the government be obeyed, Puckett was unequivocal in stating, “I do not believe that any faithful negro Christian can be denied the right to enter into a congregation and participate in the worship of God simply because he is a negro. Such would be showing respect of persons,” Puckett concluded, in language borrowed from the King James Version of the Bible, “and if ye have respect of persons ye commit sin.” He was careful not to endorse blacks activists who “seek to enter a white assembly for publicity purposes and to gain a political end or prove a point.” Such actions, in his estimation, should be condemned and forbidden. But he was equally adamant that “no negro Christian, who sincerely desires to worship God . . . should be denied access to the assembly of the saints.”\footnote{Puckett, 191-192. Among other places, activists entered churches in Jackson, Mississippi, and Selma, Alabama. These are described in W. J. Cunningham, \textit{Agony at Galloway: One Church’s Struggle with Social Change} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1980); Charles Eagles, \textit{Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993; reprint, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000); and Anne Moody, \textit{Coming of Age in Mississippi} (New York: Laurel, 1968).}
If Puckett’s speech had been met with derision, it would not have appeared in print and certainly would not have garnered a ringing endorsement from William Wallace, *Truth* magazine’s associate editor. While previous authors in COC periodicals had voiced general support for desegregation, Puckett’s article tackled more than just whether or not integration or racial discrimination was right or wrong. He addressed the civil rights movement in general, and coupled with the warm reception his comments received, Puckett’s remarks represent the best available summary of the positions maintained by most white church members toward the civil rights movement.

At the same time that articles printed in COC periodicals owned by whites sought to nuance or qualify their positions on segregation or race relations in general, at least one prominent preacher and editor spoke forcefully against the racism that pervaded much of the denomination. In his role as editor of the *Echo*, R. N. Hogan authored and published a series of essays in the summer of 1963 that frankly addressed race relations in COCs. These articles were not the first to decry the racism of the white churches, but in the past, the *Echo* had given some mixed signals. A few items that appeared in the 1940s even suggested a general agreement with white segregationists over topics such as racial origins or miscegenation. In an article about the latter, for example, one author asked, “Do I believe in it? No! I could not believe in it and believe in God at the same time.”

Occasionally, a black author would chastise his white brethren from the pages of the *Echo*. Upon reading a 1949 Sunday school lesson about race relations published by the Gospel Advocate Company, a New York minister expressed shock and surprise “to learn that some of our leading brethren are violating the basic principles of Christianity by encouraging bigotry and discrimination. . . . Segregation as we know it in the

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South and other sections,” he continued, “is unscriptural and un-Christ like, and any person who 
upholds this practice is walking contrary to the teaching of Christ.” For the most part, however, 
the *Echo* followed its counterparts at the *Christian Chronicle, Firm Foundation*, or *Gospel 
Advocate* and gave most of its attention to matters of doctrine or news from churches around the 
country.

By the late 1950s, however, this acquiescence to the white majority in the church began to 
fade. As some COC colleges remained segregated and the civil rights movement captivated the 
nation’s attention in the early 1960s, R. N. Hogan felt compelled to speak firmly and directly. 
Like Puckett, Hogan’s remarks reflect his primitivist worldview. While he was much more 
critical of COCs, Hogan generally refrained from addressing larger social issues. Citing the 
Supreme Court and evoking the sanctity of law and numerous scriptures, he lambasted those 
people who chose to uphold segregation. In an essay published in June, he wrote, “For nearly a 
hundred years our white brethren have been hiding behind the law of our land respecting 
segregation in the so-called christian [sic] schools. . . . The highest tribunal in our land has 
ordered desegregation . . . and what is more important is the fact that Christ ordered 
desegregation over two thousand years ago.” He condemned several colleges by name—David 
Lipscomb, Harding, and Freed-Hardeman—and asked what reason could they give, other than 
“sheer prejudice and hate,” for maintaining segregated facilities. Among his many biblical 
references, Hogan quoted from the first Johannine epistle: “Whosoever hateth his brother is [a] 
murderer[:] and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.” 40 He then frankly 
asked, “If the Bible is right, and it is, are these brethren who are practicing such things less than 
outlaws and murderers?” Hogan did not wholly dismiss whites who had been willing to speak

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40 1 John 3:15 (KJV).
openly about racism in the church. In fact, he mentioned Carl Spain and James Willeford as men with the “intestinal fortitude to stand up and tell people the truth about racial prejudice,” and he alluded to “a good number of white christians [sic] who love the Lord and do not have any prejudice in their hearts against any one.” Nevertheless, the presence of these whites did not appease his anger toward the segregated colleges or the churches in cities that had been torn by racial strife like Birmingham, Alabama and Jackson, Mississippi. “Where are the Churches of Christ . . . in these places?” he asked. Hogan also admonished his black brethren “to love all white people, for you will go to hell if you hate them, like some of them are going to hell for hating you.”

This acerbic language continued in the next month’s article where Hogan compared segregationist Christians to the hypocrites condemned by Jesus. Hogan asked, “How many of these race-hating, superior-minded, self-centered hypocrites who are parading around as Christians would like to be treated as they are treating the Negro because of the color of his skin?” No topic was off limits for Hogan, as evidenced by the fact that he also discussed interracial marriage, the ultimate weapon in the segregationist arsenal of white resistance to all things integrated. To this concern, Hogan declared that “the Negro isn’t interested in marrying the white man’s daughter any more than the white man is interested in marrying the Negro’s daughter . . . [and] the white man doesn’t seem to have any confidence in his daughter being able to take care of herself.” Unlike the ambivalence of the essays in the periodicals operated by whites, Hogan’s readers, who numbered in the thousands and included both black and white

subscribers, could have had no doubts about where he stood regarding integration, but he carefully avoided any endorsement of the civil rights movement.42

Hogan’s 1963 essays are significant in several respects. First, they mark the CE’s break from its relative silence on issues involving racial prejudice. Like its white counterparts, the journal’s primary goal was to be didactic, evangelistic, and informative. But now the Echo was making a bold statement: that one could not truly be Christian if he or she practiced racial prejudice, and racial prejudice included the maintenance of segregation. Second, this conclusion was reached and aimed at whites within the denomination, including some of the most prominent figures: college presidents and journal editors. With no denominational hierarchy to speak definitively on racial issues, Hogan, a black preacher, was able to share thoughts about his white counterparts untempered by the bureaucratic back-rubbing that might characterize other denominations. Thus, Hogan used his forum with the Echo to attack the white power brokers within the denomination in no uncertain terms. And while his readers were predominantly black church members, Hogan’s influence on colleges or other journals, even if minimal in 1963, would become increasingly important as time passed and blacks took advantage of more economic and educational opportunities. Readers would not soon forget which of the COC colleges were the most reluctant to desegregate.

After Hogan’s series in the Echo, the Chronicle started a forum on race relations within its pages during the fall of 1963. The Chronicle admitted that “the racial issue . . . is becoming, more and more, a problem that members of the Church cannot ignore.” To initiate the discussion, two southern preachers, both white, were allowed to pen their perspectives, and

readers were encouraged to submit letters to the editor in response. One preacher spoke favorably of integration, the other forged a familiar position, suggesting that the Bible did not speak explicitly to the question of integration, that a person should be able to associate with whomever she or he prefers, and that the apostle Paul was not an advocate for social change during an era of slavery. The latter preacher also asserted that “there is ‘a great gulf fixed’ between the two [blacks and whites] socially” and that there was, therefore, nothing inherently wrong with maintaining segregation.43

An editorial, titled “Let’s Discuss The Negro Issue,” appeared in the next issue. It summarized for readers the two positions previously laid out and again solicited letters on the topic. “Have you noticed the silence of our gospel papers on this topic? Have you noticed how our preachers can somehow preach about everything under the sun except this ticklish situation?” Editor James Nichols admitted his paper’s own shortcomings in this regard but resolved to face the issue in the future. Yet the editor also refused to take a stand, attempting to remain neutral in providing these summaries and calling for more discussion. Alongside the editorial, a cartoon based upon the Lukan parable about “the good Samaritan” depicted a dark-skinned person laying on the side of a road, aptly labeled “HIGHWAY OF LIFE 1963.” The person appeared disheveled and injured; “RESULTS OF RACIAL INJUSTICES” was written above. In the bottom, right-hand corner, two white gentlemen, PREJUDICE and HATE, had smugly passed by. Another person, CHRISTIAN LOVE, was approaching. “Will you . . . pass by on the other side too?” the headline asked. Through words and pictures, the Chronicle was choosing to confront its readers, and COCs as a whole, with the most pressing issues in race relations. Among the

periodicals owned and operated by whites, it was the only one willing to grant substantive coverage and discussion to those issues.\footnote{James W. Nichols, “Let’s Discuss The Negro Issue,” \textit{Christian Chronicle} (27 September 1963): 2. About this editorial, Don Haymes notes, “Despite its resolutely uncommitted posture on the topic at hand, this editorial is a deliberately revolutionary document in the context of the Churches of Christ. Indeed, the refusal to take a position in this volatile controversy is itself the revolutionary attitude. Yes, there is no ‘thus saith the Lord’ that prescribes the relations between Americans of European and African descent in the church—but when did lack of a ‘direct command’ ever before give pause to an editor of a journal among Churches of Christ? . . . For an editor of such a paper, in a Christian sect defined almost exclusively by its vigorous arguments from silence, this [not knowing the answers] is an extraordinary admission.” See http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/race/haymes27.html (last accessed 13 April 2007).}

As the editors had requested, letters began to arrive, and the initial response was almost wholly in favor of integration. These letters also questioned the denomination’s general silence. “With all her talk on most subjects, the church has remained surprisingly quiet about the explosive human relations issue,” one minister wrote. Another lamented that for “too long we have engaged in ‘theological hair-splitting’ about such matters as intra-church co-operation while Roman Catholicism, Liberal Protestantism, and even the civil government have led the fight against ungodly racial hatred.” And another urged readers to take action: “The time is late for pussyfooting about human relations. Platitudes and pronouncements are feeble substitutes for deeds of valor.” In fact, the published letters were so positive that a subsequent editorial defended the notion that the \textit{Chronicle} had chosen sides. The editor insisted that most of the letters were for integration in general, “and these came from North \textbf{and} South” (emph. in original). Subsequent letters appeared on both sides of the issue, but a majority of them continued to speak favorably of racial integration throughout society and in COCs. While they certainly do not represent a scientific survey, this correspondence suggests that many whites within the denomination were open to addressing the concerns raised by the civil rights movement, especially as these concerns related to integration. The silence of the prominent
journals and many pulpits may have had as much to do with placating a combustible minority than with uncertainty over the proper course of action.45

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the two most influential periodicals in COCs, the Advocate and Foundation, said little about race relations. The Advocate published one article about interracial marriage in 1947. By contrast, the Foundation almost seems vocal with its one editorial in 1956. But finally, as if compelled by Hogan’s pointed comments or the furor surrounding the civil rights movement, these two journals made room for a few articles in 1964. Their silence had been a tool for marginalizing and discrediting the civil rights movement and those voices, both black and white, who advocated social change, but by 1964, the ongoing silence suggested an aloofness from the struggles of many congregants, particularly the white southerners who sought divine guidance amid racial turmoil.

In March, the Foundation printed an editorial and two articles about race relations. One article was a blistering attack on racial prejudice, written by a graduate student named Maurice Ethridge. His essay acknowledged the existence of some churches that refused blacks from worshiping with them, but he appealed to both the Bible and science to prove them wrong. He discredited the notion that certain biblical passages, such as the “curse of Ham,” taught or implied racial inferiority or segregation. And he cited scholarly sources from the fields of anthropology, psychology, and biology that invalidated racial superiority of any kind. “There is,” he concluded, “absolutely no scriptural, moral or scientific justification for the practices of segregating the church of our Lord on the basis of racial differences.”46


46 F. Maurice Ethridge, “‘I Believe The Bible (When it suits me),” Firm Foundation 81 (31 March 1964): 198, 204.
The second article was composed by James Fowler, a COC minister from Birmingham, Alabama. While he opposed racial prejudice, his remarks were tempered by his firsthand observations of his city during the tumultuous campaign of 1963, and he shared his displeasure with the immediate change that the leaders of the civil rights movement seemed to expect. He questioned the efficacy of demonstrations that utilized children and doubted the value of joining a movement with often evolving and amorphous goals. “I have no defense of the injustices that have prevailed in the past and that still prevail,” he added. “But neither can I find it within the spirit of Christianity to join the church to organized movements whose ends are not always clear, and whose methods and motives may not always be above reproach, and whose value in the cause of justice is questioned even by many of the people whom they are supposed to help.” He felt that race relations were worse in Birmingham after 1963 than before, yet he also failed to mention fire hoses, police dogs, and bombs. Fowler claimed that he was no apologist for any “southern way of life,” but he also seemed oblivious to the hardships faced by African Americans within his community.47

Fowler’s piece is also informative in that he notes how some COCs in Birmingham admitted demonstrators into their worship assemblies, while others did not. He also investigated the feelings of black COCs in the area. “I have checked our colored preachers of Birmingham and found knowledge of only one member that took part in demonstrations,” he reported, “and she now says she would not do it again.” These comments betray the paternalism that had been characteristic of white church members for years, a trait that was increasingly unfashionable but still customary. Fowler’s essay is also significant in its plaintive cry for calm and patience. “The

New Testament era closed with the apostles still striving to lead Jewish Christians out of racial prejudices,” he noted, implying that even the “first century church” had some things to learn and so might its twentieth century counterpart. “The same Paul that rebuked Peter for racial discrimination . . . circumcised Timothy because of the Jews.” Fowler also complained about the letters sent to his church from people across the country who “may be guilty of ‘judging’ their brethren unjustly . . . let us never forget that there is in the church ‘great freedom’ to differ and that each congregation is autonomous.” While Fowler might have been willing to acknowledge that Birmingham had some problems, he was not interested in having those problems identified, scrutinized, or, at least in the near future, corrected.48

However, the editorial page of this issue offers insight into the attitude of a powerful and influential editor and preacher within the denomination. Editor Reuel Lemmons of Texas knew COCs well, even claiming in this editorial to “know many thousands of brethren,” only one of which, in his memory, “would deny any human being the right to enter the kingdom of God.” As Don Haymes observed, Lemmons was “a master of ecclesial politics” and a self-styled shepherd of the church. Lemmons claimed to have received scores of articles about integration, both pro and con, but he perceived those people who wholeheartedly favored integration as petulant. “They are dead sure they are right and that all others are prejudiced and unchristian. . . . Many . . . have not lived long enough yet to know enough about the many and deeprooted aspects of this problem to be as positive as they propose to be.” Like others from COCs, Lemmons insisted that “Christianity and the church were neither planned in heaven nor commissioned on earth to revolutionize existing governments nor to uproot social structures.” Thus, he seemed almost irritated at his own compulsion to finally publish a few articles about race relations. They were

48 Fowler, 199, 205.
the first to appear since Dye’s 1956 editorial stated much of what Lemmons reiterated in 1964: social activism is outside the bounds of New Testament Christianity. These articles would be the last to mention revolutionary events in race relations until 1968.49

As his remarks indicate, Lemmons sought to marginalize both the preachers who spoke favorably of integration and the very discussion of race relations itself. Not only did he insist that the church should have no role in fomenting social change, but he also championed the apostle Paul, claiming that the evangelist “segregated himself to live with Acquila [sic] and Priscilla because they were tent makers and so was he. . . . When Paul segregated himself from Barnabas at the beginning of his second missionary journey we believe he had a right to do so. We do not think it was a sin, and, somehow, we can’t help but be glad that some of our brethren are not there to set the old fellow straight on this matter of integration.” Without a hint of incredulity, Lemmons even implied that Jesus sometimes practiced segregation, noting that “the Lord went off into the desert alone.” The wizened editor did not end his outlandish observations here. He further claimed that COCs had never had a problem with segregation in the first place. The church “is the most completely integrated institution we know, and all the brethren accept all the brethren as brethren. We have never had a problem here.” By making such assertions and by divorcing the racial component of contemporary problems from the discussion altogether, Lemmons was trying to disarm critics of COCs and the South. “The thing that pains us most,” he concluded, “is that those who know the least about it are the ones who always have the answers.”50


50 [Lemmons], 194.
The Advocate and its highly respected editor, B. C. Goodpasture of Nashville, was even more ambivalent than Lemmons about the civil rights movement and race relations in general. Goodpasture was a close friend and long-time patron of Marshall Keeble. He once published a brief biography and collection of Keeble’s sermons, officiated the wedding ceremony for Keeble’s marriage to his second wife after his first wife’s death, and helped conduct Keeble’s funeral service in 1968. Their relationship was complex on a number of levels, but the two shared a mutual disdain for the civil rights movement and for those nominal Christians who seemed to be exacerbating already tense race relations in many southern communities. Goodpasture left no records that might elucidate his personal feelings about race relations, and his Advocate was noticeably silent on the topic. So silent, in fact, that the only article published in the 1950s and 1960s that even alluded to race relations was a piece written by James Bales in 1964.\footnote{B. C. Goodpasture, Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble, Evangelist (Nashville, Tennessee: Gospel Advocate Company, 1931; reprint, 1964); and John C. Hardin, “B. C. Goodpasture and the Gospel Advocate: The ‘Standard Bearer’ for Churches of Christ, 1939-1977,” Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 2006.} 

Bales’s article was an exegesis of Galatians 3:28, an oft-quoted passage by Christians who favored integration. While the essay never specifically mentioned contemporary race relations, the gist was clear, as evidenced by one subtitle within the piece: “IT CANNOT MEAN THAT ALL DISTINCTIONS HAVE VANISHED.” Thus, Bales sets out to show that, taken in context, the apostle Paul’s comment did not necessarily change certain social relationships in the “first century church.” Bales pointed out that a Jewish Christian was still a Jew; a slave was still a slave; and males and females maintained their biological identities. He then proceeded to explain how people might be equals in a spiritual sense that did not preclude other differences, such as personal talents, economic wealth, and educational achievements. In identifying these
differences, his final point was that “we are not equal culturally or socially, nor do we have to be.” Bales offered a peculiar example to prove this point. “A highly refined, well educated, sensitive Christian young woman is justified in being discriminating with reference to whom she is to marry . . . For such a woman to marry an uncouth, crude ignoramus would hardly be required on the grounds that if she did not, she was discriminating against him on the basis of culture, etc.” Then, almost as an aside, Bales asserted that “there is no law of God . . . which says that one Christian cannot refuse to marry another Christian solely on the basis of race. In some sense a Christian—of whatever race he may be—should be color blind but there are other senses in which the Bible does not require that he be color blind.” Bales’s article, therefore, was a critique of what he must have perceived as an overuse of Galatians 3:28 to promote equality and unity across a variety of social settings. But in the course of his argument, he acknowledged that there was nothing inherently wrong with interracial relationships, a position that was most unpopular.52

By implication alone, Bales’s final paragraph addressed some questions relating to social activism and integration, another primary motivation for his essay.

One Christian ought not refuse to eat the Lord’s supper with another Christian. However, because one has become a Christian it does not mean that one therefore has the duty to ignore all of the laws and customs of society which he does not like. Nor does it mean that one should force himself into a situation where he knows that it will cause trouble. He may not feel that others are practicing the Golden Rule as they ought, but does that give him the right to ignore all of the attitudes, customs and even prejudices of others? Certainly one cannot justify it by quoting Gal. 3:28.53

These comments revealed Bales’s disapproval of the civil rights movement. There was nothing unscriptural about integrated assembles or even interracial marriages, Bales thought, but the

53 Ibid., 553.
freedom of association was not so important as to justify the unrest that often erupted when people asserted their individual civil rights.

Goodpasture undoubtedly agreed with Bales, but he felt no compulsion to comment or publish didactic articles specifically aimed at racial prejudice. The topic of race relations would resurface, at least in the background, in issues of the Advocate that eulogized Marshall Keeble in 1968. But the first article devoted exclusively to racial prejudice would only appear after Goodpasture’s death. In a 1979 issue, racism would be called “one of mankind’s most universal sins,” but up until that time, it apparently warranted no attention.54

Among the journals owned and operated by whites, only the Chronicle would occasionally venture into a discussion of race relations as the 1960s wore on. In 1966, one such article was written by a young preacher named Dwain Evans, nationally famous for his leadership in starting new churches under the aegis of the Exodus movement, a series of church plantings in which numerous families from large, southern churches moved to a city in the north with a sparse COC population. While visiting Texas, Evans stumbled across an issue of The Pulpit Digest, a publication popular among Christian ministers from many denominations, that caught his attention. He was shocked to discover that a Southern Baptist preacher named Will Campbell had preached and then published a sermon about racial segregation that quoted none other than David Lipscomb. Evans was awed by the irony. “[T]here are many Churches of Christ where a preacher would be in peril of his job should he quote Brother Lipscomb.”55
The growing cynicism of younger preachers like Evans increased throughout the decade. Frustrated over the dismissive attitude displayed by many of their elders in the faith, a significant cadre of young people, both black and white, would gradually choose to forge their own paths, often without the blessing of men like Lemmons, Goodpasture, and Bales. While the older leadership held fast to their identity as the “New Testament church,” the youth movement could not fathom restoration without racial reconciliation, both in their churches and in the larger society. Thus, this new generation of COC members would begin actively engaging in social ministries aimed at overcoming the racism that had long been endemic to American society, even though the “social gospel” was never popular among COCs. By the end of the decade, they would also begin pursuing racial reconciliation with their black brothers and sisters through various conferences and by personal interaction. Based upon the COC media’s silence about race relations and, eventually, hostility toward the civil rights movement, some also realized that the quest for primitive Christianity, if it included overcoming racial injustice and segregation, would have to be pursued outside COCs.
CHAPTER 6
THE CHURCH AND THE MOVEMENT

As various protests and Supreme Court rulings loosened segregation’s grip on the South, the civil rights movement increasingly became a topic of hot conversation, one that COC ministers could no longer ignore. Preachers tackled mounting racial tensions in their sermons and correspondence, just as they would any contemporary issue that caught the attention and curiosity of their congregants. Church members sought a word from God about the civil rights movement, and ministers have always been expected to speak on behalf of the divine. Before the 1950s, Sunday school lessons and occasional comments from the pulpit generally disparaged racial prejudice (loosely defined), but white churchgoers, especially after the 1954 Brown decision, wanted to know if refraining from racial prejudice necessitated sharing public spaces with black people. Many white church members sought to distinguish racial prejudice, a sin, from criticism of the civil rights movement. The admonitions that COC preachers gave to their congregants varied widely, but a minister’s race was not the sole determinant of his position. In general, white members were more likely to be critical of the civil rights movement and of the “denominational preachers” who occupied themselves with social activism; black members were more likely to be sympathetic to the aims, if not the means, of civil rights activists. But extant sources indicate that very few black church members, due in part to their exclusivist attitudes toward other Christians, participated in civil rights activities.

This chapter examines how the civil rights movement affected black and white churches. A few COC ministers were found alongside Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; others, both black and white, opposed social activism or any open association with “denominational preachers.” However, faith inspired opinions on each side. For some, faith meant a career spent fighting segregation and institutional racism. Others utilized faith to justify and buttress their
racist assumptions, while still others genuinely believed that faith had no place amid discussions of politics and society.

In some respects, those people who participated in civil rights demonstrations within their communities were exceptional anyway. With very few exceptions, white southerners were largely missing. “Most of the white people who appear in film footage of civil rights marches,” historian Timothy Tyson has wryly noted, “were brave followers of Leon Trotsky or radical Catholic sisters or saintly kooks of one description or another, and almost all of them were from somewhere else.” Most black citizens were not activists either, at least if marching in the street or volunteering for arrest are the standards for determining involvement. In commenting on his own hometown in North Carolina, Tyson observed, “The majority of African Americans in Oxford and elsewhere had stayed on the sidelines, paralyzed by fear, indifference, or their inability to imagine a better world. . . . there were always black people too fearful, too attached to ‘their’ white folks, too pessimistic or too beaten down by white supremacy to stand up for themselves.” The same was true of COCs. If activists composed only a small fraction of the overall black population, then the participation of black members of COCs within the framework of the wider struggle was hardly measurable. Active involvement in the civil rights movement would have required close association with leaders of other denominations, but COCs only met with other denominations for debating the finer points of baptismal theology or what constituted worshiping “in spirit and in truth.” And perhaps more importantly, black activism would have jeopardized relationships with white churches that had long provided the financial and physical means necessary for blacks to operate their own churches and maintain their missionary
endeavors. While numerous black members worked within the confines of the denomination to enact change, very few sought to impact people outside of COCs.¹

Those few who did, however, are highly instructive, illustrating the conundrums which black members of COCs faced. According to extant sources, the only black civil rights activists who were members of COCs and who remained in the South throughout the 1950s and 1960s were Fred Gray and his family. In 1930, Gray was born to a carpenter and domestic in Montgomery where he attended COCs with his parents. “The church was the center of our early childhood,” Gray recalled. In 1943, in an unsubtle effort to persuade her son to become a minister, Gray’s mother arranged for him to complete his grammar school education at NCI where he learned Bible at the feet of Marshall Keeble and even accompanied him on fund-raising trips around the country. Upon completing his degree requirements in 1947, Gray immediately returned to Montgomery and enrolled in Alabama State College. At the time, he wanted to become a minister and history teacher, but his college experiences changed those plans. The daily indignities of riding a bus in Montgomery coupled with the inspiration from several professors convinced Gray to aim for a career in law. After gaining entrance to Cleveland’s Western Reserve University Law School in 1951, he privately pledged to “return to Montgomery and use the law to ‘destroy everything segregated that I could find.’”²

Despite the rigorous demands of law school, Gray found time to attend church services regularly, including midweek services. He eventually became the assistant minister of the East 100th Street Church of Christ (now University Church of Christ) in Cleveland, learning the practice of ministry under the tutelage of J. S. Winston while preparing for his career in law. By

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² Gray, 8-20.
the fall of 1954, Gray returned to Montgomery as an attorney, ready to keep the private pledge that he had made while a student at Alabama State. From the outset, his personal faith inspired his legal endeavors. In November 1955, one month before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, Gray spoke to the Ten Times One Is Ten Club, the oldest club for African American women in Montgomery. Only twenty-four years old at the time, Gray’s speech foreshadowed his entire career. “We must be strong, and we must be financially able and willing to carry our cases to court if our officials will not voluntarily desegregate our schools, parks, transportation system and all other public facilities,” he told his audience. “During these crucial days, days of great decision, may the God of Heaven direct us, help us and may He through His divine guidance lead all men to realize that we were all made from one flesh, and that we are all God’s children. May God bless us, assist us, and may He speed the day when all of our schools and all other public facilities will be completely integrated.” A few months prior to this appearance, Gray had represented Claudette Colvin, a fifteen-year-old who refused to obey a bus driver’s instructions to give up her seat in the back for a white patron. Despite his best efforts, Colvin was found guilty of assault and battery (the charge that she violated the segregation ordinance was dropped) by the juvenile court of Montgomery County, but the case gave Gray his first taste of the work necessary to attack racial segregation through legal means.³

The experience proved most valuable. On 1 December 1955, as he had many times throughout the previous year, Gray shared lunch with Rosa Parks. Little did they know that before the end of the day, she would be arrested and charged with violating segregation laws after refusing a bus driver’s order to vacate her seat. This particular act of resistance was comparable

to Colvin’s and many others who had defied southern segregation ordinances. Yet Parks’s action was the spark that set in motion what has arguably become the most popular bus boycott in history. Gray served as Parks’s attorney, and he was also lead counsel for the Supreme Court case, *Browder v. Gayle*, that finally integrated public transportation in Alabama after a year of protest. In *Browder*, the court ruled that certain segregation laws in Montgomery violated parts of the 14th Amendment, a conclusion that helped launch Gray’s career as a civil rights attorney and COC preacher.4

Not long after the bus boycott ended in December 1956, Gray became the minister of the Newtown Church of Christ in Montgomery, and he served in that capacity for sixteen years before he moved to Tuskegee and became involved with a COC there. At times, he was criticized for having these two professions. While ministers were often bi-vocational, a career in law was often frowned upon by COCs. But Gray adamantly defended his life’s work. In his autobiography, he wrote that “having his life centered around Christ has assisted me in all of the cases that I have handled during my practice.” In a 1985 interview conducted shortly after he became president of the National Bar Association, Gray emphasized, “The church has always been first in my life, and I feel my work [as an attorney] has been an extension of what the Bible teaches. . . . God made each of us from Adam and there is equal justice for all of us under Jesus.” Thus, Gray interpreted his legal career in explicitly religious terms. He was also an advocate of nonviolence, though his reasons seemed to be more practical than philosophical. Gray recalled, “I always knew that there was the possibility of being hurt, but I never let it bother me to the extent of me being afraid of doing what I thought I needed to do. . . . I never had a [gun] permit.

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4 Gray, 36-37, 50-51, 68-73, 94-95; and Thornton, 53-96, 597-598n.71. Thornton notes that Gray’s memoirs are incorrect in asserting that Parks was charged with disorderly conduct. Gray’s role in these events is also recounted in Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958).
because I felt, one, if someone really wanted to kill you, they’d probably do it before you can use it. And secondly, if I had a pistol and used it even in the circumstances the average person would say are justified, because of my practice, they would put me under the jail.”

Gray was an exceptional figure within COCs. He has even suggested that he was the first black person in the denomination to be both a preacher and an attorney, but even beyond his career choice, Gray and his immediate family members were among only a handful of COC congregants who were actively involved in the civil rights movement in the South. He was by far the most prominent COC member within popular movement circles, and, unlike black preachers within COCs who gained some prominence as activists, did his work inside the South. Gray also remained actively involved with the NAACP, a civil rights organization that many within COC circles, both black and white, considered a distraction from the cause of spreading the Gospel. He too is staunch in his restorationist outlook. Ironically, Gray’s primitivist theology was completely orthodox among COCs. But unlike many others in the church, Gray’s religious beliefs did not strictly prohibit his association with other ministers, such as Martin Luther King, in a cause that many imbued with religious significance. Indeed, while many congregants might debate the finer points of baptismal theology with their friends and colleagues, Gray does not recall any religious discussions with other ministers who were involved in the movement. He has continued to preach for COCs since his years at NCI, and in recent decades, he has also served as an elder. Gray’s position as a longtime member of the board of trustees for

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Southwestern Christian College further confirms his credentials as a theological conservative, as this school has long maintained a reputation for orthodoxy among COCs.6

Although Fred Gray gained more public notoriety in the realm of politics and law, the ministry of Floyd Rose probably stirred more controversy within COCs. Like Gray, Rose was a black southerner who experienced racial segregation during his formative years. He was born in Valdosta, Georgia to a sharecropping family in 1938 before moving to Atlanta at the age of six, when his father became minister of the Simpson Street Church of Christ. While Rose lived with the daily indignities imposed upon African Americans in the Jim Crow South, one particular event in his childhood seared his memory and instilled a resolve in him that would impact his career as a minister and civil rights activist. During a church trip from Atlanta to Ensley, Alabama (a suburb of Birmingham), Rose was seated beside an elderly lady who told him that she desperately needed to use the restroom. Since there was no restroom on the bus, he promptly walked to the front of the bus and told the white driver that a lady needed to use the restroom. Shortly after crossing the state line, the driver pulled over to the right side of the road, across the street from a gas station. Rose stepped off of the bus and entered the station to request permission for this lady to use the restroom. What happened next would always haunt him.

This big, burly white guy, with a cigar hanging out of the right side of his mouth, looked up and said, “We ain’t got no nigger restrooms.” And I said, “But she’s an old lady.” He took the cigar out of his mouth . . . came around and opened the door, and put his big fat hand in the pit of my stomach and just shoved me back. And I went stumbling back, and my back hit the gas pump. And then . . . I slid down, wearing my little blue suede suit my mother had bought me for the trip . . . grit and grime and dirt and oil [and] sand [got] all in it. And I turned and I looked toward that bus. Those black folk were staring out of the window, their eyes frozen with fear. [They] didn’t move and didn’t say a word when I got on the bus. And I looked in his direction and I looked in theirs, and I decided then that I didn’t want to be like him and I didn’t want to be like them. I didn’t want to make

6 Gray, 256, 310; and Gray interview by author.
people afraid of me, and I didn’t want to be afraid of people who made other people afraid. I got back on that bus. Nobody said one word! Not one! And the old lady said she had soiled her clothes.  

Rose experienced problems in the public school system, and he was finally expelled for slapping a teacher. His parents sent him to NCI where he, like Gray, learned Bible and homiletics from Marshall Keeble. Rose also had other formative experiences. During a fund-raising trip with Keeble in the early 1950s, he met a wealthy, white church member named Billie Sol Estes in Pecos, Texas. Estes gave Rose ten dollars and instructed the student to call his parents and ask if they would mind Estes financing their son’s education. Rose took the money but never expected to see Estes again, so he never called his parents. Then, a few nights later in Carlsbad, New Mexico, Estes appeared again. In spite of the segregated seating arrangements inside the church auditorium, Estes sat in the “colored section” next to Rose. After the services, Estes gave Rose another ten dollars and asked if he had telephoned his parents. Realizing what a tremendous opportunity this might be, Rose fibbed and told Estes that his parents would be delighted to have him sponsor their son’s education. True to his word, Estes paid for Rose’s education at NCI and sent forty dollars a month for living expenses. He also financed Rose’s first two years of college at SWCC and tried, unsuccessfully, to have him admitted to ACC. On several occasions in hotels and restaurants, Estes and Rose would flaunt Jim Crow customs, and Estes, whose wealth accounted for his ability to act and associate with whom he pleased, spoke before numerous black COCs during the late 1950s and early 1960s as one of the few southern whites who advocated their full equality before the law. As a man of great wealth, Estes was also well-connected. He maintained a relationship with Lyndon Johnson until the early 1960s, when Estes’s fiscal and legal problems threatened to undermine Johnson’s political credibility. Due to

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7 Rose interview.
his fraud convictions (which were later overturned) and claims that Johnson facilitated the assassination of his predecessor in the Oval Office, Estes quickly became a marginal figure in political and church circles. Nevertheless, his impact on Rose was tremendous. Rose named his first son Billie Sol and later delivered the eulogy for his patron’s wife.8

While Gray was fighting legal battles to overcome racial injustice, Rose worked through his pulpit to coordinate protest marches and economic boycotts. As he finished his education in the early 1960s, Rose began showing more interest in the work of movement leaders like Jim Bevel and Diane Nash. A few people, including Rose, who were associated with NCI ignored Keeble’s instructions when he told them not to participate in a Nashville march led by Bevel and Nash. Rose, along with his father and Franklin Florence, would also cause a stir on the campus of David Lipscomb College in 1963 when he sought entrance there. President Athens Clay Pullias called the police who escorted them off of the campus while many white students gathered around and booed the officers.9

Yet it was the death of Martin Luther King and the reaction of some of his fellow ministers in COCs that inspired Rose to radically alter his course. The epiphany began as he returned from Florida after the 1968 lectureship, the moment when some ministers had used the occasion of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination to publicly question the authenticity of the slain leader’s faith. Conversely, Rose realized how much had changed in his lifetime. “As I drove back to Toledo,” he recalled, “eating in desegregated restaurants and using the restroom facilities that were accessible to whites and blacks alike, I asked myself as I reflected on my Church’s attitude toward Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement, whether the light that was within us had itself

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.
blinded us to the true light.” Rose still preached and practiced a restorationist theology, but he began to question some of the fundamental claims of COCs. “Although at the time I had not settled completely in mind the question of the ‘One Church,’” he later confessed, “somehow I could not bring myself to believe that Martin Luther King, Jr. was outside the Will of God [emph. in original].” Over the next several years, he would grapple with theological questions that arose in his mind shortly after King’s death. “Like the Pharisees, we [COCs] were eager to cross land and sea to make one proselyte; to convert one Baptist or Methodist, but were less inclined to go across the street to feed the hungry or clothe the naked,” Rose opined. “While others were known for what they were and did, we were always known for what we said” [emph. in original]. Upon having this epiphany, Rose was overcome with guilt and shame. COCs “became spectators,” in his mind, “reapers of the benefits while others were participants in the making of a better America. Oh how ashamed I felt at times. While we emphasized the importance of baptism by immersion, weekly communion, liberal giving, the non use of instrumental music in the worship service on Sunday; we were humiliated and dehumanized by signs that read ‘colored only’ . . . on Monday.”

In the 1970s, Rose gradually began focusing his ministry more upon the life and teachings of Jesus, but he soon discovered that his growing disinterest in restorationism and exclusivism ostracized him from other ministers. People became increasingly wary about whether or not he was a “sound preacher.” His alma mater, SWCC, and some churches even rescinded speaking invitations. At the pinnacle of his popularity among COCs, when he was receiving nearly thirty invitations a year to hold revivals, he left the denomination. In 1979, he started a new church in Toledo that gave special attention to social activism. Success soon followed. He became

10 Rose, 38-40.
president of the local NAACP in 1982, having only joined the organization one month earlier.

Among other accomplishments, Rose succeeded with a program dubbed “Operation Fair Share” that used economic pressure to open up employment and business opportunities to Toledo’s African Americans. At the time, Rose vowed to “turn in our charge cards where we can’t turn in our time cards.” The difference was profound, as agreements worth more than fifty million dollars were negotiated for minority businesses and employees. Along with his work through the NAACP, Rose participated in nonviolent demonstrations that resulted in numerous arrests. He also brought such renowned and often controversial figures as Stokely Carmichael, Rosa Parks, Louis Farrakhan, and T. D. Jakes into his church to speak on special occasions. In the mid-1990s, Rose rejoined the church of his youth but maintained the beliefs that precipitated his break with COCs. Rose also moved back to Valdosta in 1996 where he continues to work as a social activist and remains a controversial figure within the denomination.\textsuperscript{11}

While Gray stayed in the South and maintained close ties to COCs and their theology, Rose made a name for himself outside of the South and, for a time at least, outside of the confines of COCs. Franklin Florence, a third black activist who was also educated at NCI, left the South like Rose but maintained his conservative theology like Gray. Florence moved to Rochester, New York in April 1959 where he became the minister of the Reynolds Street Church of Christ. Like Gray, his Christian disposition and disgust at racism would inspire his civil rights activities, but before he became a local leader in Rochester, Florence cultivated contacts with prominent white members of COCs. The restorationism and exclusivism that characterized COCs were also a part

\textsuperscript{11} Rose interview; and Rose, 4-12, 27, 84-87.
of Florence’s theology, and his interactions with white members reveal another way in which blacks and whites cooperated within the denomination.12

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Florence solicited donations for a new church building for his Rochester flock, and many of his letters went to whites within the denomination. Even more revealing is the fact that he also requested their expertise in organizing church ministries and in clarifying certain biblical passages. For example, Florence asked Gus Nichols, a conservative white preacher from Alabama, about his understanding of issues surrounding marriage, such as whether or not a person from COCs could “marry outside the faith” (i.e., marry someone from another denomination). Nichols sent a brief but cordial reply that addressed Florence’s questions. The young minister also maintained a sizable collection of sermons, primarily those broadcast over Nashville’s WLAC by notable white preachers from COCs. And like countless other COCs, the Reynolds Street Church of Christ made financial contributions to the \textit{Herald of Truth} radio program. Florence not only sought answers to theological questions, but he also used successful white ministers as a resource for his own ministry. At mid-century, the Madison Church of Christ in Nashville was one of the largest in the country. Florence actually borrowed organizational ideas from Madison and its minister, Ira North, to incorporate into his own church programs in Rochester. Florence and North exchanged personal letters, and North urged his young black counterpart to visit the Madison church.13

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12 Franklin D. R. Florence to Dr. John D. Young, 17 January 1961. Franklin Florence Papers, box 1, folder 10. Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

13 Gus Nichols to Franklin D. R. Florence Sr., 13 December 1958. Franklin Florence Papers, box 2, folder 24; 1963 Reynolds Street Church of Christ Program. Franklin Florence Papers, box 1, folder 1; and Ira North to Franklin D. Florence Sr., 26 January 1960. Franklin Florence Papers, box 2, folder 19. Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester. Numerous sermons by Batsell Barrett Baxter and a few by B. C. Goodpasture, Ira North, and J. P. Sanders can be found box 1, folders 31 and 32.
Through long letters, telephone conversations, or personal encounters, Florence worked tirelessly during the early years of his Rochester ministry to raise funds for a church building. His letters gave a history of “the work of the church” in Rochester and outlined possibilities for numerical and spiritual growth. Florence attended the lectureships at Abilene Christian College in 1961 where he made repeated requests for donations, and he also telephoned church leaders about his church’s financial needs. He emphasized his church’s independence and the progress that members, about one hundred in number, had made through their own efforts. “Everything that has been accomplished thus far has been done without outside help,” he insisted in one letter, “but we are presently in need of assistance if our demands are to be met.” And elsewhere, he wrote, “Our wish is to ask the church, to help us help ourselves.” Florence even sought help from Pat Boone, a member of COCs whose musical career made him one of the most popular recording artists in pre-Beatles America. Although white churches had often served as benefactors to black churches, Florence’s requests often elicited negative responses, a fact that might have helped foster the sense of frustration that he would one day express toward COCs, which he would later describe as “reactionary and racist.”

If Florence kept at least tenuous ties to whites within the denomination, his relationships with blacks never faltered. The Reynolds Street Church of Christ regularly donated money to NCI and SWCC, and Fred Gray was a guest speaker for the church in 1962, delivering a message titled “The Church in a Changing World.” In that same year, Florence was invited to speak at the NCI lectureship, returning to the place where he had recently delivered a baccalaureate address for the school’s graduates. These opportunities certainly depended upon the approval of

Marshall Keeble who, like other institutional figures in COCs, had a penchant for ensuring that only “sound doctrine” be spoken on his watch. In an era marked by sit-ins and freedom rides, Florence was noticeably silent on the issue of race relations at the baccalaureate service. His sermon was delivered exactly two weeks after white attackers firebombed freedom riders in Anniston, Alabama, but his words could have just as easily been spoken by a white minister in any COC. The sermon was titled “This Critical Hour,” and it included familiar harangues against sins—deteriorating families, juvenile delinquency, crime, liquor, and dishonesty in general—that preachers from all across the religious landscape lamented. Ironically, he cited a Bible verse—James 2:9, “But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin”—and urged his audience not to commit “the sin of respect of person[s].” This plea appeared alongside similar ones concerning greed and indifference. And in reciting a list of things that cannot save a person, Florence included legislation. “And Legislation,” he cried, “that holds God’s authority in contempt, oft ‘loosing wild tongues that hold not God in awe,’ forgetting that ‘the wicked shall be turned into hell with all the nations that forget God,’ says, ‘It is not in me to save you.’”

Florence always maintained a level of theological orthodoxy within COCs, yet he also became increasingly interested in the civil rights movement and social activism in general. By the mid-1960s, Florence was becoming an outspoken and well-connected activist in the city of Rochester. After the Southern Christian Leadership Conference dismissed the possibility of extending its activities into Rochester, Florence, now a prominent member of the local NAACP, secured speaking appearances from Malcolm X and later Stokely Carmichael. In 1965, following the suggestion of Saul Alinsky, a self-described radical and community organizer who had

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15 1960 Reynolds Street Church of Christ program and “Activities during 1962.” Franklin Florence Papers, box 1, folder 1; and Franklin Florence, “This Critical Hour” (sermon preached on 28 May 1961 at the baccalaureate service for NCI in Nashville, Tennessee). Franklin Florence Papers, box 1, folder 30. Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.
worked extensively with Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers, a group of community and
religious leaders from Rochester formed a new organization, FIGHT, an acronym for Freedom,
Integration, God, Honor, Today. (In a revealing change, the “I” was later said to represent
Independence.)

Florence became the president of FIGHT, and under his leadership, the group enjoyed
many successes. FIGHT focused primarily upon improving housing conditions, job training, and
employment opportunities for African Americans. Rochester enjoyed an unemployment rate that
occasionally dipped below 2%, but the rate for African Americans was consistently over 10%.
The disparity between black and white incomes was over two thousand dollars, the highest of any
city in New York state. Cost disparities in housing also posed another problem, as gross monthly
rent for whites averaged about twenty-five dollars less per month than for blacks. These
problems remained unaddressed, in part, because political representation in the city was all-
white. FIGHT waged its biggest battle from September 1966 to April 1967 over the hiring
practices of the Eastman Kodak Company. While Florence and FIGHT were not completely
successful in their attack on Kodak, many of their employment goals for the company and for the
city of Rochester were met by the early 1970s.

While Florence had much in common with Gray and Rose, he displayed a greater interest
in the politics of the black power movement. Along with numerous other cities across the nation,
Rochester suffered a riot in 1964, and FIGHT leaders occasionally alluded to the threat of
violence or social unrest to attain their goals. When Kodak attempted to undermine FIGHT’s
aims, Florence announced, “Black leaders in every ghetto across the nation are watching the

Historian 60, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 59-75; and Hughes, 304-305.

17 Wadhwani, 74-75.
Kodak-FIGHT controversy and several groups have offered any help [that] FIGHT request[s].” Alinsky once referred to Kodak as “a southern plantation transplanted in the north,” and other leaders warned that ignoring Rochester’s problems might escalate the conflict “to every negro ghetto in America.” When compromise between FIGHT and Kodak seemed increasingly unlikely, Florence warned, “The cold of February will give way to the war-in of spring and eventually to the long hot summer. What happens in Rochester in the summer of ‘67 is at the doorstep of Eastman Kodak.” Despite his successes in leading FIGHT and his prominence in the African American community, the Reynolds Street Church of Christ gradually became disillusioned with his leadership, and the congregation asked Florence to leave in 1970. He complied and, with a few members from the Reynolds Street church, formed a new church in Rochester, the Central Church of Christ, where he served as senior minister for over thirty-five years.18

The careers of Gray, Rose, and Florence illustrate at least three options that were open to African Americans within COCs, but for the most part, members of COCs simply did not take participate in the civil rights movement. These three men were exceptional in maintaining their denominational affiliation and participating in civil rights activism. To be sure, COCs have always included blacks who refused to accept the racism and segregation that seemed to be endemic to white churches and the general populace. In the first half of the twentieth century, G. P. Bowser turned away white patronage that relied on his subservience to Jim Crow, and he once refused to operate a new school for black children if they were required to enter through the back door. Likewise, R. N. Hogan, Bowser’s protege, frequently berated his white brothers and sisters for their racism through the pages of the Christian Echo. But these voices echoed only within

18 Ibid., 65, 70. Information regarding the split within Florence’s church appears in the collection description for the Franklin Florence Papers. See http://www.library.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=882.
the confines of the denomination. Bowser and Hogan did not attack segregation through the
courts like Gray; nor did they work for economic equality like Rose and Florence. They certainly
did not join forces with “denominational preachers.” Ultimately, Bowser, Hogan, and most other
black ministers were, like their white counterparts, more concerned with restoring New
Testament Christianity than with fighting social injustices. Thus, they might preach or write
about the evils of racism, but in their minds, there was never a cause to march in the streets or
join forces with a civil rights movement.19

The civil rights movement evoked different responses from some white church members.
After the Supreme Court’s Brown decision aroused discussion of integration in public grade
schools, some ministers revived old stories about racial origins, returning to the Bible to validate
white supremacy as divinely ordained. For example, on 15 August 1954, W. A. Cameron
appeared before the Disston Avenue Church of Christ in Gulfport, Florida. His sermon, titled
“The Origin and Development of the Negro Race,” proved popular enough that a nearby church
asked to hear the same sermon a week later. Cameron’s lesson began with an intricate
genealogical history of Noah and his descendants. He focused primarily on Noah’s son, Ham,
who fathered four sons, including two named Canaan and Cush. Cameron determined that a
number of Ham’s descendants called themselves Cushites and migrated to previously
uninhabited land south of Egypt that later became known as Ethiopia. According Cameron’s
reading of Genesis 9, Noah cursed Canaan and his descendants to perpetual servitude. Cameron,
as had many other whites before him (and not a few after), believed that this curse had modern

implications. “[T]he descendants of Canaan,” he surmised, “would always be the servants of all the other races of the whole world.”

Despite this conclusion, Cameron was critical of the slave trade that had brought Africans to the Americas. “Today, had it not been for the lustful greed of the unscrupulous class of white men infesting the earth, there would have been no Negro’s [sic] in America.” Without the slave trade, he continued, “the black man would be in his own country, where Jehovah put him, and left him, and wanted him.” Yet this critical evaluation did not temper his harsh racism. He told his audiences that if they wanted “to know how to treat the colored people (Descendants of Ham),” then they should “read Gods [sic] explicit instruction to the Jews on that particular subject [in] Deuteronomy 7:1-5.” This particular passage is an excerpt from one of Moses’s discourses to the Israelites, after they had escaped from Egypt but before they had reached “the land of promise.” Moses claimed that God would drive out the nations that already occupied the land, and then he gave these orders:

thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly.

Cameron urged his audience to “follow [God’s] instruction therein, and you will be on safe ground for time and eternity.”


21 Quotation from Deuteronomy 7:2b-4 (KJV).

22 Cameron, 7.
As if this affirmation of Mosaic violence was not enough, Cameron then listed a collection of biblical verses that buttressed his belief that the Bible sanctioned white supremacy, or at least taught black inferiority. He mentioned the complaints that Moses faced from his brother and sister for marrying a Cushite woman, and he recalled that King Solomon married a black woman who “ruined Solomon” and led him “away from God and into idolatry.” Cameron also cited a few verses where Cushites were described as servants. “Why prolong the line of evidence?” he asked. “Today, the negro is still serving the sentence placed upon him. Let us leave him where God and the Bible left him and all will be well.”

Cameron closed with more vituperative comments. Having determined the origin of the races, he turned to the social development of people with African ancestry. “It’s nill [sic],” he flatly stated. “They have always been cursed with a sense [sic] of fear, ignorance, superstition and an inferior[ity] complex.” In explaining exceptions to racial stereotypes, Cameron further claimed that “all those negro’s [sic] who have a generous fertilization of white blood have invariably left the evidence of it behind them. But the genuine negro article is just what he has always been.” He concluded the sermon by suggesting “to every white christian” that if they needed “a servant for any purpose,” then they should hire a black person and pay him or her well. “Remember the Negro is not responsible for being here,” Cameron stated. “Our progenitors brought them here, many of them against their will, which makes them the white mans [sic] problem.” Before ending his sermon, Cameron hearkened back to Deuteronomy one last time, urging his hearers to “let the white people of every state in the United States solve that problem in harmony with the word of God.”

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Ibid.

Cameron, 9.
Cameron’s sermon, preached three months after the Brown ruling, undoubtedly addressed questions that had arisen in the minds of many whites. Although de jure segregation was a post-Civil War development, preachers like Cameron had come to believe and teach that racial segregation originated with God and sacred scripture. Various efforts at racial integration, however sporadic and tentative in the mid 1950s, threatened the surety and sanctity of perceived truths about race and religion. Cameron’s message assured his audiences that racial segregation was part of God’s plan, and as such, it should be maintained at all costs.

As Cameron’s sermon responded to the Brown decision, a 1957 sermon by Leon Burns Sr., titled “Why Desegregation Will Fail,” reflected the skepticism for desegregation that many white southerners felt in Tennessee. Amid racial turmoil, preachers often felt compelled to speak a word from God, and in the fall of 1956, riots erupted in Clinton, Tennessee, after segregationists rallied their forces to prevent the implementation of judicial desegregation orders. Schools in Clinton were closed. During the following March, shortly after the schools in Clinton reopened, Burns delivered his oration to the West Seventh Street Church of Christ in Columbia, Tennessee. Many of his remarks centered upon the politics of race, rather than on any biblical or theological issues, so in this sense, his sermon was somewhat unusual for COCs. Recently, attention has been given to this sermon by other historians, including David Chappell, who finds in Burns’ utterances evidence that segregationists conceded that they could not garner biblical support for their positions. One comment in particular deserves careful scrutiny, as it has been misinterpreted by Chappell, who failed to give adequate attention to the hermeneutical approaches of COCs to the Bible. Burns stated, “The Bible does not give a positive command for or against segregation between Negroes and Whites, but it is clearly seen by necessary inference that segregation is an important part of Divine providence and purpose.” A cursory
reading would seem to vindicate Chappell’s use of Burns except that the phrase “necessary inference” has a special connotation for COCs. Necessary inference was one part of a threefold hermeneutic that COCs have traditionally used to interpret the Bible. COCs have long believed that the New Testament gives instructions in one of three ways: through direct commands, examples, and necessary inferences. Each component of this hermeneutic approach carries equal weight. About this phenomenon, historian Richard Hughes noted that within COCs, this hermeneutic had “harden[ed] into a virtual orthodoxy by the twentieth century.” Thus, the fact that the Bible, in Burns’s view, taught segregation by “necessary inference” was just as important as if it explicitly stated that black and white people should never interact.25

Indeed, Burns makes his sentiments more explicit in other portions of his sermon that Chappell simply neglects. For example, Burns insisted that “those forces behind integration” were not really interested in equal educational opportunities or in repealing segregation laws in general. “These are simply means to an end, and the end is free and unrestrained intermarriage between Negroes and Whites, and they will not be satisfied until they get it.” Much like Cameron, Burns proceeded to cite scripture where God was supposed to have condemned interracial marriage. “Any student of human nature should know that there has always been a strong sexual attraction in every nation for people of another nation,” he claimed. “This was clearly demonstrated by the Israelites when Joshua lead [sic] them into the promised land. God

knew this attraction existed and in order to keep the people from losing their identity completely, he gave them the solemn command not to intermarry with other nations.”

The final two sections of Burns’s sermon are even titled, “Old Testament Examples of Segregation” and “New Testament Teaching on This Subject.” In the former, he highlighted numerous examples that vindicated his belief that segregation was a biblical tenet that modern Americans should obey. Burns cited Leviticus 19:19, which states, “You shall not let your livestock breed with another kind. You shall not sow your field with mixed seed. Nor shall a garment of mixed linen and wool come upon you” (NKJV). Then he asked, “If such elements in the lower order of God’s creation were to be unmixed, does it not follow that the same principle would apply to human relationships?” From the book of Genesis, Burns reasoned that the descendants of Cain and Seth intermarried. The intermarriage of these two peoples “which God had by law segregated was the direct cause of the wickedness that brought on the great flood,” he claimed. Like Cameron, Burns also mentioned Noah’s curse and Deuteronomy 7. To these stories, he added vignettes from the life of the patriarch Abraham. “God’s refusal to accept Ishmael, Abraham’s son by an Egyptian woman,” Burns imagined, “is further proof that God intended Abraham’s blood line to be kept pure.” The care with which wives were found for Isaac and Jacob, Abraham’s son and grandson, “shows that God did not intend that they mix their blood with that of other nations,” Burns said.

Turning to the New Testament, Burns’s arguments for segregation were even more specious, but he remained firm in his conviction that it was vindicated by holy writ. Here he noted that in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles on the day of Pentecost

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26 Burns, 6-7.

27 Ibid., 14-15.
and caused them to speak in various languages so that people within earshot could hear the gospel in their native tongue. “If God had intended that in the Christian dispensation all racial, national, and language barriers were to be dissolved, this was the place to announce it.” Instead, God seemed to be confirming lingual distinctions and, in Burns’s judgment, segregation. He pointed out other scriptures where dissension arose between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The apostles taught that “the Jew could remain a Jew, and the Gentile remain a Gentile, but they would be one in their spiritual relationship to one another and to Christ.” Finally, Burns described a scene from the book of Revelation where the redeemed souls of all ages are gathered around God’s throne. “The appearance of all nations and races will not only enhance the praise given to God, but will demonstrate the love, wisdom and mercy of God’s eternal plan for man’s salvation,” Burns preached. Then he asked, “How could any sane person even think of demanding that all nations must be one before this great day comes[?] To do so is to rob Heaven of its praise and God of His eternal glory.” Burns clearly wanted no part of heaven on earth.28

With this peculiar logic, Burns earnestly believed that the Bible taught racial segregation, and therefore, he was bound to uphold it as a biblical principle to obey. “[I]f I believed that integration of the races was even slightly suggested in the Bible . . . I would dedicate my life to bringing this about,” he said in closing. “[B]ut in the light of overwhelming evidence both in and out of the Bible, I cannot believe this, and so have dedicated myself—without prejudice toward any race or individual—to maintaining segregation in our schools and in all realms of social contact as the only Christian, logical, and practical way to promote peace and good will among all men.” Unlike Cameron, Burns summarily condemned any hint of violence and hatred, a notable assertion given his city’s racial history. Eleven years before his sermon, Columbia had

28 Ibid., 16-17.
been the scene of a race riot, or what might better be termed a violent, state-sanctioned assault on
the black community, but Burns urged his white listeners in particular to remove “all prejudice
and hatred” from their hearts and to “deplore all acts of violence.” Nevertheless, he remained
adamant that racial segregation was divinely ordained.29

Although Cameron aligned himself with the most theologically conservative element
within Churches of Christ, Burns was definitely included in the denomination’s mainstream. His
occasional speaking engagements at the Harding College Bible Lectures, both before and after
the delivery and subsequent publication of this sermon, suggest that he was accepted within the
denomination and among his colleagues as a doctrinally sound and able preacher. He even
appeared on the same program with the venerable black preacher, Marshall Keeble. These
details about Burns do not quantify the churches or members who subscribed to his particular
view of race relations, but his good standing among his peers shows that he was not a marginal
figure.30

As evidenced by his appearance at lectureships, Burns’s influence extended beyond his
local church. The same could be said of “Why Desegregation Will Fail.” The sermon was
broadcast over a local radio station, and in anticipation of the high demand, the West Seventh
Street Church of Christ published a pamphlet with the full text of the sermon. The pamphlets
were sold in bulk: one dollar for ten copies, four dollars for fifty, or six dollars for one hundred.
In this form, the sermon was placed in church tract boards, available for church members or
visitors to have. Thus, at least in some COCs, Burns’s sermon appeared alongside pamphlets

29 Ibid., 17; and Robert W. Ikard, No More Social Lynchings (Franklin, Tennessee: Hillsboro Press, 1997).
30 For example, see Leon C. Burns, “Opportunities Presented to the Church by Religious Conditions in the World,”
in Harding College Bible Lectures (1959): Some Current Problems and Opportunities Facing the Church (Austin,
that discussed baptism, instrumental music in worship (a sin to the a cappella COCs), and the evils of alcohol and gambling. It could be picked up by members who wanted to learn what the Bible said about racial segregation and those who needed the Bible to vindicate what they already believed.31

Burns’s homiletic endeavors to preserve segregation also inspired other preachers to do the same. On 22 September 1957, less than three weeks after nine African Americans attempted to desegregated Little Rock’s Central High School, Guthrie Dean, a COC preacher from Judsonia, Arkansas, preached a sermon over KWCB in Searcy that acknowledged Burns’s earlier effort. This sermon on race was not Dean’s first. During the previous year, he was still serving a congregation in Ruston, Louisiana, when he delivered a message, titled “The Christian Attitude Toward Integration,” over that city’s radio station, KRUS. Unlike the discourses of Cameron and Burns, Dean’s remarks made very little use of scripture. He opted instead for a history lesson.32

Dean’s commentary on American history and race relations was notable for its patriotism, its defense of the Old South, and its attempt to associate the plaintiffs and Supreme Court justices involved in the Brown decision with the Communist Party. In contrast to Cameron, Dean was a southern apologist, so he began with an account of American slavery that emphasized how “early Americans are not to be judged too harshly for accepting this practice” and how “all slaves . . .

31 Burns, title page, 1.


This sermon was located among the papers of James Bales whose handwriting seems to have changed the title. Parentheses appear around “The Christian,” and a question mark appears after the word “Christian.” The name “Guthrie Dean’s” is written above, and an arrow was drawn to suggest that Bales’s believed the sermon was more about Dean’s perspective than “the Christian” one. This discovery would otherwise be insignificant except for the uproar that Bales would later cause with his exposé of Martin Luther King Jr.
would have been freed by the natural growth of a new nation in its efforts to live by its own Constitution.” Thus, Dean contended that the Civil War had nothing to do with slavery and everything to do with states’ rights; that Reconstruction was a disaster; and that the KKK was composed of “a group of honest and sincere men who had no desire to harm the Negro.” His veneration of the Lost Cause and its rhetoric was most apparent when he claimed that from the end of Reconstruction, “the Whites and the Negroes in all sections of our country got along increasingly well.”

According to Dean, all was well in American race relations until FDR recognized the Soviet Union and the Communist Party began fomenting racial strife. Dean’s attacks spared no one. He criticized Justice Hugo Black for accepting awards from the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and Chief Justice Earl Warren for forging a unanimous decision in Brown, “a thing which he obviously agreed to do before he was appointed to the Court.” Dean charged witnesses for the plaintiffs with being members of numerous “Communist-front organizations.” About religious leaders who claimed that racial segregation was wrong, he said, “[T]hey know nothing of the higher principles of Christianity, or of humanity.”

Over halfway through his remarks, Dean finally turned to the Bible, claiming that it “abundantly proves that God intended that there be many nations and races upon the earth.” In similar fashion to Burns, Dean suggested that Christianity “makes no provision for all men to be equal while in this material life.” He pointed to Pauline texts from the New Testament that instructed servants to remain with their masters and masters to treat their servants well. Dean also addressed Galatians 3:28, a passage often quoted by Christians who were favorably disposed

33 Dean, “The Christian Attitude Toward Integration.”
34 Ibid.
toward integration. The verse states, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male for female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (KJV). “If this verse proves the scripturalness of desegregation,” he exclaimed, “it also demands that there be no segregation between male and female. Hence the division between male and female in public restrooms and in dormitories would be unscriptural.”

While Dean focused less upon biblical texts and more upon the relationship that he perceived between communism and integration, he still understood this component of the black freedom struggle as “theological drama.” “There should be no doubt in our minds,” he emphasized, “that this desegregation battle will be fought along religious lines.” Dean was so disturbed by the nature of the battle that he feared the potential of physical violence. “[T]he bloodiest wars of human history have been religious wars,” he warned, before noting that the newspapers had recently been filled with “mob violence, race difficulties, forced integration, and murmuring [sic] of another Civil War.” His greatest fears were the atheism of the Communist Party and those people who espoused racial integration as a Christian principle. These two notions threatened not only “the southern way of life” but also Dean’s entire worldview.

Criticism of distant entities such as the federal government and Supreme Court justices soon gave way to more localized attacks, and some ministers used the church’s restoration theology to appeal to whites who were weary of social turmoil and racially charged issues. In this manner, Christian primitivism was used as a tool to highlight the shortcomings of

35 Ibid.
participants, especially Christian ministers, who were involved in the civil rights movement. The
New Testament did not speak of social or political protest; Jesus had not organized marches
against the Romans; and the apostle Paul even sent a slave back to his master. These
components of biblical narratives were used by some COC ministers to disparage activists who
claimed to find inspiration for social protest in their Christian faiths. Thus, white COCs in
particular sought to capitalize on the discomfort of the white southern populace by emphasizing
the church’s plea for a return to New Testament Christianity. Implicit in that appeal was a desire
for preachers and activists to attend to spiritual matters rather than political or social ones. By
upholding COCs as a nondenominational church devoted solely to practicing New Testament
Christianity, whites disturbed by the social activism of denominational ministers could depict
COCs as a haven for people who wished to practice Christianity without the discomfort of having
a denominational hierarchy pushing racial equality.

This perspective was personified in a white preacher from Montgomery, Alabama named
O. B. Porterfield who was minister of the Cleveland Avenue Church of Christ. On Wednesday
night, 24 March 1965, as many as 25,000 people were preparing for the next day’s march up
Dexter Avenue to the steps of the state capitol, the final leg of a trek that had begun for some in
Selma. The protest originated in the suppression of the black franchise in Alabama’s Black Belt
counties, particularly Dallas County and its county seat, Selma, where just over two weeks ago,
Alabama state troopers had repelled peaceful demonstrators with billy clubs and tear gas. Bloody
Sunday, as it came to be called, inspired people from around the country to descend upon
Alabama a few weeks later when another march was launched. Still disturbed by the negative
publicity of Bloody Sunday and the Montgomery bus boycott less than ten years earlier, many
white citizens of Montgomery were especially wary of what the following day might bring.
The demonstration, supported in part by clergy from across the country, called attention to the thousands of African Americans who were prohibited from voting in a country that claimed to be an international advocate of democracy. Ironically, Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders were planning the next day’s activities at the home of Fred Gray, a local attorney, civil rights activist, and COC minister. Gray was a pivotal figure in the legal arena of the fight against segregation, particularly in Alabama. Although he only participated in the last day’s walk to the capitol, Gray had obtained the necessary court order to protect the marchers on their journey from Selma to Montgomery. On the morrow, he would be one of several civil rights leaders to meet with Governor Wallace about the franchise, but Gray was not the only one from COCs to be heard in Montgomery.37

That night, Porterfield appeared on local television station WKAB with a speech that analyzed the impending march and especially the ministers who were participating. His opening remarks recounted the threat of communism, the rising divorce rate, and the increasing crime rate among young people, but he wasted little time in reaching the main point of his message. “We need a unity movement tonight,” he pleaded. “Since the Church of Christ had its beginning about 2000 years ago we have been pleading for people to stay with God’s word. . . . For a long time we have pleaded with preachers to stay out of politics and preach just the Gospel. For that reason neither I nor any Minister of the Church of Christ as far as we know has been seen parading up and down the street or praying on the street corners to be seen of men. Our job first and foremost is to serve Christ, save souls and not prove points.” In the context of the Selma to Montgomery march, Porterfield used the restorationist rhetoric of COCs as a rallying cry for disgruntled whites. And he was obviously unaware that a fellow COC preacher—one that he

knew from their days of working together as circulation managers for a Montgomery newspaper—was playing a pivotal role in the march.\textsuperscript{38}

Porterfield continued his sermon by arguing that preachers should be doing a better job in curtailing the aforementioned social ills by giving greater attention to the teaching of the scriptures. On behalf of the Cleveland Avenue Church of Christ and himself, he urged “the so-called preachers from out of the state that have invaded this city and this state . . . [to] get off the streets, get out of the march, go back to your pulpit, but on the way back study to see what God said to do before you enter the pulpit again.” Porterfield also turned his attention to the conduct of a few marchers. He was so incensed that preachers would even associate themselves with some protestors, including a “single pregnant girl” and people who were “committing fornication on a street in Selma and also in Montgomery,” that he asked, “Is this the type person that you ministers are upholding tonight and fighting for social equality for[?]” Porterfield complained about those people who were arrested for indecent exposure because, having no other choice, they “began to ‘relieve’ themselves . . . to the extent that it flowed down Dexter Avenue for approximately 1 or 2 blocks.” Again, he demanded, “The least that you could do tonight is cease requesting so-called civil rights and social equality until you present to the people of Montgomery a higher type person and better morals.”\textsuperscript{39}

As his sermon progressed, Porterfield’s disdain for both the ministers and the other protestors only seemed to build, and he began citing scriptures to validate his argument that the march and the ministers who supported it were displeasing to God. First, he mentioned the New

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\textsuperscript{38} O. B. Porterfield, [untitled] (sermon preached on 24 March 1965 at television station WKAB in Montgomery, Alabama). Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; and Fred Gray to Barclay Key, 9 February 2006. Original in possession of author.  \\

\textsuperscript{39} Porterfield, untitled sermon.
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Testament story of Onesimus, a slave who converted to Christianity and was sent back to his master by the apostle Paul. “Don’t you think tonight,” Porterfield opined, “that if Onesimus could live as a Christian as a slave . . . that anybody that wants to go home to Heaven whether they are white or colored can do so in the country and the state that we live in?” He reiterated the point by stating, “It is good to vote, yes, and it is good to be educated, yes, but neither of these things are necessary for salvation.” Especially perturbed by the number of young people in the march, Porterfield also cited Proverbs 22:6 and Ephesians 6. Having ventured close enough to the march to observe its participants, Porterfield exclaimed that “a large number of these boys and girls are the scum of the earth!”

Halfway through his speech, and in keeping with what had become customary for white segregationists, Porterfield leveled the charge of communism against the civil rights movement, noting in particular that some marchers were communists and therefore atheists. Although he did not accuse specific people of belonging to the Communist Party, he did provide several names and anecdotes that would appall his mostly white audience. Porterfield pointed out that Mario Savio of Free Speech Movement fame was participating in the march, and he informed viewers that students within this movement at the University of California “for no reason whatsoever, wrote a four letter sex word and paraded” around campus with it. Students from Michigan who had helped collect money and clothes for the Vietcong were also in Montgomery. And one young person, Porterfield noted, gave a speech in a church and “used the same sex word . . . except he added I-n-g to it.” Porterfield, along with most of white Montgomery, was petrified.

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40 Ibid. Proverbs 22:6 states, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (KJV), while the mention of Ephesians 6 refers to the first three verses of that chapter: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (KJV).

41 Ibid.
Throughout the second half of his sermon, Porterfield continued to combine criticism of the civil rights movement with biblical references, appeals for primitive Christianity, and praise for state and local officials. He encouraged his audience to visit a COC, where one could “go to hear the Word of God, and not a rabble rouser. You will not hear freedom songs,” Porterfield continued, “but instead you will hear singing and praising to God. You will not hear bad things about the Sheriff or Col. Lingo or the Governor but you will meet to take the Lord’s Supper. . . . The Church of Christ deals with Godly things in Godly ways.” He even took the time to explain how COCs were locally autonomous and did not belong to the National Council of Churches. Porterfield warned his audience that if they belonged to a denomination whose church was a member of the council, then their money was being directed toward the council’s activities, including its opposition to government-sponsored prayer in public schools and its heavy investment in the Delta ministry. In what was undoubtedly an appeal to potential new members, he assured his audience that the “money given to a Church of Christ is used to preach the Gospel and to help the needy.”

Despite his fiery rhetoric about the march in general, Porterfield’s specific criticisms of Martin Luther King Jr. were relatively mild and possibly quite curious in the minds of his listeners. After quoting from Psalm 111:9 (“holy and reverend is his name”), Porterfield revived an old adage among COCs that hearkened back to the denomination’s egalitarian roots. He noted that men like King and Ralph Abernathy should not be called “Reverend” because that term was only used once in the English Bible and that occasion was in reference to God. To use the term as a title for men was sacrilegious and “a down right sin and a disgrace in the eyes of Almighty God.” At the end of his message, Porterfield would also insist that King was “not the perfect

42 Ibid. For more on the activities of the National Council of Churches in the South, see Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).
leader” and that he enjoyed the comforts of a house trailer while other marchers were forced to take shelter under trees and tents. Porterfield also included a barrage of indirect attacks on movement leaders, citing another biblical passage, Titus 3:1, to voice his displeasure over anyone breaking the law, regardless of what that law might be. At this juncture, he commended Colonel Al Lingo, head of the Alabama State Troopers, and the sheriffs of Montgomery and Dallas Counties, Mac Sim Butler and Jim Clark. Just over two weeks after Bloody Sunday, Porterfield expressed his gratitude to these men who, in his words, “have risked their lives and . . . gone to the last degree in order to protect the citizens of the State and the intruders from danger.” After lauding their work, he issued a special invitation to these three men and Governor Wallace to worship with the Cleveland Avenue Church of Christ. Porterfield promised that “you will be treated with the courtesy you deserve, and we will honor you by complimenting you for these trying hours that you have endured.”

In his closing remarks, Porterfield returned to the scriptures, seeking to further discredit the strong presence of the clergy in the march. A number of clergymen donned their collars during the protest, and Porterfield criticized this practice. He cited Matthew 23:5 and asked, “why is it you haven’t seen a Church of Christ minister dressed in such a way?” Because, he answered, “the Pharisees and Scribes were condemned for changing their type clothing in order to be seen of men.” Porterfield quoted the Golden Rule and promised to send a copy of his sermon to President Johnson, requesting that he “practice the Golden Rule and get this unholy, ungodly mess out of our streets, if he does not want it in his home.” He turned to 1 Peter 4:16, an oft-quoted passage by overtly religious participants in the civil rights movement, and pointed out that the previous verse instructs the reader not to suffer “as an evil doer, or as a busy body in other

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43 Porterfield, untitled sermon. Titus 3:1 states, “Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work” (KJV).
men’s matters,” a clear description of the marchers in Burns’s mind. Finally, he directed his audience to the Sermon on the Mount. Porterfield instructed those, “white or colored,” who might have been mistreated or imposed upon to turn the other cheek or go the second mile.\textsuperscript{44}

In the end, Porterfield wanted all of Montgomery, but especially its white citizens, to know that COCs were an alternative to the social discord, an alternative to belonging to a denomination whose ministers or money might have been aiding the march. “[W]e are humble as we possibly can be, we love one another, and the preacher does the very best at every minute to set a good example,” he stated. “Ministers of the church \textit{sic} of Christ . . . are striving to preach the word of God as best they know how, and not be entangled with the things of this world.” In a final plea for citizens to speak out against the march and to stay at home rather than participate, he contrasted King, the movement’s leader, with Jesus, the church’s leader. “[T]he Leader we have will absolutely show us the right way. Isn’t this what the Church really is to be, isn’t this what the world is seeking for tonight, a \textit{real restoration of simple New Testament Christianity}?” [emph. in original].\textsuperscript{45}

Together, Cameron, Burns, and, to a lesser extent, Dean utilized the Bible in their arguments against integration, but Porterfield best exemplified how a COC minister used his primitivist faith to oppose the civil rights movement. Like the others, he employed the scriptures, but in contrast to them, he did not debate the intricate details of integration. Rather than debate integration, Porterfield attempted to denigrate those people, ministers in particular, whose Christian consciences led them to support the civil rights movement and the Selma to

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. Matthew 23:5 states, “But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,” while 1 Peter 4:16 says, “Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf” (KJV).

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
Montgomery march. With the battle over integration having already been fought and seemingly lost, Porterfield demanded that preachers occupy themselves with only spiritual matters.

Similar sentiments facilitated the publication in 1967 of a controversial book, *The Martin Luther King Story*, by prolific author, college professor, and anticommunist crusader James Bales. George Benson, the longtime president of Harding College, and B. C. Goodpasture, the popular editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, encouraged Bales to unleash his anticommunist pen against King. Despite their prominence within and even outside of COCs, sources reveal little about the attitudes of Benson and Goodpasture toward the civil rights movement. Although Harding College finally allowed black students in 1963, Benson continued preaching sermons that revealed his skepticism about desegregation and concerns over interracial sex. “Before God, all men are equal,” he stated in a 1966 sermon, but “in like manner there is no reason to think the Lord wants a mixing of the races and the creating of just one mongrel race.” Meanwhile, Goodpasture cultivated a close relationship with the famous black preacher, Marshall Keeble. Their relationship exemplified the paternalism characteristic of many southern whites. Keeble’s ministry relied heavily on Goodpasture’s personal endorsements and his ability to secure funds from white patrons. Given the *Advocate’s* general silence on race relations and the civil rights movement in particular, Goodpasture was certainly no supporter of King or any aspect of the African American freedom struggle.46

In many respects, Bales was an enigmatic figure within COCs. He never opposed school integration but was always wary of civil rights activists and the “lawlessness” that seemed to follow them. Bales definitely perceived communism as a bigger threat than integration, equal access to public facilities, or the black franchise, but he could not shake the idea that the Communist Party helped foment the racial discord that became so prevalent in the 1960s. Notwithstanding encouragement from Benson and Goodpasture, as author of *The Martin Luther King Story*, he bears ultimate responsibility for its contents, and its publication helped widen the growing chasm that existed between blacks and whites within COCs.

Bales provides an excellent example of the struggle that waged in the minds of many whites during the civil rights movement, and his perspective sheds some light on viewpoints within COCs. In word and theory, he believed that freedom and liberty should be extended to everyone, and his appropriation of Christianity cultivated a desire to practice goodwill toward all people. Bales genuinely perceived communism as a direct and immediate threat to those ideals, and his patriotic zeal prevented him from recognizing the injustices born of institutional racism. When the country seemed to erupt in chaos, he began to view social protest as an attack upon those principles that he championed most. In sum, Bales’s fear of social disorder made him suspicious of any racial change and its advocates at the very time when Christian faith and democratic spirit were inspiring others to work for the extension of civil rights to all citizens.

While these examples highlight the perspectives of many whites, the COCs included a remarkable number of blacks who also expressed opposition to the civil rights movement. Marshall Keeble, arguably the most prominent preacher—black or white—within COCs through the middle of the twentieth century, expressed his opposition to civil rights activities on numerous occasions. Floyd Rose, a student of Keeble’s at the Nashville Christian Institute (NCI)
from 1950 to 1957, recalled an occasion when Martin Luther King Jr. was scheduled to speak at Nashville’s Fisk University. Several of the students at NCI desperately wanted to hear King speak, but they were not allowed to attend. Keeble told Rose that King was “the worst enemy that the Church of Christ had.” Students at NCI also wanted to recruit a school alumnus, Fred Gray, to speak at their lectureship. A petition was circulated among NCI students in an effort to convince Keeble, who was also the school’s president, to invite Gray to speak. Keeble refused, telling Rose that Gray had gotten “too smart.” Gray, who greatly admired Keeble and was always proud to be associated with him and NCI, claimed to understand his mentor’s position. “A portion of his preaching and work in the church had been sponsored by white members of the Church of Christ,” Gray wrote in his autobiography. “I am quite confident that it was difficult for him to understand how one of his former boy preachers would now be standing in courtrooms fighting against racial discrimination.”

Keeble was not the only black preacher who expressed opposition to King and the civil rights movement. During the first week of April 1968, black COC preachers were conducting their annual lectureship. The host church was the Golden Heights Church of Christ in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. On Thursday, April 4, Floyd Rose was sitting in the church auditorium and listening to various preachers when someone handed him a note that said King had been shot. Rose sat beside Franklin Florence, a minister and activist from Rochester, New York, and he shared the note with him. The two exited the building and went to Rose’s car where they heard

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over the radio that King had been killed. The two cried together before collecting their emotions and reentering the building.  

Shortly after returning to their seats, they were stunned to hear what was said next. Columbus Grimsley, minister of the host church, received a note with the solemn news. Between speakers, he entered the pulpit and made the grim announcement to the audience. “I just got a note here where Martin Luther King was shot and killed in Memphis tonight. That just goes to show you sometimes you can push people too far.” Grimsley then put the note in his pocket and announced the next speaker on the program. Rose and Florence were stunned. “This is the only church in the world that would ignore this man’s death,” they later told Grimsley. “Can we at least send his wife a telegram or hold a news conference or say something?” Two days later, the leaders in charge of the lectureship finally relented and permitted a sympathy telegram to be sent to Coretta Scott King on behalf of all the ministers in attendance. Roosevelt Wells, the minister who read the telegram to the full assembly, ended his remarks by noting, “Of course we know [King] wasn’t a Christian.” Later, another African American preacher named Jacob McClinton entered into a discussion with Rose about King. “Floyd, I know you don’t like it,” McClinton insisted, “but Martin Luther King is in hell burning now if this book [the Bible] can be trusted.”

These vignettes recall a time before King had been, in the words of Tyson, “filled with whatever generic good wishes the occasion dictates.” They illustrate two significant points about African Americans in COCs. First, they generally shared the exclusivist mentality of their white counterparts. Over time, the restorationist theology of COCs had gradually led them to believe that they were members of the only true church and that other expressions of Christianity were

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48 Rose interview.

misguided, even if sincere. Thus, many black church members felt closer to their white brothers and sisters in the faith than they did to King and other black activists who were ostensibly working for their social, educational, political, and economic improvement. For many African Americans, the insular world of COCs prevented them from seeing the broader implications of the civil rights movement. When racial identities were subordinated under the guise of Christian unity, blacks and whites took comfort in their self-perception as the “true church” vis-à-vis “the denominations.” Most civil rights leaders belonged to the latter and were, therefore, ultimately detrimental to the church. African Americans in COCs took greater comfort in their good standing before God and their eternal salvation than in the possibility of being able to attend a white school, enter a front door, or vote in political elections.50

Second, the opposition of black ministers within COCs to the civil rights movement should be understood, as Gray noted, in the context of white patronage. Many congregations taught “spiritual equality” on Sundays but practiced inequality the rest of the week. Indeed, “spiritual equality in Christ” served as a shibboleth for many whites whose status in society went largely unchallenged in a denomination more preoccupied with restorationist theology and the great beyond than matters of social justice in the here and now. White church members could claim to abhor racial prejudice and offer support to black churches, preachers, and schools, even while maintaining segregated colleges in the South and generally ignoring racial discrimination in economics, education, politics, and social customs.

Marshall Keeble was well aware of this arrangement, and Rose once confronted the elderly preacher about it. “Why don’t you just tell them?! You got to know this [segregation] is wrong. Just tell them! . . . Somebody ought to just tell them. And they respect you. You’re the only one

50 Tyson, 107.
they let in their pulpits. You’re the only one they let speak in the universities. Tell them!” On this occasion, Keeble had listened to Rose’s harangue in silence, but as his former student got up to leave, he finally responded. “Floyd, you want me to tell them?! Just tell them?!” Keeble asked. “Then . . . how these kids going to go to school? If I tell them—I hate this as much as you do—but if I tell them what’s going to happen to this school?” White church members who knew Keeble would have been surprised at even this expression of frustration. For them, Keeble appeared to personify what blacks should be: content with their station in life and focused solely on the Lord’s work. In fact, Keeble disliked the indignities of the Jim Crow South as much as anyone. Yet, his manner of coping—immersing himself in preaching and working tirelessly to uplift black churches and to educate black youths—was an archaic and ultimately unacceptable response to the younger blacks who were more enamored by freedom rallies, sit-ins, and protest marches. Despite their disdain for Keeble’s compliance with white leaders, several of his students honed their leadership and speaking skills under his guidance before becoming strong voices for civil rights movements across the country.51

In the late 1960s, and especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King, some black and white ministers within COCs reassessed their attitudes and the disposition of COCs in general toward race relations. Several race relations forums were organized and conducted across the country, and COC periodicals such as the 20th Century Christian and the Christian Chronicle published articles by blacks and whites that tackled racially sensitive topics. At the pinnacle of its popularity in 1968, the Herald of Truth broadcast a series of sermons on race relations that were preached by John Allen Chalk, who at the age of thirty was quickly becoming the denomination’s star preacher. Yet these overtures arrived late, and in the long run, they did

51 Gray interview; and Rose interview.
little to change COCs. The closing of NCI and the transfer of its assets to David Lipscomb
College only increased the distrust that many blacks had toward whites within the denomination
and, while there were tentative signs of racial reconciliation in some quarters, black churches
increasingly attained economic independence from white churches, thus negating a primary basis
for their relationships within COCs. Meanwhile, white churches congratulated themselves for
their longtime support of black churches that could now operate independently. In subsequent
decades and with little reason to interact, black and white churches forged new directions that
excluded the likelihood of interracial camaraderie or cooperation.
CHAPTER 7  
THE RECKONING

During the 1960s, the civil rights movement enjoyed notable victories in the halls of Congress, even if white southerners were often reticent to comply with federal mandates. By 1970, many public schools in the South were desegregating, and African Americans were beginning to win political offices that were not previously accessible. COCs were also evolving. By 1965, all COC colleges were nominally open to qualified applicants. Both black and white churches continued to reconcile their self-understanding as “the New Testament church” with the racial divisions that marked their congregations. The civil rights movement had not only challenged the administration of a “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” to borrow Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, but it challenged churches—especially those in the “Bible Belt”—to reevaluate the implications of Christian faith and practice.

While the latter years of the 1960s are marked in popular imagination by political turmoil and social unrest, this era was also a time of reckoning for the faithful. COCs assessed themselves and the changing dynamics of race through a series of media programs and race relations workshops. Discussions were sometimes heated, and denominational infighting even extended into the courts when the Nashville Christian Institute (NCI) closed and its assets were transferred to David Lipscomb College. And while Marshall Keeble treated controversy as anathema during his life, his death—which occurred only sixteen days after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination—provoked heated exchanges about their respective careers. Although Keeble was largely unknown outside of the insular world of COCs, the timing of his death made comparisons to King inevitable. Assessments of these two disparate, African American preachers illuminate much about common understandings of race and religion during that era.
What follows chronicles the tumultuous years of the mid and late 1960s as they pertain to race relations in COCs. The chapter specifically seeks to answer questions regarding the denomination’s response to the increasing militancy of some civil rights activists and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. In the wake of these events, COCs—often for the first time—made concerted efforts toward racial reconciliation within the denomination. Without a denominational hierarchy offering organized direction, COCs illustrate the variety of options pursued by both black and white believers. Given their biracial membership, COCs were uniquely poised to facilitate interracial cooperation and dialogue. However, black and white churches, with few exceptions, did not find interracial cooperation desirable or necessary to their existence. Black churches depended less and less on white patronage and turned their attention to problems of crime, education, and poverty that particularly affected their congregants. The growing presence of Black Muslims served as a call to arms for churches who conceived Jesus as the only path to eternal salvation. White churches, composed of members who were increasingly disillusioned by the militancy of black activists, were all too eager to turn away from their black brothers and sisters in the faith. These churches increasingly looked abroad for ways to invest their missionary dollars, and they also joined the broader evangelical community by creating and promoting programs for young people.

This component of the story parallels broader developments throughout the country and affirms the enduring truth of the “proverb” popularized by King: “It is appalling,” he often said, “that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.” If whites were ready to repent of their sins by 1970, to use religious parlance, blacks had ample reason not to simply forgive and forget. Between legal victories, gradual political gains, and growing economic strength, black churches gladly forged a direction of their own. Despite the
similar theologies that characterized black and white COCs, or even black and white congregants from other evangelical churches, Sunday morning continues to be the most segregated time of the week.¹

COCs prided themselves as being the church. The unity of the body of Christ was a doctrinal point wrought with significance for the church’s self-perception. Jesus’s prayer for unity among his followers in the Gospel of John was often used to refute Baptists, Methodists, or other “denominationalists” who might downplay the significance of church affiliation. The “one body” described in Pauline literature had come to be identified as COCs in the minds of its congregants, both black and white. But in the mid 1960s, several black members—young ministers in particular—determined that COCs had failed miserably to fulfill the biblical mandate for unity, an important component of the church’s claim to have restored New Testament Christianity. “To the extent that we have made that claim a reality in our doctrine and worship,” black minister Hubert Locke wrote in 1965, “we can be humbly grateful to God and proud of our position in the religious world. To the degree, however, that we have failed to heed one of the cardinal, basic, fundamental teachings of Scripture, that ‘God has made of one blood all men to dwell upon the face of the earth,’ that in Christ ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free but all are one in Him,’ to this degree have we made a mockery of the Gospel and of our restoration claims.”²

While both black and white members often collaborated in efforts to establish separate churches, the perseverance of segregation in church colleges and discrimination elsewhere left many black ministers questioning this fundamental supposition about the COCs and unity. Even

after all of the colleges had admitted a few black students, gross forms of discrimination persisted throughout the denomination. For example, during a winter revival in Newnan, Georgia in 1964, minister Andrew Hairston needed a baptistry to immerse those people who sought conversion. COCs have always emphasized the significance of full immersion of adult believers for the remission of sins. “This is the universal doctrine of the Church of Christ,” Hairston noted, as he recalled his Newnan experience. This precise method and purpose for baptism “can be rightly used as a test of fellowship,” he added. Initially, Hairston facilitated the transport of his new converts to Atlanta, about forty miles northeast of Newnan, where they could be baptized inside his Simpson Street Church of Christ. He soon grew weary of this arrangement, especially since there was another Church of Christ in Newnan with a baptistry.

Alongside one of the Simpson Street church elders, Hairston approached the minister of the local white church who gladly welcomed Hairston to use the church’s facilities. After a few baptisms, however, local whites in Newnan began to grumble about the appearance of “race mixing.” The fact that blacks were baptizing inside, immersing themselves in water usually reserved for whites, only heightened their concerns. When the revival closed, the elders of the white church asked Hairston not to use their building any more. Hairston was appalled. His shock was further aggravated by the suggestion that next time he should inquire about the possibility of using a black Baptist church, one of the very denominations that COCs were presumably trying to subvert. Hairston wrote in the Christian Echo, “If a Negro Baptist Church is willing to grant us use of their baptisery [sic] and the so-called ‘WHITE CHURCH OF CHRIST’ will not, it seems that the Baptist are [sic] closer to the kingdom than they.” Not only was the request that Hairston no longer use the white church offensive, the white elders

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seemingly undermined some of the very theology that COCs valued most. Hairston concluded that “all so called CHURCHES OF CHRIST ought to stop being called Church of Christ and take on the name ‘CHURCH OF THE WHITE MAN,’ and any Church of Christ among Negroes condoning such practices ought to be called the ‘CHURCH OF THE NEGRO.’”

Hairston later took up the topic of religious division for the Echo, reiterating earlier remarks made by Locke. “If we have preached in the Church of Christ for years, division is sinful and wrong and therefore hinders one being acceptable to the Lord, disqualifies an organization or institution from being the true Church, where does that put the present day Church of Christ?” he asked. Noting that racial segregation was a defining characteristic of COCs, Hairston leveled a damning accusation, equating the church with other denominations. “It seems that there is one primary difference between the division in the Churches of Christ and that in the Religious World in general. They have labeled their division with the respectable term of denominationalism and we have refused to get a name for ours and just go on calling it UNITY.”

Young black ministers like Hairston were weary of maintaining the facade of Christian unity with whites who long maintained segregated colleges and who allowed public opinion to dictate the use of their church facilities. To be sure, some white members were also appalled at Hairston’s story of the Newnan church. “I cannot conceive of a Church of Christ refusing the use of their [sic] baptistry to assist lost souls in obeying the Gospel of Christ,” one Alabama reader wrote to the Echo. “Yes, I am Southern and white,” he added, “but I try to be Christian.” But stories similar to Hairston’s Newnan experience also percolated throughout the South, reminding

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4 Ibid.

5 Andrew J. Hairston, “If Division Disqualifies What About the Church of Christ?,” Christian Echo 60, no. 3 (March 1965): 1.
all that the nuanced relationships that black and white COCs had forged during the century had run up against a wider, white public that disdained any hint of integration. While the white church in Newnan did not mind Hairston using its baptistry, the church’s elders were more concerned with maintaining a good reputation among local whites. And a good reputation, especially in the South, required whites to completely dissociate themselves from their black brothers and sisters.⁶

At mid-decade, the venerable black preacher and editor of the *Echo*, R. N. Hogan, continued to criticize his white brethren for their racism, although he never explicitly endorsed the civil rights movement. Hogan remained convinced that the church could overcome racism through strict adherence to the New Testament. “When professed children of God become God-fearing, truth-loving and self-denying as they should be,” he wrote, “they will respect God to the extent that there will be no such thing on earth as a Negro Church of Christ and a white Church of Christ, a Negro Christian College and a White Christian College.” With one important caveat, Hogan generally agreed with the aphorism that the law might change practice but it cannot change the heart. “That may be true regarding the law of the land,” he concluded, “but if God’s law doesn’t change the heart the soul is hell bound.” Less concerned about the legal system than restoration theology, Hogan emphasized that obedience to God’s law was the key to overcoming prejudice and furthering the cause of New Testament Christianity. When COCs begin exhibiting the proper disposition toward people of other races, he insisted, “we can lift up our heads and tell the denominations that of a truth they are wrong without fear that they will point to one of our segregated schools and tell us that the Church of Christ doesn’t practice what it preaches.”⁷

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Despite the slow pace of desegregation among white COC colleges and the general apathy, if not disdain, shown toward the civil rights movement by white church members, most black congregants in COCs initially believed that racial animosities could and would be eased through sound gospel teaching and rigorous application of moral principles. By placing their faith in the Bible and the church, African Americans in COCs—outside of a few young ministers—did little to involve themselves in the civil rights movement. Even when significant events were mentioned in the *Echo*, they were interpreted in light of the church’s primitivism. Bloody Sunday was mentioned in the *Echo* in May of that year. The attack was briefly described as “shameful and inhuman,” and it was placed in the context of the quest for full citizenship rights for African Americans. After recounting the words of the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation, the author quickly turned to theology. “In the year A.D. 33 there was a greater man than Abraham Lincoln . . . [who] went to [the] Mount Calvary Cross and delivered an Executive Order . . . It was to free the church from segregation.” The writer lamented the fact that nearly two thousand years later, “the church still isn’t free of segregation. The reason it is not free . . . is because men are not willing to live by the commandments of God.” This article concluded that events in Selma were shameful but not as abhorrent as the church’s shortcomings. “For, if we had stood up and preached the unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ to all people . . . I am sure there would be no Selma today.” Selma was mentioned once more in the *Echo*. The following month, an essay by Norman Adamson, a black minister from Chicago, recounted his experiences of marching from Selma to Montgomery. It was the first and
last time that active participation in a civil rights demonstration received attention in extant copies of the *Echo.*

A few articles even expressed hostility toward civil rights marches. When two Chicago churches, one black and one white, submitted a report about its day school in July 1966, they made indirect criticisms of Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights organizations that had recently launched campaigns in their city. Describing their work as “a cooling breeze” to the “long hot summer,” the ministers from this project wrote, “While some were marching to bring ‘social equality,’ bringing out the worst in both black and white, causing millions of dollars in property damage, physical injuries and deaths, a small group, in the Christian spirit, conducted . . . Day School . . . They marched too! However, their marching was in the neighborhood from door to door, in classrooms, and by living example to teach the ‘Gospel of Christ.’” These two churches were not the only ones to shun demonstrations in favor of cooperative ministries.

By the mid 1960s, several churches and ministers developed evangelistic programs that included both black and white members. Unlike the traditional pattern of a white church inviting a black preacher to hold a revival and establish a new, segregated church, these efforts were predicated upon interracial unity and cooperation. One such event occurred in Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 1967, when black minister Columbus Grimsley—who, during the following year, would announce Martin Luther King Jr.’s death by noting, “that just goes to show you [that] sometimes you can push people too far”—organized what he dubbed “the first integrated meeting in the history of the Church of Christ in Florida.” To be sure, numerous revivals in the past had

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8 J. R. Davis Sr., “Let’s Face It!,” *Christian Echo* 60, no. 5 (May 1965): 3-4; and Norman Adamson, “Reflections...On Selma and Montgomery,” *Christian Echo* 60, no. 6 (June 1965): 1-2. This assertion is made based upon extant copies.

included blacks and whites, but this one differed in several respects. Most noticeably, Grimsley’s black church hosted the event and invited a white evangelist to conduct the revival, at the time, ironically, when some civil rights activists were explicating the benefits of “black power.” Eighteen congregations participated, ten black and eight white. Although no one was baptized during the week, Grimsley was pleased to announce that “the fellowship we enjoyed, and the good we feel that was done, and the joy we all received was a great blessing.” After this experience, he promoted the idea that other black churches should follow his lead. “Brethren, this is true integration, and I think that more congregations among Negroes should begin this practice [of] inviting a White Evangelist,” he urged. Grimsley was optimistic that whites would respond to such overtures, and he envisioned a day when black churches would hire white ministers and vice versa. When this time arrived, he concluded, “we will have no more Marching through the streets, we will have no more organizations forming in the name of peace, and . . . Black, power, or, white power [sic], but it will be God’s Power, and it will be brought about by Christians working together.”

If Grimsley had high expectations for the unity and goodwill among black and white southerners, other ministers believed that interracial ministries would appeal to the lost souls residing in urban centers. In Cleveland, a black church sponsored a revival near the Hough district, an area of the city that had been ravaged by riots in 1966. “The uniqueness of this meeting,” announced the Echo, “is the bi-racial team that conducted the meeting.” The church invited two evangelists named Lamar Clark and John Henry Morgan, one black and one white, to hold the revival. The duo combed the streets of nearby neighborhoods, urging people to attend their nightly services. “Men and women from all walks of life from the higher social strata to the

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lowest strata were represented each night,” the *Echo* reported. Sermon titles, such as “Is Cleveland Burning?” and “Locked Doors Don’t Help,” were partly designed to incite fears of rioting and personal safety. After scouring Cleveland for potential converts by day, the ministers alternated preaching duties each night. Their success—the *Echo* noted that “as many as 75 per cent of those in attendance were not members of the Lord’s church or even affiliated with any church”—led them to “go further into the slum area” and begin another meeting. During the revival’s second week, two services were conducted, as each evangelist agreed to preach nightly. “Though we are the first attempting this inner-city approach,” Clark said, “we are hoping that other bi-racial teams will be started throughout the country.”

In many respects, COCs were poised to make breakthroughs in race relations that were nearly inconceivable in other denominations. Although white members outnumbered blacks, COCs had substantial numbers of black and white congregants. To that end, historian David Edwin Harrell noted in 1971 that “Churches of Christ appeared more genuinely interracial than any other major southern sect, though only by comparison.” In addition to the demographics of its members, the radical autonomy of local churches also meant that an individual church could pursue racial reconciliation when and as it pleased. Local leaders and their flocks did not need to wait for permission from another authority or for a convention vote. This feature of COCs undoubtedly produced some interesting encounters, most of which were never recorded and were soon forgotten. However, Anne Moody, in her popular autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, recalled one situation that might have typified countless others in COCs across the South.


Moody was Baptist, but during her time as a student at Tougaloo College she joined classmates in efforts to integrate churches in Jackson, Mississippi. In the summer of 1963, exactly two weeks after the funeral of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, Moody and her friends ventured to a local, white COC. On the previous Sunday, their integrated group had sought entrance into five or six Jackson churches but were greeted by hostile church ushers and armed policemen. As Moody and her friends approached this COC, they were again met by ushers who read a resolution prohibiting their entrance that had presumably been endorsed by the church’s elders or a majority of its members. On this occasion, however, Moody recalled that “they offered to give us cab fare to the Negro extension of the church.”

A formal resolution of any type was extremely rare for COCs because of their claim that the Bible was their “sole authority for faith and practice,” thereby rendering creeds or resolutions unnecessary. The dire straits in which white churches in Jackson found themselves precipitated this exception. The best this COC could offer, in contrast to the other denominations in town, was a means of transportation to “the Negro extension of the church.” Moody and her group refused the offer, but as they walked to their cars, an elderly lady from the church, whom Moody called “Mrs. Dixon,” stopped them. “We’ll sit with you,” she told the students, and the group returned with her to the church’s front door. A brief exchange ensued between Dixon, a church member who apparently saw no harm in having the students worship with the church, and the usher, who had been appointed to enforce what the church had decreed. “A resolution has been passed, and we are to abide by it,” he insisted.

13 Anne Moody, Coming of Age in Mississippi (New York: Laurel, 1968), 283-284.

14 Ibid.
“Who are we to decide such a thing?” Dixon asked. “This is a house of God, and God is to make all of the decisions. He is the judge of us all.” The ushers grew angry. They were already frustrated by the presence of the students, but this elderly sister’s insistence that the group be admitted only exacerbated the tension. Given the church’s historic subjugation of women, the ushers were likely offended by a woman’s challenge to a decision administered and made by men. For her part, Mrs. Dixon may have finally found a brief opportunity to give voice to an opinion that she could not bring before the entire church. The ushers threatened to call the police, and Moody and her friends moved on to an Episcopal church where they were granted entrance. Moody thanked Mrs. Dixon for her kindness. “As we walked away from the church,” she remembered, “we noticed the family leaving by a side entrance. The old lady was waving to us.” This occasion seems to have precipitated one white family’s exit from a church that closed its doors to African Americans, a choice made more difficult by the primitivist faith of a group that envisioned itself as the only true body of believers.\(^\text{15}\)

This particular story might be indicative of situations across the South. There are numerous examples of blacks worshiping with whites and even some individuals having membership in southern, white COCs. This COC in Jackson was certainly not the only one with a Mrs. Dixon, a person who saw no reason to prevent people from participating in a worship assembly. Moody’s account does not suggest that Dixon was somehow progressive in her thinking. In all likelihood, she would have had qualms about interracial marriage, for example, but in her mind, such a misgiving would not deter her from singing and praying with a black person. However, the Mrs. Dixons of the South had little or no success in winning a consensus for the admission of all comers to the church. She and others were left with the option of leaving

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
or simply accepting the fact that they were outnumbered and powerless to sway church elders or the majority of a church’s membership.

Meanwhile, local church autonomy both helped and hindered interracial dialogue. Some black and white churches in various parts of the country began merging in the mid 1960s, and a few were never really segregated. At the same time, no denominational hierarchy was in place to press for change or to issue official pronouncements that articulated the church’s position, as was the case in other denominations. Therefore, COCs never had official positions beyond the scope of what local leaders might do or say or perhaps what a prominent editor might write in a periodical. For this reason, COCs could be found among both the first and the last to pursue integrated churches.

While some churches sought to bridge racial divides through cooperative ministries, other forces inflamed animosities between blacks and whites within the church. Two events in particular—the publication of a book about Martin Luther King Jr. by Harding College professor James Bales and the closing of NCI with the subsequent transfer of its assets to David Lipscomb College—deepened the distrust that blacks and whites often felt toward each other. Indeed, the controversy surrounding NCI spilled into the courts where a group of alumni, led by attorney Fred Gray, challenged the legal grounds upon which the transfer was made.

The issue seems to arise suddenly in two denominational periodicals. The 13 March 1967 issue of the *Gospel Advocate* included an essay by Marshall Keeble that explained why NCI must permanently close its doors. Citing problems with accreditation, aging facilities, teacher shortages, and declining enrollment, Keeble broadly outlined the enormous scope of any project that sought to salvage and improve the school. “If we continue to operate as a school, we must spend several million dollars,” he noted. In his closing remarks, Keeble urged readers to accept
what must have appeared inevitable. “No one could regret the closing of our school more than sister Keeble and I, but we must change. Times have changed, so please accept this change.”

In the same month, the Echo printed an essay by R. N. Hogan about when a Christian or church may seek legal redress against another Christian or church, and in the April issue, Keeble’s essay about NCI was reprinted, confirming for many people who had given so much of their heart, pride, and money to NCI that the school really was closing. Keeble’s essay also included an explanation of what would happen next, news that probably came as an even greater shock. NCI’s board of trustees decided to liquidate the school’s assets and transfer them to David Lipscomb College, one of the last bastions of racial segregation in COCs and a college that up until just a few years before had required visiting NCI students to sit in the balcony of the college auditorium. The amount, some $700,000, was formally transferred to the A. M. Burton-Marshall Keeble Scholarship Fund of the David Lipscomb College Foundation, a scholarship intended for use by African American students at the college. But several NCI alumni were furious at these developments, and they soon formulated legal grounds upon which to challenge them.

Before his death on 1 August 1966, A. M. Burton, the school’s primary patron and chairman of the board of trustees, had appointed a committee, one that included the white president, Willie Cato, and several members of the board, to assess NCI and its prospects for the future. The committee made the recommendation to close the school, and the full board, composed of six whites and four blacks, followed its recommendation. However, several

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members of the NCI board also belonged to the board of trustees at David Lipscomb College, and Athens Clay Pullias, president of Lipscomb, had succeeded Burton as chairman of the NCI board. Thus, there were clearly conflicts of interest, and NCI alumni were prepared to settle the matter in a class action lawsuit. As plaintiffs, Gray included “all Negro members of the Church of Christ, referred to as Negro Brotherhood for and in whose behalf Nashville Christian Institute was established and/or who have contributed time, talent or property to the school and/or who are alumni, present or former students, or have an interest as a Negro member of the Church of Christ or as a Negro patron, alumnus or student in the continuing existence of the school.” The presidents of both institutions and both boards of trustees, a group that included Tennessee Congressman Joe Evins, were named as defendants.\textsuperscript{18}

A year after the suit was filed and as the case wound its way through the courts, R. N. Hogan, in an essay titled “The Grab of the Century,” recounted the history of NCI and explained to his readers how Lipscomb’s board now permitted a few African Americans to attend “in exchange for robbing the Negroes of their School and also in order to secure Grants from the Government. These men who claim to be Christians are guilty of robbing poor Negroes who struggled and gave of their meager income in order to build a Christian school for their children who were denied the privilege of attending the white so-called christian [\textit{sic}] school.” Hogan also revisited the question, “should we go to law with our brethren?” His answer insisted that “certainly we should not and if we were dealing with Christians instead of those who pretend to be it would not be necessary to go to law, for they would live by the golden [\textit{sic}] Rule.” With that assessment, he urged his readers to support Fred Gray who was working \textit{pro bono}.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{19} Hogan, “The Grab of the Century.”
The plaintiffs sought injunctive relief based on the conflicts of interest and an allegation that the transfer had violated the due process and equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. Gray also noted that NCI was a grade school, not a college, so neither current nor potential NCI students benefitted from the fact that Lipscomb had undergone token integration. Meanwhile, African Americans were certainly in no hurry to attend a school where they had never been previously welcomed as students or equals. Despite these arguments, federal district judge Frank Gray Jr. ruled in favor of the defendants, but the case reached the United States Court of Appeals by the winter of 1968. A final ruling was issued on 26 February 1969, and it affirmed the lower court’s decision. “The case is not free from difficulty,” the court admitted, while acknowledging “the emotional trauma experienced by the plaintiffs.” It was the duty of the court, however, to determine the validity of the NCI board’s actions. The judges agreed that “the board had a duty to take affirmative action” because of the schools’s decline, but they also disliked the circumstances, as they quoted the lower court’s opinion that the board’s action “may not have been the best judgment which could have been made.” Nevertheless, the ruling stated, “The question before us is whether there is any evidence of fraud, unfairness, or self-dealing by the NCI board of directors. We hold there is not.”

In many respects, that decision concluded an era for black and white COCs. For several decades, NCI served a myriad of purposes. For blacks, especially males, the school represented the best path to a career in ministry, a place where one could learn the trade from a master, Marshall Keeble. NCI offered opportunities that black members who were loyal to the denomination could not find elsewhere in the segregated South, and countless black churches helped support the school with whatever resources they could muster. “N.C.I. was ours,”

Southwestern Christian College President Jack Evans recalled. For white members, the school served as evidence that they “knew” and “cared for their Negroes” as much as anyone. Thus, they demonstrated a profound ignorance regarding the significance of NCI to black members and to what black members, outside of four members of the board, wanted to do about the school’s future.  

In addition to the closing of NCI and the transfer of its assets to a recently segregated college, the publication of a book about Martin Luther King by one of the COCs’ most prolific authors and thinkers further widened a chasm that had always existed but was now rending in the face of changes in the 1960s. Dr. James Bales authored *The Martin Luther King Story*, and its contents exemplify how opponents of the civil rights movement used anticommunist hysteria to vilify leaders like King. Even if many black preachers in COCs fiercely disagreed with King’s theology, they realized that he was a pivotal figure in the African American freedom struggle and disliked overt criticism of his work, especially from a white professor at a recently (and barely) desegregated COC college. Some white preachers agreed with their assessment. For Bales, however, the book was the culmination of several years spent collecting materials about the civil rights movement and communism. He pored through numerous magazine and newspaper articles, press releases from Congress and the NAACP, and two books written by King, *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958) and *Why We Can’t Wait* (1964). Bales made countless requests for copies of speeches and other materials that were not easily available to the general public. On at least one occasion, he even made a direct inquiry to King himself, addressing him as “Sir” and

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apparently seeking clarification on the civil rights leader’s foreign policy positions. Additionally, Bales’s daily reading included a perusal of several communist periodicals such as The Worker.22

By the mid-1960s, anticommunism had become a cottage industry for many ultraconservative organizations, and Christian fundamentalists seemed especially attracted to this political fervor, as it provided a palpable way to combat atheism. For this reason, Bales found a publisher in Billy James Hargis and his Christian Crusade. In the words of one contemporary observer, Hargis “conceives of Americanism, Christian fundamentalism, free enterprise, and anti-communism as forming a single, tightly knit creed.” Bales certainly subscribed to such a creed, as did his friend and boss, George Benson, whose contributions to conservative politics reached the highest echelons of government power. Benson began endearing himself to conservative politicos in the 1940s, when he appeared before the House Ways and Means Committee and suggested drastic budget cuts to several New Deal programs.23

People who associated Christianity with anticommunism and criticized civil rights activists were often considered racist. This accusation undoubtedly applied to many people, but Bales tried to circumvent the charge in the introduction to his book. Since Bales had “dealt with numerous white Communists, and with those who in one way or another have aided and abetted Communists either consciously or unconsciously,” he saw “no reason to refuse to consider someone just because he is a Negro. Being a Negro does not grant King immunity from criticism, any more than it should make him a special target of criticism.” Bales added that

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because of his Christian faith, he strove “to manifest goodwill toward people regardless of their race, creed, clique, clan, or class.” In what might have been another effort to dodge any accusation of racism, he dedicated the book to Philippa Duke Schuyler, whose well-known parents—black author and journalist George Schuyler and white Texan artist and journalist Josephine Cogdill—believed that racial discord could be overcome through the production of interracial children. The dedication came shortly after Philippa Schuyler’s untimely death as a “Friend of Freedom . . . on a Mission of Mercy” in Vietnam, and her political conservativism explains Bales’s affinity for her. He was surely aware of her fascinating, and for many in his generation, problematic background. This dedication does not suggest that Bales actually approved of interracial marriage, but at the very least it shows nonchalance toward what many southerners, black and white, considered a controversial issue.24

*The Martin Luther King Story* attempted unsuccessfully to expose King as an anarchist and communist (making little distinction between these two ideologies), and each chapter title assigned a new label for the maligned leader: anarchist, apostate, pacifist, leftist, and “collaborator with the Reds.” Beginning with Chapter One’s examination of “King’s Doctrine of Lawlessness,” Bales’s fear of social disorder served as the cornerstone of the entire book. In the first chapter alone, he describes King’s defiance of court orders as the “voice of lawlessness,” speaks of King’s “spirit of lawlessness,” and quotes such disparate figures as Abraham Lincoln, J. Edgar Hoover, and Thurgood Marshall expressing their concerns about lawlessness. While this particular term was employed by a variety of white resisters to the civil rights movement, “lawlessness” may have had special import for Bales because of its uses in English translations

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24 Bales, 3, 7; and “Schuyler, Philippa Duke,” in *Microsoft Encarta Africana* (accessed 23 November 2003), available from http://www.africana.com/research/encarta/it_056.asp. Philippa Schuyler was in Vietnam as a news correspondent but died during an attempt to rescue Catholic schoolchildren from a war zone.
of the Bible. In a sermon against religious legalism, Jesus tells his audience that “you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” The first Johannine epistle states, “Every one that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.” Bales was familiar with these two passages and he perceived these words as applicable to civil rights activists and King in particular. With regard to the latter, Bales insisted that his reform efforts would give way to anarchy, the ultimate expression of lawlessness, out of which a dictatorship would eventually arise. Bales’s fears are evident from the book’s vitriolic tone. “Is King engaged in a pink tea party designed to overthrow the government of the United States?” he asked.²⁵

The conclusion that King was a pawn of the Communist Party seemed self-evident to Bales, but he sought to prove his case in four ways. First, he listed numerous comments from King about his proclivity for Christian socialism (as opposed to capitalism) or which questioned his loyalties with regard to foreign policy. Second, Bales included quotations from Communist Party publications like *The Worker* that seemed to correlate with King’s ideas. This reasoning provided one stream of logic that led to the conclusion that King was a communist. Third, Bales suggested that King’s prominent appearances within the Communist Party press indicated a close association. Anytime coverage seemed favorably predisposed toward King, Bales interpreted it as evidence for King’s covert yet significant place in Communist Party circles.²⁶

Guilt by association was the final tactic that Bales utilized. He laboriously explained how some members of the Communist Party had participated in or even coordinated civil rights

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²⁵ Bales, 11, 22, 24, 28. The biblical citations are from Matthew 23:28 and 1 John 3:4. The first quotation comes form the New American Standard Bible, and the second comes from the older American Standard Version. Bales was known to have used both versions.

²⁶ Bales, 36-46.
protests. Bales also named numerous people, including controversial student activist Stokely Carmichael, and recalled their ties to the Communist Party and to King. This diverse collection of individuals and organizations showed how Bales was either unwilling or unable to distinguish ideological and tactical variations within the movement, and in the middle of his text, Bales admits that King’s initial relationships with communists may not have been a conscious decision. But, he added, “it has certainly ended with conscious collaboration with Communists in an effort to defeat investigation of internal communism and to defeat our resistance to external Communist aggression.” In Bales’s opinion, the threat of lawlessness had increased due to King’s inability to perceive dangers posed by communists.27

Bales’s comments proved incendiary on a number of levels, and his repeated references to King’s “pink pacifism” would be a primary source of his detractors’ ire. Considering the fact that Bales was formerly a pacifist, the harshness of this criticism seems especially perplexing. Later in the text, Bales noted how King once admitted that the use of military force against Hitler was justified, but even in this case, Bales criticized King for being inconsistent. Having cited the fear of disorder and lawlessness as the driving forces behind this book, the few passages that mention race in The Martin Luther King Story merit attention. Aside from the disclaimer in Bales’s introduction, there were few extended comments on the nation’s racial turmoil. One instant came at the conclusion of his chapter about King’s pacifism in the face of communist aggression. Here, Bales emphasized that he does not advocate violence in connection with race problems in the United States. Instead, they should be handled in “the spirit of goodwill.” But,

27 Ibid., 61-114.
“when members of either race resort to violence,” Bales added, “the author believes that law and order should be upheld by the police power of the state.”

The next comment on race relations came in the final chapter. It explored the ways in which communists broadened their bases of support in this country and overseas. In this context, Bales alleged that communists manipulated “the race question, even at some point where reform is needed.” These two brief and isolated statements suggest Bales’s failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of the civil rights movement’s efforts to ensure equal protection and political rights for all citizens, but at the same time, they reinforce the argument that his primary concern in attacking King was not simple racism but a genuine passion for social order and stability. His fear of lawlessness outweighed any tentative sympathies that he may have harbored for legislative reform, and he failed to realize the significant obstacles that African Americans faced in their pursuit of equal justice under the law.

Predictably, *The Martin Luther King Story* was widely disseminated among COCs and right-wing political groups, and it received both complimentary and disparaging reviews. Many white colleagues praised the volume, giving Bales free advertisement in several denominational journals. One such publication even lauded the book as “the greatest exposé of the civil rights movement ever written.” In stark contrast, others—both black and white—saw only racial prejudice and misinformation. A black preacher from Detroit made his opinion of Bales’s book especially clear: its “accusations are preposterous, its conclusions are not based upon facts, it is against every rule of journalistic ethics, should be publicly exposed as being hate literature and should be condemned as ‘racist’ in its intent.” In a letter to publisher Billy James Hargis, white

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28 Ibid., 60, 199.

29 Ibid., 116.
radio evangelist John Allen Chalk wished “that Bales had been a little more factual and a little less emotional.” Shortly after King’s assassination, a white preacher and Bales admirer named Cled Wimbish wrote a letter to the author expressing his disdain and questioning the book’s purpose and value. “I have thought and thought about it, and the only thing I can see that [the book] could do is to cause whites to fear Negroes all the more and then to hate them all the more and to feel justified in their hatred and in resisting the Negro’s attempts to receive the full equality that is rightfully his.” Writing after King’s assassination, Wimbish confided that church members were being affected. One lady recommended the book to Wimbish after he spoke positively of King from the pulpit. She later confessed that she had not read the book herself, leading Wimbish to conclude that “she simply knew that it was reinforcing her own feelings about Dr. King.” Another member had told Wimbish that “a person could have read that book and then have felt justified in killing Dr. King. He could have felt that it was a holy act.” Then during the spring of 1969, when a tinge of racial unrest could be felt on the campus of Harding College, a committee composed of faculty and students presented a report to the administration regarding the ways in which race relations at the school could be improved. Removing The Martin Luther King Story from the school library was one of their suggestions.³⁰

Such mixed reactions prove that not everyone believed Bales when he claimed that race was not a motivating factor for the book. Sources do not reveal his specific reaction to these criticisms, but some evidence suggests that he stood by the book’s content. In a letter to Chalk, Bales curtly wondered “whether or not you have read closely my chapter on King’s doctrine of

anarchy . . . [and] the chapter that deals with his modernism.” Bales took the liberty to send Chalk a copy of the book, and he closed his brief letter by continuing his attack on King’s “lawlessness,” writing, “In the New York Times Magazine for March 31 . . . King took the position that it was right to violate just laws in order to call attention to certain matters.” Even in the wake of King’s death, Bales clearly believed that his assertions about the slain leader were both valid and worth repeating.31

Bales continued to peddle his book amid a third controversy that brewed within COCs. In April 1968, two successful African American ministers died. One death, the assassination of King, shocked the world; the other death, that of Marshall Keeble at age eighty-nine, was hardly noticed by anyone outside of COCs. Yet the deaths of these two men and the subsequent reactions by both black and white preachers within COCs illustrate the complexities of faith and race within the denomination. Most ministers were appropriately sorrowful over the assassination of King, but several whites were cautious in their condolences. Only a few weeks passed before some ministers used the death of Keeble, a man widely admired by both black and white congregants, to articulate their ideas about proper ministerial behavior, making implicit references to the recent death of King and specific comments about race. Meanwhile, other black and white ministers used the death of King to open dialogue about the need to improve race relations within the church and society. Such efforts were met with hostility and skepticism by churches and ministers who disapproved of the civil rights movement and the social turmoil that it sometimes precipitated. Indeed, white ministers from COCs reacted much like their counterparts in other denominations, but the inclusion of Keeble in their discourse provides a means of understanding why some whites were so critical of King, how conservative Christianity

31 James D. Bales to John Allen Chalk, 15 August 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 A-C Correspondence, folder B. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
could be used to justify the racial status quo within existing political structures, and how Keeble personified white conceptions of “acceptable” behavior for black preachers.32

Keeble clearly had the rare ability to communicate with both black and white audiences, and if success can be measured in numbers, his record suggests that his popularity among COCs was unmatched. Despite this rhetorical appeal, his legacy within COCs is mixed because of his general capitulation to racial norms in the South. Keeble was certainly no civil rights activist, nor was he overtly political in any traditional sense. Outside of one oral history that recalled an occasion in 1964 when Keeble publicly endorsed Lyndon Johnson, the venerable minister shied away from politics. As a lifelong preacher, his primary objective seemed to be converting sinners or winning people to the “undenominational Christianity” espoused by COCs. Keeble consistently pursued these ends throughout his lifetime, and even his critics acknowledged that preaching was his primary concern. When Keeble died, his illustrious career was reverently recollected by both black and white churches who recognized his immense contributions to the growth of the denomination. However, when contrasted with remarks about King, the adulation of Keeble after his death reveals much about the racial attitudes among ministers in COCs. White ministers generally divided into two groups: those who used the deaths of King and Keeble to advocate changes within the church and the larger society and those who used the two men to support institutional racism.33


As the nation continued to deal with the shock of King’s assassination, the Sunday following his death, April 7, was a day of mourning for many churches throughout the nation. Some ministers in COCs observed this day of mourning, and their homilies or weekly bulletins poignantly addressed the tragedy of King’s murder, as well as the tumult that had followed in cities across the country. Robert Meyers of the Riverside COC in Wichita, Kansas, titled his sermon, “Can We Understand? (A sermon delivered on Sunday after a murder).” As a white man, Meyers knew that his remarks would be controversial. “I am unlikely to win approval from all of you today,” he admitted, “no matter how I speak.” Nevertheless, he used the occasion to endorse King, whose death Meyers stated, “made it chillingly clear that we must do something about the poisons of racism or face unbelievable civil terrors in years to come.” His sermon ultimately asked his largely conservative, white audience to understand the circumstances that give rise to civil unrest. “Their [rioters’] burnings and lootings and surly rebellions,” Meyers proclaimed, “however frightening or annoying, are in actuality one of the most sorrow-filled cries for help ever to sound inside the halls of human misery.” Meyers still belied his good intentions by comparing rioters to children throwing a tantrum, but his message of understanding sounded an unfamiliar refrain within COCs.34

Other ministers expressed similar viewpoints. In Port Arthur, Texas, Cled Wimbish confessed “that many of us have thought that Dr. King was just a troublemaker. I have. We thought that if he hadn’t stirred up his people, they would have been happy to leave things as they were. But I believe that we were very wrong in thinking that.” His sermon included a lengthy quotation from King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. In like manner, John Allen Chalk crafted a

34 Robert Meyers, “Can We Understand? (A sermon delivered on Sunday after a murder),” [7 April 1968]. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-Ch. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
sermon about King that he delivered on April 7 and on several other occasions during the summer of 1968. Titled “The Continuing Message of Dr. Martin Luther King,” the sermon did not “offer blanket endorsement” of King or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Chalk emphasized that King was not “doctrinally sound.” However, Chalk suggested, “Every honest, concerned Christian man . . . will allow Dr. King’s life and teachings to help illuminate . . . Biblical principles. . . . The pulpits that overlooked the opportunity to speak God’s Word to men seized by the demons of hate, prejudice, selfishness, and ignorance the Sunday after King’s death were guilty of either inexcusable obscurationism or criminal neglect.” The sermon described the qualities in King’s life and writings that should be emulated, and Chalk quoted extensively from King’s speeches and books. A young preacher named Rubel Shelly also used the Sunday following King’s death to preach a sermon about race relations for a small church in Mississippi. He was fired the next day.35

Sermons were not the only forum for white ministers who wished to open a dialogue about racial injustice. A week after King’s death, Dwain Evans published an article for his congregation’s weekly bulletin that echoed several sermons on that day. Evans’s language was even more direct. “The non-violence which was so much a part of the life of Dr. King even til the day of his death was first taught by Jesus Christ. Would that we of the white race had learned this lesson so well as Dr. King.” Evans went on to write that integration “can only be a small part of the answer [to the problem of race]. The critical thing is that white man and black man must stand together as equals.” Chalk and Evans, along with a host of black ministers, would soon be invited to an open forum on race relations sponsored by a COC in Dayton, Ohio. The

death of King had clearly shaken some ministers and awakened them to the opportunities that might bring about equality and harmony among blacks and whites.\textsuperscript{36}

These sentiments were exceptions, however, and not the rule for COCs. For the most part, the denomination’s most popular periodicals, with the exception of the \textit{Echo}, remained eerily silent about King and race relations in general. The death of Keeble on April 20 broke the silence. B. C. Goodpasture, longtime editor of the \textit{Gospel Advocate}, was also one of the first to memorialize his deceased colleague in print. An editorial in the \textit{Advocate} eulogized Keeble as “inimitable” and suggested that he would primarily be remembered “as a preacher of the gospel [who] possessed many noble qualities.” A portrait of Keeble graced the cover of this issue, and the one-page editorial was a fitting tribute to a man with immeasurable influence among COCs. Unfortunately, this respectful tone proved transitory, and like several church publications throughout the summer and fall, the \textit{Advocate} became most ungracious in its assessment of Keeble.\textsuperscript{37}

A weekly bulletin published by the fledgling South Williamsport (PA) COC foreshadowed debates that would occupy prominent ministers in the church for the remainder of the year. It expressed a common viewpoint among many white COCs. A brief article announced the death of Keeble and then attempted to eulogize him through disparaging remarks aimed at African American civil rights activists. “Brother Keeble was a Negro,” the article reminded its readers, who “will not be remembered for the marches he led. He will not be remembered for the many speeches he made in interest of the poor, which Jesus said, ‘will be with you always.’”

\textsuperscript{36} Dwain Evans, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” \textit{Milestones} VI, no. 15 (11 April 1968): 4. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92Ra-Ch. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.

not be remembered because he pled for ‘black power.’ He will be remembered because he ‘preached the word.’” Readers could not have missed the message. As an African American, Keeble’s life was honorable precisely because he was not a civil rights agitator. He was a “sound preacher” who did not concern himself with political advocacy on behalf of minorities or the poor.38

Popular and influential white-owned periodicals among COCs soon offered similar appraisals. For example, in an editorial written by Reuel Lemmons in the Firm Foundation used a eulogy of Keeble to make derisive comments about civil rights activism, associating it with all forms of social unrest. He wrote that Keeble “never led a riot; he never burned out a block of buildings; he never marched on Washington.” With no hint of incredulity, Lemmons suggested that Keeble “traveled—without discrimination—for seventy years among blacks and whites alike. . . . If he ever knew there were segregation lines he never indicated it. Indeed, because of his life and work there has been an infinitesimally small amount of racial prejudice in the Church of Christ.” Lemmons, meanwhile, resisted efforts to extol King after his death. When John Allen Chalk submitted an article for publication in the Foundation that praised King, Lemmons refused to publish it. In his estimation, King was not praiseworthy. In a letter to Chalk, Lemmons contended, “I do not believe I have an ounce of racial prejudice in me. I never have. . . . I did not run the King article for this reason. A lot of people wanted to compare [him] to Jesus Christ. In reality King was a modernist, and denied the faith of Jesus Christ as taught in the Bible. I do not agree with praising him either in our pulpits or our papers. If he was not an outright Communist, he certainly advocated communistic causes.” Lemmons used Christian

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38 “He Preached the Word!” bulletin of South Williamsport (PA) Church of Christ 5, no. 19 (10 May 1968). John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-MK. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
primitivism as a convenient means of dismissing King and any worthy cause that he might have represented. Other ministers were quick to point out Lemmons’s inconsistencies.39

Reactions to the editorial varied, but several ministers sent letters of protest to Lemmons. One described the article’s “rather thinly veiled criticism” of King as “absurd,” to which Lemmons responded, “my only regret is that the criticism was veiled at all.” At the close of this same reply, Lemmons admitted, “It is possible that I am blind to a serious situation, but I seriously doubt it.” He was clearly more comfortable with an African American like Keeble who was focused exclusively on the mission of the church, whereas activists like King, Lemmons believed, were misled both theologically and politically. In his death, Keeble became a convenient tool for whites who were bent on dismissing issues raised by the civil rights movement.40

Lemmons also received at least two letters from African American ministers that expressed strong dismay, especially since they had respected Lemmons “as a dedicated servant of God who honestly wrote, taught, and preached that which was just as well as truthful.” Both letters recounted circumstances in which Keeble endured discourtesies or mistreatment because of his skin. One letter was particularly direct in assessing Lemmons’s opinions on race. “[Y]our appreciation of black men,” wrote Roosevelt Wells, “is limited to those who do not actively and openly protest the shameful unchristian and unamerican and unhuman treatment the black people of this country have received.” Wells charged Lemmons with being either explicitly racist or


40 Jennings Davis Jr. to Reuel Lemmons, 20 May 1968; and Reuel Lemmons to Jennings Davis Jr., 23 May 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-MK. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
completely insensitive to the “color crisis” in America. “In the spirit of Christ,” he concluded, “I recommend that you do some research, some soul searching, and some waking up.” These two letters were primarily concerned with setting the record straight about Keeble’s experiences in COCs and the racism that pervaded the denomination. Wells, whose distaste for King was most notably illustrated when he publicly stated that King was not a Christian, rightly surmised that Lemmons was critical of anyone who openly protested racial injustice.41

Not to be outdone by Lemmons and the Foundation, B. C. Goodpasture published a special edition of the Advocate in honor of Keeble. An article written by Karl Pettus contrasted Keeble with King by listing characteristics that did not describe Keeble but did apply to King’s life. It is quoted at length to show the obvious references to King.

No flag was flown at half-mast in his honor. He wasn’t eulogized by our nation’s political leaders and political office seekers. He never won the coveted Nobel Prize. He never led a march or demonstration, peaceful or otherwise. He was never connected with a riot.

. . . He didn’t march for school integration, but he worked and spent himself for most of his life for Christian education. He gained equality and universal respect by the life he lived and the work he performed before God and his fellow man, both black and white. No day or week of mourning has been declared in his memory.42

John Allen Chalk penned an illuminating letter to the revered Goodpasture that expressed his displeasure over Pettus’s commentary. According to Chalk, the article was simply “a backhanded slap” at King and another example of Keeble being “‘used’ by a white man to get something off his chest.” The letter also alleged that Pettus should not be permitted to write an article about Keeble “because he operates a ‘white-only’ enterprise that denys [sic] the universal

41 Norman R. Adamson to Reuel Lemmons, 29 May 1968; and Roosevelt Wells to Reuel Lemmons, 7 June 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-MK. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.

Christ.” Chalk further criticized the implication that Keeble had to gain equality. In Chalk’s estimation, the article implicitly suggested “that more Marshall Keeble’s [sic] will solve our nation’s social ills. This says that other Black men, Christians and Gospel preachers, who do not happen to operate like Brother Keeble, who are nevertheless preaching the Gospel, are all wrong.”

While the Foundation and the Advocate channeled their criticisms of King through eulogies of Keeble, Noble Patterson was more explicit in the July issue of his Christian Journal. After briefly acknowledging how King’s murder was deplorable, Patterson launched into a tirade against the civil rights leader and COC preachers who seemed to have an affinity for him. King, Patterson wrote, “did not believe the Bible . . . did not accept the virgin birth and the deity of Jesus Christ . . . [and] adopted the philosophy of India’s Ghandi [sic] more than he accepted the principles of Christ.” While these charges contain some elements of truth regarding King’s theology, they demonstrate how conservative Christianity was used to discredit the entirety of King’s work. “It is beyond comprehension,” Patterson fumed, “how any, especially some of our own brethren, could support the principles that guided the life of Martin Luther King.” He was further appalled that flags were lowered to half-mast at a college affiliated with COCs when the same courtesy was not extended to Keeble who was, in apparent contrast to King, “sound in the faith, fruitful and law-abiding. . . . This school lowered the flag for a Baptist preacher, but not for a gospel preacher.” Although he did not call him by name, Patterson also took aim at Chalk by commenting upon “one of our young and dynamic radio evangelists” who preached a sermon about the continuing message of King. “If there was ever a message that needed to be DIS-

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43 John Allen Chalk to Brother Goodpasture, undated. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-MK. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis. A handwritten note on this letter indicates that Chalk never mailed it. Goodpasture was forty years older than Chalk, and his imposing reputation among COCs may have been too intimidating for the young preacher.
continued,” Patterson insisted, “it is the message of Martin Luther King.” Patterson’s jeremiad proved popular enough among some whites that it was reprinted elsewhere, including the *Word of Truth*, a periodical edited and published in Alabama by another respected preacher, Gus Nichols. The West End Church of Christ in Birmingham also printed Patterson’s editorial (though it incorrectly attributed it to Nichols) because it “represents the thinking of many many people in this part of the country.” West End’s minister noted how “it has been difficult to understand why any faithful Christian would use this non-Christian as an example of anything.” Patterson and his journalistic counterparts could not have been clearer: black activism similar to King’s fell outside the bounds of acceptable behavior for African Americans and for Christians, as defined by COCs. 

Despite the circumstances surrounding NCI, Bales, and Keeble, several leaders within the church began creating opportunities to bridge racial divides. The cooperation of numerous churches in one revival served to emphasize the common theological perspectives of black and white COCs. The use of white preachers by black churches or interracial evangelistic teams fostered unity and presented to outsiders a face of growing interracial cooperation and camaraderie. But before COCs could make significant gains in their various efforts at proselytization, they had to first address the proverbial beam in their own eye. To do so, leading ministers organized several events, often described as race relations workshops, and invited church members to participate. Such meetings were held in Los Angeles, Nashville, Atlanta, and Dayton, Ohio in 1968.

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In these forums, the sensitive topics pertaining to race relations were discussed openly, and black ministers, perhaps for the first time, were able to address frankly the church’s collective failures and prescribe solutions for the future. The white members who attended, in many respects, served as the captive audience, forced to recognize the laments of their black brothers and sisters and to admit the failures of their churches to fulfill the biblical mandates for unity and equality. But many white congregants were also defensive and prone to view racism as someone else’s problem. The result was that these workshops, while creating some measure of understanding and even goodwill between black and white churches, marked the end of an era. Black churches and ministers no longer needed the patronage of white churches, and for the most part, white churches were not interested in associating with their black brothers and sisters in what might be deemed mutual relationships.

Although a race relations seminar was conducted in Nashville before Martin Luther King’s assassination, his death and the rioting that ensued galvanized support for interracial dialogue. COCs were not indifferent to King’s death or the quest for civil rights that his life came to represent, and race relations forums in Dayton and Atlanta should be understood as responses to his assassination. On May 24-25, the Collegiate Heights Church of Christ in Dayton conducted an open forum themed “Human Relations.” The church’s minister, Woodie Morrison, was a young graduate of Southwestern Christian College, and he invited numerous preachers to serve as panelists. Keynote speakers included Dwain Evans, who had been featured in a 1963 issue of Time, and John Allen Chalk, whose voice was carried by over 150 radio stations across the country on the Herald of Truth program. G. P. Holt and Zebedee Bishop were also featured speakers whose names were easily recognized by readers of the Echo, as was the paper’s editor, R. N. Hogan, who attended and served as a panelist on Saturday, May 25. The Collegiate
Heights church hosted another panelist and SWCC graduate, Roosevelt Wells, for a revival during the following week.45

The keynote addresses at Dayton provide insight into both what the organizers thought were the most pressing topics and what these preachers wanted to convey to an interracial audience. Morrison’s advertisement of the forum included a flier that emphasized the urgency of the issues. “We are caught up in a nightmare of despair and are probably approaching the threshold of a bloody war in this Country unknown to mankind, unless some sincere efforts are put forth to change the thinking of the peoples of our Nation and world,” he warned.

 “[O]ppressed people,” Morrison continued, “are saying that time has run out, and they want in, they want to be accepted and treated like other men created in God’s image.” Given these circumstances, Morrison felt compelled to organize a forum as a way for “God’s people to discuss these subjects in love, truth, and honesty.”46

To this end, two keynote addresses were delivered on both Friday and Saturday nights. Each night featured one black and one white preacher, and their four pictures adorned Morrison’s advertisements. Their sermons were intended to be didactic, although they often slipped into a confessional mode that highlighted the racism of white churches and members or black members’ firsthand experiences with discrimination. The four main topics indicate the forum organizers’ desire to address all social questions with biblical answers: “A Christian’s View on Open Housing,” “The Black Church–The White Church–Why?,” “Is Interracial Marriage


46 “Open Forum” advertisement. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-DO. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
Sinful?,” and “The Other Wall,” an exposition based upon a Pauline passage in Ephesians that depicts Jesus as one who broke down a wall separating Jews and Gentiles.\textsuperscript{47}

The first white speaker, Dwain Evans, opened his remarks with an admission of his own shortcomings. “I recognize that as I stand here even this evening that I must confess to you that the sin of race prejudice in my own life, a race prejudice that has been both explicit and implicit, an evil which is so distasteful to me that I am completely overcome at the thought that I still find myself afflicted with it.” Such candor shows how some white ministers, by the late 1960s, were coming to terms with past racial attitudes that did not comport to their professional calling.

Evans was certainly not an angry or violent racist, but he expressed regret over his past silence on racial injustice and his paternalistic disposition toward African Americans.\textsuperscript{48}

Evans alluded to this past when he said, “I think that we Christians can almost accept anything in terms of race relations except open housing. This immediately presents many problems for us white Christians because open housing, we say, is a political issue. We say this very piously as if to indicate that because there is a political issue involved then Christians have no part nor lot in the matter of open housing.” He reminded his audience that COCs had taken strong stands on public referendums dealing with gambling or the sale of alcohol and had occasionally cooperated with denominations in the process. Evans concluded that “Churches of Christ down through the years have not hesitated to get involved in those things that were political when they recognized that there were moral implications involved where Christians

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. The specific text quoted in this latter sermon was Ephesians 2:11-22. Verses 14-18 state, “For he is our peace, who made both one, and brake down the middle wall of partition, having abolished in the flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; that he might create in himself of the two one new man, so making peace; and might reconcile them both in one body unto God through the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and he came and preached peace to you that were far off, and peace to them that were nigh: for through him we both have our access in one Spirit unto the Father” (ASV).

\textsuperscript{48} Dwain Evans, “A Christian’s View on Open Housing.” Transcript in John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-DO. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
needed to take their stand, and I’m glad they did.” And open housing, in his opinion, was another issue that necessitated a strong stance, regardless of politics. “I want to emphasize to you,” Evans exclaimed, “that Jesus Christ our Lord took open housing out of the realm of politics when he said in M[atthew] 25, ‘I was a stranger and you took me in.’”

In his remarks, Evans also addressed the two principle excuses that church members had proffered regarding their lack of support for the civil rights movement, particularly noting the inconsistencies of espousing primitivism and strictly adhering to laws that enabled racial discrimination. First, Evans noted that COCs, especially those accustomed to a very legalistic rendering of the New Testament, were apt to favor “law and order” over the civil disobedience that often characterized civil rights protests. “You know,” Evans said, “one of the catch phrases that we use to immediately excuse our lack of activity in these areas is civil disobedience, and our opposition to civil disobedience. I submit to you that we’re not real well acquainted with what went on in the first century when we do this.” Second, he acknowledged the passage from the New Testament, Romans 13, that taught subjection to government powers, but he went on to remind the audience that the apostles Peter and John disobeyed governing authorities when they continued to proclaim Jesus’s resurrection. “We ought to obey God rather than men,” Evans insisted, as he echoed the apostles’ remark in Acts 4. The implication that COCs were failing to appreciate a practice of first century Christianity was damning to a group whose utmost objective, at least according to its rhetoric, was the restoration of New Testament Christianity. He closed by explaining how his church in West Islip, New York had circulated petitions that

49 Ibid.
expressed support for open housing, an action inspired in part by two black church members who were unable to find housing in their community.\textsuperscript{50}

Ivory James, the black minister who spoke on Friday night, attacked the church’s hypocrisy in proclaiming that it embodied New Testament Christianity while it generally practiced racial segregation. “[I]t is indeed strange,” he surmised, “when one considers that we, as members of the Lord’s true body and who accept the scriptures . . . only as our rule of faith and practice in religious matters react as we do when it comes down to race. All the while we preach very loudly that division is sinful.” James further acknowledged how some people believed that the Bible forbade racial integration, an “old die-hard argument” espoused by people concerned about interracial marriage. He chose not to refute what he considered to be a ludicrous idea. James also spoke of his personal experiences with white churches. For example, he described his recent visit to the Hillsboro Church of Christ in Nashville where he went to discuss some business with the church’s minister. When James arrived early for a scheduled service and waited on the minister, no member would speak to him or even acknowledge his presence. At the close of the service, the Hillsboro minister called upon James to lead the closing prayer and proudly stated, “You know, probably five years ago, the only Negro minister in the Church of Christ that could’ve led a closing prayer here would have been [Marshall Keeble].” James was not amused by the irony.\textsuperscript{51}

In his closing remarks, James addressed those whites who “say the colored people would rather be by themselves. . . . How in the world do you know this?” he asked. “Have you ever taken the time to ask some of us colored people?” His inquiry apparently struck a nerve with

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Ivory James, “The Negro Church–The White Church–Why?” Transcript in John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-DO. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
some whites in attendance. James immediately sensed the tension that filled the room, and he left his prepared remarks. “Now, don’t y’ll [sic] be all tense, because I wanta [sic] say what I got on my mind. I want y’ll [sic] to loosen up a little bit, loosen up a little bit.” James’s words could have only been offensive had they contained an element of truth. Whites who spoke on behalf of blacks—“they don’t want to go to school with us” or “they don’t want to worship with us”—commonly did so as a polite way of supporting racial segregation. To be sure, such whites were sometimes correct in their assessment, but rarely were they correct because they had an open and honest conversation with blacks. “The Lord’s Church is no longer fishers of men, but we have become keepers of the aquarium,” James insisted, before closing his sermon with his own revised version of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.  

While James contended that biblical mandates against integration were absurd, the topic was not so absurd as to be lightly dismissed by the forum’s organizers. On the following night, G. P. Holt addressed a question that had bedeviled the minds of many people: “Is Interracial Marriage Sinful?” Indeed, Holt related a personal experience where “a brother . . . spent 15 minutes trying to point out that God made everything after its kind and this simply suggests that each race should marry its kind.” In his sermon, Holt proceeded to show how this brother was mistaken, concluding that “it is our privilege as children of God to marry whomever we desire, as long as that person is in the Lord, and the thing that will hinder us from accepting a plain truthful presentation of this will be nothing more than plain old down to earth racial prejudice.”

Because of his nationally broadcast sermons for the Herald of Truth radio program, John Allen Chalk was arguably the most recognizable name on the forum’s program. His sermon

52 Ibid.

53 G. P. Holt, “Is Interracial Marriage Sinful?” Transcript in John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-DO. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
focused primarily on the text of Ephesians 2:11-22, a Pauline passage that explains the removal of figurative walls that separated Jews from Gentiles. But the urgency of Chalk’s message was strengthened by several anecdotes that he shared. These stories were intended to illustrate the presence of barriers that separated black and white churches, barriers that he hoped—like the apostle’s walls—would soon crumble. When the Herald of Truth received response cards from listeners across the country, administrators processed the responses and sent them to COCs in the vicinity of the listener. Chalk recalled one occasion when a lady wished to make contact with a local church near her home in Louisiana. The Herald of Truth’s contact soon wrote back to the program and reported, “I made a call on the lady who wrote into your program. She is . . . a colored person. . . . We have no work among those people.” On another occasion, the Herald of Truth heard back from an elder in Kentucky who had not even bothered to visit the listener. He recognized the address and refused to make contact. Chalk also had vignettes to share apart from the radio ministry. He explained how an especially militant black student activist on the campus of Pepperdine College was inspired in part because of an occasion from her childhood when she asked a white preacher for a drink of water. He obliged her request by serving her with water in his dog’s bowl. Chalk described how the largest COC in Memphis chose not to distribute an issue of the Christian Chronicle to its members because it featured new developments at Southwestern Christian College, and he noted how a presentation at a lectureship by a black preacher was the only one omitted from a published collection of the event’s proceedings. A wall certainly existed, and Chalk had little trouble identifying its presence.\(^{54}\)

Zebedee Bishop offered a summary at the conclusion of the forum, and his outlook was bleak. He used the occasion to deliver a lecture that had recently been refused by Pepperdine

\(^{54}\) John Allen Chalk, “The Other Wall.” Transcript in John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-DO. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
College. Bishop’s speech, perhaps directed in part at Chalk and other whites in attendance, was forceful and direct. “Many of you speak tonight with the authority that you know the Negro. I imagine you know the Negro, but you don’t know the black man. There is a profound transition taking place in our society right now,” he continued, “and I’m afraid that the church of Christ, as usual, is going to be the last to understand what’s really happening to this nation and to this world.” Restoration of New Testament Christianity was still a goal, in his opinion, but it could not come at the expense of racial justice. Indeed, in Bishop’s mind, the presence of racial injustice indicated that the church was not present. “Now it is time past for the church of Christ to renounce its historical and spiritual dishonesty. It is time to cease from frustrating the restoration of the universal church of Christ.” Bishop spoke more favorably than many of King, noting that “many times when God’s people think they can fold their hands, lock their arms and forget all about it, God has a way of working through history and working through other mediums to bring about his purpose.” King, presumably, was still not considered one of “God’s people,” but he at least was a servant of providence.  

Bishop offered little hope for the future, and in that sense, his words were somewhat prophetic. Noting with much chagrin that the Catholic Church and the secular government had worked more toward racial justice than COCs—who had only “follow[ed] behind and said Amen”—Bishop did offer some prescription. “Unless white members . . . stand in their communities, schools, political groups, homes and the church, and let justice ring forth . . . Christianity and the church will become defunct . . . As long as the white church maintains its exclusiveness, the black church will exist and it must exist.” He went on to urge the assembled

55 Zebedee Bishop, “Where Do We Go from Here?” Transcript in John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-DO. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
leaders to do more “to help move the church to this bold new expression of faith in the restoration of truth in the church.”

Some church leaders did respond. Plans had already been made for several of the most prominent figures within the church—preachers, elders, college presidents, and professors—to convene in Atlanta to discuss race relations in COCs. A white preacher and Harding College professor named Jimmy Allen joined two black ministers, Eugene Lawton of Newark and Roosevelt Wells of New York, in sending invitations that quoted from President Johnson’s National Advisory Council on Civil Disorder in observing a “deepening racial division.” The invitation further stated, “The New Testament churches are facing this same critical problem. In many areas, there are two fellowships of our people, one is black and the other is white. We are interested in eradicating the barriers that divide us and setting forth CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMS to make us truly one in the colorless Christ.” The call went out for a meeting at Atlanta’s Hilton Inn on June 25-26, a Tuesday and Wednesday.

Some fifty people convened in Atlanta, but several people were noticeably absent, too. B. C. Goodpasture, editor of the Gospel Advocate, did not attend, nor did any administrators from COC colleges in Alabama and Tennessee. Fred Gray, who undoubtedly was the one figure from COCs most easily associated with the civil rights movement, did not attend either. The only person in attendance with any reputation for civil rights activism was Franklin Florence, and he did not appear as a speaker. Several black preachers were on the program, of course, including Roosevelt Wells, who spoke during Wednesday afternoon’s final session. No women were

56 Ibid.

present at the conference, a fact that especially perturbed Ona Belknap, editor of the *Christian Woman*. In a letter to John Allen Chalk, she frankly expressed her disappointment in terms that hearkened to the growing women’s liberation movement. “I was told I could not attend the meeting . . . because I am a woman,” she wrote to Chalk. “[W]hy, oh why, are we treated like second class citizens?” Belknap surmised that “the men in the brotherhood still prefer their women silent, stupid and pregnant. Such women,” she sarcastically warned, “will continue to raise hippies, radicals and atheists, for their own intellect has been so stifled through the years they do well to be able to understand crochet instructions.” Belknap’s pleas for females to participate apparently went unheeded.\(^5^8\)

Upon their arrival on Tuesday morning, the men were greeted with programs, one-page photocopies folded in half, that outlined the conference itinerary. The front of the program indicated the theme, “Equal members and equal partner[s] in Christ,” a phrase lifted from the apostle Paul’s Ephesians epistle that suggested a different future and the only possible basis for black and white COCs to maintain any relationship. The back of the program looked to the past. A paragraph from David Lipscomb’s pen was printed. It was lifted from the 21 February 1878 issue of the *Gospel Advocate*, and it showed how Lipscomb’s admonition, now ninety years old, had never really been heeded. “We believe it is sinful to have two congregations in the same community for persons of separate and distinct races,” it began, before closing, “For the whites to

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\(^{58}\) An incomplete list of all attendees can be found in “Statement of Acknowledgment of Racial Prejudice and Proposals for Improving Race Relations in Churches of Christ.” John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-AC. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis. Also see the photograph in *Christian Echo* 63, no. 9 (September 1968): 7 or *Mission* 2, no. 3 (September 1968): 89, which also includes a caption listing those pictured. Ona Belknap to John Allen Chalk, 28 June 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 A-C Correspondence, folder B. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
reject the Negro is to make the whites self-righteous, self-sufficient, exclusive and unchristian in
spirit.”59

After conference organizers brought Tuesday’s morning session to order, Dr. Clifton Ganus, who served as vice president of Harding College from 1957 until he became its president in 1965, opened with an address titled, “Jesus Speaks on Race Relations.” Twelve days later, he delivered a similar sermon to the College Church of Christ back in Searcy, Arkansas where he served as an elder. “The sermon was very well received,” he later wrote. “I feel that we have an unusual situation and that our brethren are really trying to do what is right. We try to treat all people alike regardless of their color.” Ganus shared this assessment with Andrew Hairston, black minister of Atlanta’s Simpson Street Church of Christ. Hairston had followed Ganus to the speaker’s podium at the conference, and his lecture on “Spiritual Equality in Christ” spared no words in its assessment of COCs and race relations.60

Hairston, who would later become a successful attorney and judge in the city court of Atlanta, expressed his pleasure that this conference had been convened in his city, even though the timing was “extremely late and definitely too late to allow the church to make the impression God would have had.” Hairston affirmed his orthodoxy to COC doctrine, emphasizing how he believed “in the one church” but could not perceive how this church could be present “among

59 “Conference on Improving Race Relations in the Churches of Christ” program. Clifton L. Ganus Jr. Papers. Unprocessed. Administration Building, Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas. Ephesians 3:1-6 states, “It is in this great cause that I, Paul, have become Christ's prisoner for you Gentiles. For you must have heard how God gave me grace to become your minister, and how he allowed me to understand his secret by giving me a direct Revelation. (What I have written briefly of this above will explain to you my knowledge of the mystery of Christ.) This secret was hidden to past generations of mankind, but it has now, by the spirit, been made plain to God's consecrated messengers and prophets. It is simply this: that the Gentiles, who were previously excluded from God's agreements, are to be equal heirs with his chosen people, equal members and equal partners in God's promise given by Christ through the Gospel” (Phillips).

people who accommodate a racist system.” His topic was ironic in many respects because whites had long affirmed the spiritual equality of their black brothers and sisters, but this affirmation had rarely translated into other facets of life. Like most other orthodox black ministers, Hairston presented a special challenge to whites in COCs. Other denominations could tolerate division more easily because they did not constantly rail against it; their identity was not based upon a self-perception that they were the only true church. COCs, however, with their “us against the world” mentality, could not afford to ostracize a significant portion of its membership. To do so would cause division, the very thing that they preached against. For decades, COCs had attempted to navigate southern racial customs through loose associations between black and white churches. These associations led white COCs to affirm their unity with their black brothers and sisters while maintaining segregated institutions. But the momentous events of the 1960s and the awakening of black consciousness among church members necessitated changes, changes that most white churches were either slow or simply unwilling to make.61

Hairston was acutely aware of this phenomenon. “Since racism is division, and the church and acknowledged division are entities which cannot . . . exist in a single situation,” he told the conference, “no honest person or true christian [sic] should contend for the existence of the true church in the midst of known or acknowledged segregation.” He went on to note that “the Church of Christ became more segregated than before” the Brown decision of 1954. “Prior to this time whites frequented Negro meetings and services. After this ruling, there came an abrupt lessening of this limited interaction which came to be a symbol of approval of equality and brotherhood rather than condescension and accommodation.” According to this assessment, the meaning of an assembly of black and white people had changed since the mid-1950s, and white

church members did not want to be associated with this new meaning, one that might
conceivably connote acceptance of racial equality. Hairston confessed that “blacks’ greatest
single sin in this matter of segregation is accommodation,” but now they faced an unusual
dilemma. “We condemned our black denominational brothers and denied them fellowship
because they called their ministers reverend, had instrumental music or sold dinners to support
their churches. However, we have found ourselves rejected by whites of the church whom we
thought were our brothers.”

Hairston’s frank assessment of COCs included some advice about how to proceed, but he
was not optimistic, concluding that the “church is presently competing for number one position
as the strongest citadel of segregation.” He attributed the recent victories of the civil rights
movement to “the god of the courts, the god of economics, the god of the legislature, and the god
of pressure groups,” not “the god of the church.” For COCs to improve, Hairston first suggested
that whites must also integrate into black churches rather than expecting blacks to immediately
join white churches and institutions. Returning to the title of his address, he contended that
spiritual equality “must mean not only that you can open the door for me; it must also mean that I
can open the door for you without either having any hesitancy toward entering because of who
opened the door.” Second, he admonished black churches to “repent of the sin of parasiteism
\[sic\]” and to become self-supporting rather than dependent upon the good will of white churches.
Finally, he urged this group of influential men to “consider the whole man” and be vigilant about
the image that churches and institutions project. “The self-respecting black of today and
tomorrow does not and will not hear you when you talk of spiritual equality when every piece of
literature, filmstrip, Herald of Truth speaker, and giant effort of evangelism set forth only

\[62\] Ibid.
whites.” If COCs really believed in spiritual equality, Hairston insisted, then it should be reflected in every endeavor. Otherwise, a claim of “spiritual equality is nothing more than a clanking cymbol [sic].”

Among other laments raised by the black ministers, Bales’s *The Martin Luther King Story* was also mentioned. “Please don’t write books attacking the most prominent Negro leader and then document it with writings from biased newspapers,” one preacher said, before explaining how deeply hurt he was to find the book for sale at the Harding Graduate School bookstore in Memphis shortly after King’s assassination. Cled Wimbish, who would compose his letter to Bales before the week ended, felt compelled to stand and publicly disavow the book. “I wanted it understood,” he later wrote, “that I believed that it represented only a one-sided view and was not a factual, scholarly study.” President Ganus did not defend his notable professor, but he did suggest that Bales be contacted about his book. After reading portions of the book for himself, Ganus expressed ambivalence about Bales’s assertions. “I am sure that much that [Bales] has said is true and I know that some people view it with colored glasses and are probably about as guilty as one may be in misjudging,” he would later write to Wimbish. “On the other hand, there is also room for questioning some of the statements made.”

Hairston’s remarks were met with mixed reviews, but by the close of the conference, a statement was drafted that acknowledged “the sin of racial prejudice which has existed in Churches of Christ and church-related institutions and businesses. Because we love the church of Jesus Christ,” the preamble continued, “and want to see her fully committed to the principles

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63 Ibid. Hairston’s final remark referred to another Pauline epistle, 1 Corinthians 13:1, which states, “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbol” (ASV).

of Spiritual Equality and racial justice for all persons, we plead for the end of discrimination in all of its forms in the life of the church.” Attendees also compiled a list of twenty-seven proposals aimed at rectifying discriminatory practices in local churches, church-related institutions and businesses, and individual congregants. Much like the Dayton meeting, the conference in Atlanta served as a forum for discussion, but these men had no power over COCs across the country. A local newspaper even reported that the “integrated group of ministers . . . emphasized that they did not constitute a formal organization, but were ‘a gathering of concerned Christians.’” The significance of the statement was further curtailed by the fact that the two college administrators in attendance did not sign.65

The conference received widely divergent interpretations. Writing in his church’s bulletin, minister Dwain Evans, who had also participated in the Dayton forum, called it “a historical meeting” and “a step in the right direction.” In his estimation, the occasion marked “the first time white ministers heard black ministers ‘tell it like it is.’” Evans also shared a fascinating moment that he described as a “highpoint of the conference.” After hearing a stirring message from black minister David Jones Jr. that apparently mentioned interracial marriage, a white administrator from Pepperdine said, “David, I want you to know that I would be proud for one of my daughters to marry one of your sons.” The statement was apparently made without consultation with either sons or daughters, but this expression marked a rare moment in the church’s (or even the South’s) history.66

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Dr. John Stevens also spoke favorably of his experience in Atlanta. Stevens, who would become the president of Abilene Christian College the following year, circulated a memo to other administrators that summarized his understanding of how to proceed. He recalled that two years ago, black minister Hubert Locke had suggested “that we should do away with the Negro colleges and Negro congregations.” Opinions had since changed, however, so that “now the insistence seems to be that before the Negro can ever be accepted as an equal he must demonstrate his ability not only to follow but also to lead.” In this instance, Stevens mischaracterized the purpose for maintaining historically black institutions; earning equality was certainly not what Hairston, Locke, and others conceived. But Stevens did chronicle, even if inadvertently, a significant change then occurring among black preachers and many others in black communities. Integration for the sake of integration was no longer a goal when it entailed the dissolution of historically black institutions. “By the same line of reasoning,” Stevens noted, “Negro congregations must develop themselves to open their doors to white members who would attend congregations with Negro leaders and preachers on the same basis as Negroes are now being invited to attend white congregations.” Stevens surmised that “this is the essence of the so-called ‘Black Power’ emphasis being now made by our brethren, and it seems to me to be a logical position.” In another context, Dwain Evans had made a similar observation. Upon returning from the national lectureship of African American COCs in April, he wrote in his weekly bulletin article, “Integration is not the issue with them. Integration is something which is naturally assumed. The issue is whether the white church is willing to treat the Negro church as
a partner, as its equal. There is an increasing resentment concerning the age-old paternalism of the white church.”

With regard to the proposals concerning “Local Church Activities” and “Church Related Institutions,” Stevens recommended that Abilene Christian College and local churches there take prompt action. In the process, however, he reminded the other administrators to take a “hands off” approach to black congregations and colleges. Stevens noted that discussions among some whites of closing the 10th and Treadaway COC in Abilene were “probably not valid at this moment.” Then he pinpointed a dilemma that white churches often encountered: “The trouble is, of course, that they have always been a very weak congregation and probably could not exist at all without being subsidized by the College church, and yet every month that the subsidy continues increases the resentment toward paternalism.” The members of the 10th and Treadaway church might have disagreed with Stevens’ assessment of their strength, but his comment illustrates perfectly how many whites began to approach issues relating to the integration of churches. “Would it be better for the College church to cut the congregation adrift and let it see what it can do?” Stevens asked. “The impression I got in Atlanta was that it would be. Of course, probably the best thing would be for a number of white brethren to place membership with the congregation and help it grow.” Here Stevens identified a problem that loomed larger than the strength or weakness of any particular church. In some respects, it involved the same fundamental issues that arose in the wake of NCI’s closure. Whites might be increasingly comfortable with blacks joining their churches and schools, but would white

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congregants also be willing to join black churches or attend historically black colleges? In general, the answer to that question was a resounding “no.” Thus, the desire of black members to see their churches and institutions survive, coupled with the unwillingness of whites to integrate into historically black organizations, helps to explain the persistence of racially segregated churches.68

Stevens also shared his memorandum with Dwain Evans. He sought Evans’ approval of these impressions. The latter “was very impressed” with what Stevens shared, before offering his own brief assessment. “The thinking men of the Afro-American church are more interested today in real equality of relationships between black and white than they are in token integration. I think we are going to see the emphasis on black power increasing rather than decreasing. . . . I think it is a good thing. I know that as white men, we will be tested in the years and months to come. I pray that we may be patient as we deal with excesses on the part of our black brothers. Surely, they have been patient with us for a long time.” Indeed, the patience of black ministers with COCs endured, even as they forged new paths away from white churches. Andrew Hairston sent letters to each participant in which he described the meeting as a “blessing” and a “new field of meaningful spiritual interaction.” He also included a photograph of the entire group, a newspaper article from the Atlanta Constitution that reported on the event, and a copy of his lecture. Hairston and other black ministers expressed cautious optimism about the future of

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black and white COCs, but they also chose not to linger over whites who were defensive or content with only gradual change.  

Harding professor Jimmy Allen, one of the event’s organizers, was a bit less diplomatic in his assessment of the conference. “I think that some good was done in spite of some negative attitudes,” he wrote to an editor. Yet Allen did urge him to add a black writer to his staff. “Since I write so infrequently, I would be delighted to give up my position to a qualified Negro brother.”  

Allen felt like he was doing his part in implementing the conference’s proposals, but he clearly disliked the straightforward talk of preachers like Hairston and Franklin Florence who left little doubt of their positions on past and present race relations. Given that Allen was one of the conference organizers, it came as no surprise that others would offer more negative assessments.  

In an essay titled “A New Creed Appears,” evangelist W.L. Totty of Indianapolis took issue with the conference and the statement that it approved. COCs had, in part, defined themselves as a group “with no creed but the Bible,” as the saying went. The statement issued in Atlanta might loosely be defined as a creed. Plus, the statement included suggestions for individual churches, and this feature of the document hinted at a violation of local autonomy. “We wonder how that group in Atlanta, Georgia, thought they could have workshops of any kind for the churches in every region of the United States. Every congregation is autonomous in its government,” Totty reminded his readers. “I heartily believe that race prejudice . . . [has] no

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place among God’s people. But we believe that the Bible is sufficient and that we do not need proposals (creeds) signed by certain men. What we need more than anything else in the world is to have the Bible taught just as it is without fear or favor—a thing that is not being done, I fear, in many sections of our country now.” Thus, even though the statement expressed sentiments to which Totty would have subscribed, he deemed it unacceptable and “a denominational venture.”

His article also circulated among churches in the South that might have had ulterior motives in opposing the statement.71

While Totty might have maintained what, in his mind, were legitimate theological misgivings about such a conference, other detractors’ motives were clearly not so noble. Foster Ramsey published an article for a church bulletin that bemoaned the emergence of what he called “ecumenical councils.” He noted, “We have long been accustomed to councils and conferences among the denominations in which decisions have been made and fastened on those religious bodies. . . . Preachers and teachers of the church of Christ are beginning to meet in these ecumenical councils where they come to certain decisions and attempt to set up these decisions as the pattern for the conduct of the churches of Christ in the future.” Ramsey then proceeded to mischaracterize several aspects of the statement, though he claimed to have learned his information from someone who attended. For example, he said that the signed statement insisted that churches who refused to integrate would be disfellowshipped and that preachers and teachers

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were to encourage interracial marriage. “And so grows modernism and liberalism in the church!” Ramsey concluded.⁷²

Taking another approach, Bob Anderson, minister of the Mayfair Church of Christ in Huntsville, Alabama, composed and distributed a satirical letter, typed on letterhead from the “Committee For [sic] the Escalation of the Eskimo,” about some preachers who met in New Mexico to discuss “an area of concern,” namely “that no real concerted interest has ever been demonstrated toward the Eskimo.” According to Anderson, the assembled ministers “recognized that there is a trend toward ‘speaking for the brotherhood.’” The recommendations arising from Anderson’s imaginary meeting were clearly intended to parody and trivialize the Atlanta conference’s proposals. One, for example, urged church colleges to design “a special course . . . to teach introduction to Eskimo culture.”⁷³

The Getwell Church of Christ in Memphis was more direct in expressing disdain for the Atlanta conference and its statement. In a September bulletin for its congregants, the church outlined a few of the proposals and named some of the signatories. Then, in a section titled “Agitation and Division,” the bulletin stated, “It seems that some brethren are determined to create dissension and division in the church over racial issues.” No mention was made of the black and white participants and their intentions to foster interracial unity within the church. Instead, the article cited “statements of radicalism” recently made by Dwain Evans in his church bulletin. Similar to his remarks in Dayton, Evans had urged his congregants to view open

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⁷² Clipping of Foster L. Ramsey, “And Now There Are Ecumenical Councils!,” (9 August 1968). John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 Herald of Truth Correspondence, folder 92RR-COC-AM. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.

⁷³ Bob Anderson to To Whom It May Concern, [undated]; Jennings Davis Jr. to Bob Anderson, 16 October 1968; and Dwain Evans to Bob Anderson, 23 October 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 Herald of Truth Correspondence, folder 92RR-COC-AM. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
housing as a religious issue, and he also expressed his occasional shame at being a white man. The Getwell bulletin noted that Christianity and slavery coexisted in the New Testament and that these “brethren have come dangerously close to an effort at creed-making for the churches of Christ.” Foreshadowing future debates about affirmative action, the bulletin article closed by charging the men with “advocat[ing] racism in reverse. They oppose hiring white men just because they are white, but they insist on hiring black men just because they are black. What makes one right and the other wrong? Truly, the legs of the lame are not equal.” This final assertion left little doubt as to the Getwell congregation’s feelings about race relations in general and African Americans in particular. In the wake of the Atlanta conference, John Allen Chalk was amazed that misinformation abounded about the meeting and the statement. Listeners to his weekly radio sermon wrote letters asking for details of the conference and an explanation of the statement. “I have racked my brain and have talked with other participants in that conference at length as to the reasons why these misunderstandings would arise,” he wrote to friends in Tennessee. “We have been able to arrive at only one conclusion: rank prejudice and racial animosity.”

The elders of the Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, the church primarily responsible for the Herald of Truth radio program, decided to address the issue of race relations in a sermon series. During the summer months of 1968, John Allen Chalk preached a sermon series titled “Three American Revolutions” that focused on social issues relating to crime, race, and sex for the Herald of Truth radio program. On four consecutive Sundays in July, Chalk delivered messages relating to race relations. The response was remarkable as the program

74 Clipping of “The Atlanta Conference (1),” The Getwell Reminder IX, no. 44 (12 September 1968). John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 Herald of Truth Correspondence, folder 92RR-COC-AM; and John Allen Chalk to Don and Regina Stevens, 18 November 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 D-Z Correspondence, folder S. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
received several thousand letters from both members of COCs and listeners not affiliated with
the denomination. Most letters complimented Chalk and the sermons which were approved in
advance by the elders of the Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas. The letters that
disapproved, however, largely show how the quest for primitivism superceded potential concerns
about racism. While some whites certainly used primitivism as a tool to oppose the civil rights
movement, many of these letters indicate that disdain for social activism was not necessarily a
position against racial equality.

For example, a preacher from Oklahoma expressed his concern “about the ‘liberal’ image
the program is getting . . . Many of us are not at all thrilled about the ‘Three Revolutions’.
Sounds too much like the Social Gospel themes of the liberals! . . . People will listen to the old
themes of Grace, Faith, Repentance, Baptism, Obedience, The Church, Undenominational
Christianity, etc. They are hungry for them. They have heard all they want of Crime, Race and
Sex.” A minister from Tennessee wrote a letter to share his “firm conviction that we need to tell
people what to do to be saved. We need sermons on the identity of the New Testament church,
the oneness of the church, scriptural worship, on evils of denominationalism, etc. We have no
business meddling in politics, social problems, etc. If we preach to men what to do to get right
with God, they will also get right with one another.” The elders of a COC in Lubbock, Texas,
determined that “in recent weeks the radio programs have sacrificed the sharp evangelistic thrust
in favor of emphasis on critical social problems. . . . We realize that the issues of sex, crime, and
racism are real, and that any scriptures that may guide us in these areas need to be taught.
However, we fear that the caustic and emotional approach reflected in recent radio sermons will
be more hurtful than helpful in leading lost souls to Christ.” A minister from Florida warned that
“the denominational churches have involved themselves in social and political arguments that
have all but destroyed many of them. . . . The denominational churches have forsaken the gospel, what little they had, for social theology.” And the elders of the Tarrant Church of Christ in Birmingham, Alabama even claimed that if Chalk “had dealt with this matter in one lesson as a problem in the church rather than as a problem in society, it would not have disturbed us. But we feel that he has used the Herald of Truth to discuss a political issue.”

This sampling of letters reveals the extent to which many COCs wished to avoid discussion of issues relating to social problems. Even the responses to these complaints maintained this theme. An elder of the Highland Church of Christ replied to one of the above grievances by asking “that you detail any fact you may have regarding the views of John Allen Chalk that are not in harmony with God’s Word. . . . Please take your Bible and point out to us where any of these sermons is not in harmony with the truth.” This same elder informed the Tarrant church from Birmingham, “In regard to the July sermons on racial problems, I read each manuscript presented during the month and in those manuscripts there are an average of 43-plus scriptures from God’s Word used in each of these four sermons.” In this manner, then, the debate was not so much about scriptural teaching on the subject of race as much as whether or not those teachings should be a big concern of the church and broadcast to listeners across the country. For this reason, a minister from Virginia, who claimed to be sharing evangelistic films “with two colored groups” when the sermons on race were broadcast, would write that “the programs presented have not been for the most part what is needed in this area. As you know this is a

mission area. We are the only church in the city of Roanoke.” In other words, sermons on race were no way to convert people to New Testament Christianity.76

In at least one instance, the sermons were reported to have been damaging to churches that had been making some progress in changing their members’ racist attitudes. The elders from the Central Church of Christ in Birmingham admitted that many of their members exhibited the “racial prejudices common in our area.” They went on to insist that most had “made progress in overcoming them, even those few members who have been vocal about it. This progress has been aided by some plain yet tactful teaching from our pulpit.” When the elders learned that the Herald of Truth would address racism in a series of sermons, they were hopeful that members would show further improvement, but the opposite occurred. “In our opinion,” they wrote, “brother Chalk presented the Bible teaching correctly . . . However, some of his references to nonbiblical studies . . . and his applications of Bible principles to ‘housing’ seemed most to arouse the prejudices.” Due to this response, the elders chose not to publicize future Herald of Truth broadcasts, despite their agreement with the gist of Chalk’s sermons on race.77

Together, these stories point to the enormous variety of attitudes and actions that characterized black and white churches by the late 1960s. Based on their correspondence with the Herald of Truth, most congregants accepted racial equality as an idea and a biblical principle to be followed, but they continued to differ on the methods of implementing equality in society and on the efficacy of the church to involve itself in such matters. With no denominational hierarchy pressing for change and no real interest in interracial cooperation among most white

76 Art Haddox to W. R. Craig, 22 July 1968; Art Haddox to Elders, Tarrant Road Church of Christ, 19 August 1968; and Garland Elkins to A. L. Haddox, 3 October 1968. Herald of Truth Papers, series II, box 16, folder Disapprove. Special Collections, Brown Library, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.

churches, black and white COCs generally ventured in separate directions. The Schrader Lane Church of Christ in Nashville offers one of the better examples of a black church forging its own path. Under the leadership of its young minister, David Jones Jr., the church, formerly known as the Jefferson Street Church of Christ, sponsored one of the first race relations workshops in Nashville. Like many other African American preachers in COCs, Jones was educated at NCI, and he subsequently earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at Tennessee State University. Jones personified the break with the past made by many young African American ministers. Under his leadership, the church developed its social conscience and became more assertive in its service to the local community, characteristics that were not typically emphasized in COCs. The new endeavors proposed during Jones’s first few years of ministry included the construction of an orphanage, a home for the elderly, and a church camp, programs and services that whites churches had traditionally reserved for themselves. Jones openly endorsed the aims of the civil rights movement, undeterred by any criticism that he might face from influential churches, ministers, or college administrators in Nashville. A history of the Schrader Lane church notes that Jones was frequently invited to speak on issues relating to the civil rights movement. “This was rare,” the book notes, “since Churches of Christ were not involved in the mainstream of the civil rights effort.” Changes were occurring, however, and this same narrative declares, “It was during this period that the Jefferson Street Church of Christ began to assert its autonomy and to seek a means to overcome its traditional complacent image.”

CHAPTER 8
EXORCISING DEMONS

The fallout from the Atlanta race relations conference and the *Herald of Truth* sermon series continued into the fall of 1968, but if efforts toward racial reconciliation looked promising during the forums of that year, the implementation of specific suggestions often faltered. Many churches, both black and white, were simply uninterested in participating in processes that would undoubtedly entail conflict and dissension. Rather than actively and consistently pursue racial reconciliation, most COCs permitted legal reforms to absolve them of any responsibility in facilitating interracial dialogue, understanding, and community. Over time, churches began choosing to ignore rather than to discuss and resolve sources of distrust. Excuses such as “they don’t want to worship like we do” became easier to espouse than working to make unity a lived reality.

This chapter explores the ways that COCs struggled to exorcise past demons. Black churches often turned their attention to the problems facing America’s inner cities, as well as the unique demands that confronted African Americans in the South after the legal changes of the 1960s. In larger cities, they felt increasingly threatened by the popularity of Black Muslims and had to design their ministries around the challenges to their faith from such groups as the Nation of Islam. Meanwhile, white churches increasingly invested in missionaries, youth programs, and new buildings, often following their constituents out of the cities and into the “safety” of the predominantly white suburbs. In several instances, black churches purchased the buildings and property that had previously belonged to white churches, literally filling the void left by their departing brothers and sisters. Ironically, the result was that black and white COCs grew more distant in subsequent years than they had been before the decade of the 1960s began, a trend further supported by white congregants who grew strident in their criticism of black members.
who they perceived as “blindly caught up in the spirit of the day.” White members also began downplaying the effects of racism by choosing to emphasize how black churches had often benefitted from white benevolence. For example, in a 1969 article published in the *Christian Echo* and titled “A Plea to My Black Brethren,” white minister John Waddey noted that “Anglo and Black brethren have worked together through the years. Whites have assisted Negro Christians in local efforts and in the training of ministers. We have worked hand in hand to preach the gospel.”¹

There were some exceptions to this pattern, stories that further illustrate the varieties of responses within communities of faith to the African American freedom struggle. In a few instances, black and white churches merged as an expression of their commitment to Christian unity and, perhaps unconsciously, as a reaffirmation of the exclusivism expressed with regard to other denominations. This kind of integration even occurred in at least three southern states—Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana—and Missouri, places hardly known for progressive views on race relations. Some churches also developed ministries and programs that incorporated both black and white members. These examples were rare, however, and many black churches were understandably wary of their white counterparts, fully aware that white churches had a long history of controlling nominally black institutions, subverting black leaders, and failing to appreciate the contributions and talents of black members. In contrast, some COCs offer conclusive proof that the tradition of segregation did not simply die a painful death in the 1960s; indeed, segregation thrived in some churches and even persisted for a while in the housing policies of David Lipscomb College. Incidents at several church colleges in

1969—Harding, Pepperdine, and Oklahoma Christian—further inflamed racial hostilities, and the issue of interracial sex continued to incite heated discussions.

Throughout its existence, the *Echo* had often lamented the presence of segregated COCs, even while affirming white benevolence. Efforts to promote church unity, and by default, racial unity, became more common during the 1960s. A few COCs from around the country attempted to create and maintain integrated churches, and these efforts, even if rare, warrant attention, especially when they occurred in the South or in riot-torn northern cities. On the whole, it seems that integrated churches typically had a majority of white members, as fewer whites were willing to integrate into black churches or attend a church where the majority of members were black. But COCs also had no reason to practice “token integration” as did so many educational institutions during the era. Outside of moral or theological motivations, churches had no compelling reason to integrate. There was obviously no denominational mandate. The only conceivable economic concern would involve more concentrated and efficient efforts in carrying out various ministries or missionary activities. One might possibly imagine that some white congregants thought of saving money by incorporating black churches into their own, but this notion fails to acknowledge the desire that many black congregants felt about integrated churches. One preacher from Mississippi wrote a piece in 1968, titled “The Trouble with Skin,” that stated, “I am not writing to try and make someone believe that just worshiping with the White will get us to heaven. Not by any means, but its [*sic*] a good start.” He associated righteousness with belonging to an integrated church. Three years later, R. N. Hogan assailed whites for fleeing when blacks moved into a neighborhood. He urged them to stay and to create and embrace integrated churches. “A great contribution can be made to the growth of the Lord’s Church if our white brethren will stop running and remain in the community regardless of who or
what races comes into the community, [and] preach the gospel to them, for that is exactly what the Lord said to do.” His comments further prove that if individual COCs chose to integrate, they were making a conscious, local decision that went against the prevailing trend within the fellowship.2

The primary evidence about these integrated churches is frequently elusive or piecemeal. For example, almost nothing is known about an integrated church in St. Paul, Minnesota, that sponsored a revival with the black preacher from the Adams Street COC in Enterprise, Alabama, in 1963. A letter from a church member in Enterprise noted that the St. Paul church was predominantly white and that Brother Balloon “was the first colored minister ever to conduct a [gospel] meeting with that church.” In terms of saving lost souls, the revival was also a success. “Through the glory and honor of God,” the Enterprise sister proclaimed, “there were ten responses including both white and colored. Eight for baptism, two for restoration.”3

The Echo offered an account of how a black and a white church in Tucson, Arizona merged to form one, integrated church in the summer of 1964. The leaders of the two churches—the West Side COC and the South Side COC—began discussing the feasibility of merging. “Finally,” the article reports, “after many meetings, and the solving or resolving of every conceivable obstacle[,] the weeks and months of careful planning, visualizing and hopefulness became a reality as the two congregations, [sic] merged [and] combined their talents and resources and became one, effective November 15, 1964.” The new church continued to use the facilities of the white congregation, perhaps explaining why three black members refused to join the integrated church. Likewise, three couples from the white church moved their

2 Eugene Green, “The Trouble with Skin,” Christian Echo 63, no. 7 (July 1968): 5; and Hogan, “Contribution,” 2.

membership to another congregation. “At the beginning of any work you will always have a Sanballat and Tobiah,” the account wryly noted, referring to an obscure story in the Hebrew scriptures about two cynical Jewish exiles who distracted from efforts to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. Despite a few detractors, the merger was considered a success and an inspiration for more integrated churches. In Willcox, Arizona, some eighty miles east of Tucson, a gospel meeting hosted by a white church resulted in the baptism of three black locals. “[T]hat congregation is now [sic] intergrated and the possibility of even more conversions [is] very promising. There are other areas in Arizona where the same type of work is being contemplated. Not the establishing of separate congregations, but the conversion of individuals and their addition to the existing congregations.”

The story of these Tucson churches also reveals some motivating factors. Seven specific “advantages and-or results” were listed. They included breaking down sociological barriers, dispelling racial myths, interracial cooperation in ministry, numeric strength, combining and more efficiently using resources, and “recognition of the fact that people of all races . . . are basically the same.” The benefits of combined resources were further explicated, as the author described how many smaller churches were “Serving no good purpose other than housekeeping for the Lord.” Opportunities for ministry seemed more promising if smaller churches would choose to consolidate, and the article departed from its theme of racial unity to admonish smaller churches to consider other possibilities. “Each day I am becoming more and more convinced that there is strength not only in unity alone but also in numbers, and that if we could lay aside our petty differences, combine our talent and resources[,] we could indeed reach many more souls who are groping in darkness.” The article was careful not to expect integration everywhere.

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“This is not to say,” it continued, “that in every area all the Negro and White congregations ought to merge into one building. It is to say, however, that in some areas there are as many as four congregations almost within rock throwing distance of each other, all struggling[,] doing nothing or very little to execute the command of our Lord.”

While this account raises more questions than it provides answers about the logistics and structure of the new arrangements, the integrated congregation seemed to thrive. Eight months after the merger became official, the church proudly reported “that we are one, and that the color line as such does not exist, that a spirit of love and oneness, togetherness . . . is exemplified by the congregation.” In some sense, this new church exemplified what COCs had sought to create all along. By subordinating racial identities within the church—“the color line as such does not exist”—members could more easily ignore the presence and profound influence of “the color line” within the rest of society.

Other churches had minimal deliberations over integration. In 1965, the Echo included a letter from Joplin, Missouri, that briefly explained how churches there had integrated and were using the facilities of the white congregation: “The congregation of Christ’s Church formerly meeting at 906 Furnace Street has been closed for several months and all races are meeting together at the 4th and Forest Ave. congregation. If any of God’s children are passing through Joplin or are planning to move into this area you will find a cordial welcome at 4th Street and Forest Avenue.”

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid. In the latest edition (2003) of Churches of Christ in the United States, the South Side church is described as an African American church.

7 Letter from Bessie Elam, Christian Echo 60, no. 6 (June 1965): 9.
A few years later, in Sweetwater, Texas, a white church and its minister, Dick Bartholomew, planned an event to which members from the black church were formally invited. “On this occasion,” Bartholomew reported, “our negro brethren closed up shop to be our honored guests.” This particular experience in Sweetwater, a city some forty miles west of Abilene, proved especially positive for most everyone involved. Subsequent communications led about forty black members to formally identify with Bartholomew’s church. “This of course has not come without its trials, tribulations, threats, and moves, but it has come, and it is here to stay!” he proudly exclaimed.8

Factors other than theology or good will could also precipitate a merger. In the fall of 1968, the building that belonged to the Butler Boulevard Church of Christ Lansing, Michigan, was purchased by Oldsmobile. Rather than find or construct another building, this black church sought to merge with the Holmes Road Church of Christ, a white church in Lansing. Coming on the heels of so much urban tumult, the merger caught the attention of Lansing’s State Journal, which reported the story with a front-page headline proclaiming, “Races Unite in Church Merger.” Ministerial duties were split between the black minister, W. D. Wiley, and the white minister, Allen Killom, a 1930 graduate of Freed-Hardeman College. The State Journal quoted both men. Killom noted for the paper that “While militants and advocates of black power and white segregationists have been warring against each other and clamoring for their respective ‘rights,’ we have been quietly solving this problem among the members of the two churches.” Wiley called the merger “a history-making event” and expressed his happiness to be participating. Killom shared the story of the two churches with the Echo, where he further explained, “Both congregations have shown a wonderful attitude. Not one criticism has been

8 Dick Bartholomew to John Allen Chalk, 13 July 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 A-C Correspondence, folder B. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
voiced.” Killom closed his report with a jab at the various forums that had been conducted throughout 1968. “We feel that this is Christianity in action, a far more effective way than conducting ‘Race Relations Workshops’, although these also may prove helpful, and we urge the whole brotherhood to consider this solution.”

While these examples of interracialism occurred outside of what is typically considered “the South,” a few deep South churches did try to confront racial segregation in similar ways. In the summer of 1968, a white preacher named Evans McMullen of Griffin, Georgia, converted Clarence Goodman, a black Baptist preacher, and his family to the restorationist faith of COCs. Located about forty miles south of Atlanta, Griffin was hardly a place where one would expect to find an integrated church, but the church members, buttressed by their primitivist world view, saw the benefits of having an integrated membership. Indeed, shortly after Goodman’s conversion, the Griffin church made arrangements for him to attend a preaching school in Lubbock, Texas. Upon completing school there, the church hired Goodman as an associate evangelist and, in the words of one observer, “the one church will continue its efforts to evangelize the total population,” not just local whites.

More concerted efforts at integration occurred at locations in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Alabama. In the fall of 1968, the Belmont Avenue Church of Christ in Nashville hosted a revival in which six black and white ministers alternated as speakers throughout the week. Batsell Barrett Baxter, chair of the Department of Bible at David Lipscomb College and popular television preacher for the Herald of Truth, participated in the meeting. “The attendance was a

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10 John Allen Chalk to Ivory James, 13 September 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 D-Z Correspondence, folder J. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis; and Evans McMullen, interview by author, tape recording, Valdosta, Georgia, 21 July 2006.
full house each night,” he wrote to a colleague, “and it now appears that this congregation will be able to continue in its present location with a mixed membership.” Likewise, in the city of Sulphur, Louisiana, near the Texas border, a gospel meeting sponsored by a white church featured John Whitley, a black minister from Houston. Whitley agreed to preach “with the understanding that should any of another race obey the gospel, they would be welcomed, yes, even expected to worship with the existing church,” namely the South Sulpher Church of Christ. Jim Brasher, the minister for the white church, urged his congregants to make the revival a success. In his weekly bulletin article, he reminded his church, “When Jesus Christ commanded his people to preach the gospel to every creature, he included men of all races and colors. We have been negligent in the past, but with God’s help, we hope to remedy that in the future. You can help by telling your acquaintances among the Negroes about this meeting.” Four people were baptized, including an elderly black woman. In a letter to the Echo, Whitley deemed the meeting a success and illustrated the common cause that could be found among black and white COCs who viewed themselves as the only authentic practitioners of Christianity. “[S]ince the thrust of this meeting was to break down barriers which existed and to know that no Christians among Negroes lived in the Sulphur area to their knowledge, we were especially happy that the city witnessed this historic meeting and tremendous Christian fellowship.”

One of the most remarkable mergers of black and white churches occurred in Tuskegee, Alabama. Along with his work as a civil rights attorney, Fred Gray continued to serve as the minister of the Newtown Church of Christ in Montgomery throughout the 1960s. He occasionally contributed articles to the Echo, including one in 1966 that urged churches to

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conduct personal evangelism workshops for their members. However, Gray officially resigned as minister of the church on 5 November 1973. He had long since moved his family to Tuskegee, and they finally decided to place membership with the Tuskegee Institute Church of Christ. A white church, the East End Church of Christ, was also located in Tuskegee, and for a variety of reasons, both churches had experienced declining memberships in recent years. Allan Parker, the president of a local bank and a friend of Gray, served the East End church as an elder. Unlike other denominations in Tuskegee, the East End church had always allowed black visitors to attend its services. Moreover, Gray found Parker to be a reliable white ally during earlier efforts to desegregate local schools in Macon County. Historian Robert Norrell even described Parker as one of a very small number of white liberals in Tuskegee, if liberalism there was defined as “open acceptance of the need for changes in race relations.” About Tuskegee and Parker, Norrell further noted, “One might be a Goldwater Republican in national politics but, because of one’s racial views, a liberal on Tuskegee issues.” Parker not only cooperated during the desegregation process, he also made a timely loan available to Gray as he prepared the lawsuit that sought redress for the abuses of the black men who were unwitting subjects of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Parker was willing to wait until the case was resolved before requiring payments.\(^\text{12}\)

After Gray became a member of the Institute church, he and Parker met to discuss the possibility of merging the black and white churches. Together, they developed and implemented a plan that created one Tuskegee Church of Christ, composed of black and white members. The new church had two white elders, including Parker, and one black elder, Gray. The relationship

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between these two men remained strong in subsequent years. When Gray was serving as president of the National Bar Association in 1986, he pushed Parker’s nomination for the prestigious Gertrude Rush Award and presented the award to him at a special ceremony. For his part, Parker continued to actively support Gray’s career, including his nomination as U.S. District Judge during the Jimmy Carter administration.¹³

Another situation unfolded for the West End Church of Christ in Atlanta during the early 1970s. The changing demographics of the surrounding neighborhood served as the impetus for this white church with a declining membership to reconsider its situation. The church elders made the decision to hire a black minister, Wesley Brown. During his youth, Brown attended a revival at the West End church; he was required to enter through a side door and sit in the balcony. Now he was asked to be the full-time minister, a job that he accepted and still holds. Over time, the number of white members dwindled, and as of this writing, the church consists almost exclusively of black congregants.¹⁴

Integrated churches were not particularly common within any denomination, anywhere in the country. The fact that several COCs, including some in the South and urban North, purposely sought to create integrated congregations is alone remarkable, even if membership rolls did not remain interracial. The Tuskegee church that formed under the leadership of Gray and Parker was composed only of African Americans thirty years later, much like West End in Atlanta. Whites did not formally break away; they just gradually moved from the area. Thus, in this

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¹⁴ Wesley Brown, interview by author, Atlanta, Georgia, 18 July 2006; and Ernest Holsendolph, interview by author, Stone Mountain, Georgia, 19 July 2006.
instance and others, segregated communities partially explain the existence of all-black or all-white churches.\textsuperscript{15}

In most communities, racially segregated churches persisted, and even as a few congregations were merging, some white churches continued to encourage and finance the establishment of separate black churches. For example, in Biloxi, Mississippi, the aptly named Division Street Church of Christ was formed in the mid 1960s when two African American women settled there. Upon arriving in her new town, the \textit{Echo} reports, Georgia Brown “began to search for the Lord’s church, after being closely associated with some of the Caucasian brethren, they were encouraging [her] to have a gospel meeting.” In traditional fashion, the white church helped conduct a revival with the aim of converting black locals who would then form the nucleus of a new church. However, when no converts were won, a few white members began meeting in the homes of these two ladies and their friends. White men continued to conduct the services, and they finally found a black preacher who would take on the task of building the church. When the black church, still “going from house to house,” grew to fifty members, the white church purchased a building and parsonage for them. Without the slightest hint of irony, the black church’s reporter told the \textit{Echo}, “The work that these brethren are doing with the Negro brethren remind[s] me of what the Bible say[s]. How sweet and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.”\textsuperscript{16}

A letter from a white church member in Alabama to the \textit{Echo} in the early 1970s bemoaned the extent to which some churches maintained their racial exclusivity. The writer, whose name was withheld by the editor, claimed to have promoted integration and to have heard several

\textsuperscript{15} Gray interview.

\textsuperscript{16} “Greetings to the Brotherhood,” \textit{Christian Echo} 61, no. 6 (June 1966): 7.
prominent black preachers during his lifetime. “I do get great pleasure from reading of the good work the black Christians are doing.” Yet, he regretted that he was unable to attend a recent revival that featured a black preacher because, in his words, “the situation is bad here in Ala.”

The pressure of local whites was too much for him to bear. He also described how an elderly black woman lived beside “the building of the white folks.” The frail woman was rarely able to get out of her house, but as the writer stated, “I think it is just awful that she can’t just step out of her house and a few steps to get into the building where the white meet, but there are so many looking for a chance to make trouble they just do not do that. What a pity!!”

Likewise, two white churches in Memphis demonstrate the reticence that most whites felt about leaving their segregated past. The highly reputable Union Avenue Church of Christ in Memphis consistently invited the denomination’s most popular preachers to speak for its annual revivals, and in 1968, they sought the services of John Allen Chalk. Coming on the heels of Chalk’s 1968 summer series, the decision was undoubtedly controversial, and the church requested that Chalk refrain from using sermon material that might “agitate the racial problem.”

Chalk refused the invitation to speak where his message might be censored, but he did meet with the church’s elders about his recent sermons on race relations and his participation in various forums, including the one in Atlanta. He gave them a bound volume of his summer sermons, and in a letter penned subsequent to their meeting, he called “special attention to the four sermons that center around racial prejudice and discrimination. I personally urge you,” he continued, “to read these lessons carefully watching for the sound, Biblical principles taught in them.” Chalk’s letter also hints at the questions and criticisms that the elders raised with him. “At no point have

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we even veered toward the ‘social gospel’ as opposed to the far-reaching implications of the gospel of Christ, and of the Biblical nature of the New Testament church.”

One elder of the Union Avenue church, M.A. Shelton, privately corresponded with Chalk in the wake of these events. In doing so, he exhibited slight paranoia at the thought that others might discover the contents of his letter to Chalk. “I would like to ask that you keep this letter in confidence,” he told Chalk. “The views expressed are my own personal view and I am avoiding the use of church stationery so as to give no indication that I am writing in any capacity other than an individual Christian.” The big secret, so to speak, was the fact that he was favorably disposed toward Chalk and generally agreed with the preacher’s sentiments with regard to race relations. “Perhaps the thing that impressed me most in our meeting was your kind responses given with a smile to questions and statements, some of which were not made in the same spirit,” Shelton wrote. “From what I have read [of the sermons] thus far, and from impressions gained during your visit with us, I do not believe that your views on racial matters are significantly different to mine.”

An incident at the Highland Street Church of Christ in Memphis also showed the limits that some white congregants sought to maintain in their association with black people. In the spring of 1970, the A Capella Singers of Southwestern Christian College, a choral group composed of students who traveled the country and performed to raise funds for the school, scheduled a summer appearance at the Highland Street church. The elders permitted the all-

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19 M. A. Shelton to John Allen Chalk, 18 December 1968; and John Allen Chalk to M. A. Shelton, 30 December 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 D-Z Correspondence, folder S. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
black group to perform, but they requested that no appeals for funds be made from the pulpit. Jack Evans, president of the college, indicated that the group would comply with the request, but he also made a request of the Highland Street elders. Since the group was set to perform on a Wednesday night, Evans sought some volunteers from the church who would be willing to lodge choral members and provide a few meals. This practice was common because in their extensive travels, the group could save a lot of money by simply boarding with church members who, one might assume, would be willing to assist the students and the college. However, the Highland Street church elders refused. In a letter to Evans, they wrote, “Since your requests were not stated clearly in your first letter we feel that it [is] best to cancel your engagement at Highland Street.”

Evans easily recognized the elders’ excuse as a polite way of expressing their unwillingness to open their homes to black students. In his reply, he thanked the elders for contacting him and also shared his opinion, in no uncertain terms, of why they reneged. “I feel that the real reason for the cancellation . . . is racism. It is a matter of your not wanting any responsibility for lodging or asking any of the white members of your congregation to lodge eight black Christian young people. Not because those young people are immoral, violent, or militant, but because they are black.” Evans was further appalled because the choral program had long served as a means of bridging racial divides. In fact, white churches had often hosted the group, citing their hospitality as evidence that they were not guilty of racial prejudice. Evans wrote that “such programs as our singers are giving are helping the ‘black’ and ‘white’ churches of Christ to

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get to know each other as congregations all over the brotherhood have lived in the home of those who are converted and dedicated to Christ, and not to the mores of a racist society.”

This episode was part of a series of racially charged incidents that plagued the Highland Street church. Earlier in the year, a Sunday school class of high school seniors was coached by their teacher, Harold Bowie, to participate in the church’s springtime evangelistic endeavors. The students “asked if it would be permissible and desirable to include all the students of Memphis State University and the people of the immediate community near the Highland Street church building . . . without regard to race.” Bowie, who also happened to be a church deacon, approached the elders about this request and waited for an answer. Weeks passed without a reply, so Bowie sought a meeting with the elders. During the meeting, they concluded “that it would [not] be expedient . . . to include the black people . . . because the congregation had not been sufficiently taught to accept such a change.” Bowie was displeased with this response, but he left the meeting with the assurance that “a planned effort be made to begin such instruction in a tactful but positive way in our Bible classes and from the pulpit.” Months passed, and the promised instruction never materialized.

In fact, the elders seemed to regress. When several participants in the Highland Street church’s college ministry prepared a report of their activities for the congregation, they planned to include a black student who had been active in several programs at the church’s Christian Student Center. Upon learning of these plans, the elders cancelled the student’s appearance and reprimanded the parties responsible for making such plans without their approval. Although the


22 Harold Bowie to Elders and Deacons, Highland Street Church of Christ, 10 June 1970. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
elders soon issued a statement that all people were welcome to work and worship with the Highland Street church, this overture was too late for Bowie. He resigned as a deacon and moved his family to another church. In his letter of resignation, he emphasized that he had not asked “for an immediate integration of the Highland Street congregation, but rather for an educational program that will lead us gently and gradually, but definitely from where we are to where we aught [sic] to be.” Bowie was clearly not an “agitator” of any kind. Nor was he rebellious. “My family and I are willing to work and worship under decisions that do not agree with our judgment,” he insisted, “so long as these decisions do not involve a compromise of Christian principles.” Though he might also be called a “gradualist,” in many regards, Bowie could no longer accept the elders’ version of racial gradualism. “I cannot imagine that Jesus would have canceled the Negro student from his assignment to report on the Christian Student Center,” he told them, “and I cannot believe that he would have canceled the seven black [SWCC] students from appearing for a program in our building because housing was requested for them.”

Efforts at racial reconciliation came haltingly in Memphis. In late October 1970, a race relations forum was organized by H. E. Steele, a white elder of the Macon Road COC in Memphis. Few, if any, tangible results developed out of the meeting. Four months later, Steele observed, “It almost seems as if it went the other way and solidified both sides into a determination to go their separate ways.” In a letter to John Allen Chalk, Steele lamented the lack of cooperation that he seemed to be getting from his black brothers and sisters. R. N. Hogan refused to publish a report about the meeting in the Echo, and the minister and elders of a local black church failed to respond to efforts at cooperation and fellowship. Chalk best summarized

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23 Ibid.
the situation: “Simply because spiritual principles are recognized, and even given lip service, the fact remains that most of us within the church are culturally dominated. . . . our attitudes and actions are those superimposed upon us by the larger culture outside . . . We simply can’t expect them [black minister and elders] to move in unfamiliar territory where, for the most part, they are not welcomed.”

Black COCs often chose to move forward without, independent of any influence from or relationship with white churches. The voices of black preachers became especially strident as the 1960s came to a close. In the minds of many African Americans, the name “Church of Christ” was associated with white racism. David Jones Jr., minister of Nashville’s Schrader Lane Church of Christ, lamented how preaching “to Negroes is increasingly more difficult by Negro preachers because he is regarded as a traitor, an uncle tom [sic], a whitened black man, because . . . [of] the actions, disinterest, and racism of ‘white’ Christianity. Frankly, it is a burden for the black man to be a member of the 20th Century Church of Christ because of its racist policies.” A black COC minister from Detroit assessed the situation even more frankly. In a letter written in response to Chalk’s sermons on race, Jesse Johnson interpreted the sermons on behalf of “most black people.” The sermons were “(1) meager, (2) far too late, and (3) insignificant” without subsequent positive actions. “Once again,” Johnson’s lengthy letter later stated, “as always, the Churches of Christ are guilty of being ‘the echo’ and not ‘the voice.’ . . . After the whole of our society is discussing, debating, and condemning white racism in our american [sic] way of life, one of our brethren speaks to this point on nationwide radio. . . . What is tragic is the fact that we have procrastinated so long in speaking on the subject. But what is even more pathetic is that

24 H. E. Steele to John Allen Chalk, 7 February 1971; and John Allen Chalk to H. E. Steele. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1971 Correspondence, folder G[?]. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
after such a long delay in addressing ourselves to this matter and after one of the brethren finally decided to speak to the issue, he then becomes the target of severe criticism.” In Johnson’s opinion, the situation could not be more dire. “If the white church does not both speak and act promptly, it could very well mean the end of christianity [sic] in any form, in the black community. Some of our black ministers are already feeling the pressure and the intimidation of our people because of racism as practiced in white churches.” In retrospect, Johnson’s predictions were clearly overstated, but the urgency in his tone should not be dismissed. By the end of the 1960s, white COCs were showing only piecemeal and grudging recognition of black aspirations, and black COCs were feeling the heat for associating with them. But no church member could easily walk away from what he or she truly believed was the church, so black congregants found themselves in a bind. The solution was, in effect, to leave white COCs to wrestle with their own demons. Facing pressure from within their congregations and the broader African American communities to which they belonged, black churches tried to isolate themselves from their white counterparts who were simply too slow or too stubborn to acknowledge the presence of racial prejudice within the church and to take steps to correct past injustices.25

Amid debates about the 1968 Atlanta conference, the statement signed there, and what to do, if anything, about integrating churches, one particular issue exacerbated the fears of some whites: interracial marriage. Of the stories that circulated about the Atlanta conference, the account of a white man stating publicly that he would approve of his daughter marrying the son of a black preacher was the most controversial. The action led some white members to claim that

25 David Jones Jr. to The Elders, Highland Church of Christ [Abilene, TX], 31 July 1968; and Jesse Johnson to The Elders, Highland Church of Christ [Abilene, TX], 4 August 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-HCC. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
the Atlanta assembly was advocating “mixed marriages,” such that one “prominent minister . . .
said that the question of intermarriage was ‘settled’ in favor of intermarriage as a ‘should Do’
[sic] proposition.” John Allen Chalk received numerous letters asking for clarification of what
had really happened in Atlanta. To one inquiry, he replied, “The question of interracial marriage
was never discussed, even though it was mentioned by one participant in a one sentence
reference.” Nevertheless, the very idea that a group of church leaders had somehow endorsed
interracial marriage persisted and raised the hackles of many white congregants.26

One young mother named Patricia Sullivan from Wichita, Kansas sought Chalk’s practical
advice about what to teach her children regarding interracial marriage. The couple who lived
next door to the white Sullivan family included a black father, white mother, and two sons.
“They are fine people,” she told Chalk, “and my children are great friends with theirs. Their
children have even been attending Bible study and worship services with us. The problem is: Is
interracial marriage wrong? . . . I want to know what Christian parents should be teaching their
children regarding this matter.” Sullivan could not get a straight answer from friends.
Meanwhile, her mother claimed that “the Bible teaches that God commanded the races to be
separate,” and her mother-in-law, “a member of the Lord’s Church,” simply hated all black
people. But based on her study of the Bible, Sullivan saw nothing wrong with interracial
marriage. “I can find no teaching regarding a Christian marrying someone of a different race. . . .
What does it matter to God or to other Christians, if one Christian is black and his or her [mate
is] white, yellow, or red?” The question became even more relevant because of recent actions by
her children. Her son, a kindergarten student, recently returned home and announced that he had

26 Stanley James A. McInery to John Allen Chalk, 9 October 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 D-Z
Correspondence, folder M; Miles Cotham to John Allen Chalk, 16 October 1968; and John Allen Chalk to Miles
Cotham, 6 November 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box A-C 1968 Correspondence, folder C. Special
Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
a black girlfriend. Likewise, Sullivan’s daughter, a fifth grader, developed a crush on a Filipino classmate. The practical concerns of parenting and the mixed signals that she was receiving from family and friends, including fellow church members at her all-white church, led Sullivan to write an inquiry to Chalk, who confirmed her sentiments. “I know of no Biblical teaching that condemns interracial marriages,” he wrote to Sullivan. He acknowledged the “social pressures involved in [inter]racial marriages” but concluded that an interracial couple should be given “total support and encouragement” once committing to marriage.27

Chalk also faced criticism from family members over both his preaching about racism and his perspective on interracial marriage. His mother-in-law, Ora Traughber, lived in Nashville and heard unfavorable remarks made about Chalk. She asked, through her daughter, what his opinion was of interracial marriages. Chalk responded with a thorough letter that outlined his general beliefs about race and racism. “After recognizing all the complications and all the problems, I have to say that the Bible does not forbid such marriages,” he wrote. Chalk believed that scripture only taught that Christians should marry Christians; race was of no concern. Thus, using his own children as examples, Chalk posed a question to his mother-in-law by reversing the segregationists’ trump card, “Would you want your daughter to marry one?” Chalk asked Traughber, “Do you want Mary Beth or John to marry a non-Christian white instead of a Christian Negro?” On another occasion, a relative from Mississippi admitted that he had publicly questioned the content of some of Chalk’s sermons on race. In his letter to Chalk, he mentioned interracial marriage, too. “John, I believe that if you could only know what I went through—and am still going through—with Markie, your attitude in the matter of interracial

27 Patricia Sullivan to John Allen Chalk, undated; and John Allen Chalk to Patricia Sullivan, 13 September 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 D-Z Correspondence, folder S. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
relationships would take on a marked change. Or perhaps I’m wrong about that too. Maybe you will welcome, without the slightest reservation, a son-in-law or daughter-in-law of a non-white race. If so, I have wrongfully judged you; and I beg your forgiveness.” Chalk replied that he had “no way to know of the burden borne in your experience with Markie,” but he also insisted that “God’s word does not condemn such relationships.” In fact, Chalk was keen to know why the specter of interracial romance was such a big concern. “Since we are all committed to the truth of the Bible, and since the truth of the Bible must guide all human relationships, some of the reaction to the question of intermarriage is not in keeping with God’s word.” The crucial point is not so much to note Chalk’s progressive position as to emphasize the preeminence of interracial marriage in the discourse on race among white church members. As centuries-old barriers to interracial marriages were crumbling through judicial and legal reforms, white members of COCs were wrestling with their consciences over both segregated churches and the taboo of interracial romance.28

The slow pace of change within the denomination could also be observed at several COC college campuses. As black students at Harding College grew weary of the vestiges of segregation in campus life and within the minds of many people in the Harding community, they organized a separate social club and began vocalizing their complaints to administrators. The events that unfolded during the 1968-69 school year demonstrated important trends within COCs and among white southerners more generally. While a few white students at Harding joined their black schoolmates, the black students belonged to a minority of people in the Harding

28 John Allen Chalk to Ora Traughber, 12 August 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 D-Z Correspondence, folder T; Brad Brumley to John Allen Chalk, 22 November 1968; and John Allen Chalk to Brad Brumley, 2 December 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 A-C Correspondence, folder B. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis. Also see Charles W. Beecham, The Difference (New York: Carlton Press, 1971). Beecham describes his experiences as an African American who encountered several obstacles when he chose to attend a white COC in New Jersey and fell in love with a young woman there.
community who wanted the school to move away from its religious, social, and political conservativism. Dissenting students were often reluctant to undertake bold forms of protest for fear of an administrative hand that could strike hard and fast and with the full support of campus community. Events during the school year show how many whites failed to fully grasp how the legacies of segregation and other forms of racial discrimination echoed into the lives of black classmates and into the operation of the college.

Black students at Harding created a new club, Groove Phi, in the fall of 1968. Their problems with the social clubs—excessive fees for programs in which they did not participate or being restricted by other club members in their intramural participation—were some of the issues that troubled the students. They were also incensed that derogatory terms such as “boy,” “Nigra,” and “colored” were still used frequently when white people spoke of or to them. Additionally, the National Education Program—a conservative think tank on campus—and the American studies program continued to bombard students with warnings about the dangers of communism and the communist influence upon civil rights activists. During the previous fall, Professor James Bales had published his controversial book, *The Martin Luther King Story*, with “A STUDY IN APOSTASY, AGITATION, AND ANARCHY” emblazoned across the top of the front cover. One black student also had some of his personal property burned. With the renewed popularity of the pep band’s playing of “Dixie” and disciplinary actions handed down by the administration that some perceived as unfair, black students were questioning Harding’s commitment to racial equality.29

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The establishment of Groove Phi represented an act of defiance, a way of communicating that the social clubs at Harding, among other things, were unacceptable. Members of Groove Phi also started a petition that urged the band not to play “Dixie,” and they arranged a meeting with President Cilfton Ganus in which they confronted him directly over their poor relationship with the administration and with many members of the faculty. Harding needed to make some changes, and the students expected them to be made quickly.\[^{30}\]

Ganus had been making attempts to improve race relations at Harding. Jimmy Allen, one of his faculty members from the Bible department, helped coordinate the race relations conference in Atlanta in 1968. Ganus accompanied Allen to the conference and was a speaker during one of the sessions, even though he did not sign the statement that was issued. At a faculty meeting in February 1969, Ganus presented a summary of the suggestions that the black students had given to him during their meeting. His remarks focused primarily on the social clubs; the relationships between himself, the faculty, and the black students; and the playing of “Dixie.” Ganus also made sure that the black students were receiving financial aid from the college. Indeed, all but one of the twenty-eight students were receiving money from Harding, and this one already had someone paying for his expenses. In Ganus’s opinion, while some white students might have been mistreating their black schoolmates, Harding was not.\[^{31}\]

By the spring semester, many white students were becoming increasingly perturbed at the vocal minority of black students who were making their feelings known. Their criticisms were


perceived as an attack on both their white classmates, Harding, and the nation as a whole. The editor of the *Bison* later recalled that most white students were unaware of any racial problems on campus. But the spring semester proved to be a different story. Subtle criticisms of the civil rights movement could be detected in the *Bison*’s commentary about campus life. In writing about Groove Phi, one editorial noted that the social club “may be a sign of their [black students’] desire to segregate themselves from Whites, but still to be treated as equal creations—a desire which some political leaders have obviously overlooked.” About the controversy over “Dixie,” this same essay contended that, for the most part, the tune is “fondly recalled by Southerners without thought of slavery or freedom, white or black.” It did admit that some people might “have malice in their hearts” when they listened to the song, but coupled with some letters to the editor, the tenor of the *Bison* toward the African American freedom struggle had changed since the early 1960s. By the close of the decade, black needs, demands, and aspirations upset white comfort zones and exposed the limits of the earlier, tentative support for the core goals of the civil rights movement.32

In the spring of 1969, the rhetorical tone of discussions on campus about race relations and civil rights became more heated. The *Bison* later complained, “The time has come when students must be either *for* or *against* civil rights. They cannot possibly harbor ideas which relate to the pros and cons on both sides of the issue. . . . At the risk of sounding trite, students today must either be with the ‘in’ crowd or with ‘the establishment.’” For many students, faculty, and administrators, the very hint of dissatisfaction, especially as it might relate to student unrest

32 Kay Gowen, interview by author, tape recording, Searcy, Arkansas, 10 May 2005; and Gowen, untitled editorial, 17 January 1969, 2.
across the nation over civil rights and the Vietnam War, was inappropriate for Harding and the image it was trying to protect and cultivate as a conservative, Christian college.33

Tensions were fed by more than just black students and their quest for change or a few dissident white students upset over the suppression of their opinions. The head of the psychology department, Dr. Bob Gilliam, worked behind the scenes to encourage students to speak out. In addition to class discussions and private conversations, he sponsored several activities that made race relations a pressing issue. In February, he chaperoned a group of Harding students to a human relations seminar at Oklahoma Christian College. Here, the students heard such notable COC speakers as John Allen Chalk, Franklin Florence, and Howard Wright, an alumus of Harding. After the conference, one Harding student in attendance admitted that “it was rousing to think that I could be so unaware. It motivated me to do something about the problem. It really made me aware of how stagnant my religion was.” Neither Ganus nor the Bison, however, was amused with the professor’s influence. Without naming specific professors, one editorial lambasted teachers “who have been guilt of destroying student integrity by promoting ideas through students which they did not have the courage to openly advance themselves. They have cultivated students for their own ego and popularity to the point of placing student against student in the communication gap. And they have developed power cliques in students to offset their own weaknesses.” Ganus would later remember Gilliam as “the one who was kind of leading the rabble.” He recalled “taking more abuse from him than . . . all of the faculty put together.”34

33 “To Those Concerned,” 2; and Kay Gowen, untitled editorials, Bison, 14 February 1969 and 21 February 1969, 2.

34 “Human Relations Seminar at OCC Draws Seventeen Harding Students,” and Kay Gowen, untitled editorial, Bison, 21 February 1969, 2, 3; and Ganus interview.
The racial climate was further aggravated in the wake of a leadership conference on campus that tackled issues related to race relations at Harding. The Student Association sponsored and Gilliam coordinated the event on consecutive Wednesday nights when a panel of black students took the stage to voice their feelings of animosity and distrust toward Harding. Other students participated by peppering the panelists with questions, and total attendance reached nearly 200 for each session. Ganus also attended but did not participate, even when one of the black students called for “a change from a prejudiced administration, beginning with the president of the college, Dr. Ganus.” In the course of the second session, students were allowed to brainstorm for ideas about improving race relations at Harding. In a special edition devoted to the conference, the *Bison* printed a list of about seventy suggestions that included correcting “inaccurate Biblical interpretations concerning race,” banning Bales’s book about King, incorporating the study of black people into history courses, not sending letters home about interracial dating, and hiring black faculty. Some black students met separately and compiled suggestions that included a desire for the administration to “take a definite stand on racial problems.” At the close of the conference, a committee that included three black students was formed to refine the suggestions and present them to Ganus.35

A *Bison* editorial in the special edition devoted to the conference finally acknowledged that Harding had a problem with race relations, “but in doing so,” it added, “we cannot blow it out of perspective.” While sparing no criticism of both black and white students, the essay came down harder on the black students who had seemingly thrown the campus into tumult. “The thought of ‘talking things over’ seems to infuriate some Blacks [*sic*]. They cry that the time for talking has

long since passed. . . . Have the blacks actually talked or have they demanded? . . . The lines of communication have always been present, but the methods employed have been detrimental. It must be added at this point that abusive and false accusations do not constitute a means for solving problems.” From the perspective of many white students, the problem was not so much about Harding as it was about the insistent demands and criticism. The *Bison* never acknowledged the fact that social clubs were discriminatory, that there were no black faculty members, that administrators did closely monitor interracial romances, and that black students had no representation on the *Bison* staff or in the Student Association. As if some of the grievances were not obvious, the newspaper even took a poll to determine the causes of Harding’s racial problem. One respondent, a white student, best summarized the most fundamental issue: “We are so afraid that we might help the Negroes that don’t deserve help that we won’t go an extra mile with them in order to deal fairly with those that have not been treated fairly.” She also added, “It would be contrary to Christian ideals to deny justice to those warranting it, by trying to avoid giving it to those that have continually abused it. I would much rather see some Negroes not making use of opportunities giving [*sic*] them than all Negroes with no opportunities.” This student insightfully summarized the sentiments maintained by many white southerners who harbored limited conceptions of how to correct past racial injustices. Simply opening the school doors to black students, many thought, would be sufficient to providing equal opportunity for all.36

The committee submitted its report to Ganus on Wednesday, March 19. Along with a lengthy statement that included perceptive analysis of why racial problems existed in the country, the committee compiled a list of specific steps that could be taken to improve the situation at

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Harding. In commenting upon the list of grievances compiled by black students in December, the committee stated, “We view the negotiable recommendations not as demands from the Blacks but concrete things the Whites (Harding) can do without compromising any principles in taking the first steps in this establishment of trust. Doing some of these things now may look like a capitulation. This is sad. Perhaps if we had already done some of these things we would not be in the position we find ourselves in because of our own inaction.” Many of the suggestions that the committee recommended can be directly linked to student suggestions, such as the hiring of black faculty, developing curriculum to include the history of black people, and clarifying scriptures that some used to justify racial prejudice. The committee also asked Ganus to make clear statements about his position on hiring black faculty, recruiting black students, and interracial dating.37

On the very next day, Ganus appeared before the student body during chapel to respond to the committee’s recommendations. At the time, Harding held two daily chapel services, and students were required to attend one each day. Many of the black students attended the first service, where they heard Ganus defend himself and Harding, while castigating those students who had been belligerent in raising some issues before the college community. In defending himself against charges of racial prejudice, Ganus informed his audiences that he “had been prejudiced all right—prejudiced toward helping people regardless of their color.” The evidence he offered, however, was hardly convincing. Ganus described how he and his wife let their “colored maid” eat at the dinner table with them, and he included other acts—helping desegregate Harding, providing aid to various black people, and participating in the race relations conference in Atlanta—that, in his mind, confirmed that he was not prejudiced. As he shared the

37 “Committee Report on Suggestions for Improvement of Race Relations,” Race Relations folder. Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas.
committee’s recommendations with the student body, there was a sense in which Ganus responded positively to their conclusions, but he also spent a considerable amount of time in his speech chastising his detractors. In the process, he made a number of statements that the black students considered demeaning and insulting. “I guess most [black students] are better fed and housed and better treated than at home,” Ganus contended, before reciting a list of at least ten grievances that he had with black students. “Irresponsibility is a terrible curse to any man,” he went on to say, “and [for] too long it has been winked at in the Black man because his great grandfather was a slave.” In some respects, he was dismissive of any special difficulties that black students’ might be facing, adding that many whites “have had a background of prejudiced teaching and bitter experience at the hands of the blacks.” On each occasion that the speech was given that morning, Ganus received a standing ovation from the white students. During the second delivery, however, about twenty black students and a few of their white schoolmates walked out of the speech. Having already listened to or heard about the first one, they staged a mild protest that gained statewide attention. Yet these students must have realized at that moment that their actions were not going to change Harding. And although they were pictured giving a black power salute in the next day’s *Arkansas Gazette*, their poses suggest defeat instead of victory. None of their fists were raised higher than their heads.38

This act of modest defiance would not be the last such protest at Harding. A few weeks later, when Harding was hosting the annual Freedom Forum, about thirty students picked up some pamphlets, titled “The Communist Blueprint for the American Negro,” that Bales had made available to attendees. Led by black students Darryl Patterson, Travis Sanders, and Eddie

38 Clifton L. Ganus Jr., “Race Relations at Harding” (speech given at Harding College on 20 March 1969), Race Relations folder. Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas; and Ginger Shiras, “Blacks Get Up, Leave as Harding Head Explains Race Situation, Calls for ‘Closer Walk With God,’” *Arkansas Gazette*, 21 March 1969, 1B.
Allen, the students burned the tracts and tossed the remnants into the lily pond in front of the administration building. Despite boldly telling onlookers that they could have burned a building instead, the demonstration was peaceful. “This is supposed to be a Christian institution,” Patterson told the crowd that gathered, “and they allow this obscene literature.” Yet this event also showed the cleavages between black and white students at Harding. When a photographer from the Gazette tried to take pictures, white students blocked his view. They were tired of black grievances, tired of the protests, tired of the bad publicity. Protests “are definitely not winning any souls to Christ,” the Bison lamented. “Several faculty members and several students reportedly are leaving Harding College. But before these can be happy elsewhere, they seem to feel that they have to leave behind the smoldering ruins of what the rest of us still feel is a great institution” [emph. in original]. Letters sent by students to Ganus in the aftermath of these events were also positive. One student wrote, “I appreciate you and what you said in chapel today,” before admitting that he was “a little apprehensive as to what your stand on race relations might be.” There was a reason behind student ambivalence prior to Ganus’s speech. To maintain the facilities and growth of Harding, Ganus could not show too much concern for the special circumstances in which black students found themselves by attending a historically segregated college with a student population that was 98% white. The words that he spoke in chapel on March 20 still incited some patrons to write letters requesting that he toughen his position. “Let this be remembered as the year of the purge, the great purge,” one lady wrote. In some respects, she received her wish. Professor Gilliam left for another university, and another popular
professor who was espousing what some considered liberal ideas, was fired. Black student activists Patterson, Sanders, and Allen were not allowed to return to Harding in the fall.\(^{39}\)

Harding was not the only COC college that experienced racial turmoil in the late 1960s, as both Oklahoma Christian College and Pepperdine College experienced comparable problems. The story of Harding was especially significant in a number of respects, however, with import beyond COCs. College administrators such as former Harding President George Benson had maintained a segregated institution for theological, financial, and political reasons. Students, on the other hand, seemingly had less at stake. In the years before their schools were desegregated, they were vocal proponents of inviting black students into their midst. It was the Christian thing to do. However, as black demands moved well beyond school attendance in the mid and late 1960s, white students grew defensive about and weary of discrimination in their institutions. Neither students nor administrators seemed to realize how deeply segregation and racism had affected and continued to affect their colleges, their churches, and their country. Black students, meanwhile, knew firsthand how racial prejudice lingered and affected their everyday lives. Their impatience clashed with white incomprehension, indifference, and defensiveness.

Even into the early 1970s, David Lipscomb College persisted in discriminating against black students in its on-campus housing arrangements. President Athens Clay Pullias fought desegregation at every opportunity. When a white attorney named John Acuff, a Lipscomb alumnus who studied law at Vanderbilt, was approached about suing his alma mater in 1970, he made a direct inquiry to President Pullias. In a confidential letter, Acuff wrote that Pullias

“replied to me in a letter which said in essence that I didn’t really understand the problem and that with more years I would better understand these kind of problems and whatever.” Acuff did not receive replies to subsequent letters, so he contacted another prominent person at the college about the housing situation. This person remained anonymous in Acuff’s letter but informed him that “those in charge” had indicated “that it would be unpopular to obey the laws but that when they were ‘inforced [sic] generally, we will be eagerly [sic] to comply.”’ Thus, the college practiced housing discrimination years after it became illegal, an unsubtle reminder that the law and order rhetoric of many whites was nothing more than a means to preserve segregation. Acuff wrote, “I hear so much today about law and order and as a member of the legal establishment have committed my life to that cause and yet I see here an institution that claims to be Christian [blatantly] ignoring the law of the land.” With a torn conscience over how to proceed, Acuff wrote his letter to confidants who might be able to provide some guidance and support.40

While African Americans faced continued opposition to their integration into white COC colleges and some churches, they were also confronted with new competition in the battle over souls. In African American communities across the country, various forms of Islam appealed to people who perceived Christianity as “a white man’s religion,” a bedrock of western slavery, and an instrument of contrived racial oppression. Past actions of many white churches confirmed this assessment, so black members had to justify not only their faith in Jesus but also their membership in COCs. White churches often made this argument more difficult. If some white churches taught various forms of racial segregation and if individual churches were racially segregated, then blacks were left to explain this discrepancy to potential converts who were increasingly younger, well-educated, and prone to question COCs’ primitivist claims.

40 John E. Acuff to Brothers, 11 January 1971. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
This difficulty was exploited by the Nation of Islam. When Henry Stokes’s mother learned that her son had joined the NOI, she feared for his soul. Stokes was once a faithful member of COCs. During his time in the Air Force, he attended a COC while stationed in Scotland, but upon returning to the United States, he made some personal changes. Mrs. Stokes attributed the changes to family trouble, and her first act was to give her son transcripts of the young voice who boldly and eloquently preached about Jesus every Sunday night on the Herald of Truth radio program. Henry Stokes soon wrote a letter to John Allen Chalk, explaining his new faith and why he rejected Christianity. He had listened to one of Chalk’s latest sermons, “What Jesus Says for Himself.” The sermon, much to his mother’s chagrin, reaffirmed Stokes’s “belief in Islam as taught by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.” Concerning Christianity, Stokes professed “that it is a religion established by white people, for white people, for the purpose of dominating and enslaving Blackmen [sic], the world over. . . . How a sane Blackman [sic] can see Christianity in any other light today is a mystery to me.” He even inferred, incorrectly, that Chalk was a member of the John Birch Society because of his comments about communism. For his part, Chalk assured Stokes’s mother that he “tried to answer the charges he [Henry] makes and have tried to show him how Christ is the answer, rather than the faith of Islam.”

In a separate letter, Chalk commended Stokes for his “pride of blackness” and duly acknowledged the “many unfortunate, ungodly, and unscriptural things [that] have been advanced in the name of Christianity regarding race.” Citing several passages from the Christian scriptures, he countered Stokes’s assertions about Jesus and asked for more information about the Nation of Islam. Stokes’s subsequent reply illustrates how the two men were communicating

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41 Z. P. Stokes to John Allen Chalk, 16 April 1968; Henry Stokes to John Allen Chalk, 12 April 1968; and John Allen Chalk to Z. P. Stokes, 19 April 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968 Herald of Truth Correspondence, folder S. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
from entirely different perspectives. Chalk wanted to discuss, in person if possible, theology and Christian apologetics, and he even purchased a copy of Muhammad’s *Message to the Blackman in America* and a subscription to *Muhammad Speaks*. But the time for theological discussions had long passed for men like Stokes who were not as interested in theology as they were in social reform and justice. Stokes encouraged Chalk to discuss theology directly with Elijah Muhammad who, in his words, had “shown Black America the way to real freedom, justice, and equality here on this earth.” Temporal notions of freedom, justice, and equality of which he spoke were concepts largely foreign to parochial COCs. The denomination as a whole, with a past badly and perhaps irrevocably tainted by its historical apathy toward the social plight of African Americans, no longer appealed to someone like Henry Stokes. A church that urged unity and practiced segregation could not compete with the messages offered by the Nation of Islam. Chalk was forced to admit as much in a subsequent letter to Stokes’s mother. “Our problem today in America is that the church has not shown the way through to racial peace. We have remained in racial denominationalism, even within the church of Christ, rather than showing, rather than practicing, rather than preaching the one body seen in both groups of believers, as well as taught regarding the whole church of all the saved.”

The challenges posed by the Nation of Islam just as difficult to dispel for black COC ministers. R. N. Hogan accepted a challenge to publicly debate Henry Majied of the Nation of Islam at a Church of Christ in Vallejo, California, about twenty-five miles north of Oakland. In the winter of 1971-72, Hogan wrote a series of articles for the *Echo* on what he termed “the Black Muslim Cult.” The series described both the debate and his assessment of the Nation of Islam.

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Islam. Like Chalk, Hogan argued theology, but outside of the predictable rhetoric on whether or not Jesus was the son of God and speculation about the “authenticity” of Elijah Muhammad, the discussion hinged upon race. Ironically, Hogan chose to employ an argument often used by white people to defend his willingness to associate with whites churches. “My opponent accused me of defending the white man because I pointed out that the black man had something to do with enslaving black men,” he wrote in the *Echo*. “I still say that I do not condone the white man nor defend him in the atrocities that he has imposed on the black man and I do not condone nor defend the black man in the atrocities that he has imposed on other black men.” Regardless of what he said about the origins of slavery, Hogan had to contend with the fact that he belonged to COCs, a group composed largely of whites who had shown little regard to the most pressing social issues of the era. “I still say that I am not going to hate the white man who is trying to live the Christian life, because of what his great grandfather did to my great grandfather. The greatest contribution to the growth of this Cult is that they continue to preach hate for the white man for what he did to our forefathers.” For years, Hogan had tolerated white congregants, whether or not they viewed him as their equal. Belonging to the church offered little alternative. Black Muslims were unwilling to endure and transcend the hatred as Hogan had. For even if he spoke against white racism, Hogan still belonged to a group that maintained segregated colleges into the mid 1960s and that refused to seat black worshipers in some all-white churches.43

*Muhammad Speaks*, the newspaper of the Nation of Islam, considered the debate a victory. The headline blared, “Wait-for-Heaven line of Christians smashed by debate of Muslim minister.” Hogan’s Christian rhetoric and association with predominantly white COCs faced a formidable challenge from a group that championed its black identity. “THE DOUBT and

disappointment registered by his own church members surprised many observers, and a loud
groan of disappointment was registered throughout the audience when Brother Hogan
stammered, ‘He talked about I tried to defend the white man. Did he hear me say I don’t
condone the white man for what he’s done in the south? I said I don’t condone or justify the
Negro for what he’s done. Negroes killed more Negroes than any white people” [emph. in
original]. The most revealing comment from *Muhammad Speaks* came at the end of the article.

“Brother Hogan continued his personal denunciation of the Muslims after the debate had
concluded before the few stubborn church members who remained after the Muslims and all of
the youthful audience had departed.” Hogan was most comfortable debating theology. When the
discussion turned to race, Hogan had difficulty justifying both his beliefs and especially his
association with white COCs.44

Hogan’s subsequent series of essays examined the history and beliefs of the Nation of
Islam. Each article was intended to educate readers and provide fodder for discussions that were
sure to arise in the homes of many African Americans. The very first essay began by
emphasizing that Wallace Fard, the Nation’s founder, “started this cult by going into the ghettos
of the black communities of Detroit teaching hate against the white man, pointing out their living
conditions, lack of civil rights and all too prevalent discrimination in the area.” To some extent,
Hogan surely caricatured the Nation of Islam, but he also addressed those issues that were
ultimately damning COCs (and other Christian denominations, for that matter) in the eyes of the
Nation of Islam and its recruits. At the conclusion of his first essay, he summarized the reasons
why African Americans should avoid the Nation of Islam, but he also admitted one of the
group’s strengths. “The Muslim organization is an organization that teaches hate, denies the

44 Charles 20X, “Wait-for-Heaven line of Christians smashed by debate of Muslim minister,” *Muhammad Speaks*
10, no. 51 (3 September 1971): 21-22.
Sonship of Christ, accepts human claims, rejects the inspired word of God and is carnally militant.” But, he added, “The only thing that I can commend them for is that they teach the young Black people to be clean, self respect and to do for themselves.” These latter two points were especially relevant, for in their acceptance of white paternalism, many black COCs had failed to teach self-respect and independence. The Nation of Islam was filling that void.45

In his second essay, Hogan addressed the assertion “that the white man wrote the Bible and it is therefore the white man’s Bible. . . . This false teaching is being propagated by the Black Muslim Cult to create hate and prejudice against the white man.” By contrast, Hogan and most other members of COCs believed that the Bible “originated . . . in the mind of God.” To dispel the notion that the Bible was the sole creation and possession of whites, Hogan humorously surmised that if whites had written the Bible, “it would have been a racist Bible, advocating racism instead of condemning it.” This line of reasoning acknowledged white racism but sought to defend what had historically been a tool of that racism, the Bible. Hogan even gave specific examples, suggesting that whites would have omitted Acts 17:26 because “the white man . . . would have had a certain place on the earth for the black man to dwell, for even now he doesn’t want the black man in certain areas. . . . for some, even in the Church of Christ don’t think it is a sin to be a racist.”46 Finally, Hogan equated the Nation of Islam with whites who had long practiced racial discrimination. “If the Black Muslims had written the Bible, they would have left out all the scriptures that I have referred to also, for they hate the white man and are therefore, condemned by the Almighty God of Heaven.” In his final installment, Hogan attempted to further marginalize the Nation of Islam by referring to it as the “Black Ku Klux


46 Acts 17:26 states, “And [God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation” (KJV).
Klan” and suggesting that his readers completely shun the Nation of Islam as they would the Klan.47

Yet Hogan could not deny the reasons behind the Nation’s popularity. It seemed to offer some things that traditional Christianity, especially COCs, did not. The growth of the Nation of Islam, Hogan observed in his final essay, was “the result of the fact that the Negro has been exploited, oppressed and suppressed by the white man in every state of our country, in the North as well as in the South.” It was one of the strongest statements that he ever made in the pages of the Echo. He was not just castigating whites for segregating their colleges and churches. Hogan now feared that African Americans would be lost to the Nation of Islam, and he tried to coopt some of the group’s own rhetoric to combat it. Thus, he wrote that the Nation of Islam “took advantage of the conditions into which the white man had driven the Negro.” Its members speak “with increasing frequency of the atrocities imposed on the Black man throughout the major negro population centers of America. They are therefore, succeeding to bring into their Cult the militant, underprivileged [sic] and exploited people who fall for their idea of a separate state.” This remark was perhaps born of jealousy as much as criticism. The Nation of Islam had attracted the very souls that were the responsibility of Christians, Hogan realized. In the process of critiquing the “cult,” he found it necessary to match their rhetoric in assessing the history of race relations in the United States. Hogan was certainly not one to call for political separation, and he never suggested that one person should hate another. But dealing with the Nation of Islam forced him to concede that COCs—his church, the church—had failed miserably to address the depth that centuries of institutional racism had wrought upon African Americans.48


African American COCs also became more open to activities, literature, and programs that emphasized racial identity and pride. In the past, even if church members struggled with self-doubt because of their “blackness,” encouraging black pride was never integral to a preacher’s message or a church’s ministry. A poem, composed by Lucy Mae Harris, contributed to the *Echo* in the summer of 1965, marked the beginning of a time when fostering racial pride received more attention from preachers who did not want to lose their flocks to the Nation of Islam or Black Power movement, or at least to their ideologies. “Did God mean to punish me, when He made my face black?” the opening line plaintively asks. “No!,” the third line states, “God made me in His image, Equal to all other men.” The poem ultimately found solidarity with Jesus who “was treated quite the same” as African Americans who suffered discrimination and humiliation. “So no matter how much I suffer, because black is my skin,/I ask God to forgive them and give me courage to the end./I’m proud of my complexion, for God mad me this way,/I know He is with me, no matter what they do or say.”

Since the spread of Christianity among slaves, many African Americans found assurance from the crucifixion of Jesus, a story of divine suffering, but they now turned to other alternatives of self-discovery. Several African American churches began coordinating African American studies workshops for their members and interested local citizens. Classes typically focused on the African heritage of African Americans and “Blacks in the Bible,” as noted in the history of the Schrader Lane Church of Christ in Nashville. The Schrader Lane church later developed an African studies class with a broader historical and political focus. In addition to studying some fundamental knowledge about the entire continent, classes began focusing on state formation in Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, Mali, Ghana, and Benin; the invasion of Africa by Europeans; the

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49 Lucy Mae Harris, “Because My Skin is [sic] Black,” *Christian Echo* 60, no. 7 (July 1965): 8.
Atlantic slave trade; and American slavery. “We have to deal with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and the future,” the church’s official history notes.\textsuperscript{50}

As black church members were finding new self-respect and solidarity through pride and self-awareness, white congregants felt increasingly ostracized. If some measure of unity existed before the 1960s between black and white COCs, however perfunctory it might have been, white members who had been apathetic to or ignorant of institutional racism typically found no common cause with black churches who spoke of African American history and empowerment. These sentiments can be observed in the white church members who gravitated toward the political aspirations of George Wallace. For example, in the summer and fall of 1968, Guy Woods, a popular preacher in middle Tennessee, became an outspoken critic of the \textit{Herald of Truth} and vocal supporter of Wallace. One preacher, who hosted Woods as a guest for a revival in September, wrote to John Allen Chalk and described Woods’s disposition. “Race he says is not to be discussed from the pulpit especially the radio pulpit. . . . He is a strong Wallace supporter and actively campaigns for him among brethren.” The association between Wallace and white members was also made by a black minister named Humphrey Foutz. He urged the \textit{Herald of Truth} television producers to include blacks in the films that were used as evangelistic tools. Foutz observed that one film “looked like a commercial for George Wallace or at best the John Birch Society.” The powers in Abilene were “constantly harping on the ‘Code Words’ Law and Order. . . . They sound like the ‘George Wallace’ of organized religion.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{More than Conquerors: History & Growth of the Schrader Lane Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee} (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 2000), 76-77.

\textsuperscript{51} Bill Goodpasture to John Allen Chalk, 23 September 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box 1968D-Z Correspondence, folder G; and Humphrey Foutz to Prentice Meador, 7 October 1968. John Allen Chalk Papers, box Race Relations, folder 92RR-COC-HOT. Special Collections, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis.
In fact, one of the most prominent Wallace associates during and subsequent to the 1960s was a former political rival, Jimmy Faulkner, of Alabama. Faulkner was a businessman and journalist by trade. He was educated at Freed-Hardeman College and the University of Missouri, where he belonged to the Kappa Alpha fraternity, “largely because it was a Southern organization.” From a political standpoint, Faulkner’s relationship with Wallace began at the 1948 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, made famous by the walkout staged by some southern delegates who broke with the national party’s platform on civil rights and formed the Dixiecrat Party with Strom Thurmond as its presidential nominee. Joined by Faulkner’s wife and another delegate, Wallace and Faulkner traveled to the convention together in the latter’s car. “We were all elected as anti-Truman delegates because it was in March of that same year that President Truman had come out declaring that all schools would be integrated,” Faulkner later recalled. (Truman never made such a declaration.) “I had qualified as a Truman delegate, but had to change to anti-Truman in order to get elected.” Both Faulkner and Wallace had future political aspirations to consider.52

Meanwhile, Faulkner first pursued his gubernatorial dreams in 1954, when he narrowly missed a run-off with “Big Jim” Folsom. His next opportunity came in 1958 when he finished third in the Democratic primary out of fourteen candidates, behind John Patterson and Wallace. According to historian Dan Carter, Faulkner was the “most racially moderate” candidate in the field of hopefuls. His biographer noted that “Faulkner had a greater acceptance of integration than most Southerners, a trait that would work against him in a statewide election in the fifties.”

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This election was especially contentious as “the race issue took over” in the wake of the Montgomery bus boycott, Patterson’s successful quest to banish the NAACP from Alabama, the Civil Rights Act of 1957, and the desegregation crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas. Faulkner later claimed that the KKK worked for John Patterson, who was also state attorney general at the time, and Wallace’s defeat in the runoff prompted his notorious pledge that “no other son of a bitch will ever out-nigger me again.”

Although Faulkner seemed relatively progressive compared to his contemporaries in Alabama, he never shied away from backing Wallace in subsequent elections, despite the latter’s increasingly outrageous claims. Indeed, if Faulkner later disparaged Patterson’s Klan support, it did not discourage him from supporting him in the runoff. Faulkner, intent on getting back at Wallace for his support of Folsom in 1954, permitted his campaign organization to raise money for Patterson during the runoff. As the election of 1962 neared, Wallace entreated Faulkner for his support. “Jimmy,” Wallace said, “you claim that I cost you an election one time and I know that you cost me an election one time, can’t we start all over again?” Faulkner consented, and “from then on we were friends,” he told his biographer. Wallace relied heavily on Faulkner during future campaigns. In Wallace’s 1968 presidential bid, Faulkner gave the responsibility of preparing campaign literature to one of his editors and spent a lot of time securing signatures in states like California to ensure that Wallace’s name appeared on the ballot. Faulkner was head of the Wallace campaign in California, Oregon, and Washington. Other elections included more favors. During the contentious gubernatorial race of 1970, Faulkner had to co-sign a note for one hundred thousand dollars to keep the Wallace campaign financially solvent, and when Hubert

53 Carter, 93, 96; and Stanton, 144-145.
Humphrey sought to create a Humphrey-Wallace ticket for the presidency in 1972, Faulkner served as the intermediary between the two hopefuls.\textsuperscript{54}

Faulkner’s support probably had to do with politics as much as faith, but he was very devout and instilled that same devotion in his children. “When Sunday came around, you went to church!” one son recalled. “And Sunday night you went to church, regardless what else was going on. And Wednesday, too! It wasn’t any use talking about it. . . . I don’t care what ball game or something else was going on, you went to church. Even when we were traveling, we would find a church of Christ, and we’d go to church.” The title of Faulkner’s biography, \textit{Faith and Works}, further suggests the significance of faith in his life, and his strong identity as a member of COCs can also be observed in his service as a song leader, treasurer, deacon, and elder. His generous financial assistance to Alabama Christian College in Montgomery led administrators there to rename the school after him in the 1980s. Thus, Faulkner University bears the name of its chief benefactor and chairman of the board, an Alabama politico with close ties to the state’s most notorious segregationist, George Wallace.\textsuperscript{55}

If whites within COCs remained distant from King and social reform in general, blacks were going in the opposite direction. The inherent tensions between a self-perception as the church and the obstinate practice of racial segregation in many quarters were irreconcilable for many minds. Either churches had to change or new paths, including a permanent break from the COCs, had to be forged. As the 1970s unfolded, African American COCs continued to embrace the legacies of civil rights struggles, even if very few of them actively participated. Likewise, African American students gradually filtered into COC colleges. Ironically, the colleges, sites of

\textsuperscript{54} Stanton, 105, 149-150, 153; and Carter, 300.

\textsuperscript{55} Stanton, 97.
such protracted struggles to desegregate, became the only place where blacks and whites within COCs regularly interacted. Only the dawn of a new century and new assessments of the past would resurrect serious desires to pursue racial reconciliation.
CHAPTER 9
REPENTANCE, RECONCILIATION, AND RESISTANCE

On Sunday morning, 19 June 2005, a friend and I arrived in time for the morning worship service with the 61 North Bypass COC in Vicksburg, Mississippi. It was a relatively new church, founded in 1987 as the third predominantly African American COC in Vicksburg. Eight weeks prior to our arrival, however, an event transpired that would have been almost unthinkable a few decades ago. A predominantly white COC merged into the 61 North Bypass COC, “uniting to form a new congregation of the Lord’s church,” according to one announcement.¹

We arrived on Father’s Day and settled into a pew in the back of the sanctuary. Over two hundred people, about evenly split between black and white congregants, had crowded into the small building for worship that day. The simple, A-frame structure included a small foyer that separated the sanctuary from the outside, and in this area, the sweltering summer heat and the cool air conditioner waged war each time the entrance doors opened. It symbolically called to mind “long, hot summers,” “the heat,” and a state with a long history of racial violence, oppression, and distrust competing against a collection of people who, at least for a few hours each week, seemed to forget and defy that past.

COCs are known for their a capella worship, a characteristic that perhaps limits the aura of excitement that stereotypes some evangelical or African American churches, so an up-tempo song or an occasional “amen” during a sermon is about as exciting as it gets. The song leader on this day was an elderly white man whose pace and song selection might well have disappointed anyone under sixty years old. In keeping with COC tradition, the Eucharist was served, as it is each week, by a group of men who distributed the unleavened bread and grape juice (COCs are

traditionally “teetotalers” who teach abstention from all alcoholic beverages) between prayers that “those partaking of it will do so in a worthy manner.” The sermon was delivered by Willie Nettle, the African American minister, and he chose as his text I Corinthians 16:13-14, an excerpt from a Pauline epistle that simply states, “Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love” (NKJV).

In lifting this text from the apostle’s closing salutations to ancient Corinthian churches, Nettle found a message for fathers and their wives. “Women are to submit and obey their husbands,” Nettle insisted, as he gave homage to another Pauline text. Contemporary fathers, he opined, were not “being men” because they refused to assert their authority in the home. Nettle extended this definition of masculinity to include “the denominations” when he suggested that “not being a man” could also refer to people with “denominational ties who refuse to listen to the Word of God [and are] being wishy-washy with the Word.” He even made room in his homily for criticism of homosexuality and same-sex marriages in which the couple adopts a child. The sermon could have been preached in many COCs across the country, black or white.

These two churches announced their intention to integrate in a letter sent to the Magnolia (MS) Messenger, a periodical affiliated with COCs, that includes didactic essays and reports on events related to the denomination in Mississippi. One paragraph summarized their reasons for merging: “Because of our love for Christ, his love for us, his pleas for unity of Christians and our love for each other, both congregations are convinced that worshipping and working together and following the principles and guidelines of God’s word will make each of us stronger in Christ. We believe the blending of black and white cultures will not only glorify God, but also

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2 This particular turn of phrase is frequently used because it alludes to a Pauline text that states, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” (1 Corinthians 11:26-28, NKJV).
bless everyone involved. As one united body, we hope to have a stronger witness to the community and be better able to evangelize both populations in the Vicksburg area.” The letter further noted that both ministers would share ministerial duties. “We ask for your prayers for success as we embark in this new work,” the letter concluded, “and we pray that our move to unity will be one of many over the next several years.”

This story is unique, however. Over the past three decades, little has changed between black and white COCs. Indeed, the fact that the Vicksburg story is so extraordinary further proves that COCs have long ceased efforts toward racial reconciliation and understanding. Instead, memories of the tumultuous 1960s have been whitewashed. For example, Harding University published an informational volume about its institution, titled Against the Grain. Among other speculative assertions, one section insisted that “True academic freedom cannot be separated from Christianity” and “The modern university, no longer capable of substantial reflection on the goals of life, inevitably creates a mental environment in which wisdom is sacrificed for mere information.”

Perhaps the most disingenuous comments in the volume concern the desegregation of Harding. The story is told in three sentences. It begins by noting that the “South was still segregated in the early 1960s, but Harding students and staff were ready to integrate and made known their views as early as 1957.” The text then proudly notes that “[q]uietly,” the Harding graduate school in Memphis desegregated in 1962 followed one year later by the undergraduate school in Searcy. “Harding was the first private college in Arkansas to integrate,” this account proclaims, “and Benson received a standing ovation in chapel when he announced it.” While much of the South was still segregated, the University of Arkansas law school desegregated in

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the fall of 1949, and with much notoriety, the public high schools in Little Rock were
desegregated in the late 1950s. Benson, of course, loathed desegregating his college; even after
the first black students came on campus, he continued to teach that God intended the races to
remain separate. Furthermore, “integration” had hardly occurred at Harding by the close of the
1960s, when twenty black students could be counted among a student body of almost two
thousand people. Harding’s history of race relations can only be described as “against the grain,”
if by “grain” one means racial integration and equality of opportunity for blacks and whites.4

At least one formerly segregated COC college has displayed a greater willingness to
acknowledge and atone for its past. In 1999, Abilene Christian University issued a formal
apology to African American members of COCs. Royce Money, president of the university,
appeared at the fiftieth annual lectureship on the campus of Southwestern Christian College
where he read a prepared statement. “We are here today to confess the sins of racism and
discrimination and to issue a formal apology to all of you and to ask for your forgiveness,” he
said. “We understand from the Lord that part of repentance involves the resolve to go in a
different direction in the future than we have in the past. But before we focus on the future, we
need to confess the sins of racism and discrimination of the past against our African American
brothers and sisters in Christ.” Sharing the stage with Money was Andrew Hairston who had
railed against the racism of white COCs during the 1960s. Hairston himself had been rejected by
Abilene Christian College before the school desegregated. By 1999, Hairston had enjoyed a
successful career as an attorney and judge in Atlanta, as well as minister for the Simpson Street
Church of Christ. He also served as chairman of the board of trustees at SWCC, and he
embraced Money after the apology was read. “I appreciate Dr. Money and ACU taking a lead on

4 David B. Burks, ed., Against the Grain: The Mission of Harding University (Searcy, Arkansas: Harding
University, 1998), 41, 58.
this, even if it’s somewhat late,” Hairston said. “The apology and reconciliation efforts are things that others couldn’t bring themselves to do.” The audience, composed primarily of African Americans, stood and applauded at the close of Money’s remarks. Many shouted, “Amen!” Some were moved to tears. A few months later, during the annual lectureship at Abilene Christian University, a replay of these proceedings was shown during the opening session to a crowd of some four thousand people. Practical suggestions for encouraging racial reconciliation among churches were also discussed by a committee of black and white ministers whose October meeting had precipitated the apology.5

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a few black and white churches are finding enough common ground to venture into joint ministry efforts. The Schrader Lane Church of Christ in Nashville, for example, has taken the lead in a program aimed at helping welfare recipients achieve an education and gainful employment. Once a person graduates from the program, the church matches funds that the participants are able to save, thereby giving them some measure of financial security and independence. In this effort, the Schrader Lane church has been joined by a predominantly white church, the Woodmont Hills Church of Christ, also in Nashville. Other churches are consciously pursuing interracialism by hiring ministers that reflect the ethnic demographics of local communities. For example, the historically black Sterling Boulevard Church of Christ in Sheffield, Alabama, has hired two associate ministers, one white and one Hispanic, to diversify its membership and provide an example of interracial community in a state

5 Michelle Morris, “‘The Right Thing to Do’,” ACU Today (Spring 2000), available online at http://www.acu.edu/alumni/acu-today/spring2000/cover01.html (last accessed 13 April 2007).
known for its racial animosities. There are undoubtedly comparable examples, especially in urban areas across the country.\textsuperscript{6}

However, these initiatives, like the two churches in Vicksburg, are exceptional. In contrast to overtures for reconciliation, the Harding University library, for example, houses the George Benson reading room, complete with a large portrait and a sizable collection of plaques and other honors bestowed upon the former president. Benson was certainly a phenomenal administrator in the sense that he almost single-handedly brought Harding out of obscurity. But reconciliation between blacks and whites is impeded when a person with Benson’s perspectives on race is so uncritically honored. Contemporary assessments of past race relations have also been hindered by the destruction of pertinent materials. Benson’s files were thoroughly purged by his wife before they were donated to Harding. Even worse, the papers of Athens Clay Pullias, president of David Lipscomb College from 1946 to 1977, and Hubert Allen Dixon, president of Freed-Hardeman College from 1950 to 1969, no longer exist. Repeated attempts by this author (a Lipscomb alumnus) to gain access to the minutes from Lipscomb University’s board of trustees meetings from the 1950s and 1960s were met with refusal. The same can be said of Faulkner University, where sources that might illuminate the history of race relations at that school are no longer extant.

One cannot prove that concerted efforts have been made to conceal certain aspects of the past, but there are other indications that many people within COCs would prefer to forget the denomination’s troubled past. For example, a 1979 volume that examined the history of COCs in Tennessee during the first half of the twentieth century did not even bother mentioning black churches and ministers. In a more recent example, a prominent website hosted and maintained

\textsuperscript{6} Rubel Shelly, interview by author, tape recording, Nashville, Tennessee, 28 June 2005. Information about the Sterling Boulevard COC comes from conversations with one of these associate ministers, Riley Turner.
by a COC in Georgia, TheRestorationMovement.com, features biographies and pictures of numerous preachers but included only one African American: Marshall Keeble. There are brief biographical sketches of Pullias, Benson, Dixon, James Bales, and Rex Turner, former president of Faulkner. Their contributions to COCs are described in some detail on the site. But there is no mention of G. P. Bowser, R. N. Hogan, or any other African American preacher. Based on this website alone, one could reasonably conclude that the denomination was almost exclusively white. Yet the site hails Keeble as “[p]erhaps . . . the most influential preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the 20th century.”

The construction of these memories not only neglects a significant number of COCs and their members, but it also illustrates the selectivity involved in commemorating a denomination that, in many quarters at least, continues to pride itself as the most authentic expression of Christianity. In some sense, this selective memory is not surprising because it fits the pattern of how the civil rights movement is remembered and utilized for a variety of agendas. Though hated by many people during his life, Martin Luther King Jr. has become a heroic figure for most every segment of the population, even though his ideas about economic, social, and political justice contradict much of the political rhetoric and actions of both “major” political parties. An adult who wishes to visit the exhibits at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute during the week must pay nine dollars for admission. Even Fred Gray recently invoked the name of King and the movement during his defense of a white, multimillionaire corporate executive in Birmingham. “You can make Dr. King’s dream come true by returning a not guilty verdict for Richard Scrushy,” Gray told a jury. Scrushy stood accused of buying a seat on a hospital regulatory board

by arranging $500,000 in contributions to a state lottery campaign on behalf of former Alabama Governor Don Siegelman. If the twelve jurors were able to render a “not guilty” verdict, Gray told them that they would “be able to join in that old song: ‘Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, free at last.”’

The legacy of race relations in COCs includes several ambiguities. If exclusivism led some whites to associate more freely with blacks than they might have otherwise, this theological bent did not lend itself to assessing and perhaps working to correct the gross injustices perpetrated against blacks both in the South and throughout the United States, nor did it foster a spirit of equality between blacks and whites. While primitivism had been a force for promoting interaction before the 1960s, interest in interracial cooperation waned once African Americans embraced the independence that came with securing more economic and political freedom. Meanwhile, primitivism and exclusivism, traits that had characterized COCs for decades, began to diminish as a unifying force. The cry that the church has no business in politics, for example, had a hollow ring when more and more church members were holding political offices, working diligently for temperance ordinances, or answering the call of the Moral Majority. And although churches still shied away from civil rights activism, by the close of the century, they were more likely to participate in ministries that pursued social justice.

In the wake of the momentous changes of the 1960s, COCs were one of the few denominations that actually made conscious efforts to integrate individual, local congregations. This practice was by no means widespread, but those rare occasions when churches merged or labored to incorporate people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds have much to teach about the

racial perspectives of some church members who defined church unity in both theological, ethnic, and practical terms. COCs always touted church unity, even if that unity never necessitated interracial churches. In churches that made conscious decisions to include people of all races, however, one finds the rare occasion where words are met with deeds. But white churches did not frequently make this choice, even if a wayward black person occasionally happened upon their services; black churches could rarely find enough whites who were willing to integrate their assemblies. Given this outcome, it is little wonder that subsequent generations have become increasingly cynical about faith questions, “the race question,” and COCs’ answers to both.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

It all began in Moulton, Alabama, during the fall of 1975, but I will skip ahead to 9 July 1976, the date when I entered this world. Much has changed since that day. I learned how to read, write, and type (or at least peck) before entering kindergarten, and I never found a good reason to stop. After a woefully inadequate grade school education, I ventured into college without a clue but with a general interest in history and religion. In three and a half years, I managed to graduate with a major in history and a minor in philosophy and religion, among other things, from the University of North Alabama. Still unsure what I wanted to be if and when I grew up, I completed a seminary degree at David Lipscomb University and learned what I did not want to be. During the course of my seminary training, I taught history at my high school alma mater for three years and became convinced of two things. One, I wanted to teach history. (I was shocked to discover that people were actually compensated, albeit in small amounts, for telling stories.) Two, I did not know much history. Finally, after five years and two degrees at the University of Florida, I know just enough to be dangerous.

Meanwhile, life happened. I am married to the most patient and loving person in the world, Sonya Gray, who could not have imagined all of the challenges when she agreed to this gig. We have an adorable child named Langston Hadley who stumbled into the story as I began this dissertation.