

COLORBLIND CHRISTIANS: WHITE EVANGELICAL INSTITUTIONS AND
THEOLOGIES OF RACE IN THE ERA OF CIVIL RIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Colorblind Christians: White Evangelical Institutions and Theologies of Race in the Era of Civil Rights, traces the history of black and white evangelical encounters between the 1960s and 1990s. In the crucible of these encounters, white evangelicals forged a new theology of race: Christian colorblindness. Drawing on biblical idioms and the rhetoric of spiritual unity, white evangelicals turned their back on white supremacist theologies even as they resisted black evangelical calls for a more thorough redistribution of power. In the ambiguous space between racist reaction and anti-racist Christianity, white evangelicals successfully expanded their movement and adapted to the changes the civil rights movement wrought. Professing to be united in Christ, they molded an evangelical form of whiteness while proclaiming colorblind intentions. Colorblind Christians embraced a politics of church primacy. They believed that conversion to evangelical Christianity, not systemic change or legal reform, was the source of racial progress. When people became Christians, their new identity as members of the Body of Christ superseded any racial identity. Black evangelicals could use such claims to press for inclusion in white evangelical institutions. But white evangelicals often used the same logic to silence black evangelical demands for reform. In these spaces of ostensible Christian unity, white evangelicals preserved whiteness at the center of American evangelicalism.

The story of black and white evangelical encounters reveals an American racial order that was at once racial and religious. *Colorblind Christians* invites scholars of race to consider how religion shapes racial formation and encourages scholars of religion to think about how race structures religion. Using the archives of the nation's largest

Protestant denomination, overlooked records from the most influential church growth initiative of the era, and rarely-examined sources such as student newspapers from white evangelical colleges, *Colorblind Christians* shows how white evangelicals shaped the American racial order and became successful religio-racial entrepreneurs in a time of rapid change. Using race strategically to grow their churches, white evangelicals invested in whiteness in the name of spreading a colorblind gospel. Black evangelicals promoted an alternative evangelical vision that placed racial justice at the center of the gospel. Their efforts to belong in American evangelicalism revealed the racial boundaries of the movement. By the end of the twentieth century, Christian colorblindness had helped to grow evangelicalism and enhance its political power, but it did so by coloring evangelicalism white. Black evangelicals, outsiders in their own religious tradition, continued to expose these often-invisible investments and pointed the way toward an evangelicalism beyond whiteness.

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Graber, Keith Call, and the rest of the staff at the Billy Graham Center Archives. They were so quick to answer all my questions and help me with what I needed (even if I proved it *is* possible to ask stupid questions). Thanks to Taffey Hall and her staff at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives. I have very fond memories of my week in Nashville. I also owe a special thanks to Glen Pierce at the Messiah College Archives, who patiently assisted me when I was a very green researcher indeed. Thanks also to Anna-Kajsa Anderson at the F.M. Johnson Archives and Special Collections at North Park University; Hendrina VanSpronsen at Heritage Hall, Calvin University; Laura Habecker at the Willard J. Houghton Library, Houghton University; Corie Zylstra at the Crowell Library Archives, Moody Bible Institute; Sunya Notley at Bailey Library, Nyack College; Amy Yuncker at the Everett L. Cattell Library, Malone University; and Melvin Hartwick at the Masland Library, Cairn University. Special thanks also to David Goss and Sarah Larlee at the Gordon College archives. On the strength of a single email inquiry from a stranger, Sarah spent what I imagine was a considerable amount of time tracking down documents in the archives.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On the evening of November 24, 2014, St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney Bob McCulloch announced that a white police officer would not be indicted for the shooting death of a black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri. As the nation looked on, Michael Brown's family cried out in grief and fires raged in the night. The moment produced astonishing split-screen images: the President of the United States calling for calm while buildings up and down Florissant Avenue burned to the ground. The following summer, as Black Lives Matter activists marked the anniversary of Michael Brown's death with renewed protests, one of the country's most influential evangelical pastors decided to weigh in on social media. Rick Warren shared an image of two police officers, one white and one black, standing together and holding out their hands on which were written "His life matters." The meme might have seemed to be a typical example of the colorblind ideology that dominated so much of American racial discourse. But for Warren, the matter was theological. And so he added a commentary of his own:

#AllLivesMatterToGod

Racism isn't caused by SKIN but by SIN.

"From one man GOD made every nation of men to inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they'd live." Acts 17:26¹

¹ Ironically, the meaning of the scripture Warren quoted to support his point was far from obvious. It had a long and contested history as a proof text for both evangelical integrationists and evangelical segregationists. Integrationists quoted the first line, "from one man" (often translated "from one blood") to emphasize the unity of humanity created by God, while segregationists quoted the second half of the verse to argue that God had ordained segregation.

As cries of “Black Lives Matter” rang out on the nation’s streets, Warren universalized and sacralized the slogan. “All Lives Matter” was God’s Word on America’s raging racial controversy. Warren’s diagnosis of the roots of racism—“SIN” rather than “SKIN”—was a pithy alliteration with a long history going back at least to the civil rights movement.² But what did it mean in this case? Warren implied that activists were misguided because they failed to recognize the root of sin in the human heart, a disposition that knew no bounds of color. Warren’s generic invocation of sin deflected critique of whiteness and removed the reality of racial hierarchy from view. His audience could imagine themselves as opponents of racism without bearing particular responsibility as white people in a society structured around whiteness. Where did Rick Warren get these ideas? How did his audience know how to interpret them? Warren worked with the tools generations of white evangelicals had created in their adaptive response to the civil rights movement. His intervention in social media conveyed abundant meaning in few words because it expressed the colorblind theology that white evangelicals had spent the better part of five decades learning.

Colorblind Christians is a history of black and white evangelical encounters, and the theologies of race they produced, between the 1960s and the 1990s. In response to the civil rights movement, white evangelicals created a new theology of race: a phenomenon I call Christian colorblindness. Borrowing creatively from the idioms of scripture and the rhetoric of black evangelicals, white evangelicals took theological concepts that had been used to attack Jim Crow and repurposed them to maintain their investments in whiteness

² In the 1960s some evangelicals used the phrase to oppose Martin Luther King’s brand of civil rights activism (though Warren probably did not know this).

in a new era of colorblindness. White evangelicals offered an individualistic message of repentance and salvation, expressed through their own institutions, as the most potent force able to change lives and transcend racial boundaries. Seeking to address racial problems close to home through their churches, colleges, and parachurch ministries, white evangelicals emphasized the spiritual unity of all true believers in Jesus Christ, the power of the gospel to solve racial problems, and the importance of interpersonal relationships to heal the wounds of racism. As black evangelicals sought inclusion and reform in white evangelical institutions, they repeatedly insisted white evangelicals' brand of colorblind Christianity failed to eradicate racism. Christian colorblindness not only allowed whiteness to hide in plain sight, it shaped the character of that whiteness. Overt expressions of superiority and segregationist readings of scripture became taboo. But just as importantly, anti-racist interrogation of white identity and concern for racial justice remained off-limits. Colorblind Christianity fostered communities in which whiteness often remained an invisible investment carried on under the banner of Christian unity and faithfulness to the gospel. The result was a distinctly evangelical form of whiteness.

Christian Colorblindness and the American Racial Order

Seen from the vantage point of Christian colorblindness, the colorblind racial order of the post-civil rights era appears as a political theology—an ostensibly secular phenomenon that in fact translates the religious into the secular, drawing much of its

power from the theological assumptions of a religious public.³ For all the excellent work scholars of race and whiteness have done to explore colorblind racial ideology, the religious features of this order have been all but ignored.⁴ Implicit in much of the scholarship on whiteness is a version of the secularization thesis. While scholars almost universally acknowledge the crucial role of religion in racialization in the early modern period, much of the scholarship on race in contemporary America proceeds as if religion is no longer important. But scholars of religion have shown that religion not only persists; it shapes the very content and categories of the so-called secular.⁵ This insight must be

³ The concept of political theology has its origin in the work of Carl Schmitt, whose 1922 book *Political Theology* argued that “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” Daniel Pellerin, “Political Theology,” in *The Encyclopedia of Political Science*, edited by George Thomas Kurian (Washington, D.C., CQ Press, 2011), 1292-1293. See also Vincent W. Lloyd, ed., *Race and Political Theology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 1-21.

⁴ Major works on colorblind ideology include Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, editors, *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Michael K. Brown et al., *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Meghan A. Burke, *Racial Ambivalence in Diverse Communities: Whiteness and the Power of Color-Blind Ideologies* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012); Sarah Nilsen and Sarah E. Turner, eds., *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Justin Gomer, *Colorblindness, A Life: Race, Film, and the Articulation of An Ideology*, Ph.D. Diss, University of California at Berkeley, 2014. Major historical treatments of the rise of colorblindness have given little attention to religion. See for example Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Daniel Martinez HoSang, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Lean N. Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁵ Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). “The secular is not an absence of religion,” writes Kathryn Lofton; “rather, the secular is religion’s kaleidoscopic

brought to bear on the American racial order. A vision that assumes religion's declining significance cannot understand race in the contemporary United States. Throughout this dissertation, I use phrases such as "investment in whiteness" to deliberately echo foundational works in whiteness studies while also suggesting the limits of that scholarship.⁶ Like other white Americans, white evangelicals invested in and benefited from a racial hierarchy that was often invisible to them. But I refer to an evangelical investment in whiteness in a more specific sense. White evangelicals invested in racial hierarchy *as evangelicals*. When they strategically used race to grow their churches, for example, they gave an evangelical cast to whiteness and shaped the contours of the American racial order. Even in the twenty-first century, race in the United States—as Rick Warren suggested—remained profoundly theological.

As white evangelicals fashioned a new theology of race, they created a significant grassroots symbiosis between Christian colorblindness and the colorblindness of a conservative political ascendancy in the decades after the civil rights movement. Americans read Monday morning's newspaper with the Sunday sermon ringing in their ears. When they picked up their Bibles, they did not put down their political commitments. While colorblind ideology in American politics might be expressed in

buffet." Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of An Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 209.

⁶ See for example the near-total absence of religion in Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1707-1791; Kimberlé Crenshaw et al, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995); Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, third edition (New York: NYU Press, 2017); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, twentieth anniversary edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018).

idioms of national unity (“we’re all Americans”) or human solidarity (“we’re all the same under the skin”) the idioms of Christian colorblindness—the “body of Christ,” “unity in Christ,” “Jesus died for us all,” “we’re all equal at the cross”—are at once distinct and constitutive of a sacralized racial order. To understand the durability of colorblind ideology, we must come to see that the post-civil rights era political order was at once racial and religious. Though white evangelicals alone did not create the politics of colorblindness, tens of millions of white evangelicals drew on their theology to imbue those politics with a sacred character.

Scholars and evangelicals themselves have often attempted to police borders between what is political and what is theological, what is sacred and profane.⁷ Christian colorblindness obliterated these imagined borders, even if its practitioners were not always aware of its deeply political nature. On questions of race most white evangelicals insisted that the Christian gospel working in individual hearts was the only real solution. Organized political activism for racial justice was a distraction from the real source of racial progress. So pervasive did this pietistic posture become that white evangelicals did not see it as a form of politics. It became, instead, the supposedly obvious Christian approach to racial tension. Yet it would be a mistake to see this stance as non-political, or as just another example of evangelicals’ well-documented preferences for personal and

⁷ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion and the Domestication of Dissent* (Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2005), 64-81. For examples of Christian scholars lamenting what they see as inappropriate mixing of religion and politics, see Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical’s Lament* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Charles Marsh, *Wayward Christian Soldiers: Freeing the Gospel from Political Captivity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

anti-structural solutions to social problems.⁸ It was, instead, a theologically-fueled politics of church primacy.⁹ While other moral concerns such as abortion became the focus of organized white evangelical political activism and structural interventions beyond the church, white evangelicals took a different approach to racism. They were not bewitched by the individualistic cultural values of a colorblind racial order blinding them to structural inequality. Rather, their own theo-political values of church primacy made them co-constructors of this colorblind order.

It may be tempting to see this pietistic posture and the theological language of race as a mere cover for reactionary political commitments. Yet inquiring after the sincerity of evangelical theologies of race is a dead end, rewarding answers that are too binary and simplistic. Rather than imagining theological discourse as a façade, it is more useful to understand theology as one of the main ways evangelicals performed politics. Part of what it meant to be an opinion-shaper in an evangelical context was to have the skill to express racial opinions in the language of biblical idiom and evangelical theology. This wasn't a sign of insincerity; it was a mark of belonging. And it was only part of a

⁸ A helpful discussion of this outlook, which Samuel L. Perry calls “pietistic idealism,” is found in Perry, *Growing God's Family: The Global Orphan Care Movement and the Limits of Evangelical Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 8-13. The crucial distinction I seek to make is that white evangelicals apply this pietistic approach in some contexts, especially when race is in view, while rejecting it in others.

⁹ While evangelicals have often been described as anti-statist, the idea of church primacy connotes the positive content evangelicals believed was inherent in their church-centric vision. As Steven Miller and Axel Schafer have shown, white evangelical anti-statism was not a negation of state power but an assertion of its proper role in support of evangelical institutions. See Steven P. Miller, “The Persistence of Antiliberalism: Evangelicals and the Race Problem,” in *American Evangelicals and the 1960s*, ed. Axel R. Schafer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013): 81-96; Axel R. Schafer, *Piety and Public Funding: Evangelicals and the State in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

broader ferment during decades in which, as Lilian Calles Barger has written, “Across the left/right spectrum, theology was validating the religious and spiritual significance of the political.”¹⁰

Rather than exploring this theo-politics from the inside, much of the popular and scholarly literature imagines white evangelicals primarily as partisan political actors.¹¹ As the story goes, white evangelicals grudgingly looked on as the civil rights movement swept the land, and then they became Republicans. Though some scholars have done excellent work to complicate this one-dimensional picture, the rise of the so-called Christian Right so dominates the conversation that the ecclesial changes the civil rights movement set in motion among white evangelicals remain underexplored and poorly understood.¹² Looking from the outside in, the popular story of white evangelical

¹⁰ Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 253.

¹¹ Frances FitzGerald’s recent popular history of evangelicalism is symptomatic of this trend. It devotes hundreds of pages in the second half of the book to a small cadre of elite white evangelical political activists, leaving the internal worlds of evangelical communities largely unexplored. See Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 291-623.

¹² On white evangelicals, civil rights, and the rise of the Christian Right see Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Daren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); Randall J. Stephens, “‘It Has to Come from the Hearts of the People’: Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Race, and the 1964 Civil Rights Act,” *Journal of American Studies* (2015): 1-27. For scholars who have tried to take evangelical theology and institutions seriously beyond their influence on partisan politics, see Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown,” *The Journal of American History* 91 (2004): 119-144; Curtis J. Evans, “White Evangelical Responses to the Civil Rights Movement,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102 (2009): 245-273; Mark

resistance to civil rights and subsequent political mobilization insists that the rhythms and preoccupations of white evangelicals' own racial-religious worlds, especially those outside the South, are of little interest compared to their status as a powerful Republican constituency. In contrast, this study examines the very places white evangelicals insisted were the centers of their attention: their churches, schools, and parachurch ministries. Because evangelicals' primary racial and religious acts occurred in and through their own institutions, scholars must seek to understand those spaces, not only in the South, but in national and transnational contexts. It was in these spaces, not in the field of partisan politics, that white evangelicals insisted America's racial destiny would be shaped.

What Is A White Evangelical Anyway?

Christian colorblindness provides a useful framework to trace the changing meanings of whiteness and evangelicalism in the civil rights era. In recent years the argument that the categories of race and religion are mutually constituted has become well-established among scholars of religion.¹³ Yet in practice, this insight has done little

Mulder, *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015). Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Ansley L. Quiros, *God With Us: Lived Theology and the Freedom Struggle in Americus, Georgia, 1942-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

¹³ On the co-construction of religion and race see Kathryn Gin Lum and Paul Harvey, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1-19; Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister, eds., *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-34. A notably successful example of this framework in action is found in Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

to alter the analytical frames of many studies of evangelicalism, a field whose foundational works have become infamous for their inattention to race.¹⁴ Though *white evangelical* is one of the most overworked phrases in our political and historical lexicon, to invert the phrase and speak of *evangelical whiteness* still raises eyebrows. When we begin to think through the lens of this inversion, whiteness can never be assumed; its connotations must be explicated in specific contexts. Through this inversion, whiteness becomes variegated and diverse, as much religious as racial as it takes on theological, institutional, and temporal inflections. The rise and spread of what I call Christian colorblindness is one way the transformation of evangelical whiteness, and its effect on the broader American racial order, can be seen.

Christian colorblindness not only allowed white evangelicals to adapt to a changing society, it became constitutive of evangelical identity. Those who embraced Christian colorblindness found themselves inside the camp. Those who rejected it, especially black evangelicals, often found their evangelical bona fides called into question. Historians' inattention to the black evangelical story has not only hidden an important part of evangelicalism's history, it has also made it harder for scholars to discern how central whiteness was in policing evangelicalism's borders. By challenging Christian colorblindness, black evangelicals held up a mirror to the evangelical mainstream, exposing its investment in whiteness. In this sense, white evangelicalism can be understood as a religio-racial identity. Judith Weisenfeld has employed this term to describe black religious movements in the era of the Great Migration whose members

¹⁴ See for example George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

understood “individual and collective identity as constituted in the conjunction of religion and race.”¹⁵ Weisenfeld tells a story of people at the margins of American life who used this religio-racial self-fashioning as an instrument of deliberate resistance. We can imagine white evangelicalism as a religio-racial inversion of this self-fashioning: often unconscious rather than deliberate, and a means of identification with the racial hierarchy rather than resistance to it. The tangible reality of evangelical whiteness was borne out again and again by black evangelicals’ efforts to belong in evangelical spaces and institutions. The intensity of their struggle in historically white evangelical spaces revealed just how *white* evangelicalism was. At the same time, the extraordinary success and influence of evangelicalism in the mainstream of American life suggested how *evangelical* whiteness had become.¹⁶

Defining evangelicalism has become a question of intense scholarly debate.¹⁷ As definitions proliferate, hopes for an encompassing definition able to command wide

¹⁵ Though Weisenfeld goes on to use the term in a more specific sense most applicable to her subject, she suggests its broader relevance, writing, “In some sense, all religious groups in the United States could be characterized as religio-racial ones, given the deeply powerful, if sometimes veiled, ways the American system of racial hierarchy has structured religious beliefs, practices, and institutions for all people in its frame.” Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 5.

¹⁶ Steven Miller has suggested that evangelicalism in this period was no longer a subculture. It had entered the American mainstream. If this was so, its racial posture was a key prerequisite for this success. Positioned as not excessively reactionary yet inoffensive to the sensibilities of racially conservative whites, evangelicalism thrived in the post-civil rights era. Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born Again Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ David Bebbington’s definition based on four theological beliefs gained wide acceptance but has come under increasing attack in recent years as historians have emphasized the social and cultural contexts of evangelicalism. Todd Brenneman has called evangelicalism an “aesthetic worldview,” and Kristin Kobes Du Mez argues it is

agreement recede. This is for the best. In a very different context, the historian of empire A.G. Hopkins has written that “The only reasonable requirements [of scholarly definitions] are that [they] are aligned with the purpose of a particular enquiry, and that ideological and other presuppositions are acknowledged...”¹⁸ Just so. Rather than casting a totalizing definition of evangelicalism, this study approaches the movement through the variable of race and the category of Christian colorblindness. It is helpful to bear in mind that I use Christian colorblindness to refer to something that was always in the process of becoming. Some of the constituent parts of Christian colorblindness were as old as the Christian scriptures. As far back as the eighteenth century, abolitionists used the language of spiritual equality to argue against the enslavement of human beings.¹⁹ In the twentieth century, Martin Luther King and other civil rights activists spoke in terms that would be familiar to any white evangelical by the 1990s. Rather than imagining these ideas as inherently liberatory or oppressive, it is more useful to pay close attention to the context and purpose of their deployment. What was new and important in the civil rights era was the way white evangelicals created a robust theology of race that explained a particular

an “imagined religious community.” David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Todd M. Brenneman, *Homespun Gospel: The Triumph of Sentimentality in Contemporary American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Kristin Du Mez, “Evangelicalism Is An Imagined Religious Community,” The Anxious Bench blog, August 9, 2018.

¹⁸ A.G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 26.

¹⁹ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

moment of social change and taught them how to act in it without displacing the centrality of whiteness in their religious communities.

Overview of the Dissertation

The organization of this study has an hourglass shape. The opening and closing chapters take a broader view of the racial climate of evangelicalism and its intersections with the American mainstream in the 1960s and the 1990s, respectively. The four chapters in between trace narrower threads, alternating between churches and colleges to explore specific facets of change in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In their churches evangelicals worshipped, found comfort and community, and learned ways of imagining God, themselves, and others. Racial change in these spaces was fraught precisely because the stakes were so high. To explore this, I utilize the archives of the nation's largest Protestant denomination (the Southern Baptist Convention) and one of the most influential interdenominational evangelistic movements of the period, the Church Growth Movement. Colleges were sites of training for future evangelical leaders and spaces where the evangelical mainstream was constructed. Throughout the civil rights era and beyond, evangelical college students spoke more unguardedly about race than their elders, providing a particularly fertile trail of religio-racial formation across time.

White evangelicals experienced the civil rights movement as a test of the strength of their institutions and the faithfulness of their movement. Chapter 2 describes what the civil rights movement looked like from an evangelical perspective, and how evangelical thinking changed in response to it. Black evangelicals made themselves increasingly visible during these years, using colorblind theologies to challenge racial discrimination

in evangelical spaces. By the end of this tumultuous period, if evangelicals could not agree on the precise path forward, they could agree on one thing: the way to racial progress ran through their own institutions and the message of the Gospel they carried. This conviction became the foundation on which white evangelicals built Christian colorblindness.

White evangelical college campuses emerged in the late 1960s as key sites of racial change and the construction of Christian colorblindness. Chapter 3 describes how, beginning in the late 1960s, many white evangelical colleges began to actively recruit black students for the first time. Contested visions of what it would mean to create colorblind Christian academic communities flourished. The presence of black students proved to be more controversial than white administrators had imagined. On some campuses there was an atmosphere of crisis in the early 1970s as increasingly race-conscious black students demanded reforms and critiqued white evangelical racism. White administrators and students often responded with emerging rhetoric of Christian colorblindness. Just a few years before, black evangelicals had used the rhetoric of Christian unity to challenge racism. Now white evangelicals used the same language to urge black evangelicals to stop demanding racial reforms. By the middle of the 1970s, most recruitment programs had collapsed.

While white evangelical colleges recruited black students, white evangelical churches embraced a very different approach. Chapter 4 traces the emergence and transformation of the Church Growth Movement (CGM). Evangelistic strategies created in caste-conscious India in the 1930s came to be deployed in American metropolitan areas decades later. During the 1970s, the CGM defined white Americans as “a people”

akin to castes or tribes in the global South. Drawing on the revival of white ethnic identities in American culture, church growth leaders imagined whiteness as pluralism rather than hierarchy. The CGM allowed colorblind Christians to recast their segregated churches as benign expressions of American diversity in the years after the civil rights movement. In an age of white flight, the CGM helped to structure the evangelical mainstream as white, suburban, and middle class.

While the Church Growth Movement enabled evangelical flight from the city, some evangelicals sought to move toward it. Chapter 5 describes the efforts of a minority of evangelicals to contest Christian colorblindness and redefine it in an era of urban crisis. Not content with recruiting black students *from* the city, some white evangelical colleges sought to go *to* the city. In Philadelphia, Messiah College launched an urban campus in 1968 in an effort to engage the new realities the civil rights movement had wrought. At this and other institutions, early ambitions for anti-racist education and urban activism came to grief as colorblind Christians resisted the racial lessons of the American city. By the 1980s, cultural diversity, not racial justice, became the logic of these urban programs.

As white evangelical colleges continued to wrestle with questions of diversity and Christian community in the 1980s, evangelicals argued over the very meaning of the gospel on a global stage. Chapter 6 traces this debate from the famous International Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974 to a lesser-known conference on Evangelizing Ethnic America in 1985. While black and Latin American evangelicals argued that racism had to be confronted and social justice could not be separated from the gospel message, leading figures in the Church Growth Movement and Southern Baptist

Convention took a pragmatic approach, seeking to use race for the purposes of conversion. While concern for social justice seemed to gain some ascendancy at Lausanne, the trajectory to Houston '85 signaled that colorblind Christians in the United States could become multiethnic without becoming anti-racist.

By the 1990s, Christian colorblindness was a dominant force in white evangelicalism. Chapter 7 describes the flowering of the “racial reconciliation” movement in this decade, and reframes it as the culminating expression of Christian colorblindness. Widely seen as a turning point in white evangelicals’ approach to race, in fact the racial reconciliation era showed white evangelicals’ ongoing commitments to Christian colorblindness. While most black evangelicals described racial justice as the foundation of racial reconciliation, white evangelicals appropriated the rhetoric of reconciliation, discarded the vision for social justice, and doubled down on their colorblind commitments. The evangelical movement for racial reconciliation burst on the scene at the very moment a colorblind consensus in American politics became especially prominent. Evangelicals weren’t merely riding this trend; they helped to create it. In short, colorblind Christians won the struggle to define evangelicalism and shape the American racial order. The result of their victory was an evangelicalism colored white.

CHAPTER 2:
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ONE IN CHRIST? EVANGELICALS
ENCOUNTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In the 1960s, Howard Jones was among the biggest names in the world of black evangelicalism. He was a rare nonwhite graduate of Nyack Missionary College on the shores of the Hudson River just outside New York City, and in 1958 he became the first African American to serve on Billy Graham's evangelistic team. Jones expanded the reach of his ministry through preaching on the radio. On one occasion an admiring listener invited him to her home. According to Jones, the visit became awkward from the moment she opened the door, for she had not realized Jones was black. They carried on a desultory conversation and even prayed together before Jones made good his escape. She had been a faithful financial supporter of Jones's ministry, but after that day the checks stopped coming.

Jones shared anecdotes like these not to garner personal sympathy for his predicament. Rather, he wanted to dramatize what he understood as a theological scandal in evangelical Christianity. Jones's visibility at the pinnacles of evangelicalism made him the exception that proved the rule: it was a white movement that had little room for black believers. Jones believed that "The church must demonstrate the truth that as Christians we are one in Christ, regardless of race and nationality, and that all racial barriers lie shattered at the foot of his cross."¹ Jones grounded his argument in scripture. The Apostle

¹ Howard Jones, *Shall We Overcome? A Challenge to Negro and White Christians* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company), 124, 140.

Paul had declared, “There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”² For Jones, evangelicals’ failure to practice this unity in Christ was the root of the nation’s racial troubles. But it was also the secret to the nation’s renewal: if evangelicals could find a way to practice a colorblind gospel, revival could bring racial healing to America.

At a time when many white evangelicals imagined whiteness as sacred, Jones’s call for a church that transcended the color line was a powerful solvent breaking down the invidious racial distinctions structuring evangelicalism. Jones was emblematic of a vocal group of black evangelicals who sought inclusion in white evangelical spaces during the civil rights era and used biblical language to attack theologies of white supremacy. Precisely because these critiques were so rooted in the logic of evangelical theology, they were difficult for white evangelicals to ignore. For Jones, civil rights laws had their place, but spiritual renewal of the human heart was the supreme concern. Through the first half of the 1960s, Jones’s conviction that faith in Jesus Christ was the ultimate solution to racial problems—and that evangelical institutions were the vital bearers of this message—came to unite most evangelicals across race and region. But what exactly the claim of unity in Christ meant in practice proved to be extraordinarily difficult to pin down. Christian colorblindness emerged not as a full-fledged system of thought but as a theology in the making, a set of scriptures, ideas, and idioms open to numerous interpretations and applications. The battle to define and implement a colorblind theology played out in evangelical institutions during the civil rights movement, and for decades beyond it.

² Galatians 3.28.

The growing prominence of colorblind ideals in the 1950s and 1960s could be seen in everything from primary school classrooms to the halls of congress.³ But as the civil rights movement began to reshape the nation's politics and public life, its implications for evangelicals cut even closer to home. It confronted them with basic questions about theology, the church, and the future of their own institutions. A theology of colorblindness emerged not as a partisan political maneuver or an export of sunbelt suburbia, but as the result of a nationwide reckoning among evangelicals, a debate in which black evangelicals made themselves central players.⁴ As black evangelicals challenged exclusion, many white evangelicals searched for new ways of thinking about race. What, they asked, was the distinctly evangelical answer to America's racial problems?

This chapter traces the fraught debate that ensued. Part one describes the theology of white supremacy Jones struggled against. The second section explores how Jones and other black evangelicals challenged this theology. The final section of the narrative frames key years of the civil rights struggle, between the Birmingham campaign of 1963 and the Selma campaign of 1965, through the lens of the cacophonous evangelical debate in which Jones participated. If in the 1950s many white evangelicals assumed that God

³ Zoe Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice*, 2015; Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 2006.

⁴ Darren Dochuk has framed the rise of colorblindness among evangelicals as a product of Republican Party coalition-building in 1960s Southern California. This narrative glosses over what evangelicals themselves found most concerning about racial change: how it affected their own institutions. Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 274-281.

was, as one pastor put it, the “Original Segregationist,” by the middle of the 1960s such breezy assumptions had become irrevocably tinged with doubt.⁵ The colorblind theology black evangelicals used to press for change took on new significance even as its application remained contested. A black evangelical might invoke oneness in Christ to claim spiritual *and* social equality. A white evangelical might invoke the same principle to tell black evangelicals to accept their equal spiritual inheritance while remaining content with their segregated earthly lot. Howard Jones was sure that the gospel, when faithfully applied, overcame racial division. But in the 1960s, evangelicals grappled with something more ambiguous. Jones’s critiques could not be ignored. But perhaps they could be appropriated and repurposed. It turned out that there were many ways to imagine the meaning of unity in Christ.

Sacred Whiteness in Evangelical Life

Howard Jones believed there was something profoundly wrong when the very churches he agreed with on almost all matters of doctrine were the most resistant to dealing with America’s racial crisis. He deplored the fact that racists too often found safe harbor in Bible-believing, gospel-preaching churches. “Within their camp are outright segregationists, in pulpit and pew,” he declared.⁶ Perhaps Jones was thinking of pastors like Montague Cook. On the morning of September 15, 1963, Reverend Cook took to his pulpit at Trinity Baptist Church in Moultrie, Georgia to preach the second of his two-part

⁵ Carey Daniel to A.C. Miller, September 23, 1956, AR 138, Box 20, Folder 13, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN. Hereafter SBHLA.

⁶ Jones, *Shall We Overcome*, 121.

sermon series explaining why “Racial Segregation is Christian.” The week before, Cook had told his congregation how important it was to remain racially “pure.” As God chose the children of Israel long ago and called them to be separate, so the “white European likewise was tapped by the Almighty to carry on his Purpose” in the development of western civilization. White people were not superior by dint of circumstance or accident. They were a divinely chosen people set apart for a sacred mission. Now in his second sermon, Cook explained how this stark vision of white supremacy squared with the teachings of Jesus Christ. He told his congregation that Jesus taught “inequality among men” and “discernment in love.” It was possible to love the “negro race” without giving in to modern myths about human equality. The good people of Trinity Baptist Church could rest assured that racial equality violated God’s design and was contrary to Christian principles. The “race mixers” weren’t just naïve. They set themselves in open rebellion against God. For Cook, racial and religious identities were inseparable. Whiteness was not only a race; it was a calling.⁷ The very morning Reverend Cook preached his sermon, Ku Klux Klan terrorists set off a bomb in the basement of a black church in Birmingham. While Reverend Cook spoke, unbeknownst to him, the lifeless bodies of four black children lay in the rubble of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

Such explosive resonances drew the attention of many Americans toward the South as the source of the nation’s racial trouble and the site of evangelical intransigence. But some evangelicals wondered if sectional scapegoating adequately captured the reality of evangelicals’ racial commitments. “Let’s face it,” the evangelical magazine *Eternity*

⁷ Reverend Montague Cook, “Racial Segregation Is Christian,” September 8 and 15, 1963, AR 795-221, Box 59 Folder 10, SBHLA.

declared in 1964, “Most evangelicals, whether they are from the North, South, East or West, are supporters of the status quo, and consequently tend to be segregationists.”⁸ Though many white evangelicals disputed this characterization, it hit upon the essential truth that racial exclusion was the standard practice of white evangelical institutions nationwide. Though a handful of black students did attend white evangelical colleges and Bible institutes before the civil rights era, foreign students enrolled through white evangelicals’ extensive network of overseas missions were more common than American-born students of color. The vast majority of white evangelical churches were segregated in practice and happy to remain so. Some evangelicals were members of tight-knit communities of immigrant origin where ethnicity and denominational affiliation went hand in glove.⁹ For these evangelicals, it could be hard to imagine an ethical responsibility toward African Americans when they themselves were only just beginning to feel a part of the white mainstream. It was a rare church that deliberately sought to include black worshippers. When a prospective pastor interviewed for a position at an integrated Pittsburgh church, the board asked him what he thought of black Christians attending worship services. Unaware that the church was already integrated, he generously allowed, “Well, they *do* have souls.”¹⁰ In this unusual case the man’s answer was disqualifying. No doubt he readily found a job elsewhere.

⁸ “Wrongs Do Not Make Civil Rights,” *Eternity*, June 1964, 4.

⁹ See for example Philipp Gollner, “How Mennonites Became White: Religious Activism, Cultural Power, and the City,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (2016): 165-193.

¹⁰ Iola B. Parker, “Our Church’s First Negro,” *Christian Herald*, February 1964, 21.

A pastor in Pittsburgh pontificating on black souls—as though their existence was an open question—is a reminder that racist theologies often imagined as distinctly southern were in fact popular nationwide. Well into the 1960s, the Curse of Ham myth remained influential among white evangelicals across the country. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, Noah gets drunk and passes out in his tent stark naked. Noah’s son Ham sees him in this shameful state and makes light of his father’s nakedness. The unflattering episode ends with Noah pronouncing a curse on Ham’s son, declaring, “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.”¹¹ Fanciful readings of this text imagined Ham as the ancestor of all black Africans, who were now placed under a perpetual curse. Used to justify the slave-trade and chattel slavery in centuries past, in the twentieth century the curse offered a theological explanation for white rule in a segregationist order.¹² Black people’s souls might be saved, but in their life on earth they were destined for subservience. As one woman put it, the Bible clearly taught the principle of inequality rather than equality. Didn’t the scriptures say, “Servants, obey your masters”? The integrationists were trying to create “a mongrel race” contrary to God’s design. “God has made the separate races, and the white Christian is superior because of Christianity,” she declared.¹³ As late as 1970, the national synod of the Christian Reformed Church, a historically Dutch evangelical denomination concentrated

¹¹ Genesis 9:25, King James Version.

¹² On the long and tangled etymology of the Curse of Ham myth, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹³ Letter quoted in John Vander Ploeg, “The Christian Reformed Church and the Negro,” *The Banner*, October 4, 1957, 4.

in the Midwest, felt the need to make a declaration against the Curse of Ham to counter its influence among northern evangelical laypeople.¹⁴

The Hamitic Curse was just one part of the broader biblical story which many white evangelicals interpreted as a divine mandate for religio-racial purity. These tales were not only spun by southern extremists like Montague Cook. Carl McIntire, the Michigan-born evangelical firebrand whose radio show and ministry based in New Jersey garnered millions of loyal followers, explained that “God commanded the Jewish nation to be segregated and separate.” Why were liberals carrying on as if segregation was the greatest sin? “In fact, the whole history of God’s dealing with Israel in the Old Testament represents the struggle to keep them separate,” McIntire wrote.¹⁵ Reading their own experience into both the Old and New Testaments, these evangelicals understood Ancient Near-Eastern identities as directly analogous to the modern category of race. Had not God himself separated humanity at the tower of Babel? Then, God called Israel out as a special people and forbade them from intermarrying with the nations around them. Many white evangelicals believed the New Testament confirmed segregation as God’s divine plan. Even the Apostle Paul declared that God had made all the nations and determined

¹⁴ “An Inventory of Race-Related Pronouncements and Programs of the Christian Reformed Church and Related Agencies,” July 1971, 9, C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 4, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

¹⁵ Carl McIntire, “Open Letter to Martin Luther King,” May 25, 1964, Carl McIntire Papers, Box 179, Folder 1, Princeton Theological Seminary Library. I am indebted to Paul Matzko for bringing McIntire’s views to my attention and generously sharing his research. On McIntire’s influence and the extraordinary reach of his radio show, see Matzko’s forthcoming book, *The Radio Right: Creating the Silent Majority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

“the bounds of their habitation.”¹⁶ In diluted form, the segregationist narrative of scripture held some credibility even at the center of the elite white evangelical movement. In 1963, Carl Henry, the influential theologian and founding editor of *Christianity Today*, also pointed to the Apostle Paul’s words for evidence that “God has preserved distinct nations whose social components are often racial.” It was undeniable that “The one human race became separated in history...according to color,” and perhaps it was not desirable “wholly to cancel racial distinctions.”¹⁷

Henry’s struggle to reconcile the implications of scripture with contemporary racial changes was one indication of how difficult it was for white evangelical leaders to cut themselves loose from their movement’s origins. The self-described neo-evangelicals in the orbit of Henry and Billy Graham were the descendants of early-twentieth century white fundamentalism, an overtly racist movement.¹⁸ Though Graham and others made extensive efforts to rebrand fundamentalism into a more socially concerned and intellectually respectable movement, making a clean break with their racial inheritance

¹⁶ Acts 17:26

¹⁷ Carl Henry, “What of Interracial Marriage,” *Christianity Today*, October 11, 1963, 26-28.

¹⁸ Mary Beth Mathews, *African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism between the Wars* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2017), 11-40. In the 1920s, major fundamentalist publications published defenses of the KKK. Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011). As Matthew Avery Sutton has written, “Despite fundamentalists’ talk of doctrinal purity as the foundation for Christian fellowship, the color line always trumped theology.” Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 109.

was difficult.¹⁹ This was so because these leaders were embedded in white evangelical institutions and networks, and these institutions had a variety of committed stakeholders. Donors mattered, of course, but it also mattered if the elder at the local church vouched for the theological rigor of an organization, or if the Pastor assured anxious parents that their child would receive sound evangelical instruction at a particular college.²⁰ For many white evangelicals, upholding racial discrimination was a matter of theological fidelity. When national leaders expressed moderate racial opinions or suggested a need for change, it could be theologically unsettling to white evangelical laypeople. As a Southern Baptist man admitted, “My faith in religion has been shaken more” by the racial moderation of white evangelical elites “than anything that has happened in many a day.” Precisely because their racial practices were sacred, calling them into question raised a host of theological concerns. He asked, “If Southern Baptists have been wrong for over a hundred years in practicing segregation, could they not be wrong as to many other things they stand for?”²¹

¹⁹ Graham was keenly aware of the negative connotations of fundamentalism. When asked whether he was a fundamentalist, Graham replied, “If by fundamentalism you mean ‘narrow’, ‘bigoted’, ‘prejudiced’, ‘extremist’, ‘emotional’, ‘snakehandler’ without social conscience – then I am not a fundamentalist. However, if by fundamentalist you mean a person who accepts the authority of the scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ, his bodily resurrection, his second coming and personal salvation by grace through faith, then I am a fundamentalist. However, I much prefer being called ‘Christian.’” Quoted in William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959), 500-501.

²⁰ This kind of constituent pressure is masterfully explored in Adam Laats, *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²¹ J.M. Baker to Brooks Hays, May 24, 1958, AR 97, Box 2, Folder 7, SBHLA.

White evangelicals' nationwide commitment to white supremacy was especially evident in attitudes toward marriage. Howard Jones wrote that the subject of interracial marriage "almost always" came up in his conversations with white evangelicals wherever he went. The specter of interracial sexual contact loomed over all evangelical discussions of integration of their churches and schools, making it a highly significant factor in the shaping of their institutions. Jones knew of a white pastor who resigned his pastorate as soon as his daughters reached their teen years, to guard against the possibility of romances with the black boys in his church. Jones wrote, "The question, 'Would you want your daughter to marry a Negro?' haunts them."²² Here, too, many white evangelicals imagined they had scripture on their side. Were not Israel's greatest kings led astray by their marriages to foreign women? But by the 1960s, most white evangelical elites well understood it was a stretch to draw a one-to-one correspondence between Solomon's legendary harem and the contemporary question of interracial marriage. They took the view that interracial marriage was certainly unwise, but they also gingerly broke the bad news to their constituents: scripture did not seem to forbid it. Carl Henry admitted that "One can hardly say that interracial marriage is per se wicked," but nonetheless he found growing acceptance of the practice "disquieting."²³ These attitudes died hard, their decline better measured in decades than years.

As much as theologies of white supremacy could justify social discrimination, they were even more concerned with the question of spiritual authority. In American society, one might hear whiteness associated with entitlement to political rule. In

²² Jones, *Shall We Overcome?*, 135.

²³ Henry, "What of Interracial Marriage," 26-28.

evangelicalism, whiteness was often associated with doctrinal purity and theological authority. Many white evangelicals were skeptical of African American Christians exercising spiritual authority over white Christians. They were much more comfortable ministering *to* African Americans or training them for separate black ministry. Bob Harrison, a black evangelical who spent four years preparing for ministry in the Assemblies of God denomination, vividly remembered the day in 1951 when the discriminatory reality dawned on him. He and some other seniors were appearing before the District Committee of Northern California and Nevada, the board that would give them their licenses to preach in the Assemblies of God. It was, he thought, a formality. When it was his turn he bounded into the room, eager to claim his credentials and celebrate with his family waiting outside. The superintendent had other ideas. He was awfully “proud” of Bob’s work, he said, but he had some bad news. “I’m sorry, my brother, but it is not the policy of our denomination to grant credentials to Negroes.”²⁴ Harrison came to believe that white evangelicals had built “pre-fabricated” walls ready to throw up at a moment’s notice to “block the path of any Negro getting too spiritually ‘uppity.’” Black evangelicals who felt a calling to minister in white organizations invariably faced the same question: “Don’t you think you would have a more effective ministry among your own people?”²⁵

White evangelicals took care to teach the spiritual authority of whiteness to their children too. A 1962 “Story for Junior Readers” appearing in the official newsmagazine of the Assemblies of God offered religio-racial instruction to young white evangelicals.

²⁴ Bob Harrison, *When God Was Black* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 27-29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

Set in the “heart of Africa” Sarah Lewis’s didactic and inspirational tale centers on Naomi, a white missionary leading a Bible school, and Tomah, an endearing but “incorrigible” African boy. While Tomah’s “little black playmates” collect firewood, thereby displaying their eagerness to “help their beloved white teacher,” Tomah lounges on the grass, watching the birds in the trees. Naomi finally persuades Tomah to go gather firewood. While he walks down the path to the forest, Naomi kneels down to pray for Tomah’s soul. On the path, Tomah’s intractable nature is demonstrated when the birds again distract him. Then he happens upon a dead tree from which he decides to get a quick armful of inferior firewood. Climbing up into the dead tree, Tomah encounters a Black Mamba, a deadly African snake. Terrified, he prays, “Oh God, save me from this awful snake. I have been very lazy and naughty but I will not be so any more. I want to be your child now. Please help me get away from this snake!” God answers Tomah’s prayer and he runs back to Naomi, tears streaming down his face, to tell her of his near-death experience. “Will God let me be His child now, Teacher?” he asks. “Will he take away my badness if I ask Him?” Naomi promises Tomah that God will make him “all clean and new.” Now the boy’s question shifts: “Will He wash the blackness out of my heart and make it white?” Naomi assures him that God can accomplish even this, but he must understand that Jesus died for him and took the punishment that he deserved. “You know you deserve to be punished for your sins, don’t you, Tomah?” Naomi asks. “Yes, White Teacher, I do,” he replies. So Tomah bows in prayer and asks “Jesus to come into his heart.” The evidence of his conversion is clear for all to see, for Tomah immediately

goes back down the path to collect firewood, and this time he brings back an excellent bundle of wood for his white teacher.²⁶

The story of Tomah's conversion offered a very different moral than the vision of Christian colorblindness that would gain popularity in the coming years. Tomah's story explicitly instructed young white evangelicals in the supremacy of whiteness. The political setting of the story was vague and beside the point; the nature of white supremacy was spiritual. The power of the Gospel was demonstrated not in its colorblind transcendence of human boundaries, but precisely in its capacity to bring even incorrigible blackness into the realm of sacred whiteness. It is when Tomah transgresses against the wishes of his white teacher that he comes face to face with the deadly African snake, the Black Mamba. In this climactic moment, Tomah prays to God and is able to escape the black threat and return to the arms of his white teacher. As if this symbolism were not clear enough, Tomah's spiritual guilt is presented with heavy-handed racialization. The removal of his "badness" becomes inseparable from the washing of his "blackness." Such stories were not unconscious expressions of racial paternalism of the sort one might expect in an era of colorblindness; they were *celebrations* of religio-racial superiority, tributes to sacred whiteness.

In many places and institutions through the early 1960s, precisely because white supremacy was thoroughly mainstream in American life, it was still possible for white evangelicals to celebrate their religio-racial identities with little thought that they might entail profound theological problems or bring disrepute upon their communities. But

²⁶ Sarah C. Lewis, "The Black Mamba," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, September, 1962, 12.

these identities, narratives, and ways of imagining the world were coming under growing pressure. The mechanization of southern agriculture, the urbanization and unionization of African Americans, their northern migration, and their growing political clout all strained the system of white supremacy. Abroad, decolonization proceeded apace, disrupting European and American assumptions of entitlement to rule. At home, scattered black activism had coalesced into a mass movement that could not be ignored. If Americans did not yet speak of a “civil rights movement,” words like “racial crisis” and “Negro revolution” were in the air. For decades, white evangelicals’ discriminatory practices had situated their institutions comfortably in a national climate of white supremacy. Now, though the shape of things to come was yet unclear, any sentient American knew that the racial order was irrevocably changing. Alert evangelicals understood that such a transformation could never be merely about race. It raised questions about the future of their institutions and their movement. As visions of a colorblind nation and colorblind gospel gained ascendancy, white evangelicals’ exclusionary practices faced an unprecedented threat.

The Rise of the Black Evangelicals

In the 1950s and early 1960s, small numbers of black evangelicals, many of them trained at white evangelical colleges and Bible institutes, became more visible in evangelical ministries and media. Most notably, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) added Howard Jones as its first black evangelist in 1958. These men (for they were almost invariably men) were thoroughly inside the evangelical theological camp. Suspicious of liberal Protestants, even skeptical of much of the black church, their

theological rectitude was often matched by a deeply conservative social and political outlook. On the question of racism, however, they parted ways with their white evangelical brethren. They believed the racism of the white evangelical church represented a failure to faithfully apply the Bible. Rather than pointing to liberal Protestantism or black churches as models to follow, they grounded their argument in scripture and accused white evangelicals of not being evangelical enough.

Evangelicalism, they believed, had the theological and institutional resources necessary to defeat racism if only evangelicals stopped carving out a racial exception to their principles. These black evangelicals became early vocal exponents of a kind of colorblind Christianity. Black evangelicals' arguments for Christian unity anticipated the discourse that would come to dominate the white evangelical mainstream in later years. At a moment when racial discrimination was normative, the call to transcend race through the power of Jesus Christ troubled white evangelical consciences and undermined their commitments to exclusion. At the time, it was difficult to conceive of how the rhetoric of Christian unity might be repurposed to invest in whiteness.

By virtue of his association with Graham, Howard Jones had a more visible platform than any other black evangelical of the period. Jones first encountered Graham in advance of the famous New York crusade of 1957. Graham was searching for a way to reach the city's black population, and Jones's reputation preceded him. He had already conducted an evangelistic tour through West Africa, established himself on radio, and held pastorates in the Bronx and Cleveland. Jones liked to tell of how, as a young man, God had saved him "from the world of jazz" and called him to preach the gospel. He had been a great saxophonist and dreamed of making it big. But, he wrote, in reality "I was a

slave to it.” When his girlfriend Wanda had a conversion experience, she told Howard he would have to choose: his music or Jesus. If he chose music, he might gain fame but he wouldn’t have Wanda. In a dramatic moment of conviction, Jones cried out to God. If he would forgive his sins, Jones promised, “I will serve you the rest of my life.” Jazz, dancing, theater, and all kinds of “worldly” amusements had to be given up. Howard and Wanda attended Nyack College, a missionary-training school, and married after graduating.²⁷ They felt the sting of discrimination as the very denomination that trained them adopted a policy against sending African American missionaries to Africa. It was no exaggeration to say that Howard and Wanda had given up their most promising talents and grandest dreams so that they could preach the gospel.²⁸ They never seemed to doubt the trade was worth it.

In the Spring of 1957 Jones received a surprising letter from an associate of Billy Graham. The New York crusade was underway, but the crowds were all white. Could Jones help solve this problem? As Jones would later tell the story of their first meeting, Graham said “I want to integrate these meetings. But I don’t know how to do it. Would you be willing to come here and work with us for a few weeks to help us with this issue of integration?”²⁹ Jones agreed. His advice for Graham was simple: If he couldn’t get African Americans to come to Madison Square Garden, he would have to go to them.

²⁷ Howard Jones, “From the World of Jazz,” CN 19 Box 80 Folder 34, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton, Illinois. Hereafter BGCA.

²⁸ Though often overlooked at the time, Wanda was every bit as much a missionary as Howard, and had her own extensive evangelistic campaigns with West African women.

²⁹ Howard Jones, *Gospel Trailblazer: An African-American Preacher’s Historic Journey Across Racial Lines* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 136.

“Billy,” he said, “you need to go to Harlem.” Jones helped to organize successful meetings in Harlem and Brooklyn and was gratified to see Graham preach to black audiences of thousands.³⁰

The effort to reach black New Yorkers led Graham to take his most controversial racial actions to date. Bringing Jones into the fold was provocative. Inviting Martin Luther King to say a prayer at a crusade meeting stoked more vitriol from Graham’s opponents. And at the end of the summer he reached out directly to a national African American audience with an interview in *Ebony* magazine. Graham warned that everyone “shall stand before the judgment” of a color-blind God “to answer for...the way in which we have treated our neighbors.”³¹ Graham applied the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew to white evangelicals’ posture toward African Americans: “As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.” With such rhetoric, Graham repositioned the racial crisis from the political realm, where white evangelicals might imagine they could ignore it, to the much more personal realm of faithfulness to the gospel. By connecting racial prejudice so closely to the meaning of the gospel, Graham’s *Ebony* interview pushed far beyond the comfort zone of his white constituency. Graham also had a parting shot for those who clung to theologies of white supremacy. “There are a lot of segregationists who are going to be sadly disillusioned when they get to Heaven—if they get there.” For Graham, the interview garnered positive black press even as it further cemented his alienation from his fundamentalist roots. *Ebony* lauded Graham as the

³⁰ Ibid., 141-142.

³¹ “No Color Line In Heaven,” *Ebony*, September 1957, 99-104. The format of the article makes it unclear if Graham used the phrase “color-blind” to describe God or if this was the interviewer’s paraphrase.

“Blonde, blue-eyed evangelist” who “has launched a frontal assault on prejudice and bigotry.”³²

In some ways the New York Crusade was the high point of Graham’s advocacy against racism during the civil rights era. The brief collaboration with Martin Luther King, the *Ebony* interview, Jones’ arrival and the preaching in Harlem—all seemed to signal that Graham might push harder on civil rights in the future. Instead, as the civil rights movement laid bare the tensions in American society in ensuing years, Graham’s politics of church primacy became clearer. Reaching out to African Americans during his New York crusade was an expression of the growing belief that there should be no color line in the body of Christ. Such a conviction did not mean that Graham was a racial liberal. He wanted African Americans on his team both to reach black and African audiences and carefully challenge white audiences, but he wanted black evangelicals who agreed with him that the race problem, and its solution, were spiritual.

Howard Jones seemed to fit the bill. Graham later wrote that “it was decided after much prayer that although we would continue to need him and use him in our work in the States, Howard Jones’ greatest contribution to the Kingdom of God could be, and ought to be, made in Africa.”³³ Jones also traveled frequently to the United States to preach on behalf of the BGEA and act as point-person to the black community when preparing for

³² Ibid.

³³ “The Ministry of Howard O. Jones,” CN 19 Box 80 Folder 34 BGCA. See also “Cleveland Minister Jones Billy Graham,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 16, 1958, 1.

Graham to come to a city.³⁴ All of these roles carried considerable ambiguity for a black evangelist preaching a colorblind gospel. Jones took the positive view—that his blackness opened doors for him—rather than the more cynical interpretation that his blackness typecast him into certain channels of ministry. But when he later looked back on joining the Graham team from the vantage of nearly half a century, he was remarkably unsentimental about the role he believed he had played in the organization. Graham was looking for “someone who could transcend racial boundaries; someone whose theology was sound and whose approach was non-threatening; someone who understood the subtle intricacies, the manner and vernacular of white evangelical culture. In short, someone who was safe.”³⁵

Jones may have been relatively safe, but the challenge he presented to white evangelicals should not be underestimated. At times, the BGEA had trouble finding speaking engagements for him because of opposition from white churches. His status as an evangelist for the BGEA was a newsworthy event precisely because it upended racialized assumptions about who could exercise spiritual authority. Jones felt that many people around him resented his presence. Once, at a reception honoring Graham, Jones felt his isolation keenly as the only black person in the room. He distinctly heard one white minister say, “How did he get here?”³⁶ Throughout the 1960s, Jones leveraged his experiences in white evangelical spaces into a critique that was both theologically

³⁴ For typical examples of Jones playing this role, see Howard Jones to Walter Smyth, November 15, 1961 and March 4, 1962, CN 19 Box 80 Folder 34; Bob Ferm to Howard Jones, July 10, 1963, CN 19 Series 3 Sub-series 2 Box 3 Folder 8, BGCA.

³⁵ Jones, *Gospel Trailblazer*, 134.

³⁶ Jones, *Shall We Overcome?*, 127-128.

rigorous and heartfelt. He wrote eloquently about the pain of worshipping in white churches. “During the service the Negro worshipper often experiences a haunting loneliness and a sense of estrangement.” The alienation began from the moment of walking into the sanctuary. *If* he was allowed inside, he was likely to be greeted by “the popular ‘white stare,’ as though he were a creature from outer space.” And though the pastor might preach about “Our Oneness in Christ as Believers,” such inspiring words only drove home the point that “there are few white Christians who really practice this truth...”³⁷

Jones did not harbor the illusion that baring his pain before a white audience would in itself produce change. He attacked white supremacist readings of the Bible head on, exposing the Hamitic Curse as a flimsy excuse for oppression. He denounced the white church as “silent, relaxed, compromising and miserably weak” on racial injustice. He singled out white evangelical churches in particular as bastions of “unchristian” attitudes in need of “strong rebuke.” These were the churches that put a for sale sign on the door at the first hint of a black family arriving in the neighborhood, while taking pride in the all the money they raised to send white missionaries to black Africa. “Such hypocrisy and insincerity brings a reproach on the work of God,” Jones wrote.³⁸ It was precisely this strong sense of rebuke combined with hope for Christian unity that made Jones a challenging figure in evangelicalism. His colorblind rhetoric was aspirational and challenging, designed to provoke rather than placate. Jones was a believer in the politics of church primacy, and precisely for that reason he demanded of churches more than

³⁷ Jones, *Shall We Overcome?*, 123.

³⁸ Howard Jones, “Missions/Prejudice,” *His*, January 1965, 1-4, 30.

many of them were willing to hear. Even as his reputation expanded as an honored member of the Graham Team in the 1960s, many white churches would not receive him. One church only wanted Jones to come on the condition that he would not “raise the issues of evangelical responsibility to blacks in our services.” They had heard of his rebukes, and they didn’t want to be on the receiving end of one.³⁹

For Jones, white evangelicalism’s indifference to African Americans was at its root a theological problem and a failure of biblical interpretation. “The Bible unquestionably is the greatest book on justice in the world,” he declared, “yet these Christians, preaching the Bible, evade the race issue and close their eyes to the terrible social injustices imposed upon the Negro in this country.” Then he lowered the hammer: “White evangelicals must explain before God and society how they can reconcile their love for Christ and loyalty to the Bible with race prejudice and bigotry.”⁴⁰ Looking at the same scripture as his white evangelical counterparts, Jones proposed a colorblind counternarrative to biblical interpretations meant to justify religio-racial exclusion. Jones pointed to the first letter of John. Did it not say that anyone who claimed to love God yet hated his brother “abideth in death”?⁴¹ Didn’t the book of James warn believers that it was sinful to show favoritism?⁴² On what basis could white evangelicals claim blackness constituted an exception to these commands? And if white evangelicals looked a little

³⁹ M.R. Irvin to Donald L. Bailey, May 9, 1972; John W. Dillon to Howard Jones, August 11, 1969; CN 17 Box 80 Folder 34, BGCA.

⁴⁰ Jones, *Shall We Overcome?*, 122.

⁴¹ 1 John 3:11-17, KJV.

⁴² James 2:8-10, KJV.

more closely, they would see a close parallel to their experience threaded throughout the New Testament. “The Apostle Paul tells us how God took the Gentiles and Jews and blended them together into one new man, one body through Christ and His Gospel.” Here Jones identified the quintessential New Testament theme that would become central to evangelical racial discourse for the next half century.

The problem was that evangelicals couldn’t agree on what this text meant. Jones thought the upshot was clear enough: “If the Bible tells us that there is no difference in Christ, then why do we make such a differentiation between races in the church?” Such rhetorical questions were effective blows against white supremacist theology. Despite all the racism he had experienced in evangelical spaces, Jones wrote with the audacity his faith in Jesus gave him. “When people of different races comes to the cross and receive Christ as Savior,” he declared, “they become brothers in the Lord and love one another with a pure heart fervently. In their relationship as believers, racial differences are lost in the spiritual union they find in Christ.”⁴³ That this was patently untrue of white evangelicals did not mean that Jones was naïve. He felt that the love of God he had first experienced as a young man had transformed him and altered the trajectory of his whole life. He had dedicated his career to the proposition that this transformation could be shared, spread, amplified.

Jones challenged white evangelicals from the inside. His approach was theologically conservative and institutionally cautious. He wanted to shore up the foundations of the evangelical house, not tear it down. Jones’ politics of church primacy added to his credibility in evangelical circles. It was obvious to Jones that structural

⁴³ Jones, *Shall We Overcome?*, 139-140.

changes in the nation's political economy were not nearly so important as ecclesial changes in evangelicalism. Though he supported the Civil Rights Act of 1964 without any apparent reservation (this alone made him unusual in the evangelical world) he took it as axiomatic that American racism was a spiritual problem amenable, in the final analysis, only to spiritual solutions. Yet even in this respect Jones challenged his audience. While many white evangelicals placed civil rights legislation and spiritual rebirth in oppositional categories—as though an African American eating a hamburger at Woolworth's was at cross-purposes with convincing people to say the sinner's prayer—Jones saw them as complementary. Yet there was no question of which was most important. “Since the race problem is basically a moral and spiritual one, we must take a spiritual approach. We shall get at the heart of the race problem by getting at the hearts of both Negro and whites, and only Jesus Christ can do that. Christ is the final answer.”⁴⁴

Jones played an important role in the founding of the first institutional expression of his brand of black evangelicalism. In April 1963, a group of black evangelicals gathered in Los Angeles to form the National Negro Evangelical Association (later to be renamed the National Black Evangelical Association). Every member of the executive committee had attended a white evangelical college or Bible institute. The group named as its first President Marvin L. Printis, a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Jones, *Shall We Overcome?*, 139.

⁴⁵ “America's First National Negro Evangelical Leadership Conference,” CN 19 Series 3 Sub-series 2 Box 6 Folder 63, BGCA. On the founding of the NBEA see Albert G. Miller, “The Rise of African-American Evangelicalism in American Culture” in *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*, edited by Peter W. Williams (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 259-269; Soong-Chan Rah, *In Whose Image: The Emergence, Development, and Challenge of African-American Evangelicalism* (PhD. Dissertation, Duke University Divinity School, 2016), 182-195; William H. Bentley, *The*

Among a who's who of black evangelical leaders including Jones and the young evangelist Tom Skinner, the only woman was Ruth Lewis, the IntersVarsity Christian Fellowship activist who was shortly to become one of the first black women to integrate the University of Alabama.⁴⁶ Jones was invited to give the keynote address. When his scheduling commitments threatened to make him unable to travel all the way from Liberia to Los Angeles for the conference, Printis telegraphed Jones in desperation. They had been counting on Jones' name being attached to the conference. The "Entire effort [was] in jeopardy" if Jones didn't show up, Printis pleaded. "Please help us."⁴⁷ Jones made his case to the Graham Team. The conference would allow him to forge connections in advance of the planned Graham crusade in Los Angeles later that year. After all, "we do want to reach the Negro people," he pointed out.⁴⁸ Jones was eventually cleared to make the trip, though not without some grumbling. BGEA staffer George Wilson complained that Jones traveled thousands of miles "for that one colored

National Black Evangelical Association: Reflections on the Evolution of a Concept of Ministry, Revised Edition (Chicago: 1979); Ronald C. Potter, "The New Black Evangelicals" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 302-309.

⁴⁶ Homer Bigart, "Alabama Campus Accepts Negroes," *New York Times*, June 14, 1964, 65.

⁴⁷ Marvin Printis to Howard Jones, March 26, 1963, CN 19 Series 3 Sub-series 2 Box 3 Folder 8, BGCA.

⁴⁸ Howard Jones to Bob Ferm, March 29, 1963, CN 19 Series 3 Sub-series 2 Box 3 Folder 8, BGCA.

convention.” He added, “these fellows ought to soon buckle down and realize that we are not made of money.”⁴⁹

The NBEA boasted that its founding conference marked “the beginning of a new day for Negro religious life in America.”⁵⁰ Taking note of this new group, *Eternity* editorialized, “Though its leaders would probably deny it, the existence of the association reflects the fact that the National Association of Evangelicals has ignored the race problem and has not seriously sought any solutions.”⁵¹ Its leaders did deny it. Jones was eager to avoid any sense of rupture with white evangelicalism. “We do not see this as being in competition with the National Assn. of Evangelicals or any other group,” he claimed.⁵² Instead, he described the NBEA as primarily a vehicle to promote the gospel and foreign missions among African Americans. But it was also undeniably a means of increasing the visibility of black evangelicals in white evangelical discourse. One NBEA member introduced himself to the readers of a white evangelical magazine as an exotic phenomenon: “Possibly the very term ‘Negro evangelical’ will raise questions in your mind. Questions like: ‘who are these persons called Negro evangelicals? Why have we

⁴⁹ George M. Wilson to Walter Smyth, May 27, 1963, CN 19 Series 3 Sub-series 2 Box 3 Folder 8, BGCA.

⁵⁰ “America’s First National Negro Evangelical Leadership Conference,” CN 19 Series 3 Sub-series 2 Box 6 Folder 63, BGCA.

⁵¹ William J. Petersen, “Evangelicals & the Race Barriers,” *Eternity*, September 1963, 12-16, 48.

⁵² “National Group Formed by Negro Evangelicals,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1963, 15.

not heard of them before?”⁵³ With the formation of the NBEA, black evangelicals now had an institutional home to help explain themselves to their white evangelical brethren.

Though the NBEA would become more confrontational as the decade wore on, it is hard to gainsay the conservatism of its early years. Various strains of black fundamentalism contributed to the rise of the self-declared black evangelicals, and the NBEA’s leaders had been trained in white evangelical schools. William H. Bentley, later the fourth President of the NBEA, thought this inheritance had a big impact. “Since we were trained in such institutions it was virtually unavoidable that we would as unconsciously absorb the same views as those who taught us.”⁵⁴ Ronald Potter, a Wheaton College graduate who sought to move the NBEA in a more race-conscious direction, faulted black evangelicals for too often seeing “Black Christianity through White eyes.”⁵⁵ Thus there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of Jones’ claim at the time of the NBEA’s founding that it was not intended as a challenge to white evangelicalism. Indeed, many of the early leaders were so invested in the idea of Christian unity across racial lines that there was, according to Bentley, confusion about the NBEA’s identity. If

⁵³ Joseph Brown, “The Negro Evangelical and the Race Crisis, *Eternity*, September 1964, 17, 30.

⁵⁴ William H. Bentley, “Factors in the Origin and Focus of the National Black Evangelical Association,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 311. In explaining the emergence of self-described black evangelicals, Albert G. Miller has emphasized the influence of black Protestants such as B.M. Nottage of the black Plymouth Brethren church, John Davis Bell of the Christian & Missionary Alliance, and Bentley himself, of the Church of God in Christ. Nottage was a mentor to Jones, Printis, and other key black evangelical leaders including Bill Pannell. Yet, when looking back on the emergence of the NBEA, many black evangelicals themselves emphasized the extent to which white evangelicalism had formed (or, indeed, deformed) their outlook.

⁵⁵ Potter, “The New Black Evangelicals”, 303-304.

the NBEA was only for black people, “Were we any different from white Christians in whose institutions of the time we were for the most part not welcome?”⁵⁶

The founding of the NBEA was an important institutional development for the future of evangelicalism. Though it remained a tiny organization in comparison to the mammoth National Association of Evangelicals, it served as a locus for black evangelical networking, activism, and, by the later 1960s, increasingly strident criticism of white evangelicals. Throughout the climactic years of the civil rights movement, black evangelical voices rang loud and clear in the world of evangelical media. They ensured that as evangelicals debated the civil rights movement, it could not be a whites-only discussion. In the process, they provided powerful impetus for colorblind visions to overcome a legacy of white supremacist theology.

The Civil Rights Movement Through Evangelical Eyes

The civil rights movement achieved unprecedented national attention in 1963 as television coverage of violence in Birmingham stirred the conscience of the American public. It was a year of protest nationwide, as more than 1,400 demonstrations occurred all over the country. While coverage of the movement in evangelical media had been episodic in the 1950s and early 1960s, in 1963 there was a noticeable uptick. More than ever before, white evangelical media began to grapple with the rapid racial changes sweeping the country. “Let’s not kid ourselves,” *Eternity* warned its readers, “this is a revolution. And before it is over it will affect your family, your community and your

⁵⁶ Bentley, “Factors in the Origin and Focus of the National Black Evangelical Association,” 310.

church.”⁵⁷ With Bibles in one hand and legislative demands in the other, black activists put white evangelical leaders in a bind. “Don't get the idea these fellas have been sitting around in cloistered studies thinking this one out,” said a Tennessee minister. “The Negro has simply besieged us.”⁵⁸ The irrepressible specificity of activists’ theological claims put white evangelicals on the defensive. While many white evangelicals attempted to cast an ethereal vision of unity in Christ without social implications, black activists countered with a much more concrete notion. As the black civil rights activist Reverend James Lawson said, “The Christian favors the breaking down of racial barriers because the redeemed community of which he is already a citizen recognizes no barriers dividing humanity.”⁵⁹

For most evangelicals, the civil rights movement was an occasion to double down on the politics of church primacy. Activists could march and make their demands, but the church would do the more important work of spiritual transformation. While mainstream media debated the prospects of civil rights bills in Congress, evangelicals debated the responsibilities of their own institutions. In the evangelical world the highlights of the 1960s looked very different from what one might read in the pages of *Time* or the *Washington Post*. In 1964 white evangelicals might think that Billy Graham’s interracial crusade in Birmingham produced more positive change than Martin Luther King’s

⁵⁷ “Let’s Face up to the Race Issue,” *Eternity*, August 1963, 5-6.

⁵⁸ George McMillan, “Silent White Ministers of the South,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 5, 1964, 22, 114-115.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Ainsley Quiros, *God With Us: Lived Theology and the Freedom Struggle in Americus, Georgia, 1942–1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 85.

campaign in that city the year before. Such beliefs pointed to the one thing nearly all evangelicals seemed able to agree on: that only the gospel provided the final answer to the racial crisis. On this conviction evangelicals built Christian colorblindness. Rather than copying liberal egalitarianism, they drew on their theological and institutional resources to create their own brand of colorblindness. If the power of education and American institutions fueled liberal hopes, and if the force of nonviolent direct action charged activists' dreams, the supremacy of the Christian gospel and the capacity of evangelical churches to affect racial change provided distinct grounds for evangelical optimism. Yet agreement on the practical applications of this colorblind turn remained elusive.

In 1963, Birmingham became a crucible refracting differing visions of churchly responsibility. When Martin Luther King came to Birmingham he did so not only as a radical political activist, but as a Baptist minister speaking simple theological truths. The "church is the Body of Christ," King had declared in a 1956 speech. "So when the church is true to its nature it knows neither division nor disunity." To white Christians King said, "I am disturbed about what you are doing to the Body of Christ."⁶⁰ King's arrest and confinement in Birmingham produced one of the most famous documents of the movement, which was, among other things, a theological brief against white churches. His Letter from Birmingham Jail criticized churches for "commit[ing] themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and

⁶⁰ Quoted in Charles Marsh, "The Civil Rights Movement as Theological Drama," in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South*, Ted Ownby, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 30.

soul, the sacred and the secular.”⁶¹ For King, the church was at once spiritual and social, with God-given responsibilities in multiple overlapping spheres.

King’s opponents cast a much less expansive vision of the church’s responsibility amid a social crisis. The Pastor of the Birmingham’s First Baptist Church, Earl Stallings, exemplified this white evangelical sensibility. He was one of the eight white religious leaders who composed the open letter to which Martin Luther King responded from jail. Just a day after Stallings and the other clergy published the letter calling for an end to the protest campaign, a group of black activists arrived at First Baptist for the Easter Sunday worship service. Pastor Stallings not only saw to it that they were seated, he personally shook their hands. For Stallings, opposition to the tactics of the Birmingham Campaign could coexist comfortably with a sense of Christian courtesy and welcome in the house of God.

Before Stallings knew it, his photograph was splashed across the front page of the *New York Times* and reprinted nationwide.⁶² He had not intended to make a grand political statement. Nor did he want to become a lightning rod for controversy. He had merely done what he saw as his Christian duty. For taking this stance—and because a photographer captured the handshake—Stallings became a celebrated figure. Though he received many angry letters from white southerners, a much larger number of appreciative letters poured into his office from Christians all over the country. Writers praised him for his “wonderful demonstration of Christian courage and Christian love.” A

⁶¹ Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” *Testament of Hope*, 299.

⁶² See “Birmingham Negroes Given Differing Receptions at White Churches,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1963, 1.

missionary commended Stallings for his action “heard around the world.” A Pennsylvania woman wrote, “only by such acts are we going to arrive at any positive solution for the tragic misunderstandings that are tearing apart our country.”⁶³ The celebration of Pastor Stallings as a heroic figure exemplified the declining popularity of strong segregationist stands in the church and the growing conviction that a Christian sanctuary should be a place where all people were welcomed without respect to color.⁶⁴ But it did not necessarily connote support for black aspirations in their freedom struggle.

The question of the church’s social responsibilities led evangelical reactions to Martin Luther King to split sharply along racial lines. Many black evangelicals deeply admired King, even if they didn’t agree with him in all the particulars. Howard Jones met Dr. King for the first time at the 1957 New York Crusade and crossed paths with him several times thereafter. When asked what stood out to him about Dr. King, Jones said, “It was his utter devotedness to civil rights, his utter devotedness to the task of emancipating black people. Emancipating black people from prejudice, inferior housing, inferior schools, unemployment, racism. He was a completely devoted man.” Rather than seeing King as a troublemaker, Jones admired his commitment to pursuing freedom through the force of nonviolent Christian love. Jones said, “I always carried away...an impression of a man in a deeply reflective mood. I think he lived every moment for his

⁶³ Floyd C. Delaney to Earl Stallings, no date; Harold Cummins to Earl Stallings, April 15, 1963; Jean V.N. DaCosta to Earl Stallings, April 16, 1963; AR 234, Box 1 Folder 3 SBHLA.

⁶⁴ For more on Stallings see S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are The Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001). See also, Jonathan Rieder, *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

cause, for our cause, indeed for the cause of all mankind.”⁶⁵ In contrast, many white evangelicals found King’s methods and his claims infuriating. In an indignant open letter in response to Dr. King’s letter from Birmingham Jail, Carl McIntire accused King of inventing a false gospel and imposing it on the American people by force, with the threat of civil disobedience and chaos if they didn’t comply with King’s whims. The true gospel was a message of sin and repentance and the regeneration of the individual heart, and the church was the proper vehicle for this gospel.⁶⁶

Galvanized by events in Birmingham and protests around the country, some white evangelicals addressed racial questions with new urgency in the summer of 1963. *Eternity* criticized white evangelicals for being “ostrich-like with our heads in the sand” while a revolution swirled around them. “For too long we’ve contented ourselves with platitudes,” instead of taking decisive action, the magazine lamented. What would it look like to move beyond platitudes? It required local, church-based love. “[I]f there are Negroes living in your community, these Negroes are as much the spiritual responsibility of the church as the whites are.”⁶⁷ And white evangelicals’ responsibility extended beyond the church walls. If a black family moved into a white neighborhood, white evangelicals must love them. To those who did not want to upset the norms of a white supremacist church, the editorial pointed out that the Bible said that those who did not

⁶⁵ Jim Marugg, “Evangelist Sees Need to Fill Void Left by King’s Death,” April 18, 1968, *The Pasadena Star-News*, C-2.

⁶⁶ McIntire, “Open Letter to Martin Luther King,” May 25, 1964, Carl McIntire Papers, Box 179, Folder 1, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

⁶⁷ “Let’s Face up to the Race Issue,” *Eternity*, August 1963, 5-6.

love their fellow human beings “abideth in death.”⁶⁸ This allusion to scripture implied that white evangelicals who supported Jim Crow had not actually experienced a saving faith and were thus on the path to eternal damnation. Yet for all the hard-hitting criticism the editorial contained, it retained a familiar lens of white superiority. The main reason white evangelicals’ ambivalent posture toward African Americans was so sinful was because black people would be without the gospel if white evangelicals did not reach out to them. *Eternity* asked its readers to consider if they were forcing their neighbors into “a Negro ghetto where they have neither the chance nor the inclination to hear the saving gospel of Jesus Christ?” The editorial assumed that the gospel was somehow something that white evangelicals—despite their failures—had possession of, in contrast to its absence in the black community.⁶⁹

In August 1963 Billy Graham embarked on a monthlong crusade in Los Angeles. On the evening of August 27, as he looked out on a crowd of 37,000 people, he spoke about the racial crisis gripping the nation. It was the day before the March on Washington. In contrast to later sepia-hued memories of what proved to be a peaceful march, dread stalked the nation’s capital. Members of Congress sent their families away as if in anticipation of battle; many white Americans expected violence. Amid this climate of anxious anticipation, Graham’s words were bound to resonate. His voice boomed across the stadium: “I am convinced that some extremists are going too far too

⁶⁸ The editorial quoted 1 John 3:14 in the King James Version. The entire verse and the one immediately following it reveal the intensity of *Eternity*’s criticism: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.”

⁶⁹ “Let’s Face up to the Race Issue,” *Eternity*, August 1963, 5-6.

fast,” he declared. They failed to realize that “Forced integration will never work.” The racial crisis would “not be settled in the streets but it could be settled in the hearts of man.” Graham offered evangelical conversion not, as Jones would have it, alongside civil rights activism, but in replacement of it.

Some black evangelicals were appalled. Marvin Printis, in his new role as National Black Evangelical Association president, called Graham’s words “trite and demoralizing,” and charged that Graham “consistently fails to appreciate the intensity of this great social dilemma which cries out to be met headon [*sic*]...To preach regeneration as the only answer to such a pressing social ill is to so oversimplify the Gospel that it could never appeal to the people of the earth now in the throes of a revolutionary movement, including the Negroes.”⁷⁰ This intra-evangelical spat carried on in full public view illustrated the institutional importance of the NBEA. The United Press International wire report described Printis as the head of a 20,000-strong black evangelical organization. Whether the NBEA had really secured such a large membership mere months into its existence is doubtful but beside the point; rather than a lonely critic, Printis suddenly appeared to be speaking on behalf of a major evangelical constituency unhappy with evangelicalism’s biggest star. Having made himself a lightning rod with his criticisms of Graham, Printis eventually exited the presidency, which was assumed by the less threatening figure of Howard Jones. Though Jones did not always agree with

⁷⁰ “Graham Certain Forced Integration Won’t Work,” *Redlands Daily Facts*, August 28, 1963, 7; “Graham Theory On Bias Draws Negro Attack,” *The Fresno Bee*, August 28, 1963, 47.

Graham's decisions, he never aired his disagreements publicly.⁷¹ With a Billy Graham associate in the office, everyone could rest assured there would be no more sensational headlines describing NBEA attacks on "America's Pastor."

The day after Graham's warning against "forced integration," the March on Washington went forward without support from white evangelical leaders. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King spoke about Christian unity in a more secular idiom. He declared, "I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."⁷² In this iconic moment, King articulated the ur-text of colorblind America. Though he might have deplored the uses that would be made of this phrase in later decades, the sincerity of his hope was not in doubt.⁷³ It was a hope infused with eschatological longing. To imagine black and white children walking hand in hand in Alabama was "Thy kingdom come" translated into the American vernacular. For King, the great failure of white Christians was precisely their refusal to bring this spiritual yearning down to the level of the concrete where they lived.

⁷¹ Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of A Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 125.

⁷² Martin Luther King, "I Have A Dream," *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James Melvin Washington (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 219.

⁷³ On the voluminous literature documenting the appropriation of King's language, see especially Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King and the Speech that Inspired A Nation* (New York: Ecco, 2003); David Chappell, *Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King* (New York: Random House, 2014), 91-123; Jason Sokol, *The Heavens Might Crack: The Death and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Basic Books), 2018, 223-254.

In the days after the march, some white evangelicals grappled with their own quietude. “The massive demonstration was void of official evangelical representation,” *Christianity Today* admitted. Ostensibly, this was because, as one leader put it, “Our folks are sympathetic with solving the race problem, but we feel that this wasn’t the way to go about it.” “But what *is* the way?” the editorial plaintively asked.⁷⁴ Exhibiting a profound uneasiness, many white evangelicals could not bring themselves to proactively support the movement, yet they also worried that the evangelical church was somehow failing in its responsibility. For some, the very existence of the civil rights movement was *prima facie* evidence that the church had missed the mark. If evangelicals had been doing their job, spiritual solutions would have solved the problem before it emerged as a crisis on the nation’s streets.⁷⁵ Many white evangelicals found themselves in the position Martin Luther King thought so exasperating: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods...”⁷⁶

For some evangelicals, the church bombing in Birmingham coming on the heels of the March on Washington was a turning point. In Grand Rapids, three hundred Calvin College students marched in support of civil rights laws. The editor of the student newspaper declared that the “middle ground” had vanished and they now faced a stark

⁷⁴ “The Washington March and the Negro Cause,” *Christianity Today*, September 13, 1963, 27-28. See also, “Desegregation,” *Covenanter Witness*, September 11, 1963, 163.

⁷⁵ See “Civil-Rights Legislation,” *Christianity Today*, November 22, 1963, 31-32.

⁷⁶ Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” *A Testament of Hope*, 295.

choice: “One either actively protests injustice to the black man or hates him.”⁷⁷ The black evangelical Bill Pannell watched the news in horror. The bomb, he wrote, “shattered more than brick and plaster...It blistered my evangelical conscience.” After Birmingham, Pannell felt he “could no longer be a standard evangelical Christian, content merely to preach a typical evangelical Gospel.” He had to find out how the gospel connected to the life and death struggles of the contemporary racial crisis. After Birmingham, “the illusion was over.”⁷⁸

In this moment *Christianity Today* published the most forceful denunciation of the white evangelical mainstream ever seen in its pages to that time. William Henry Anderson, Jr. accused white evangelicals of being more easily awakened by “threat to profit or property” than moral appeal. Inaction in the face of the civil rights movement “could so discredit the evangelical cause as to bring it to disrepute and oblivion,” he warned. The very first thing evangelicals ought to do, he suggested, is “assert the oneness of all believers in Christ.” Anderson’s forceful denunciation of evangelical indifference combined with his seemingly esoteric solutions was characteristic of the politics of church primacy. For Anderson, oneness in Christ was not an abstraction at all. It was an urgent thing that revealed God’s work in the world. Through Jesus, God reconciled people to himself and to each other. If white and black Christians would better demonstrate this in the United States, it seemed self-evident to Anderson that this would

⁷⁷ Marlin Van Elderen, “300 Calvin Students Join In Protest March,” *Calvin College Chimes*, September 27, 1963, 1; Harold Bontekoe, “The Alternative To Hate,” *Calvin College Chimes*, September 27, 1963, 2.

⁷⁸ William E. Pannell, *My Friend, The Enemy* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1968), 56-57.

be a boon not only for the evangelical church, but for black freedom as well. “We may never be able to rid ourselves of the consciousness that the man to whom we are speaking is Negro,” he admitted. “But we can stop hurting our fellow in Christ.”⁷⁹

Though Birmingham jarred the conscience of some white evangelicals, most continued to evince a remarkable ability to combine social pessimism with spiritual utopianism. As Pastor Sam Boyle put it, “Humanistic liberals, with no faith in the Bible God and nothing to offer sinners except the mirage of a socialistic Paradise of good will, are marching with the Negroes and going to jail.” Boyle believed evangelicals had a better prescription. Instead of the “many absurd and extreme statements and demands” of “the Negro...determined...to force himself on the white majority,” evangelicals must “confess fearlessly the Bible truth that in Christ there is no racial inequality.” The solution to the racial crisis would come from those who realized that “man’s sinful nature” was the root problem, and conversion the final cure. Only then could the truth that “ye are all one in Christ Jesus” be made real.⁸⁰ It is tempting to dismiss Boyle’s views as convenient white excuses for inaction. But in fact, the elevation of spiritual over social solutions united many evangelicals across the color line in this period. NBEA secretary Joseph Brown lamented that “many Negro seminary students have been hoodwinked into believing the non-biblical dream of social peace through human efforts.” In contrast, he said, even though black evangelicals such as himself had felt the

⁷⁹ William Henry Anderson, Jr, “Evangelicals and the Race Revolution,” *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1963, 6-8.

⁸⁰ Galatians 3.28. Sam Boyle, “An Apology to the Church in Japan,” *Covenanter Witness*, November 13, 1963, 312-313.

pain of discrimination, they maintained that “the New Birth” was more important than “social justice.”⁸¹

In the aftermath of the Birmingham church bombing, Billy Graham made plans to hold an integrated crusade in the city. With significant controversy and heightened security, Graham arrived for an Easter Sunday service at the Legion Field football stadium, one year after the drama of April, 1963. Preaching to a mixed crowd of 35,000, Graham delivered a classic gospel sermon while steering clear of Birmingham’s racial troubles. The service drew widespread acclaim across American media.⁸² Described as the largest integrated gathering in Alabama’s history, pundits and pastors and ordinary Alabamans pronounced it a key step in the healing of Birmingham. The city’s moderate mayor declared that “Billy Graham has brought out the best in us,” a measure of praise conspicuously lacking for black activists. For many evangelicals, the Graham crusade was a prototypical example of productive racial action. No demands were made, no boycotts launched, no injunctions defied. Instead, ordinary people, black and white together, worshipped God and experienced real human contact. Howard Jones wrote that the crusade had been a powerful demonstration of the unity that was possible in Christ.⁸³ At the altar call, some 4,000 people came forward. A white woman who found herself sitting beside an African American for the first time in her life said, “When she put out

⁸¹ Brown, “The Negro Evangelical and the Race Crisis,” 17.

⁸² John Herbers, “35,000 In Alabama At Biracial Rites,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1964, 1; “Debate in the Senate; A Meeting in Birmingham.” *Time* April 10, 1964, 39; Benjamin E. Mays, “My View: Billy Graham and Birmingham,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 18, 1964, 10; “Historic Crowd Stirred By Dr. Graham’s Easter Sermon,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 4, 1964, 7.

⁸³ Jones, *Shall We Overcome?*, 140.

her hand to shake mine and smiled, I couldn't refuse."⁸⁴ Such anecdotes painted a seductive portrait of racial progress that possessed great appeal among white evangelicals and the broader American public.

Graham's Birmingham crusade met with a euphoric response because it represented something very unusual: integrated worship. As churches became sites of protest in Birmingham and elsewhere, congregations engaged in heated debates about whether to admit black members. The audacity of black activists who picketed churches and engaged in "kneel-ins" deeply offended many white evangelicals. For white evangelicals who believed in the spirituality of the church, a sphere held separate from state and politics, it seemed that crass political aims were polluting sacred space.⁸⁵ Yet the arguments of those opposing an open door policy betrayed a growing sense that white supremacist theology was losing its power to persuade. While the old claims of Jim Crow as a sacred order continued to be made, far more important were appeals to social custom, protection of children, and perhaps above all, the financial health of the local church. After all, integration might cause major donors to stop writing checks.⁸⁶

To be sure, white evangelical advocates of church integration had their own set of self-interested arguments—protecting the movement's reputation, the credibility of

⁸⁴ "Billy Graham in Birmingham," *Christianity Today*, April 24, 1964, 38-39.

⁸⁵ Paul Harvey, *Christianity and Race in the American South: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 171-175. See also Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸⁶ Samuel Southard, a Southern Baptist professor, studied attitudes toward integration and concluded that concern about financial decline was the single biggest factor in churches' opposition to integration. William M. Dyal, Jr., "A Strategy for Southern Baptists In Race Relations," AR 138-6, Box 1 Folder 12, SBHLA.

foreign missions, and the watching eyes of the younger generation—but oftentimes they supported integration because they felt their personal faith commitments left them with no choice. One man at First Baptist Church of Tallahassee, Florida, who had thought his mind was made up in favor of segregation, declared, “In a spiritual experience God turned me around and said, ‘Don’t you ever again in all your life hold the view you have been holding.’” From that moment he became a supporter of an open door policy. A week after the church refused entry to five African American worshippers, another man at First Baptist went from an intractable opponent of integration to a supporter after getting down on his knees to pray and seeing, in his mind’s eye, the five black activists outside the church and Jesus Christ himself standing at the pulpit. “What is he going to do?” he asked himself. “Is He going to turn them away?”⁸⁷ The man knew the answer, and so he knew what he had to do. Supporting an open door policy did not necessarily make one a racial liberal, or a supporter of the civil rights movement as such. Indeed, the felt power of such personal encounters with Jesus may have strengthened evangelicals’ conviction that racial progress came precisely through such life-altering mystical experiences rather than divisive protests.

In 1964 white evangelical media published profiles of integrated churches as models of Christian leadership on a difficult issue. The tone of these articles assumed white readers all over the country would be unfamiliar with integrated worship, fearful or awkward around black Christians, and generally full of questions about what to do. These articles also began to articulate a vision of Christian colorblindness to challenge

⁸⁷ C.A. Roberts, “The Christian Ethic and Segregation,” at Christianity and Race Relations Christian Life Commission Conference, August, 1964, 25-37, AR 138-6 Box 1 Folder 12, SBHLA.

segregated churches. Iola Parker's profile of an integrated church in Pittsburgh described Harriet Davis, a nearly saintly black woman—always patient, always kind, always forgiving—as the key actor in the integration drama. Meant to be complementary to African Americans while assuaging white fears, the portrait had the effect of demanding black perfection in integrated spaces. Parker based her case for church integration on colorblind sentimentality rooted in the consciousness of children. In one pivotal scene, Harriet and Iola listen to the church children's choir on Christmas Eve, "a black and white checkerboard of little faces." Then Iola whispers, "It is the little children, like these, who will finally straighten out this racial mess, isn't it?" Harriet replies, "Bless their little hearts. They don't know there's any difference in black and white." As Parker zooms out from this intimate scene, she asks the reader, "Need they ever know? They never will—unless we tell them. And are we so sure there *is*?"⁸⁸

Other evangelical advocates of church integration admitted it was not as simple as Parker implied. In "The Case of the Colorblind Church," Judi Culbertson suggested that it would take years of painstaking efforts and deliberate planning for the average church to become integrated. She believed the experience of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church bore this out. By 1964, the congregation had already been integrated for over a decade and had "20 Negro members who participate in church life as deacons, quartet members, as Sunday school superintendents..." But Culbertson pointed out that Tenth Presbyterian had several unique advantages that other churches might not have. Not only had the pastor worked for years to make sure the congregation was "spiritually prepared"

⁸⁸ Iola B. Parker, "Our Church's First Negro," *Christian Herald*, February 1964, 21.

for the change, integration occurred “before the Negro Revolution really got started, before every action of the Negro community was scrutinized with such concentrated suspicion and fear.” Tenth Presbyterian also benefited from its status as a downtown church with a “large commuting congregation” that made for “less social mingling.” For ordinary community churches in the throes of the revolution integration was likely to be a much harder sell. Nonetheless, integration had to be pursued, not because it was expedient but because it was right. “Racial discrimination, no matter how many good excuses we may have for it, is wrong in the eyes of God,” she wrote. Like Howard Jones, Culbertson appealed to the New Testament example of Jewish and Gentile believers becoming united. It would take years of laborious work “on a personal basis” to change attitudes. It was urgent to begin now so that African Americans would have solid Bible-believing churches to attend as black churches moved toward “a liberal social thrust.” Pulpit and choir exchanges were one place to start.⁸⁹ As timid as such appeals might appear today, in 1964 they represented a fundamental rebuke of white supremacist theologies.

Black evangelicals continued to be among the most robust proponents of colorblind theology as they attacked their exclusion from white evangelical spaces. King A. Butler, pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church in North Carolina, declared, “For a Christian (white or colored) to deal with another person on the basis of color is to eliminate the grace of God.” In Butler’s view, only those who had experienced the grace of God through saving faith in Jesus Christ were prepared to solve America’s racial

⁸⁹ Judi C. Culbertson, “The Case of the Colorblind Church,” *Eternity*, April 1964, 24-25, 47.

problems. So total was the reorientation of one's identity upon turning to Jesus Christ that race should no longer even be mentioned in the church. Butler went on, "Where Christ is supreme, our hearts and minds will bend to His will. And then, yellow skin, red skin, white skin, or black skin will not be a motivating factor for our relationships with one another."⁹⁰ NBEA secretary Joseph Brown agreed. "The solution to America's race problem is the 'grace' problem," he wrote. "If all true Christians would both tell and live this glorious gospel of the grace of God, the race problem insofar as black and white saints are concerned would vanish into the shadows of the past."⁹¹

Though black evangelicals could lapse into vague platitudes as easily as white evangelicals, there was a nuance to their views often lacking among their white counterparts. Brown portrayed black evangelicals as a people caught between the liberal civil rights movement, which had positive social concern but lacked proper doctrine, and white evangelicalism, which had correct doctrine but was disastrously deficient in social concern. While black evangelicals often advocated unity in Christ *alongside* social equality, white evangelicals often described unity in Christ as a *substitute* for equality. As Billy Graham's father-in-law L. Nelson Bell put it, the church faced "the urgent necessity of removing all barriers to spiritual fellowship in Christ, without at the same time attempting to force un-natural social relationships." Black evangelicals found these distinctions exasperating. Brown criticized white evangelicals for claiming to be faithful to scripture while practicing discrimination. How could they preach "Sonship only

⁹⁰ King A. Butler, "Black, White or God Supremacy," *Eternity*, July 1964, 17-18, 32-33.

⁹¹ Brown, "The Negro Evangelical and the Race Crisis," 17, 30.

through faith in Christ” and then “ignore the black man who is a *brother* in Christ”? Brown shared all the conservative doctrine of his white evangelical peers, so his critiques of the movement hit close to home: “Apparently, some believe that Christianity is only a white man’s possession.” He also put his finger on the vital and uncomfortable question of what exactly unity in Christ meant. “The Negro evangelical,” Brown wrote, cannot “understand how we are one in Christ but socially inferior.”⁹²

Despite Brown’s complaint, many white evangelicals went on insisting that unity in Christ had no bearing whatsoever on the question of social equality. “Just because I don’t want to socialize with them,” one Georgia woman said, “in no way means I don’t care about their souls.”⁹³ For some white evangelical leaders, such care for the soul was the acid test. Leroy Gardner of the *Evangelical Beacon* told his readers that they had a responsibility to preach the gospel to “the American Negro” just the same as anyone. But that was their only responsibility. “Social and economic discrimination” were matters of “personal prerogative.” Behind the evangelistic imperative was the persistent assumption that white evangelicals owned the gospel. Gardner described the black church as a veritable hellhole of heresy, emotional excess, and immoral behavior. Thus, if white evangelicals didn’t preach to African Americans, how would they hear the gospel? “You’ll find Negroes congenial by nature and receptive to any friendly gesture,” Gardner assured his readers. And besides, “it is not necessary to socialize with the Negro; just

⁹² L. Nelson Bell, “The Race Issue and A Christian Principle,” AR 138, Box 20, Folder 12, SBHLA. Brown, “The Negro Evangelical and the Race Crisis,” 17, 30.

⁹³ “Integration and YOU,” *Christian Herald*, February 1965, 26-27.

witness to him.”⁹⁴ With such bald pronouncements some white evangelicals tried to give the narrowest possible definition to oneness in Christ.

Other white evangelicals testified it was precisely through social encounters on an equal footing that their views were transformed. Nancy Culbertson wrote, “I have been amazed to talk to person after person who, when they got to really *know* one Negro well, found that their abstract prejudices and fears were greatly dissolved.”⁹⁵ Even passing encounters might be employed as racial lessons for evangelical audiences. A Colorado woman wrote that on two separate occasions when she had car problems on a busy highway “the white people buzzed right by” while “it was a Negro who came to our rescue.” Drawing on white evangelicals’ shared familiarity with the parable of the Good Samaritan, she asked, “Does this remind you of any particular Bible story?”⁹⁶ White evangelicals put a lot of stock in such experiences. They fit well with their view of how social change occurred. The evangelical Governor of Oregon, Mark Hatfield, wrote, “Ultimately, the solution must be found in the hearts and minds—and actions—of each of us as individuals.”⁹⁷ If some critics saw such individualizing rhetoric as an excuse for inaction, many evangelicals understood it as a call to supply the essential spiritual and moral force without which legal change would be hollow.

⁹⁴ Leroy Gardner, “The Negro Needs the Gospel,” *The Evangelical Beacon*, September 1, 1964, 4.

⁹⁵ Culbertson, “The Case of the Color-Blind Church,” 47.

⁹⁶ Mrs. B. Miller, “More Civil Rights,” *Eternity*, August 1964, 3.

⁹⁷ Mark Hatfield, “Wrongs and Civil Rights,” *Eternity*, July 1964, 3.

The remarkable trajectory of Bob Harrison's career seemed to illustrate the possibilities of this gradual and church-based method of change. After the Assemblies of God rejected his ordination in 1951, Harrison had persisted in the orbit of white evangelicalism and was eventually rewarded for his pains. In 1960 he joined Howard Jones to conduct crusades in Africa on behalf of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. In 1962, he became a part-time Graham Associate and finally received the ordination denied to him a decade earlier.⁹⁸ Like Jones, Harrison was deeply conservative. There was little theological daylight between him and Graham. At an Assemblies of God conference, Harrison spoke to his overwhelmingly white audience "as an American Christian who happens to be a 'man of color.'" He said, "I cannot help but emphasize that although political and economic pressure can help curb the racial problem, only Christ and His gospel can solve it."⁹⁹ Such rhetoric invoked race for the purpose of deemphasizing racial justice activism, assuring white evangelicals that a colorblind gospel fulfilled their evangelistic mandate *and* promoted racial progress. By emphasizing the primacy of spiritual solutions to racial problems, Harrison was able to overcome his outsider status as a black man in a white movement.

The politics of church primary continued to form evangelical responses to the major civil rights crisis of 1965. When clergy from all over the United States came to Selma, Alabama to participate in the voting rights campaign, white evangelical leaders were absent. In fact, in the days after police in Selma assaulted nonviolent protestors and

⁹⁸ Glenn Gohr, "For Such a Time as This: The Story of Evangelist Bob Harrison," *Assemblies of God Heritage*, Fall 2004, 5-11.

⁹⁹ Robert E. Harrison, "These Things Shall Be," *Pentecostal Evangel*, October 22, 1967, 2.

white supremacists bludgeoned to death pastor James Reeb, Clyde W. Taylor, Secretary General of the National Association of Evangelicals, was busy knocking down rumors that the NAE was lobbying for voting rights legislation. “The official stand of the NAE on the whole race issue, including Selma,” he wrote, “is that we do not take a stand on it. We are neither for nor against.” In a telephone conversation with an evangelical who wanted the NAE to support the civil rights movement, Taylor’s assistant explained, “The NAE has a policy of not becoming involved in political or sociological affairs that do not affect the function of the church or those involved in the propagation of the gospel.”¹⁰⁰ This was false. In fact, the NAE was not only an umbrella group for evangelical denominations, it was a lobbying arm with a history of political entanglements.¹⁰¹ But on the question of racism it favored spiritual pieties over political action. The life and death struggle of African Americans to live in freedom did not fall under the purview of the church.

Howard Jones believed his call to transcend race through the power of Christ was the crucial missing ingredient in the civil rights revolution he supported. To his surprise, many white evangelicals used the same spiritual claims to oppose that very revolution. While Jones sang Martin Luther King’s praises, most white evangelicals believed King had missed the mark. As one Pennsylvania woman put it, “The problem is not skin but sin and Christ is the cure.” She believed King’s radical politics and protests failed to deal

¹⁰⁰ Clyde W. Taylor to Herbert S. Mekeel, March 22, 1965; “Memo for Dr. Taylor,” March 12, 1965, SC-113 Box 52, Folder “Civil Rights 1965,” Wheaton College Special Collections, Buswell Library.

¹⁰¹ Just five years before it had publicized its opposition to the election of the nation’s first Catholic president. See also Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 87-92.

with the real problem of sin in the human heart.¹⁰² “Often when thinking of the civil rights movement my heart has bled for the Negro who has been treated so unjustly,” one white evangelical declared. “[B]ut over and over again the word of Christ comes to me: What shall it profit the Negro if he gain all the civil rights guaranteed him but lose his own soul? The latter is the dynamic work of the Church—it is committed to this one great task, and the sooner we get to it the sooner will injustices be solved.”¹⁰³ The beloved community of civil rights activists’ dreams would not come about through direct action or federal legislation. Instead, evangelical churches would save souls. In doing so, they would save society.

Conclusion

The most high-profile evangelical response to the Selma crisis came from Billy Graham. Reprising his role in Birmingham the year before, when Graham heard of the violence in Selma he began planning an evangelistic crusade in Montgomery. As the Graham team prepared for the crusade Howard Jones was at his post in Liberia, but planned to be back in the U.S. shortly. “I would like to be with you and the team for these meetings,” Jones wrote. “I have arranged my schedule, Billy, so that I can be with you in Montgomery, that is, if you should need me.” Besides assisting with the evangelistic

¹⁰² It is important to note that this white evangelical woman claimed she was quoting the words of a local black pastor. Paradoxically, she was well aware that her words might carry more weight if they came from a black pastor. Some black Christians did actively oppose the civil rights movement, a phenomenon that remains underexplored. Mrs. Hiram Gross to Hudson T. Amerding, May 1, 1968, RG-07-001, Box 1 Folder 30, Wheaton College Special Collections, Buswell Library.

¹⁰³ “Eutychus and his kin,” *Christianity Today*, May 8, 1964, 18.

enterprise, Jones was finishing up his book on the race problem and he believed he could gain helpful insights in Montgomery. Jones seemed to be aware he was making a big request. In a separate missive to Graham's right-hand man Walter Smyth, Jones wrote, "I do not know if I have the right to ask" to come to Montgomery. In both letters, Jones went out of his way to emphasize that his intentions were appropriately evangelical. He wanted to bring the message of the gospel to black and white Alabamans alike. He was sure that "Christ is the answer," and he praised Graham's "courage" and his ability to "ease racial tensions."¹⁰⁴

Without saying it outright, Jones was promising not to stir the pot. His desire to be in Montgomery was not an idle curiosity or a civil rights project; he would be there as a loyal Graham evangelist. A full week later, Jones received his answer in a terse telegram: "Team feels due to extremely tense situation you should not plan on crusade, as requested." The following week Graham himself followed up. "I am not sure that it would be wise for you to come to Montgomery just now."¹⁰⁵ Jones' exclusion from the Montgomery crusade was a plain and simple effort to placate white supremacist opinion. The presence of a black evangelist would indeed have raised tensions. Graham believed it would be worthwhile to preach the gospel without such controversy. The incident had the shape of a parable outlining the future of Christian colorblindness. Jones was the black supplicant seeking inclusion, Graham was the well-meaning center of white evangelical power determining the terms and pace of that inclusion.

¹⁰⁴ Howard Jones to Billy Graham, May 14, 1965; Howard Jones to Walter Smyth, May 14, 1965, CN 17 Box 80 Folder 34, BGCA.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Smyth to Howard Jones, May 21, 1965; Billy Graham to Howard Jones, May 28, 1965, CN 17 Box 80 Folder 34, BGCA.

The later 1960s tested the limits of Howard Jones' endurance. He bluntly described his anguish about racial discrimination in evangelicalism. "White evangelicals often tell me how much they love colored people. But I shudder when I hear this," he said. If they loved people, they would act on their behalf. "If our Lord were here in earthly body he would be walking the streets of the ghettos ministering to the poor." Instead, most of Jesus's white evangelical followers "bypass the Negro and his problems like the priest and the Levite passed by the wounded man in the story of the Good Samaritan." But Jones never yielded in his hope for the future, and his message never wavered. Through the gospel of Jesus Christ, black and white evangelicals could "realize their oneness in Christ as believers" and change the world together.¹⁰⁶

As black evangelical frustration with white evangelicals increased in the later 1960s, their criticisms became more pointed, and more race-conscious. George M. Perry, the third President of the NBEA, declared that Billy Graham-style evangelicalism was no longer relevant for black Americans. "We believe in the content of the message, but we can't go along with its suburban, middle-class white-orientation that has nothing to say to the poor nor to the black people."¹⁰⁷ This was a hard-hitting attack on the white evangelical turn toward Christian colorblindness. If Graham, of all people, was not actually preaching the colorblind gospel he claimed, what hope was there for white evangelicalism to transcend the racial divide? Jones' dream of evangelical unity across

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Howard Jones, *Eternity*, August 1968, 13-16; Marugg, "Evangelist Sees Need to Fill Void Left by King's Death," April 18, 1968, *The Pasadena Star-News*, C-2.

¹⁰⁷ "Graham Crusade Can Disturb The Blacks," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 18, 1970, 29.

racial lines would play out in the years ahead not in the pages of magazines but in the church sanctuaries and college classrooms of the evangelical movement. The civil rights movement had set the stage for the real battle to come in evangelicalism. The struggle for racial justice and colorblind Christianity would be won or lost in white evangelical institutions themselves. There, as a new generation of black evangelicals demanded inclusion while insisting on the importance of their blackness, the next chapter in the rise of Christian colorblindness was written.

CHAPTER 3: CREATING THE COLORBLIND CAMPUS

Founders Week, 1970, Moody Bible Institute: the most important week of the year for the storied college founded by the famous nineteenth century evangelist, D.L. Moody. Melvin Warren and Leona Jenkins knew a public protest at this time and place would have maximum impact. Warren and Jenkins might have fit the profile of hundreds of other recent graduates of the college, but for one important difference: they were black. On a cold day in February, Leona Jenkins stood on the doorstep of the college holding a large handwritten sign—“Woe unto you, hypocrites”—while Melvin Warren ceremoniously ripped their diplomas and tossed them in a trashcan. Warren told the media the protest was designed to draw attention to the “institutional white racism” of Moody Bible Institute. It certainly did that. To the administration’s chagrin, national media picked up the story and soon Moody faced a blizzard of accusations surrounding its history of segregated dorms and other forms of discrimination against black students. White students and administrators responded defensively. The dramatic protest had hit its mark. Were white evangelical colleges places of Christian community for all people, or were they yet another site where investment in whiteness was cloaked in the name of Jesus?¹

¹ “Bible Institute Grads Rip Diplomas; Protest Racism,” *Jet*, March 19, 1970, 30; “The Mood at Moody,” *Newsweek*, March 9, 1970, 51; “Ex-students protest ‘Moody white racism,’” *Moody Student*, February 13, 1970, 1; “Time for Self-Examination,” *Moody Student*, February 13, 1970, 2; “Dr. Culbertson addresses race issue,” *Moody Student*, February 27, 1970, 1; Dave Broucek, “Admin. expresses ‘Mood at Moody,’” *Moody Student*, March 13, 1970, 3.

As the MBI protest indicates, white evangelicals grappled with the consequences of the civil rights movement close to home as they confronted fraught questions about the nature of their own institutions. The historian Adam Laats has written that white evangelical colleges have constantly grappled with two imperatives that are often in tension.² Evangelical colleges aspired to rigorous and respectable academic standards equal to secular schools. They also tried to stay on the straight and narrow evangelical path, creating campus environments that reinforced faith rather than undermining it. During the 1960s, race began to figure into both these imperatives in ways it never had before. The cultural and legal changes the civil rights movement produced made nondiscrimination on the basis of race part of what it meant to be a modern academic institution. Equally important, some white evangelicals began to wonder if opening the door of evangelical higher education to black Christians was now part of what it meant to be an evangelical college. By the end of the decade, efforts to build Christian academic communities had to account for these rapidly shifting racial norms

The resulting efforts of white evangelical colleges to recruit black students reveal Christian colorblindness in formation. What would it mean to have a colorblind campus instead of a white campus? Rather than imagining that white administrators suddenly launched a clearly defined plan in the late 1960s to remake their campuses in a colorblind vein, it is more helpful to consider how the new imperatives of that tumultuous decade caused them to take actions—sometimes poorly considered actions—whose outcomes were unknown and often unforeseen. Christian colorblindness on the white evangelical

² Adam Laats, *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

campus was not a static theology brought to bear to solve the problem of racial integration. It was, instead, a contested idea emerging through negotiation and conflict between newly arriving black students and overwhelmingly white student bodies and administrations. Warren and Jenkins' protest shined a light on a crucial factor in these negotiations: the rising expectations and racial consciousness of a generation of black students arriving on white evangelical campuses in the wake of black power. They would insist that white evangelicals accept them not only as brothers and sisters in Christ but as *black* people. Such demands stoked controversy and spurred white evangelical students to embrace the language of Christian colorblindness. White evangelicals' desire to keep in step with the changing times and demonstrate Christian concern prompted recruitment of black students, but what black inclusion in these institutions would really look like was up for debate.

The period between 1967 and 1975 witnessed the sudden rise and rapid demise of white evangelical college's first significant efforts to recruit black students. It is a story in three acts. First, in the late 1960s, many white evangelical colleges launched unprecedented campaigns to enroll black students. The second act arrived for a brief moment in the ensuing years when many of these white evangelical colleges faced an era of racial crisis as the presence of black students on campus generated racial tension. By the middle of the 1970s, the third act, retrenchment, marked the end of the moment of crisis as colleges retreated from their recruitment efforts. The uneasy silence that descended on white evangelical campuses marked the solidification of the colorblind Christian campus as a space of nominal integration and white normativity. Black efforts to reform evangelical institutions brought to the surface the investment in whiteness that

marked the boundaries of evangelical identity. Colorblind theology offered a way through the tension. Using the rhetoric of Christian colorblindness, white evangelicals could express a desire for unity without engaging in systemic reform. Though the changes of the 1960s motivated white evangelical colleges to launch racially conscious recruitment campaigns, the growing dominance of Christian colorblindness discouraged the institutional reforms that might have made those campaigns successful.

Prelude: Before the Recruitment Era

If white evangelical colleges were going to recruit black students, they would have to face the matter of sex. It was bad enough that some good Christian kids might find ways to defy the rules and engage in sex outside of marriage. It was far worse if that sex could conceivably be interracial. In 1963, *Eternity* magazine asked some white evangelical college administrators about their institutions' policies on interracial dating and marriage. "Definitely not permitted" wrote one. "No dating allowed" wrote another. "We counsel against such relationships," said a third, but "do not legislate." At times, "some very frank and forceful counseling" was required to keep young people from making a tragic mistake.³ It was because of sex, more than anything else, that many white evangelical colleges that enrolled black students here or there before the 1960s often saddled them with discriminatory policies. Besides bans or counseling against interracial dating, black students might be forced to live off campus, or be encouraged to attend evening classes distinct from the daytime courses of white students living on campus.

³ Nancy Hardesty, "Black Students in Christian Schools: Are We Trying?" *Eternity*, July 1969, 38-39.

Despite the limitations, handfuls of black students did attend white evangelical colleges in the 1940s and 1950s, like those who went on to found the National Black Evangelical Association. Bill Pannell attended Fort Wayne Bible College in the late 1940s and, though a generation older than the black students of the civil rights era, emerged as an important voice on their behalf. Thoroughly embedded in evangelical networks, Pannell worked for Tom Skinner Crusades and Campus Crusade for Christ before going on to a long career as a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. Students like Pannell found that their social interactions were almost invariably fraught with the specter of interracial contact. Pannell recalled the nervousness of registration day and the cheerful housing question: “would it be all right to put you in with a fine Negro student?” Pannell, who had grown up in small-town Michigan surrounded by white people, was quite sure he knew as little about black people as anyone else in Fort Wayne. But he was black, so he would room with a black student, and that was that. On the dating question, he remembered, the explicit ban actually didn’t come until later. While he was enrolled, “they simply smiled uneasily and hoped for the best. But you got the message anyway.”⁴

Bob Harrison grew up in such a conservative environment in the circles of San Francisco fundamentalism that when the time came to apply to a college in pursuit of his dream of entering the Christian ministry, he could think of no more prestigious name than Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina. After making inquiries, he was shocked when he received the reply: “Under no circumstances will we accept a black as a student at Bob Jones University.” No matter, he reasoned, that was the South. Everyone

⁴ William E. Pannell, *My Friend, The Enemy* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1968), 47-52.

knew racism was a problem down there. So he would go to the local Assemblies of God school across town, Bethany Bible College. In what Harrison later recognized as foreshadowing, the President of Bethany looked surprised to see him. “You realize that when you enroll you’ll be our first Negro, don’t you?” Harrison, young and naive, thought being first might be great. He enjoyed his first semester, and since the college was local he could commute from home. But Bethany was in the process of relocating south to Santa Cruz. He couldn’t commute that far. He would have to live in a dorm with white students, and that meant that the administration had to put up or shut up. In the end, a workaround was found: Harrison was assigned a Filipino roommate. During the remainder of his college years, Harrison gradually became more aware of a peculiar quality to many of his social encounters. He came to believe that the fear of him “mixing socially with white girls,” and, God forbid, marrying them, was the “unspeakable, unthinkable” thing to which “everything else was really incidental.”⁵

A contretemps that played out at Wheaton College in the beginning of the 1960s demonstrated just how volatile the question of interracial dating could be and how it served as a barrier to becoming colorblind institutions. Wheaton’s President, V. Raymond Edman, asked the Division of Social Sciences to draft a statement on race relations. Much work and eight drafts later, in the summer of 1960 the Department of Sociology and Anthropology submitted a “Wheaton College Statement on Race Relations” for the President’s approval. This fascinating document set forth a theological and sociological justification for a colorblind campus. In a remarkably non-defensive and self-critical

⁵ Bob Harrison with Jim Montgomery, *When God Was Black* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 16-20.

tone, the statement told Wheaton's history as a declension narrative. It described the school's noble abolitionist beginnings sadly forsaken as the college reacted against the social gospel and "settled into a defensive position" in the early twentieth century. The professors affirmed that Wheaton had been right to emphasize proper doctrine and separation from the moral contagions of modern American life, but in doing so had tragically lost its sense of Christian responsibility on racial matters. Though explicit racial discrimination was not written into Wheaton's policies, the statement admitted that "in practice" people of color, "especially Negroes, were for a time excluded from admission." Then when several black students enrolled in the 1940s and 1950s, "they were restricted in regard to housing and certain social activities." The statement bluntly declared that "evangelical white people have tended to regard colored peoples as inferior and have so treated them," despite no scientific or biblical basis for this prejudice. Turning Wheaton's claim of fundamentalist separation from worldly evils on its head, the report declared, "Distinctions based on social categories are of this world's system... In Christ Jesus there is no segregation." Did not Colossians 3:11 make this plain?⁶ This colorblind reading of scripture allowed the professors to directly attack theologies of white supremacy and declare them unchristian. Ironically, in just a few years, similar colorblind logic would be used to tell black students to be quiet about the racial discrimination they faced.

⁶ Colossians 3:11 reads: "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." Gordon S. Jaek to V. Raymond Edman, July 11, 1960; "Wheaton College Statement On Race Relations," RG02004 Box 7 Folder 17, Wheaton College, Illinois.

Fatefully, the draft statement submitted to President Edman included this unassuming recommendation: “That rules governing dating and permissions for marriage be uniform for the whole student body.”⁷ The self-critical tone of the statement might have been difficult enough for the administration to accept, but this little proposal was explosive indeed. Edman, acting as if he had just come into possession of the nuclear codes, forwarded a single copy to the Executive Council with strict instructions to read it one at a time and then return it to him in “the utmost confidence.” It would be best, he advised, “that no word whatever be said about it, even to our families.”⁸ It was one thing to suggest that Wheaton had made some mistakes. It was another thing altogether to suggest, going forward, that Wheaton should affirm interracial romances. Professor Merrill Tenney wrote back to Edman, urging that the document be kept under wraps until it was given further study. Interracial marriage was not a sin, he admitted, but it sure was foolish. “Will some of the parents of our students regard a tacit approval of inter-racial marriage as a danger to their children?”⁹ To ask the question was to answer it. The following fall, a full fourteen months after giving the draft statement to the President, its creators were in the dark about what had happened to it, and asked President Edman for a follow-up meeting. The following year, when one faculty member published an article that echoed the sentiments of the draft statement, the Board of Trustees demanded an

⁷ Gordon S. Jaeck to V. Raymond Edman, July 11, 1960; “Wheaton College Statement On Race Relations,” RG02004 Box 7 Folder 17, Wheaton College, Illinois.

⁸ V. Raymond Edman to Executive Council, July 22, 1960, RG02004 Box 7 Folder 17, Wheaton College, Illinois.

⁹ Merrill C. Tenney to V.R. Edman, July 29, 1960, RG02004 Box 7 Folder 17, Wheaton College, Illinois.

explanation for his recklessness. President Edman made sure the statement on race relations never saw the light of day.¹⁰ In the early 1960s, making a biblical argument on behalf of integration could land one in a world of trouble at white evangelical colleges.

A 1963 *Eternity* magazine survey of white evangelical colleges and Bible institutes found that their story was Wheaton's story writ large. Black enrollment in the dozens of colleges surveyed was 0.5%. Editor William J. Petersen perceptively noted that the average white evangelical college had worked very hard both "to attain its academic standing and maintain its evangelical testimony." Historically, the presence of black students seemed to be a threat to both. Few African Americans were academically prepared to go to college, and few white evangelical parents were enthused about sending their children to a place that raised the specter of intimate interracial social contact. A black pastor suggested that if a white evangelical college simply added the word "inter-racial" to its promotional material, "our people would know that it was for them too." But Petersen doubted that white evangelical colleges "would be willing to risk alienating some of their constituency by the use of such a loaded word." Still, he believed the time had come to accept the risk of change. A white evangelical college should "go out of its way to encourage Negro young people to attend." This meant removing discriminatory policies that made black students feel unwelcome. Petersen suggested schools should not stop at trying to create a level playing field. They should launch new scholarship programs specifically for African American students. Wasn't it ironic, after all, that it

¹⁰ Laats, *Fundamentalist U*, 231-232.

was often easier for an international student from Africa to enroll in a white evangelical college than for an African American thousands of miles closer to do the same?¹¹

If Petersen's suggestions were ahead of where most white evangelical colleges were prepared to go in 1963, they did anticipate the changing calculus that emerged during the course of the decade. The legal, moral, and cultural influence of the civil rights movement made integration increasingly hard to resist. The related theological transformations within white evangelicalism, meanwhile, were turning the lily-white college into a potential theological problem instead of a wholesome marker of evangelical bona fides. What if these white institutions signaled not only high academic and moral standards, but an unchristian attitude of discrimination and disregard for fellow Christians? By the late 1960s, more and more white evangelical administrators were asking questions like these.

Act One: Recruitment Begins

The recruitment era was not only a literal enrollment of black students. It was a mood, a tenor of the times shaped by black power and the new legal regime of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Colleges receiving federal funds had to submit yearly reports of the racial composition of their student bodies and had to demonstrate compliance with nondiscrimination in employment and student admissions.¹² Colleges that had allowed a

¹¹ William J. Petersen, "Evangelicals & the Race Barriers," *Eternity*, September 1963, 12-16, 48.

¹² In a remarkably blunt self-assessment, the Christian Reformed Church studied the racial practices of its colleges and other institutions and concluded, "It appears to be more than coincidental that most if not all of the agencies which do have formal policies [of non-discrimination] also have formal government contracts and associations of one

handful of black students to attend over the years began in the late 1960s to discard discriminatory policies and launch new recruitment initiatives. Northern white evangelical colleges were not always ahead of their southern counterparts. Wayland Baptist College in Plainview Texas had admitted its first black student 1951 and had integrated dorm housing during the 1950s. Georgetown College in Kentucky integrated in 1955. Many other Southern Baptist colleges integrated in the early 1960s.¹³ But admitting black students was not the same as seeking them out. Proactive recruitment designed to enroll significant numbers of black students in this period was primarily a project of white evangelical colleges outside the South. But even at institutions that didn't experience significant increases in absolute numbers of black students, the race-conscious mobilizations of the new generation of black students challenged white evangelical campuses. White administrators' efforts to recruit black students were necessarily race-conscious, but they also reflected an emerging colorblind theology. They believed visible display of an integrated campus would bolster claims of Christian unity and demonstrate evangelical concern for the racial crisis.

The trend toward recruiting black students in the late 1960s was far from uniform. Some schools tried to shut out the noise and continue much as before. As late as 1972,

type or another, thus *requiring* subscription to a fair employment policy. "An Inventory of Personnel Practices: A Final Report of Component E in the Study of Racism in the Christian Reformed Church," February 29, 1972, 8, C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 4, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

¹³ David Christopher Roach, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Civil Rights, 1954-1995*, Dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009.

Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa had no non-white students at all.¹⁴ Others moved to action at different times and with varying degrees of commitment. Though the national context informed the move toward black recruitment, the specific spurs to action varied from one institution to another. In some cases, white student bodies took the lead in calling for change. That is what happened at Messiah College, a small evangelical institution in rural Pennsylvania. In the Spring of 1967, the college welcomed John Howard Griffin, the white author of the popular book *Black Like Me*. The book chronicled Griffin's escapades while passing as a black man in the South for six weeks in the fall of 1959. In a talk given to a large crowd of Messiah students, Griffin urged them to confront the problem of racism. Conscience-stricken students demanded action. Did Messiah students want to integrate the South without integrating their own dorm rooms, one student asked? Students launched a fund-raising drive to pay the tuition for a black student. The following semester Edna Curry, an African American woman from Gulfport, Mississippi, was enrolled as the college's lone black student."¹⁵

For other colleges, racial tensions in local metro areas provided a sense of urgency. In 1966, Dr. King launched his fair housing campaign in Chicago, and the West Side experienced rioting that summer. The following year, nearby Wheaton College launched a new "Compensatory Education Program." The initiative brought twelve black

¹⁴ "An Inventory of Institutional Admissions Practices: A Final Report of Component F in the Study of Racism in the Christian Reformed Church," 11, C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 4, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

¹⁵ Glen Pierce, "Notes on the Lecture Black Like Me," *Ivy Rustles*, May 9 1967, 6-10; "Goal of \$600 Reached In Negro Scholarship Fund Drive," *Ivy Rustles*, September 28, 1967, 1.

students to campus with the help of financial aid and large amounts of loans.¹⁶ At North Park College in Chicago proper, proactive recruitment began in 1967 and resulted in over three dozen black students at the college by the fall of 1969, a dramatic change from prior years.¹⁷ In Grand Rapids, Michigan, racial polarization around crime and school busing, coupled with controversial school segregation in the Christian Reformed Church gave impetus to new recruitment planning at the denomination's flagship Calvin College.¹⁸ In the Spring of 1970 a small interracial group of Calvin students formed a "Committee for Black Enrollment" to push the administration to recruit black students. "The plight of the black man is the nation's most severe domestic problem," the committee's president declared. Yet "The college is for the most part ignoring the problem." Meanwhile a faculty committee recommended that for the first time Calvin begin actively recruiting students beyond the Christian Reformed Church, a key step if Calvin was to have any hope of becoming more racially diverse.¹⁹ One of the few black students at Calvin before the new recruitment got under way pointed out that the black residents of Grand Rapids were well aware of Calvin College. They simply didn't want to go there. They viewed the

¹⁶ Joyce Suber, "Recruitment, Admission, Retention, and success of Minority Students," February 18, 1981, 4, RG-02-005, Box 31, Folder 19, Wheaton College Special Collections, Buswell Library, Wheaton College.

¹⁷ Memo from Dr. Kean M. Driscoll to President Karl A. Olsson, October 8, 1969, Series 9/1/26 Box 8 Folder 5 Committee on Disadvantaged Students 1969-1970, F.M. Johnson Archives and Special Collections, Brandel Library, North Park University.

¹⁸ Christopher Meehan, *Growing Pains: How Racial Struggles Changed a Church and School* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

¹⁹ Robert Ottenhoff, "An End to Isolationism." *The Chimes*, April 17, 1970, 5.

school with “cynical contempt,” he said.²⁰ Later that year the U.S. Office of Education awarded a \$15,000 planning grant “to develop a program of assistance to black students,” and in the fall of 1971 black enrollment at Calvin doubled.²¹

For many colleges, the tumultuous spring of 1968 was a moment of truth. Confronted with Dr. King’s assassination and major rebellions in urban centers, they believed that their own institutions could meet the challenge of racial hatred and violence. At Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, faculty pressure led to the creation of a “Minority Recruitment Committee.” In the fall of 1970, the college welcomed ten black men, most of them from the local metro area, its first cohort of black students.²² At Eastern Baptist College in suburban Philadelphia, the President established an “Advisory Committee on the Disadvantaged” in 1968 to explore how Eastern could help “non-white” people. By the following year Eastern had nearly two dozen black students enrolled. Though the rapid social changes of the 1960s made recruitment of black students a matter of institutional self-interest, college leaders conceived of their efforts as expressions of Christian love. As Eastern’s President declared, our “Orthodox words of truth must become Christly deeds of concern and sacrifice.”²³

²⁰ Joseph Ritchie, letter to the editor, *The Chimes*, November 15, 1969, 6.

²¹ “Calvin Receives \$15,000 Grant for Black Student Assistance,” *The Chimes*, September 11, 1970, 1. “Calvin College Enrollment of Minority Students, 1969-1977,” C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 5, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

²² Steve Harris, “Blacks at Bethel, part 1, 1969-1971: How Bethel recruited black students,” *Bethel Clarion*, March 21, 1975, 4.

²³ “College to Aid Disadvantaged Students, *The Spotlight*, December 16, 1968, 1.

This was easy to say and hard to do. Dr. King's death both motivated recruitment and exposed hostility to black concerns among white evangelical colleges' key constituencies. On the Sunday after King's assassination, as troops patrolled American cities, words of commemoration and grief rang out at memorial services all over the country. One of these memorial services occurred at Wheaton College. An ecumenical gathering of faith leaders praised the late civil rights leader, and the President of Wheaton College, Dr. Hudson T. Armerding, also gave some remarks. That's when the trouble started. Evangelical media broadcast the news that Wheaton College had hosted a memorial service for Dr. King, and dozens of letters poured in from confused and angry white evangelicals. Timothy LaHaye, a San Diego pastor who would go on to fame as the co-author of the apocalyptic fiction series *Left Behind*, found it "incredible that a Christian college could participate in honoring an out-right theological liberal heretic whose 'non-violent' demonstrations resulted in the deaths of seventeen people." He went on to hint that this episode could affect his ability to recommend Wheaton College to his congregation in the future.²⁴ Pastors, professors, Wheaton alumni, and ordinary churchgoers complained that Dr. King associated with communists, believed a false gospel, and propagated violence and disorder. "What is happening to our Christian colleges?" asked one woman.²⁵ A student at Covenant College in Tennessee was upset that the College flew its flag at half-mast in the days after Dr. King's death. "To make a martyr out of a

²⁴ Tim F. La Haye to Hudson T. Armerding, May 23, 1968, RG-02-005, Box 28 Folder 25, Wheaton College Special Collections, Buswell Library.

²⁵ Mrs. Robert Peterson to Hudson Armerding, May 9, 1968, RG-02-005, Box 28 Folder 25, Wheaton College Special Collections, Buswell Library.

man who so encouraged strife and violence in America through his actions, while he talked peace, is the height of hypocrisy,” she wrote. “I feel that Covenant College has let down its moral standards.”²⁶ Most white evangelicals objected to King’s civil disobedience not only as an affront to law and order, but as a denial of the sufficiency of the gospel and the primacy of the church as its conduit. President Armerding quickly disavowed any support for King’s methods and noted that the college had not sponsored the memorial service but merely allowed the community to use its chapel.²⁷ Even as white evangelical colleges launched a new era of black recruitment, expressing sympathy with black aspirations risked a public relations nightmare.

Sometimes, black students became unwitting pioneers of racial integration at white evangelical colleges. That is what happened to Dolphus Weary and his friend Jimmie Walker. The two young men wanted to get out of Mississippi, so a basketball scholarship to Los Angeles Baptist College came as a lifeline.²⁸ When they arrived in the Fall of 1967, they were shocked to discover that they were breaking the color line, becoming the very first black students to live on campus. They had escaped the closed society of Mississippi only to find themselves more isolated than they had ever been. When they walked around the town of Newhall there were no black faces to greet them. Black students in such difficult circumstances responded in various ways. Weary decided to embrace the role that had been thrust upon him. If he was a black ambassador to a little

²⁶ Mary Garnder, Letter to the editor, *The Bagpipe*, April 25, 1968, 2.

²⁷ For example, Hudson T. Armerding to Mrs. Marian L. Wallace, January 3, 1969, Office of Development Records, Box 1 Folder 30, Wheaton College Special Collections, Buswell Library.

²⁸ Now The Master’s University.

corner of white evangelicalism, then he would play the part to the full. He cut his hair to avoid any appearance of militancy. He took care to obey the rules and stay away from troublemakers. He focused on his studies. And perhaps most importantly, he remembered, “We never dared to date white girls. We’d been told up front that was a no-no.” In short, Dolphus Weary and Jimmie Walker, like so many black students on white evangelical campuses, were trying to walk what Weary called a “tightrope.” He wanted to be himself, but he knew his actions never represented him alone.²⁹

Weary’s memoir veils the psychic toll this tightrope must have exacted, but Martin Luther King’s murder in the Spring of Weary’s second semester marked a turning point in his approach to being a black student on a white evangelical campus. When he heard the news that King had been shot he retreated to his dorm. Then he heard a commotion down the hall and went to investigate. The radio report had just confirmed King’s death, and white students were laughing and celebrating. Weary suddenly remembered he was not alone. Where was Jimmie? He found him in his room, radio on. The two black men shared a silent moment of grief. Then they “talked into the night—the only two blacks for miles around.” For the rest of the semester, Weary was on a mission. He spoke up about racism. He courted controversy and took it upon himself to educate his white peers. No longer merely students, he and Jimmie had become “teachers...on a campus dominated by white people.”³⁰ For the small number of black students on white evangelical campuses by the late 1960s, change could not come soon enough.

²⁹ Dolphus Weary and William Hendricks, *“I Ain’t Comin’ Back”* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990), 53-58.

³⁰ Weary and Hendricks, *“I Ain’t Comin’ Back”*, 59-62.

In 1969, as recruitment efforts gathered steam, Nancy Hardesty took stock of what had changed since *Eternity's* 1963 survey and what still needed to be done. Hardesty, destined to become a controversial figure as a leading evangelical feminist, also took a progressive approach to questions of race in the evangelical community.³¹ A new survey showed that in six years white evangelical colleges had made small strides. The overtly prejudiced responses seen in the earlier survey seemed to have gone out of style. But Hardesty wondered how much had really changed. In 1963 their student bodies were 0.5% black. Now, the figure had edged up to 1.5%.³² This number was still smaller than the number of international students of color drawn to white evangelical schools through missionary contacts and scholarships. At this pace, black student enrollment at white evangelical colleges would be equal to their proportion of the American population in something like sixty to seventy years. None of this was to say that secular campuses were doing a great job at racial integration. A large survey of state universities and colleges nationwide had recently found black enrollment at these historically white institutions clocking in at about 2%. Amid ample evidence of racism and administrative cluelessness on mainstream campuses, the 1968-1969 academic year was the epicenter of the black student revolt.³³ But Hardesty worried that white evangelical colleges seemed

³¹ In 1974, Hardesty co-authored one of the first major efforts to take an interpretive approach to the Bible that was both evangelical and feminist. See Nancy Hardesty and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *All We're Meant To Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1974).

³² Nancy Hardesty, "Black Students in Christian Schools: Are We Trying?", *Eternity*, July 1969, 38-39.

³³ On the black student revolt and its enduring impact on mainstream colleges and universities, see Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

to lag behind even this meager standard. As institutions committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, should they not be leading the way toward racial integration?³⁴

Hardesty had some ideas for how white evangelical colleges could become leaders rather than followers in racial change. Issued as black recruitment efforts were gathering momentum, had her suggestions been widely followed the outcomes on white evangelical campuses might have been quite different. First, she declared that colleges had to stop caving in to fear and the pressures of wealthy donors. If recruiting black students made someone stop writing checks, that money wasn't worth having anyway. Second, Hardesty called for a new sense of Christian responsibility on the part of white evangelical colleges and churches. "Christ loved and died for all men. Because of this, our institutions should be the first to accept all men regardless of the color of their skin." Instead, she lamented, "we have been among the last." Hardesty used the rhetoric of Christian colorblindness to shame white evangelicals for their failure to live out their own professed beliefs. She insisted that this colorblind theology ought to motivate practical actions that reordered the campus environment. That would mean serious recruitment not only of black students, but of black faculty. They would have to establish "special remedial programs" for incoming black students who found the academic standards challenging. The entire student body would have to be taught "the whole story, not just the 'white' view." History courses would have to change. Sociology courses would be revamped. Classes on everything from the Bible to evangelism would have to be built

³⁴ Hardesty, "Black Students in Christian Schools," 38-39.

anew to weed out prejudiced interpretations. One thing was sure, Hardesty wrote. “Christ is calling us to do more. Will we answer His challenge?”³⁵

Act Two: Crisis

Hardesty’s suggestions did not inform most recruitment efforts. Almost without exception, black recruitment campaigns produced controversy on white evangelical campuses. Black students were invited into the Christian academic community under the rubric of help, outreach, mission. The task at hand, most white administrators seemed to believe, was to open up access to their institutions so that African American Christians could also benefit from all that they had to offer. White students and administrators tended not to reckon with how much their own institutions would need to change to make this work, or how much they might have to learn from black students. As African American Christians at the margins of white evangelical institutions called for systemic reform and insisted they could be both black and evangelical, they encountered criticism and discrimination. White evangelicals often insisted that unity in Christ was already a reality and that black Christians attacked such unity when they raised questions of systemic reform in Christian settings. While Hardesty’s colorblind theology led her to believe systemic reforms were necessary, many white students and administrators used the same theological language to tell black students to be quiet. After all, if they were all united in the love of Christ, why did they have to keep talking about race? If their spiritual identities transcended their earthly ones, weren’t the people demanding race-

³⁵ Hardesty, “Black Students in Christian Schools,” 38-39.

based reforms the real troublemakers? In the crucible of these encounters, a brand of Christian colorblindness took shape that justified inaction.

The white response to the formation of black student groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrated the growing pull of colorblind theology on white evangelical campuses. Despite the fact that these groups were almost invariably open to all students, rumors swirled that the groups were militant and separatist, a threat to the unity of the body of Christ. Even when black students carefully described their groups as efforts to build interracial understanding, many white students indignantly asked why racially conscious groups belonged on a Christian campus at all. At Philadelphia College of Bible, the new black student group stressed that its purpose was “BROTHERHOOD and UNITY,” but even this failed to stop the rumor that the new group excluded white students.³⁶ At Nyack College in New York, the student newspaper announced, “Contrary to popular opinion, the Afro-American club is for everyone.”³⁷ In the face of white students’ discomfort, one black student group drily announced that they didn’t “intend to instigate riots” so white students ought to remain calm.³⁸

Black students not only found solidarity in black student groups, they also used them to make specific demands for institutional reform. Common pleas included the hiring of black faculty, the establishment of black studies programs, curriculum redevelopment, opportunities for cultural activities, and black worship expressions in

³⁶ Ed Smith and Joyce Shimp, “Black Students Aim for Unity,” *The Scroll*, undated edition circa 1970, 1; Ralph Medley, *The Scroll*, December 10, 1970, 2.

³⁷ “AAC Also Open to White Students,” *Nyack Forum*, December 20, 1968, 1.

³⁸ “The Afro-American Society,” *The Spotlight*, November 7, 1969, 5.

chapel services. While many of these demands overlapped with the black revolution taking place on secular campuses, the stakes on white evangelical campuses were even higher. Black students insisted that the theological and institutional were linked, that their demands went to the heart of whether these white evangelical colleges would truly build Christian communities. As the Black Student Union at Messiah College declared, “Messiah, don’t be called a racist Christian institution.”³⁹ The way to avoid this designation was to support the BSU’s demands for practical race-conscious reforms.

Black students did not speak with one voice. Some students simply tried to quietly fit in as best they could. Some found their experiences on campus difficult but believed they were still better off than they would be at a secular campus. Others joined white students in expressing colorblind rhetoric. Many felt misunderstood and typecast. As one student said, “I frankly resent being constantly singled out...” Administrators had even invited him to dinner at their homes, where he heard questions like, “What does the Negro in America want?” His reply: “how should I know? I only know what one person wants—and that’s me!”⁴⁰ Other black students grudgingly accepted the role of racial teacher. One black student declared that he was willing to answer questions, but only if “the other blacks refuse to talk to you.” He had “developed the talent or curse (call it what you will) to be black enough to answer your questions and white enough to make you feel comfortable.”⁴¹

³⁹ Jacqueline Gibson, “B.S.U. Silent Minority Becomes Loud,” *Ivy Rustles*, February 16, 1972.

⁴⁰ Phil Jenks, “Racial Tokenism at Eastern Baptist College?” *The Spotlight*, March 23, 1970, 2.

⁴¹ R. Ailes, “An Unholy War,” *Covenant College Bagpipe*, January 14, 1972, 2-3.

A vocal minority of white evangelical students on these campuses supported black demands and called on their fellow white students to repent of racism. As Eastern began to experience racial tensions in the spring of 1970, a white student named Phil Jenks put the blame squarely on white students and administrators. He pointed out that black students were objects of spectacle, curiosity, and fear, yet white students still blamed them for separating themselves and not fitting in. Jenks drew a cartoon in which a black student stands in a padlocked display case, his hands against the glass, looking distressed. Above him, as if on a theater marquee, are the words, “Now Showing! Eastern’s 24 ‘Blacks’!” A white man meant to embody the college looks on in annoyance at the black student: “Whaddaya, some kind of segregationist militant or something?” he asks. Even sympathetic white students, however, often couched their concern in the rhetoric of Christian colorblindness. After excoriating white students and administrators for the racial climate on campus, Jenks’ proposed solution was not institutional reforms but a “revival” of Christian love.⁴² Like most white evangelicals, Jenks conceived of racial tensions as a lack of interpersonal Christian love rather than a systemic problem.

White students like Jenks were invariably dwarfed by a larger number of white students who did not sympathize with black students. Many white students found black students’ activism bewildering and responded defensively. Steve Heise, the editor of the Messiah College student newspaper, declared, “I must ask if racism really exists on our campus or if one faction among us is CAUSING it to develop.” He accused black students of trying to inject racial controversy into issues that he believed had nothing to

⁴² Phil Jenks, “Racial Tokenism at Eastern Baptist College?” *The Spotlight*, March 23, 1970, 2.

do with race. Perhaps, he suggested, the real problem was not white racism but “some of the things some of the Blacks are doing and saying on our campus.” The Black Student Union at Messiah had not only called for the hiring of black professors and the establishment of a black studies program. It demanded—and received!—an apology from the white student body for its racism. Heise believed this behavior was not just disagreeable, but harmful to Christian community. In the Christian academic community, those who sought to draw attention to racism were the real purveyors of racial tension. “We must get back to the point where race is no issue and skin color is overlooked,” he pleaded.⁴³

Heise’s direct attack on black students was somewhat unusual. More often white students made a more elaborate theological case for why black students should stop talking about race. After black students at Nyack College participated in the national Black Solidarity Day in the fall of 1970, a white student offered a series of indignant questions. “Isn’t it true that Jesus’ sacrifice was for all men? Isn’t it true that those that take Him as Lord and Savior become part of His Body?...Didn’t Jesus break down all barriers with what He did on Calvary? If the response to these questions is yes, why then in a so called Christian school where everyone is supposed to be...part of Christ’s body...are there words in our vocabulary such as Black Brother, White Brother, and so on?” For this student and many other white students, race-talk wasn’t merely misguided or unhelpful. It called into question the maturity of black students’ Christian faith. Anyone who “persists in using racially charged language with regards to another child of

⁴³ Steve Heise, Untitled Editorial, *Ivy Rustles*, April 4, 1972, 2.

God had better sit down with God and re-evaluate his or her form of Christianity,” he concluded.⁴⁴

The colorblind assumptions of white students collided with a new generation of black students who insisted on celebrating their blackness. Shaped by the civil rights movement and black power, many black students took pride in their blackness and refused to hide it. White students often found this bewildering. Rod Alexander, a black student at Covenant College in Tennessee, wrote that he didn't expect many of his readers to understand the point he was trying to make, but “The AFFIRMATION OF OUR BLACKNESS AND OUR HUMANITY IN BLACK IS A BEAUTIFUL, LONG-AWAITED GIFT FROM GOD.” Alexander pointed out that he was not an opponent of Christian unity. But he refused to play by white evangelical rules. “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “this white evangelical concept of ‘oneness’ with black people conspicuously capitulates to America's game entitled, ‘To be one with us, you must be like us.’” For many white students such talk seemed maddeningly vague. What exactly were they doing wrong? A white student explained that he couldn't understand Alexander's affirmation of his blackness “because I don't even know what it means for me to affirm my whiteness.”⁴⁵ Another white student wrote, “I am white and proud of it...If you are white, yellow, black or red, I'm proud of it.” Like many white students, he imagined whiteness and blackness as mirror images of each other, incidental identities that didn't

⁴⁴ Fred Banzer, letter to the editor, *Nyack Forum*, February 11, 1971, 3.

⁴⁵ R.E. Alexander, “Black talk-no.1 (general)” *The Bagpipe*, December 10, 1971, 2; R.E. Alexander, “Black talk-no.3” *The Bagpipe*, January 28, 1972, 2; Tim Belz, “Need for clarity cited,” *The Bagpipe*, January 14, 1972, 3.

matter in comparison to “what’s inside...the state of the heart. Christ has broken down the walls between us; let’s not build them again.”⁴⁶

Black students repeatedly tried to explain that they weren’t trying to build walls; they were trying to find a way to exist in white institutions, and it was extraordinarily hard to do so because their very presence was coded as divisive. Black students often felt that they were welcomed on campus only so long as they submerged their identities and embraced white normativity. At Bethel College, one black student said, “Bethel as a whole doesn’t seem to want blackness here...They want the blacks to conform to white society.”⁴⁷ At Messiah, a black student declared, “Whites are often able to accept Blacks as people, but not as Black people.” Some black students testified that Messiah wanted “shuffling Niggers” who would not challenge the superficial niceties of the campus environment. “Change at Messiah must come from the authorities,” they declared, but “The campus wishes its minority groups to be quiet and unseen.”⁴⁸ Most provocatively, black students often insisted that the way they were being treated called into question the Christian identity of their colleges. “How can Messiah be a Christian college,” they asked, “when it tears apart the personalities and feelings of Black students?”⁴⁹ Precisely because many black students sincerely believed in the unity of the body of Christ and had

⁴⁶ Ed Carpenter, letter to the editor, *The Bagpipe*, November 20, 1972, 6.

⁴⁷ Steve Harris and Del Hampton, “Blacks at Bethel, part IV, Future blacks will need ‘blackness’ at Bethel,” *Bethel Clarion*, May 9, 1975, 5.

⁴⁸ “Minutes of the Ad Hoc Committee on Discrimination,” April 24, 1972, Discrimination Committee 1972-1974 XI – 2 – 3.1, Archives of Messiah College.

⁴⁹ “Minutes of the Messiah College Committee on Discrimination,” November 27, 1972, Discrimination Committee 1972-1974 XI – 2 – 3.1, Archives of Messiah College.

expected to find it on a Christian campus, they felt their disillusionment all the more keenly. “As long as I am part of the Body,” wrote a black student, “you cannot say ‘I do not know any blacks and when I go home and begin my life vocation I will not know any blacks, so why should I read or learn about their problems?’ My problem is your problem. If I am hurting, you, as a part of the Body must feel it. This is scriptural!” She concluded, “There will be no middle ground until whites allow other races to be who God made them to be and you stop trying to melt us into a wishy-washiness of whiteness.”⁵⁰

Paradoxically, even as many white students insisted that race ought not be important among people united in Christ, black students testified that they were objects of fear and fascination on their campuses, alternately shunned and put on display. Barbara Bowser, a black woman who attended Houghton College in rural New York in the 1970s recalled her searing experiences. The questions: “does your color rub off? Is your hair wiry?” And the fears: you can’t come to my house because my father hates “colored people.” While the college claimed it was a welcoming community, she spent her freshman year feeling “terrified” in her white dorm. “I had to stay really close to the Lord to keep from committing suicide,” she concluded.⁵¹ In other cases, black students reported feeling as though they were constantly watched in the dorms. In one instance, two dozen white students looked on in fascination as a black student did her hair.⁵² “This

⁵⁰ Cynthia Robinson, letter to the editor, *The Bagpipe*, December 8, 1972, 5.

⁵¹ Barbara Bowser, “Editorial,” *Houghton Star*, March 3, 1978, 2.

⁵² “Minutes of the Ad Hoc Committee on Discrimination,” April 24, 1972, Discrimination Committee 1972-1974 XI – 2 – 3.1, Archives of Messiah College.

isn't the Bronx Zoo and we're not on display," said one black student.⁵³ In short, black students faced extraordinarily confusing environments. On the one hand they were expected to be no different from white people, while on the other hand they felt reduced to stereotyped stock characters of essentialized blackness. It is not surprising that they often responded with anger and disillusionment.

White administrators were often little better than the students. Wheaton College President Hudson Armerding weakly admitted that "the black students here on campus perceive a problem in their being here," but he seemed to think the causes of the problem were mysterious.⁵⁴ At Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, President Spoelhof came up with the idea of inviting the black students to a "special" dinner featuring "soul food." Maybe, he suggested, "a black student would play or sing or perform some way." But he had doubts about his plan because he didn't know the students, or even how many there were, and worried that a dinner might "provoke a whole series of demands and open up too early a whole can of worms."⁵⁵ The episode could serve as a metaphor for the entire era. The President thought he could establish rapport with black students if he fed them soul food and allowed them to perform their blackness through stereotyped entertainment, but hoped he could pull off the event without any demands being made upon the college. Too often, white administrators cast black students as troublemakers

⁵³ Ailes, "An Unholy War," 3.

⁵⁴ Hudson T. Armerding to Donald L. Fay, March 18, 1970, RG-02-005, Box 9, Folder 12, College Archives, Buswell Library, Wheaton College.

⁵⁵ William Spoelhof memorandum to Dean Vanden Berg, September 27, 1970, C2.1.8 Box 230, Folder 6, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

rather than understanding the sources of their frustration. At North Park College in Chicago, the Board of Directors noted in 1970 that “The younger students are a new breed. They and the black students make it difficult to enforce the rules.”⁵⁶

It didn’t help that white administrators often shared the presumptions of innocence common to many northerners and northern institutions.⁵⁷ With the Jim Crow South as a foil, it was easy for leaders of white evangelical colleges to imagine that they had always been welcoming institutions. As one Wheaton public relations official put it, Wheaton “has a history of demonstrated concern for treating persons on the basis of their individual merit, irrespective of race or color.” It could take pride in its “cosmopolitan student body” and the outreach efforts of its student body to poor people of color in nearby Chicago.⁵⁸ This sense of complacency and self-satisfaction was a barrier to the kinds of reforms black students demanded. White administrators were more likely to be mystified by black discontent than to understand its causes.

Some colleges were more proactive than others in trying to reform their campus environments. Among the most aggressive was Messiah College. In the spring of 1972 Messiah formed an interracial committee of faculty and students to study discrimination

⁵⁶ Board of Directors Minutes, April 18, 1970, Series 9/1/1 Box 10, F.M. Johnson Archives and Special Collections, Brandel Library, North Park University.

⁵⁷ Jason Sokol calls this sensibility “the northern mystique.” See Sokol, *All Eyes Are Upon Us: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

⁵⁸ D.L. Roberts to V.R. Edman, June 16, 1964, RG02004 Box 7 Folder 17, Wheaton College, Illinois.

and draft a statement of policy for the college.⁵⁹ For decades, no such institutional policies had appeared necessary; now, in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, they seemed urgent. In characteristic evangelical fashion, the committee's work was most basically a theological project. Among its first and most important projects was the laborious drafting of a "Theological Prelude to the Study of Racial Discrimination." The committee undertook an extensive fact-finding mission, interviewing students—especially black students—and commissioning a detailed survey to measure racial prejudice among students, faculty, and staff. The committee found that "overt racism is relatively uncommon at Messiah College," but "unvoiced prejudices...appear to be rather widespread throughout the white community." The committee found extensive "close-mindedness" and "cultural isolation rooted in apathy and ignorance."⁶⁰ More is known about the racial climate of Messiah precisely because the administration was more willing than most to try to understand it and make changes. At other institutions where the record is silent, the climate is likely to have been worse.

Though white students and administrators spoke the language of unity in Christ, grotesque indifference to the black experience was built into campus cultures and traditions. At Nyack College in New York, the 1968 freshman class initiation week "ended with the bang of the auctioneer's gavel Friday night. After proving their worth by

⁵⁹ D. Ray Hostetter to various faculty, March 30, 1972, Discrimination Committee 1972-1974 XI – 2 – 3.1, Archives of Messiah College.

⁶⁰ "Final Report of the Committee on Discrimination in the Area of Race," May 1973, Discrimination Committee 1972-1974 XI – 2 – 3.1, Archives of Messiah College.

various feats and tests of endurance, the frosh slaves were auctioned off...”⁶¹ That fall the black student population had surged to more than 20, including three of Howard Jones’s daughters. The black students formed an “Afro-American Society,” but what they thought of the “slave auction” was not recorded. Similar “Slave Day” events, such as one at Messiah College in 1978, were widely seen as innocuous fun.⁶² Such activities went on with the full support of the college community. They were not underground hazing activities. They were ostensibly harmless traditions proudly reported on in college publications.

To become welcoming places, these and other practices would have to change. As white evangelical colleges felt the ground shifting beneath their feet, they found it difficult to keep up. Things that might not have drawn a raised eyebrow a decade before could suddenly blow up into major controversies. That is what happened at Moody Bible Institute when the school invited the fundamentalist preacher John R. Rice to Founders Week for 1971. Rice was the editor of *Sword of the Lord*, a popular newspaper that blasted Billy Graham’s more ecumenical brand of evangelicalism and called for separation from the godless ideologies of modern America, including that of racial integration. It almost beggars belief that President Culbertson could not have known that Rice advocated racist views. But just a few short years before, that fact would have been unlikely to be counted against him. In the new world the civil rights movement wrought, with increasingly vocal black evangelicals among the voices in MBI’s orbit, it mattered a

⁶¹ “Frosh Learn Slave Trade,” *Nyack Forum*, September 30, 1968, 3; “Black Students On Black Power,” *Nyack Forum*, October 17, 1968, 6.

⁶² “‘Slaves’ For Hire,” *Intercom*, March 30, 1978.

great deal. Culbertson was slow to realize this. Just months after Melvin Warren and Leona Jenkins' protest of MBI racism, Culbertson reached out to Rice as a "Dear Brother" whose presence at Founders' Week would bring him "real joy." Rice agreed to come and MBI duly announced his inclusion in the lineup of speakers.⁶³

Then some MBI students reportedly alerted Culbertson to Rice's racist screeds, including a defense of the white supremacist Bob Jones University, which Rice published just weeks before Culbertson's invitation.⁶⁴ It is likely Culbertson had more on his mind than the concerns of a few students. He had received an anonymous letter purporting to be from a "radical group" threatening to unite Students for a Democratic Society, Black Panthers, and other radical organizations to launch "one of the biggest demonstrations Chicago has ever seen." If Culbertson didn't disinvite Jones, "we are coming," it warned, and MBI's reputation would be "destroyed."⁶⁵ Jealous of the institution's good name, Culbertson held back a letter finalizing the details of Rice's visit. Instead, the next day he sent Rice a brief note explaining that Rice's segregationist editorial gave him no choice but to rescind the invitation. "It was our hope to put the emphasis upon...the fundamentals of the faith, but now...your article has shifted it to civil rights." MBI could not let stand any impression that it supported a segregationist stance.

⁶³ William Culbertson to John R. Rice, June 3 1970, John R. Rice to William Culbertson, June 8, 1970 President's Collection: Culbertson, Box 1 Folder "Rice: March-November 1970", Crowell Library Archives, MBI.

⁶⁴ "Dull Sword," *Christianity Today*, February 26, 1971, 39.

⁶⁵ Anonymous letter postmarked December 6 1970, President's Collection: Culbertson, Box 1 Folder "Rice: December 1970", Crowell Library Archives, MBI.

Even at this late stage, Culbertson continued to think of Rice's anti-black hatred as separable from the core of Christian doctrine. It was precisely this kind of thinking that angered black students and inflamed the sense of crisis on white evangelical campuses. In a more fulsome explanation that Culbertson elected not to send, he was more explicit about what was at stake for MBI: "Our announcement of your coming has set up a flood of [illegible] and the threat of reprisal." The city was "seething" with racial tension, and MBI could not risk being associated with Rice.⁶⁶ The response to Culbertson's decision paralleled the anger directed at Wheaton College after the memorial service for Dr. King. While Culbertson appears to have had a great deal of support from faculty, administration, and black evangelicals, many Rice-supporters and Moody alumni wrote to express their frustration with the decision. Some threatened to withhold funds. Others wondered if they could still trust Moody to stand for the fundamentals of the faith.⁶⁷ Culbertson's response emphasized MBI's colorblind bona fides. As he put it in a letter to a pastor critical of his decision, "Through times of changing social mores the policy has

⁶⁶ William Culbertson to John R. Rice, unsent letter, December 7, 1970; William Culbertson to John R. Rice, December 8, 1970; handwritten notes on MBI interoffice memo paper; all in President's Collection: Culbertson, Box 1 Folder "Rice: December 1970", Crowell Library Archives, MBI. Adam Laats suggests Culbertson's decision reflected pressure from core MBI constituencies. In my judgment, given the timing of the respective letters and the contents of Culbertson's handwritten memo, it appears highly likely that the anonymous threat was decisive in Culbertson's calculations. See Laats, *Fundamentalist U*, 239.

⁶⁷ Numerous letters to Culbertson are found in the Rice folders in Box 1 of the Culbertson collection.

always been to emphasize the salvation from God by which all men who believe are made one in Christ.”⁶⁸

Colorblind theology like that Culbertson espoused led white evangelical colleges to both distance themselves from the racism on offer from places like Bob Jones University, *and* to look with alarm at black students’ race-conscious protests. Black students felt the bind campus environments put on them. “[W]e are loved for being ignorant and hated for being militant,” said one black student.⁶⁹ As much as white administrators feared black students’ activism, the demands black students made at evangelical colleges were usually not radical. They amounted to the claim that they ought to be able to be both black and Christian. At Wheaton College, President Armerding and other leaders described black students as radical, yet their demands were measured: black studies, curriculum reform, clarification on the interracial dating policy.⁷⁰ Many white evangelical students and administrators experienced these claims as radical and disorienting precisely because they made so little distinction between their racial and religious identities. As one white administrator at Wheaton confessed, “the college has allowed itself to think that white culture is the only Christian culture.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ William Culbertson to Reverend Menno Harms, January 25, 1971, President’s Collection: Culbertson, Box 1 Folder “Rice: January 1971”, Crowell Library Archives, MBI.

⁶⁹ Phyllis Mckoy, “Report on Black Solidarity Day,” *Nyack Forum*, February 11, 1971, 4.

⁷⁰ Memo from President Armerding to Dean of Faculty, March 26, 1970, RG-02-005, Box 9, Folder 12, College Archives, Buswell Library, Wheaton College.

⁷¹ Unsigned and undated document, RG-07-001, Box 4, Folder 1, College Archives, Buswell Library, Wheaton College.

The close identification of whiteness with Christianity made black students' attraction to black power all the more shocking. Some defended the black power movement wholeheartedly and tried to craft Christian forms of black power or black nationalism. Many embraced some of the language of James Cone, if not all his conclusions, and insisted "Black Theology" had something to teach white evangelicals who had imbibed "a theology of the oppressor." Such views were anathema on a colorblind campus. John Skinner, a black student at Nyack College, diagnosed the situation in 1972. As blacks became more race conscious, whites increasingly threw the charge of racism back at them in a bid to delegitimize black power and displace racism from a white problem to a black problem. As long as blacks continued "pointing their finger at the oppressor who happens to be white, the oppressor will continue to call blacks racists. I ask you, who is the true racist and who will do something about racism?"⁷² Ronald Brown, a black student at North Park, said he would not allow the college to "assimilate" him. To those upset about the perceived separatism of the Black Student Association, Brown simply quoted Stokely Carmichael. The BSA was going to be a black organization, led by blacks. This wasn't anti-white, Brown suggested, it was opposed to white paternalism. In another article titled "Help Wipe Out Fascist Oppressors"—published in the student newspaper!—Brown called for a revolution, non-violent if possible, by force if necessary.⁷³

⁷² John Skinner, "Insight on Blackness," *Nyack Forum*, February 17, 1972, 2; February 28, 1972, 2.

⁷³ Ronald Earl Brown, "Blacks Do Not Need Paternalism," *The College News*, December 1, 1969, 3. Ronald Earl Brown, "Help Wipe Out Fascist Oppressors," *The College News*, September 29, 1969, 2, 5.

Bill Pannell gave voice to the new militancy of young black evangelicals like Brown and Skinner. Few were more thoroughly engaged in white evangelical networks than Pannell, so when his book, *My Friend, the Enemy*, came out in the awful month of April, 1968, just as the urge for black recruitment gained ground, it came as a shock to many.⁷⁴ Pannell relentlessly attacked white evangelicals for their racism and spiritual pieties in the face of a deadly struggle. The promise of salvation “gives little balm when viewing the bloodied form of a twelve-year-old lying face down on Newark’s cold pavement,” he wrote. “But what would my white brother know of this? He taught me to sing ‘Take The World But Give Me Jesus.’ I took Jesus. He took the world and then voted right wing to insure his property rights.”⁷⁵ This was the kind of critique, taking in questions of class and economy, that had rarely been heard in evangelical circles up to this time. Acerbic, sarcastic, and angry, Pannell pulled few punches. “I have grown weary,” he explained, “of that kind of love which is altogether willing to accept me as long as I remain a nice Negro—humble, patient and understanding. Well, I am none of these...”⁷⁶ While many evangelicals wanted to speak of division, mistrust, and misunderstanding, Pannell spoke of white oppressors and the black oppressed. “What right,” he asked, “has the oppressor to demand that his victim be saved from sin?” Pannell pointed out that white evangelicals were eager to engage in all sorts of moral crusades. “But mention the inhumanity of a society which with unbelievable indifference

⁷⁴ <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/this-is-then-that-was-now/>

⁷⁵ William E. Pannell, *My Friend, The Enemy* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1968), introduction.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

imprisons the ‘souls of black folks,’ and these crusaders begin mumbling about sin. All right. I’ll play the game, my brother. Whose sin shall we talk about?”⁷⁷

Pannell even defended black power. In a country organized around “white power,” African Americans were now doing what immigrant groups had always done to secure their progress: banding together in ethnic solidarity and “meeting power with power.” When immigrants did it, people called it uplift and personal responsibility. But as soon as black people applied the same strategies, “shouts of ‘foul play’ rise from my conservative friend.” Pannell’s attention to power and social context cut through the emerging assumptions of colorblind theology. He seemed to sense that white evangelicals were in danger of exchanging one anti-black view for another. “You can ignore a man in several ways,” he wrote. “You can refuse to ‘see’ him by insisting that he be a man and not a Negro (‘I never think of you as a Negro. To me you’re just as good as I am’) or you can overlook him by relating to him as a Negro and not a man (‘Negroes are so full of fun, so graceful and happy, so child-like in their approach to life’).” If the latter view was in decline, the former was in the ascendancy. Both, Pannell thundered, were functions of white supremacy. The *Evangelical Beacon* accused Pannell of “super-sensitiveness” and “extreme views” but admitted that the book should cause white evangelicals to “confess our sins of prejudice” and “consider man as man regardless of color.” This simple colorblind takeaway suggested the reviewer might have missed Pannell’s point entirely. A white evangelical college student declared, “When I finished [it] I wanted to find every

⁷⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

black person I know and apologize.”⁷⁸ But for every white student who was awakened to a new understanding of the black experience, there were many more who reacted negatively.

Act Three: Retrenchment

As white students reacted against race-conscious black students and white administrators rejected demands for far-reaching institutional reforms, they gave to colorblind theology a distinctly reactionary cast. Howard Jones had used the claims of unity in Christ to press for racial change and inclusion. Now precisely the same claims were deployed to maintain whiteness at the center of evangelical colleges. The decline of the first wave of recruitment efforts was a widespread phenomenon by the middle of the 1970s. On some campuses, early black recruitment campaigns collapsed in the face of white resentment and black disillusionment. Black power advocacy on white evangelical campuses was not only a measure of the radicalism of incoming students. It revealed the deep disappointment of students who arrived on evangelical campuses expecting to find acceptance in a Christian community. For some, a semester on such a campus was a radicalizing experience all by itself, but white administrators seemed rarely to understand this. In some cases, administrators deliberately pulled the plug on recruitment programs when it became obvious their institutions were ill-prepared for black students. A common struggle at all institutions was the indifference or hostility of most of the student body. As

⁷⁸ Herbert E. Kyrk, Review of *My Friend, The Enemy*, in *Evangelical Beacon*, September 24, 1968, 25. *Brethren Missionary Herald*, September 7, 1968, 16; “Annette Griffiths, “What’s wrong with whites?” *The Moody Student*, May 8, 1970, 2.

one white student declared, “I am tired of being made to feel guilty about minority students. They’re cramming this minority business down our throats!”⁷⁹

In nearly all cases, the resources and staffing devoted to the recruitment and retention of black students proved insufficient. While committees established to study these issues almost invariably sounded the alarm about the need for more funding and more cultural opportunities for students of color, such resources were hard to come by. Too often, a committee on “minority concerns” or some other similar title was merely the administrative backwater where such concerns went to die. Questions recorded in committee minutes spoke volumes: “Is this a venting committee?” “Are we powerless?”⁸⁰ The “Committee on Disadvantaged Students” at North Park admitted that one of the problems was that white students and administrators knew next to nothing about black people or black culture and were doing “little or nothing about remedying this deficiency.”⁸¹ Faculty often dragged their heels, especially when urged to hire black professors or make changes to their classes. At a tense meeting between black students and white faculty at Wheaton College in the spring of 1970, faculty members asked what they should do. “Shut up and listen,” came the reply. President Armerding described the

⁷⁹ Joyce Suber, “Recruitment, Admission, Retention, and success of Minority Students,” February 18, 1981, 4, RG-02-005, Box 31, Folder 19, College Archives, Buswell Library, Wheaton College.

⁸⁰ Multi-cultural Relations Committee Minutes, May 9, 1983 and November 11, 1983, RG-07-08, Box 27, Folder 4, College Archives, Buswell Library, Wheaton College.

⁸¹ Unsigned and undated document circa 1970, Series 9/1/26 Box 8 Folder 5 Committee on Disadvantaged Students 1969-1970, F.M. Johnson Archives and Special Collections, Brandel Library, North Park University.

faculty response as variously “guilt-ridden...unimpressed...alienated.” Even when college leaders pushed for change they often faced pushback from faculty jealous of their prerogatives. When Armerding urged Wheaton professors to incorporate a more multicultural focus into their classes, one responded that the “contributions of the more ‘primitive’ cultures” should certainly be included, but “not to the point of over-reacting with making superficial connections.”⁸² When administrators honestly faced a realistic assessment of how much their institutions would need to change to become welcoming to African Americans, it could be dispiriting. One official at Calvin College declared, “I think the fact is that it’s not going to happen.”⁸³ The lack of substantive action spoke volumes to black students. As one Wheaton administrator confessed, “if you think that you do not consider white culture superior to black culture, yet you continue to know nothing about their culture, then you may be a member of a racist community.”⁸⁴

For most white evangelical students and administrators, the presence of black students proved far more difficult than they had imagined, in part because it forced them to encounter their own whiteness. Thinking about whiteness was theologically disturbing for many evangelicals, for it raised the possibility that their faith was not unmediated divine truth but was instead a culturally and racially conditioned religiosity. While many of the factors causing racial retrenchment on white evangelical campuses were

⁸² Memo from Alva Steffler to Donald Mitchell, February 1, 1974, RG-03-002, Box 15, Folder 2, College Archives, Buswell Library, Wheaton College.

⁸³ Bud Ipema, “A Profile of the Minority Youth Served by the Christian Reformed Church: Results of a Pre-Conference Questionnaire,” 36, C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 8, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

⁸⁴ Unsigned and undated document, RG-07-001, Box 4, Folder 1, College Archives, Buswell Library, Wheaton College.

indigenous to these institutions, the turn away from black demands also reflected the palpable fatigue evident in American political life in the 1970s as bipartisan white activism against busing and affirmative action marked the boundaries of the civil rights movement's gains. Then, too, there was simply a lot going on. As one white evangelical leader put it, "After Vietnam, ecology, women's lib, Watergate, and the energy shortage, it is difficult indeed to remember back to the 'olden days' in 1968, when the problem of race relations was in focus and near the top of everyone's list of interests or concerns."⁸⁵

The alienation and cultural disconnect black students experienced on white evangelical campuses was becoming widely known among black evangelicals. By 1974, "after many hours of conversation" with students of color attending white evangelical schools, Bill Pannell "concluded that evangelical schools as they now exist are inadequate to train minority leaders effectively." Their culture was suburban, middle-class, entirely out of touch with the realities of a world of urban injustice. Students of color didn't fit in, Pannell said, and tended "to view the atmosphere of an evangelical campus as make-believe, where make-believe whites try to absorb a make-believe theology for a fantasy world."⁸⁶ The difficulties for black students were so obvious and consistent that the National Black Evangelical Association sponsored a "Handbook for Black Christian Students," or, as editor Ruth Lewis Bentley subtitled the booklet, "How To Remain Sane and Grow In A White College Setting."⁸⁷ Her guiding principles for the

⁸⁵ Anthony Diekema, "Race Relations—Which Way?" March 8, 1974, C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 4, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

⁸⁶ Pannell, *My Friend, The Enemy*, 126.

⁸⁷ Ruth Lewis Bentley, editor, *Handbook for Black Christian Students* (Chicago: The National Black Christian Students Conference), 1974, revised edition 1975.

book were that black students needed Jesus and they needed each other. She had seen black students lose their faith altogether in the face of racism on college campuses. Bentley counseled black students to band together and find a solid Christian identity in their “redeemed blackness.”⁸⁸

Bentley gathered a team of black evangelical contributors who promoted Christian race-consciousness, even incorporating strains of black power, black theology, and black nationalism. One essay discouraged black students from spending too much energy trying to educate white students. The most likely outcome was emotional exhaustion for the black student and little change on the part of white students. Instead, the black student should pursue academic excellence and the building up of a black student group while encouraging white students, in an echo of Stokely Carmichael, to work against “the oppressive structures and the white racism” of their own community.⁸⁹ Another essay discouraged interracial dating on the grounds that it harmed black families and disrupted the ongoing “psychological liberation” the black power movement had initiated. “The first and most important step in rebuilding the black nation,” said Ronald Potter, “is developing strong black Christian families.” These black families would counter American standards of beauty and value, while integrated couples would continue to harm the psychology of black women and children. In contrast, “Nation-building within the black family will bring about health for the black man, the black

⁸⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 37-38.

woman, and the black child.”⁹⁰ Though designed as a handbook for black students on white campuses, it could easily be read as a brief for attending a historically black college.

The retreat from black recruitment left some colleges with fewer black students at the end of the process than the beginning. At Bethel, the sudden presence of black students had stirred ugly (and false) rumors that the school was lowering academic and theological standards.⁹¹ In 1972, six students were dismissed from the school for violating the code of conduct. Four of the students were black, meaning that an extraordinarily high proportion of the black students were expelled. Controversy was so intense that Bethel simply canceled its black recruitment campaign outright. By the spring of 1975, 0.4% of Bethel’s students were black.⁹² Wheaton College shut down its Compensatory Education Program and began a new initiative in 1970 that targeted black students deemed less risky. By 1980, Wheaton had a grand total of 20 black students, less than in the early 1970s. Black enrollment at Calvin peaked at 50 students in 1974-1975 and declined thereafter. By then, some Christian Reformed activists ministering to African Americans in poor urban neighborhoods felt they could no longer recommend Calvin College to prospective black students. The insensitivity and abuse were too great. President Spoelhof was resigned to the outcome. “It could be that we just are not geared

⁹⁰ Ibid., 39-43.

⁹¹ Steve Harris, “Blacks at Bethel, part 1, 1969-1971: How Bethel recruited black students,” *Bethel Clarion*, March 21, 1975, 4.

⁹² Steve Harris, “Blacks at Bethel, part 2, First Bethel blacks faced problems,” *Bethel Clarion*, April 11, 1975, 4; Steve Harris and Del Hampton, “Blacks at Bethel, part IV, Future blacks will need ‘blackness’ at Bethel,” *Bethel Clarion*, May 9, 1975, 5.

for the minority student. I hate to arrive at that conclusion, but it could be true that in our specific situation there are simply insurmountable difficulties.”⁹³ At North Park College, the black student population in 1990 was smaller than it had been a generation before.

The unique histories and ethno-religious identities of many white evangelical colleges complicated their integration efforts. Bethel was Swedish Baptist, Calvin was Dutch Reformed, Messiah was German Anabaptist, Moody was nondenominational fundamentalist. In 1972, a Christian Reformed Church report revealed that every member of the governing boards of Dordt College and Calvin College was ethnically Dutch. Even all the maintenance workers at both schools were white. An ostensibly humorous bumper sticker on sale in the Calvin bookstore was emblematic: “If yer not Dutch yer not mutch” [*sic*].⁹⁴ Into the 1980s, admissions officials at colleges such as Houghton and North Park seemed more concerned about maintaining the denominational character of their student bodies than in becoming more diverse. For denominations that were almost entirely white, these recruiting priorities had racial implications. Moreover, nearly all schools drew on donor bases and prospective student populations that had felt the influence of fundamentalism and white supremacist theology through the first half of the twentieth century. These influences whitened evangelicalism theologically and narrowed its social

⁹³ “Calvin College Enrollment of Minority Students, 1969-1977,” C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 5; Steven Rhodes and Wilma Knoll to Anthony Diekema, October 9, 1976, C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 5; Gordon D. Negen to Dean Donald Boender, December 19, 1974; William Spoelhof to Gordon D. Negen, December 17, 1974, C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 6, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

⁹⁴ “An Inventory of Personnel Practices: A Final Report of Component E in the Study of Racism in the Christian Reformed Church,” Table Two, February 29, 1972, C2.1.8 Box 230 Folder 4, Heritage Hall, Calvin College; Dawn DeHaan, letter to the editor, *The Chimes*, September 23, 1970, 2.

ambitions. The arrival of black students in the 1960s required nothing less than theological reformation and a new communal identity. By the middle of the 1970s, white evangelical campuses scaled back expectations for racial change. Lyle Hillegas, the President of Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California admitted that “we have had particular difficulty in getting blacks.” Hillegas said the school’s Hispanic and Asian students seemed to “fit in better.” Black students, he said, “easily become isolated” and seemed to reject even the well-intentioned actions of white students. In spite of all the college’s efforts—serving soul food, trying to include them in the planning of social events, featuring a “Black Emphasis Week” in chapel—Hillegas concluded “I do not think we have succeeded at all.” David McKenna, president of Seattle Pacific College, believed white evangelical colleges were being asked to bear the brunt of a broader problem. They served an overwhelmingly white constituency. Yet they faced pressure from the government and from some evangelicals to diversify, even as “the evangelical Christian community has not provided us with a black evangelical base from which to draw.” Colleges were being asked to solve a problem that only the larger evangelical community could resolve.⁹⁵

Conclusion

For white evangelical colleges, becoming more diverse was not only a matter of changing curriculum and hiring new faculty. It meant redefining the body of Christ. While the black revolt on mainstream campuses produced significant systemic changes such as the

⁹⁵ “Christian Educators Face the Issues,” *Christianity Today*, November 7, 1975, 8-12.

rise of departments of African American Studies, on white evangelical campuses black students' demands were both more modest *and* less likely to be met. White administrators pleaded institutional poverty. Not unreasonably, they pointed out that many of their institutions simply did not have the resources that a large secular college could deploy. This was true, but the theological and social context mattered too. Administrators at white evangelical schools were trying to manage environments that they needed to sell to donors, alumni, and prospective students not just as academically rigorous and in keeping with the times, but as wholesome Christian spaces where community centered in Christ was enacted. Many stakeholders in white evangelical colleges believed the very idea of black studies programs, affirmative action, black student groups, and the like, were antithetical to that vision of Christian community.

In environments where whiteness had become theologically important, becoming an inclusive academic institution raised core questions about Christian community and the nature of evangelical identity. By their very presence, black students revealed the symbiosis of whiteness and Christianity that had been so invisible to its practitioners. Anne Gilliam, a black student at Messiah College, exposed the racial theology of her institution in 1973. Like many black students, she had arrived with high expectations of a Christian community that could transcend race. During her four years there, she had become disillusioned. She now saw her role differently. "My job," she wrote, "is to show the white Christians here that they have been living a lie in the form of Jesus Christ. He has been a white Christ with white middle class values, and I am neither white nor am I

middle class.”⁹⁶ Gilliam’s four years at Messiah came at the height of the civil rights era ferment on white evangelical campuses. By the middle of the 1970s, racial tensions declined and token integration reigned. It seemed that many colleges had managed to put the genie back in the bottle. But beneath the surface, the struggle for an evangelical faith beyond the investment in whiteness would continue.

⁹⁶ Anne Gilliam, “The Black Christian’s Purpose: M.C. as a Mission Field,” *Ivy Rustles*, October 17, 1973, 2.

CHAPTER 4: GROWING THE HOMOGENEOUS CHURCH

While white evangelical colleges were making new efforts to recruit black students, white evangelical churches were moving in a very different direction. The conundrum for colorblind Christians was simple: overt church segregation had come into disrepute, but proactive church integration remained extremely difficult.¹ In this climate, the teachings of the Church Growth Movement emerged rather suddenly in the 1970s as the newest strategy for starting and growing evangelical churches within the United States.² At the heart of the CGM's teaching was the idea that socially homogeneous churches grew fastest. As the Movement's founder, Donald McGavran, declared, "Men

¹ The obstacles were legion, from differing styles of worship to perennial fears of interracial sex. See for example "Interracial Romance: Pastor's Dilemma," *Eternity*, April 1972, 12-13, 33; Margaret Rowe, "Mom, What Does the Bible Say About Blacks Marrying Whites?" *Eternity*, August 1976, 29-31.

² Despite the outsize influence of the Church Growth Movement, historians have not paid much attention to it. This is starting to change with the publication of Melani McCalister's new book, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Though McCalister gives serious attention to the CGM, she conflates its influence with that of Billy-Graham style mass evangelism. This interpretation obscures important differences between Graham and the CGM, most notably in their approach to race and their strategies of evangelization. Other historians have generally ignored not only the transnational influence of the CGM, but the movement in its entirety. Major recent works on twentieth century evangelicalism ignore or barely mention the CGM. See for example Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 2014; Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 2017. An exception is Molly Worthen's study of the battle between reason and revelation in evangelicalism. Worthen frames the CGM as an example of evangelicals' conflicted epistemologies. With respect to race, she argues that it gave evangelical leaders "a framework for coaxing their followers out of old prejudices" but "may have slowed the pace of integration." This seems an overly generous reading of the CGM's record on race. See Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 137, 140.

like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”³ “Show me a growing church,” professor C. Peter Wagner wrote in 1974, “and I’ll show you a homogeneous...church.”⁴ Critics worried that this was just another way of justifying segregation. The black evangelical activist John Perkins wrote that it was awfully “convenient” for white evangelicals to suddenly discover after the civil rights movement that “homogenous churches grow fastest!”⁵ But for colorblind Christians, the CGM offered a very appealing path forward: absolution for their monochrome congregations, and the promise of church growth without uncomfortable racial controversies.

In a post-civil rights movement age when colorblind Christians dared not defend segregation outright and, indeed, no longer wanted to do so, the Church Growth Movement gave white evangelicals theological justification and cultural analysis to recast their segregated churches and ongoing appeals to white identity as faithful evangelism rather than racism. Church growth theorists insisted their ideas did not offer any support for American segregation. After all, the origins of their movement were not to be found in the struggles of the civil rights-era American South, but in Donald McGavran’s work on the mission field of central India in the 1930s. In CGM practice, white middle-class suburbanites in the United States effectively became “a people”—a distinct cultural group with a strong sense of ethnic identity and loyalty—not unlike the Kikuyu in Kenya or the Satnamis in India. In this way church growth theorists came to understand white

³ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

⁴ C. Peter Wagner, “What Makes Churches Grow?” *Eternity*, June 1974, 56.

⁵ John Perkins, *With Justice for All: A Strategy for Community Development*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982), 107-108.

identity in the United States not as racial hierarchy but as cultural pluralism. Instead of resisting American racial hierarchy, white evangelicals could invest in it to grow their churches in an era of white flight.

Precisely because whiteness was normative for colorblind Christians, these investments appeared to them as innocuous rather than discriminatory. Though the CGM as a popular American phenomenon was a long time in coming, when it burst on the scene in the 1970s it helped to reify American evangelicalism as white, middle class, and suburban. Through the CGM, ideas generated by American missionaries in the global south in the 1930s circled back to the United States, where white evangelicals applied them in thousands of local churches in the 1970s and beyond. David Hollinger has recently suggested that American Protestant missionaries in the twentieth century created an accidental “boomerang effect.” They set out to change the world, and ended up transforming the United States.⁶ The Church Growth Movement was the evangelical corollary to this boomerang effect. Throughout the civil rights era, evangelical missionaries around the world had warned that racism at home hindered the cause of Christ abroad. These concerns made foreign missions a seemingly progressive force for evangelical racial change in the United States.⁷ But the CGM revealed a different side to

⁶ David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). Though Hollinger is mostly focused on liberal Protestants, he does mention McGavran briefly, describing his move “from liberal to conservative missionary theory” as “a striking exception to the general pattern of migration in the opposite direction.” Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad*, 74.

⁷ For representative contemporary examples, see Harold Lindell, *Missionary Principles and Practice* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1955); T.B. Maston, *The Bible and Race* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1959), 94-95. Maston wrote, “What is said in North Carolina today is known in Nigeria tomorrow!”

this missionary influence, one that doubled down on the appeal of whiteness in an age of pluralism. In its creative insistence that the power of group identity—even whiteness in the United States—could be harnessed to grow churches, the CGM demonstrated the potency of transnational exchange and the vitality of an American evangelicalism eager to borrow, appropriate, and repurpose changes in American culture for its own enduring goals of evangelization. To understand how white evangelical churches adapted to the civil rights movement, a church growth seminar turned out to be a far more revealing site of activism than a Republican Party meeting.

The Origins of the Church Growth Movement

Church Growth Movement founder Donald McGavran lived an extraordinary life. His career stretching across most of the twentieth century profoundly shaped American missionary practices and American churches.⁸ Along the way, McGavran charted a course from the liberal Protestantism of his early years to an evangelicalism more suited to his crusading spirit. Born in India in 1897, he was the son and grandson of missionaries to that country. He set foot in the United States for the first time in 1910. He remained in the United States into young adulthood, receiving his undergraduate education at Butler College in Indianapolis. While at Butler he came under the influence

⁸ Historian Brian Stanley describes the CGM as “Possibly the most influential school of thinking in modern evangelical missiology” and argues that it “has shaped a whole family off approaches to evangelistic strategy, both in the western and non-western worlds...Present-day 'seeker services'...all evangelistic strategies that pay particular attention to the need to express the gospel in terms of the prevalent cultural assumptions of the hearers can trace their origins to lessons learned outside Europe, usually through the medium of church growth theory." See Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 23.

of the Student Volunteer Movement, an influential missionary coalition that recruited college students for the foreign mission field.⁹ Inspired by the SVM, McGavran decided to become a missionary.¹⁰

McGavran's outlook at this time was broadly ecumenical rather than fundamentalist. He was a member of the Disciples of Christ, a Protestant denomination focused more on Christian unity than on litigating the so-called fundamentalist versus modernist battles of the era.¹¹ Before returning to India as a missionary in his own right in 1923, McGavran earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree at Yale Divinity School. He then took advantage of a furlough between 1930 and 1932 to complete coursework for his Ph.D. in Religious Education at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University.¹² Trained in the power centers of liberal Protestantism, McGavran would later say that in his younger years he had "counted myself one of the enlightened."¹³ In his early years in India he was comfortable in the fold of liberal Protestant missions. McGavran and his

⁹ The Student Volunteer Movement traced its origins back to an 1886 conference backed by the famous evangelist Dwight Moody. For more on the SVM see Nathan D. Showalter, *The End of A Crusade: the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions and the Great War* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Gary L. McIntosh, "The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran: A Short Overview," American Society for Church Growth Annual Meeting, November, 2005, 8-15.

¹¹ As Timothy Gloege has argued, both groups were in fact "equally modern." Timothy E.W. Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: Fundamentalism, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 9.

¹² Gary L. McIntosh, *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist* (Boca Raton, FL: Church Leader Insights, 2015), 84-87.

¹³ Donald McGavran, "not sent," December 14, 1968, CN 178 Box 4 Folder 6, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Illinois.

missionary partners declared the good news of Jesus Christ, established schools to educate the poor, and built hospitals to care for the sick. But hard experience upset his youthful self-satisfaction, and he began to wonder to what end all his efforts were pointing.

By the mid-1930s, McGavran became increasingly concerned about the stagnant condition of the missionary-founded churches. Why weren't they growing? In search of answers, he began to shed the liberal theology he had learned at Yale and Union. The most formative intellectual influence driving McGavran's shift was the Methodist missionary to India J. Waskom Pickett. In 1933 Pickett published *Christian Mass Movements in India*, a study that anticipated much of McGavran's later thought. Pickett and McGavran had come of age in the era of the "white man's burden." European imperialism meant not only soldiers, railroads, and resource extraction. It meant European and American missionaries seeking to save, educate, and uplift populations imagined as uncivilized.¹⁴ Pickett challenged some of these paternalistic assumptions and emphasized the importance of contextualizing Christianity in indigenous cultures. He criticized the individualism of western missionaries and called for a more evidence-based approach to missions. It was not enough for missionaries to be well-intentioned. They also had to assess whether their missionary methods were working. Pickett insisted that if western missionaries discarded their paternalism and individualistic assumptions whole

¹⁴ Though, as Jay Riley Case has pointed out, successful missionaries were often the first to push back against western paternalism and adopt the cultural practices of the groups they were trying to reach. See Case, *An Unpredictable Gospel: American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

populations could turn to Christianity without disrupting indigenous social bonds and cultural autonomy.¹⁵

McGavran was enthralled. His own experiences seemed to confirm Pickett's ideas. The people of central India were not becoming Christians. Churches were not growing. Why not? "We have rendered lip-service to Evangelism," McGavran wrote, "but have been too busy to practice it."¹⁶ Part of the problem, in his view, was that the good works the mission stations were doing were separating Indian Christians from their communities.¹⁷ Children attending missionary schools might become good Christians, but in the process they were also becoming like their teachers. As a result, they were cut off from their culture. After McGavran wrote a glowing review of Pickett's book, the two men worked together in 1936 to prepare a "Mass Movement Survey" of church growth in central India. McGavran believed the report demonstrated that there was an unprecedented opportunity for "rapid growth along castewise lines..."¹⁸ After McGavran's self-described awakening, he worked as a missionary in India for nearly two more decades and tried, by trial and error, to implement his new ideas about evangelism.

¹⁵ Art McPhee, "Bishop J. Waskom Pickett's Rethinking on 1930s Missions in India," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 19 (2002): 31-38.

¹⁶ Donald McGavran to "Dear Friends," September 6, 1936, CN 178 Box 25 Folder 10, BGCA.

¹⁷ Donald McGavran, "Mission Committees & Church Growth," CN 178 Box 25 Folder 9, BGCA.

¹⁸ "The Crisis Immediately Confronting Churches and Mission in Mid-India," CN 178 Box 25 Folder 9, BGCA. See also, Donald McGavran, "Dear Herb," December 11, 1973, CN 178 Box 4 Folder 9, BGCA. In this letter McGavran describes the mid-1930s as a particularly formative period in the evolution of his thought. See also, J. Waskom Pickett, "Donald A. McGavran: Missionary, Scholar, Ecumenist, Evangelist" in *God, Man and Church Growth* edited by A.R. Tippett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1-9.

He also studied other mission agencies in India to understand why some churches were growing and some were not. He came to believe there was nothing more important than the questions of how people become Christian and how churches grow. All human beings faced an eternal destiny, he knew, and only the good news of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection could save them. It was incumbent upon missionaries to use the best possible methods to bring the greatest numbers of people into the Christian fold.

In the spring of 1954, McGavran toured several states in East and Central Africa in a bid to gain a more global perspective on church growth. As he prepared for the journey, he was finalizing the manuscript of a book he hoped would shatter the complacency of western missions. He had submitted it to the publisher and was anxiously waiting to hear if it was accepted. He worried that he would be forced to shorten the book, but he didn't know how he "could cut out so much pure gold."¹⁹ He sent his manuscript off to Pickett for advice, declaring that "There is no one in India whose judgement I value more highly."²⁰ In April he set out for Africa. His travel notebooks and letters reveal a keen observer, a man eager to soak up all the information and experiences he could. As he journeyed by boat from Karachi to Kenya he enthused, "The adventure has really begun."²¹ Traveling "by ship, plane, train, car, foot, lorry, truck," McGavran

¹⁹ Donald McGavran to "Dearest Mither and Gay," February 3, 1954, CN 178 Box 1 Folder 27 BGCA.

²⁰ Donald McGavran to J. Waskom Pickett, March 13, 1954, CN 178 Box 1 Folder 27 BGCA.

²¹ Donald McGavran to "Dearest Family in India," April 10, 1954, CN 178 Box 1 Folder 27 BGCA.

made his way through Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo.²² In Uganda he took in a Sunday service at Kampala Cathedral. “I was the only white man present,” he noted.²³ While traveling McGavran commented on food and fashion, politics and geography, and, of course, the past and prospects of Christian missions in the countries he visited.

He arrived in Nairobi amid the Mau Mau revolt. The British colonial government had declared a state of emergency in October of 1952 and embarked on a brutal counterinsurgency campaign.²⁴ McGavran described a European settler community “built up in a land which they consider is their own.” He thought immigrant Indians “stir up the Africans to create trouble and to run the Europeans out” by promoting dubious promises of solidarity among people of color. Meanwhile, “The Europeans hang desperately on to the idea that they are going to rule Kenya.” They promised a fair deal to Africans and Indians, but “the Europeans themselves will decide what is a fair deal. And the Africans (the tiny educated minority) boil and bristle at this taking of their best lands by the Europeans – and their best jobs by the Asians – and plan to throw them both out!! What a

²² Donald McGavran to “Dear Family,” May 12, 1954, CN 178 Box 1 Folder 27 BGCA.

²³ Donald McGavran to “Grace and Mother,” April 27, 1954, CN 178 Box 1 Folder 27 BGCA.

²⁴ For an overview of the Mau Mau revolt focused on British methods and atrocities see Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005). Other scholars describe the Mau Mau conflict as a Kikuyu civil war more than an anti-colonial struggle. See Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

mess,” he concluded.²⁵ If McGavran’s assumption that Indians were stirring Africans up betrayed his paternalism, his recognition of legitimate African grievances about land expropriation made him more insightful than many British and American observers. In Britain and the United States “Mau Mau” usually signified atavistic and senseless violence.²⁶ McGavran’s view was more nuanced than those of Europeans invested in colonial projects as such. He could afford to take a more detached perspective about declining European power because what really mattered to him was “the state of the church and its growth.” The political context could affect the church, but it was no match for “the power of God and men dedicated to his service.”²⁷

McGavran concluded his African trip more confident than ever that the ideas born in India were applicable throughout the global south. Whether in caste-conscious India or amid the independence conflicts of colonial Africa, people needed to hear the gospel in a way that resonated in their culture and preserved their sense of belonging in their social group. He published his book, *The Bridges of God*, the following year. It was a sharp

²⁵ Donald McGavran to Win & Pat, April 18, 1954, CN 178 Box 1 Folder 27 BGCA.

²⁶ On British propaganda and perceptions of Mau Mau, see John Lonsdale, “Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya,” *Journal of African History* 31 (1990), 398; Susan L. Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency, 1944-1960* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1995), 128-193; Myles Osborne, ‘The Rooting Out of Mau Mau from the Minds of the Kikuyu is a Formidable Task’: Propaganda and the Mau Mau War,” *Journal of African History* 56 (2015), 77-97. On the political uses American conservatives made of Mau Mau, see Jesse Curtis, “‘Will the Jungle Take Over?’ *National Review* and the Defense of Western Civilization in the Era of Civil Rights and African Decolonization,” *Journal of American Studies* (2018).

²⁷ Donald McGavran to Win & Pat, April 18, 1954, CN 178 Box 1 Folder 27 BGCA.

rebuke of traditional western missionary practices. At the core of the book was the question of how people became Christians. Like Pickett, he argued that western missionaries were too often blinkered by their individualistic assumptions. Human beings' social bonds and sense of peoplehood were crucial assets in the quest to evangelize the world. These forces were the "bridges" God wished to use to bring vast "People Movements" into his kingdom.²⁸ McGavran believed that rather than orienting missionary activity around a paternalistic mission station that plucked a few individual converts out of indigenous society now and then, the task of missionaries was to invite whole groups to encounter Christ *en masse* without giving up their culture and group identity. And in places like India, the invitation to become Christian should not compel people to relinquish their caste identities. Rather than understanding caste as an obstacle to the formation of Christian churches, missionaries had to start seeing castes as pathways for God's work. Christianity could spread further and faster *along* caste lines than *across* them.

In 1955, McGavran had no thought of applying these ideas to the United States. In fact, he explicitly contrasted the "homogeneous" and "individualistic" populations of the "West" with the "castes, clans, and peoples" of the rest of the world. McGavran noted that the "intense battle against race prejudice" in the United States caused many missionaries to reject ideas of racial difference and racial consciousness. "But to ignore the significance of race hinders Christianization," he wrote. "It makes an enemy of race consciousness, instead of an ally. It does no good to say that tribal peoples ought not to

²⁸ Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (Eugene: OR, 2005, originally published by World Dominion Press, 1955).

have race prejudice. They do have it and are proud of it. It can be understood and should be made an aid to Christianization.”²⁹ With his focus set on foreign missions, McGavran believed that these evangelistic strategies were not relevant to the “modern” societies of Western Europe and the United States.³⁰ As American elites declared opportunity for all as a national creed and imagined a consensus in American life on everything from labor and capital to religion and patriotism, it was easy for McGavran to assume the United States had moved beyond the intense communal bonds and prejudices of so-called pre-modern peoples.³¹

If McGavran had looked a little more closely, he might have seen the reality of prejudice and discrimination that undergirded the so-called consensus in American society. He might have seen a religious landscape that sacralized hierarchy with every bit as much fervor as the caste system with which he was so familiar. By the time *The Bridges of God* went to press, the gathering force of the civil rights struggle was beginning to expose white evangelicals’ religio-racial commitments. One of the nation’s most popular evangelical pastors offered an example. Under W.A. Criswell’s preaching, the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, had grown to become one of the largest

²⁹ McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 8-10.

³⁰ One of McGavran’s students later argued that the CGM could be usefully understood within the framework of modernization theory. See William R. Read, “Church Growth as Modernization,” in *God, Man and Church Growth* edited by A.R. Tippett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 188-198.

³¹ On the imagined midcentury consensus, see Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For an influential contemporary account of the “American Way of Life” as a unifying national force, see Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

congregations in the country. Even Billy Graham was a member. Criswell liked to speak his mind, and he had no use for cowards. At a pastor's conference in February, 1956, Criswell vigorously defended segregation. His words struck such a chord that the Governor of South Carolina invited him to speak to the South Carolina legislature a few days later, with the expectation that he would reprise his performance. When Criswell stood before lawmakers on the afternoon of February 22, he did not disappoint. His address effectively combined Southern Baptist identity and white supremacy as a single edifice. Criswell accused integrationists of attacking everything "we love as good old Southern people and as good old Southern Baptists." There was no line between Christianity and whiteness; they made each other. Integrationists violated the sanctity of his home and struck at his deepest commitments as a white southerner and a Southern Baptist. "Some of these things are personal," Criswell said. "Some of them belong to the inside of your heart and your soul." But he insisted he had nothing against black Christians and did not feel superior to them. He believed human nature dictated that people, black and white alike, were happier among their own "kind." Segregation was preference, not hierarchy.³² Such attitudes could become fertile ground for McGavran's ideas if he desired to mine them.

The Yale historian of Christianity Kenneth Scott Latourette called *The Bridges of God* "one of the most important books on missionary methods that have appeared in

³² "An Address by Dr. W.A. Criswell, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas to the Joint Assembly," February 22, 1956, AR 795-221 Box 59 Folder 12, SBHLA, Nashville, Tennessee.

many years.”³³ Another reviewer called it “revolutionary.”³⁴ The Christian and Missionary Alliance, an evangelical denomination, made it required reading for all its new missionaries.³⁵ Amid favorable reviews, some active missionaries offered critiques of McGavran’s ideas. A missionary to Burma faulted McGavran for failing to pay sufficient attention to the workings of political power. “Isn’t it significant,” he asked, “that almost all the ‘People Movements’ have been among minority ethnic groups that have to some extent been dissatisfied with their lot?”³⁶ Other reviewers accused McGavran of compromising the gospel by accommodating social divisions and hierarchies—especially caste in India—for the sake of producing converts.³⁷ When, over a decade later, McGavran’s ideas became popular among white evangelicals in the United States, these criticisms would loom large.

Some of the ideas that would make the Church Growth Movement so alluring and controversial in the decades to come could already be seen in the drafting stage of *The Bridges of God*. An early version of the manuscript had an illustration showing how much money missionaries could expect to spend for each convert gained in different parts

³³ J.P. Kretzmann, review of *Bridges of God*, *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28 (1957): 306-307

³⁴ Georg F. Vicedom, “Revolution in Missionary Methods,” *International Review of Mission* (1956): 331-333.

³⁵ Donald McGavran to Dr. J. Allen Ranck, March 29, 1958, Reviews and Critiques; 1955-1972, CN 178 Box 31 Folder 2, BGCA.

³⁶ *Bridges of God* Reviewed by Rev. A.J. Eastman, Missionary in Burma, Reviews and Critiques; 1955-1972, CN 178 Box 31 Folder 2, BGCA.

³⁷ *Bridges of God* Reviewed by Rev. B.L. Hinchman, Missionary in Japan, Reviews and Critiques; 1955-1972, CN 178 Box 31 Folder 2, BGCA.

of India. This was the “cost per Christian.”³⁸ Evangelicals knew they could not serve God and mammon, but McGavran was sure mammon could be used to serve God. The naked pragmatism of his approach made some Christians queasy. During the manuscript stage of McGavran’s second book, one reviewer worried that his language almost made it seem as though he would “make the business of Church-growth a real business-enterprise, to be treated as Ford or Pontiac...” He warned McGavran that he might be too caught up in “the modern trend of American business-thinking.”³⁹ Another commenter wrote that McGavran seemed to advocate “growth for growth’s sake.”⁴⁰

McGavran, in typical fashion, was buoyed by the enthusiastic reviews and undeterred by the criticisms. By the time *The Bridges of God* was published he was nearing sixty years of age, but he was ready to launch a second career. He embarked on a world tour, studying church growth in Latin America and East Asia. For a few years, McGavran became something of an itinerant evangelist for his church growth theories, with teaching stints at several American colleges and seminaries. During this late-1950s interregnum between McGavran’s missionary career in India and his later prominence as

³⁸ General Comments on “How Peoples Become Christian” Reviews and Critiques; 1955-1972, CN 178 Box 31 Folder 2, BGCA. In his effort to quantify the cost of conversion, McGavran echoed the early twentieth century American fundamentalist Mel Trotter, who calculated that his organization could convert one sinner for every \$1.60 it spent. See Douglas Carl Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 21.

³⁹ Dr. Kraemer’s Comments on The Church In the Ripening World, ICG – Reviews and Critiques; 1955-1972, CN 178 Box 31 Folder 2, BGCA.

⁴⁰ James K. Matthews to Donald McGavran, March 19, 1957, Reviews and Critiques; 1955-1972, CN 178 Box 31 Folder 2, BGCA.

the founder of the Church Growth Movement he gave his most sustained attention to the problem of racism in the United States.

McGavran's Theology of Race

The United States to which McGavran returned in the 1950s was a society infused with religion. As the country mobilized for the Cold War, pastors and politicians defined America as a Christian nation in opposition to atheistic communism. Politicians competed to display their religious patriotism, adding “under God” to the pledge of allegiance and making “In God We Trust” an official national motto. Billy Graham skillfully mixed American nationalism and evangelical revivalism in his crusades, becoming a national celebrity. Movies such as *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur* were epic blockbusters, reminding Americans that they stood on God’s side in an eternal struggle between freedom and tyranny. Church membership soared. By the end of the decade, more Americans than ever before claimed a religious affiliation.⁴¹

The geography of American Christianity was changing too, as metropolitan areas experienced rapid demographic and economic transformations. Discrimination and agricultural mechanization in the South pushed millions of African Americans to try their fortunes in northern cities, moving the center of gravity of black Protestantism from the rural South to the urban North.⁴² The Great Migration changed the landscape of African

⁴¹ Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 35-164; James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 29-84.

⁴² Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Wallace D. Best,

American religion and presented a challenge to the segregated white churches of northern cities. White evangelical churches actively contributed to the dislocations of white flight, exacerbating an era of disinvestment from center cities.⁴³ In the early twentieth century, the fundamentalist movement had thrived in cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston.⁴⁴ Now their white evangelical descendants were leaving the city. What was the responsibility of local churches in a moment of such rapid and divisive racial change? McGavran wrestled with this question during a six-month sojourn in Indianapolis in 1958.

When McGavran had last lived in Indianapolis while attending Butler College, the city boasted integrated schools and the largest black population of any northern city. But from the 1920s, city leaders began to enact Jim Crow-style segregation as the African American population grew.⁴⁵ By the 1950s, segregation of housing, schools, churches, and employment networks was standard practice in the city. After arriving early in 1958, McGavran planted himself at Second Christian Church, a black congregation. He was

Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴³ Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*, 2015; Darren Dochuk, “‘Praying for a Wicked City’: Congregation, Community, and the Suburbanization of Fundamentalism,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 13 (2003): 167-203.

⁴⁴ David Harrington Watt, “Fundamentalists of the 1920s and 1930s,” in *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*, edited by Simon A. Wood and David Harrington Watt (University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 18-35; Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalists in the City: Conflict and Division in Boston’s Churches, 1885-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁵ Richard B. Pierce, *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1-8; Janet Cheatham Bell, *The Time and Place That Gave Me Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

surprised to find that he was the only white member of the church, and promptly drafted an audacious plan for a member exchange program among white and black churches in the city. Mature believers in each of the respective churches would be chosen to temporarily attend a church of another race, thereby enhancing understanding and brotherhood, and breaking down the walls of segregation. McGavran convinced the leadership of Second Christian Church to support his idea and sent a letter to dozens of churches in the city. He received a thoroughly discouraging response. White churches were not impressed with an outsider who presumed to know how to fix their churches during a six-month visit. Nor were they charmed by McGavran's blunt criticisms. He called the very notion of "coloured" and "white" churches a "satanic condition." Though his outrage at racial division was palpable, his efforts in Indianapolis bore little fruit.⁴⁶

The following year, he took up residence in Des Moines, Iowa, where he was a visiting professor at Drake Divinity School. Again the indefatigable missionary pestered the local congregations to promote church integration, and again he was rebuffed. It seemed that white Christians in northern cities had little appetite for the kind of brotherhood McGavran espoused. Though Des Moines had a much smaller black population than Indianapolis, white supremacists in the city nonetheless sought to intimidate those who challenged segregation. After a white pastor sold his house to an African American, a cross was burned on the pastor's front lawn. As McGavran sat down to write the following day, he was in no mood to make excuses for his fellow white Christians. He was "certain that among the cross-burners were members of white

⁴⁶ Donald McGavran, "A Profitable Next Step In Integration;" CN 178 Box 5 Folder 55; Donald McGavran to Ray McCready, January 30, 1977, CN 178, Box 5 Folder 55, BGCA.

churches.” And he was equally convinced that these Christians had never experienced genuine fellowship with African Americans as fellow believers in Christ. They had not shared meals or sat in the same pew or sung the same songs together. They had not encountered each other on grounds of spiritual equality. As a result, they vented their racial opinions “immorally, and ludicrously.” While paying lip-service to brotherhood, they had never actually experienced it. Instead, they indulged in “sub-Christian stereotypes.”⁴⁷

McGavran paired his outrage at white Christians with a paternalistic mindset toward black Christians. He wrote that white Christians in Des Moines “have no first-hand knowledge of the strong bearing the burdens of the weak, or of the culturally advanced joyfully fellowshiping with the culturally retarded and being accepted by them. Of this part of the cross they have no comprehension.” Most Christians were familiar with the Apostle Paul’s instruction to bear the burdens of the weak, but McGavran’s deployment of this idea in the context of the racial controversies in Des Moines made strength and weakness not just spiritual characteristics, but racial ones. McGavran seemed to indicate that white Christians could retain their assumptions of cultural superiority even as they embraced spiritual union with black believers. The work of Christ on the cross brought all human beings together and opened up the possibility of brotherhood that transcended race. Yet white people, as such, were “strong” and

⁴⁷ Donald McGavran, “Defeating Segregation Within the Congregations,” 1958, CN 178 Box 5 Folder 55, BGCA.

“advanced” and would enact brotherhood through their willingness to bear with the “weak” believers of color.⁴⁸

Despite—or because of—his missionary experiences, McGavran seemed to approach African Americans with an attitude at once accepting and colonialist. With this posture he tapped into a long American tradition of paternalism both racial and theological. Many Americans imagined white Christianity as a masculine and rational agent of uplift for black Christianity imagined as feminine and emotional. In the nineteenth century, sympathetic observers often portrayed African Americans as naturally religious, the better to emphasize their dignity in the face of suffering. By the early twentieth century, the flipside of this assumed religiosity came to the fore. African American religion supposedly revealed the primitivism and emotionalism intrinsic to blackness.⁴⁹ Whiteness carried connotations of theological maturity and biblical literacy, while blackness implied irrational spiritual exuberance. William J. Petersen, Executive Editor of *Eternity*, perfectly captured this sensibility in 1963. While urging white evangelicals to break down “race barriers,” he offered an instructive history lesson for his readers. The “American Negro” had been “set adrift spiritually by the American white” after the Civil War. The result was a century of isolation. Black churches lacked “the counsel and economic aid” of white churches. Bringing the story up to the present, Peterson spun a woeful tale of black religious damage: “they are still struggling without ways or means, the illegitimate offspring of the marriage of a slave culture and the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2008; Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Christian church. Their father is dead and their mother has disowned them.”⁵⁰ With such rhetoric Peterson put a spiritual twist on the motif of black impairment then popular among historians and social scientists, who argued that slavery and Jim Crow had wounded the black psyche and deformed black culture.⁵¹ Many white evangelicals found it easier to perceive African American Christians as subjects of pity and missionary charity—the children of a white “mother”—than as equal partners in a common faith.

In 1961, McGavran drew on his experiences in Indianapolis and Des Moines to produce an article manuscript titled “End Segregation in the Churches Now.” He shopped it around to Christian magazines including the evangelical *Christianity Today* and the more liberal *Christian Century* before another evangelical periodical, the *Christian Herald*, agreed to publish it. The core of the article was a restatement of his member exchange program. Despite its failure in Indianapolis and Des Moines, McGavran apparently thought the idea still had merit. The article provided a fascinating window into McGavran’s thought in a moment of transition. In his missiology, he was still focused on places like India and Latin America. When he turned his attention to the United States, he saw in the system of segregation a social injustice and a theological scandal. He did not immediately draw a connection to the evangelistic ideas he advocated for the global south, though the dots were there for connecting. If caste-based movements for Christ were useful in the caste-conscious society of India, why not race-based movements for

⁵⁰ William J. Petersen, “Evangelicals & the Race Barriers,” *Eternity*, September 1963, 12-16, 48.

⁵¹ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Christ in a country as race-obsessed as the United States? After the theological and cultural earthquakes of the 1960s this question would impress itself on McGavran and his followers. But these unimagined changes lay in the future. For now, McGavran offered an optimistic faith in the power of Christian fellowship to break down racial barriers.

McGavran believed there was a latent desire for brotherhood among American Christians that only needed to be awakened. There were just a few practical problems to overcome, and his member exchange program could solve each of them. People didn't want to be "oddballs" by going to an integrated church, and they didn't want their kids to develop interracial romances. McGavran hinted at this last possibility rather than stating it outright. He also understood that all too often, integrated worship in the era of white flight was a temporary phenomenon signaling a neighborhood in transition from white to black. He described "the irresistible march of Negroes to take over white residential areas," as if black homebuyers were a force of nature reshaping the metropolitan landscape. "Integrated worship," McGavran observed, "often occurs in churches lying in the path of Negro steamrollers." It was a revealing metaphor. Steamrollers flatten and crush, overwhelming whatever is in their path, leaving an empty surface in their wake. McGavran's metaphor seemed to display an assumption of white Christian entitlement in the American city.⁵² Were white evangelicals as eager for "brotherhood" as McGavran claimed? The pervasiveness of white supremacist theology seemed to challenge his optimism. The intractable core of fantasy and fear at the center of this theology—interracial sex—was a significant barrier to church integration. Rather than attacking

⁵² Donald McGavran, "End Segregation in the Churches Now," CN 178 Box 47 Folder 8, BCGA.

white fear and entitlement head on, McGavran sought to manage it through methodological innovations: *don't* send teenagers; *do* send older couples or a young family; make sure the commitment has an end date.

McGavran presumed there was a Christian consensus for brotherhood that could be stirred through a voluntary program of interpersonal interaction. The goal of these interactions was a new consciousness of the spiritual reality of Christian unity rather than a change in power. Through his member exchange program, Christians could become conscious of their unity in Christ. In doing so, they would paint a picture of the destiny of humanity. "It would please the Lord Jesus Christ to see men from every tribe and kindred and tongue and people worshipping Him together in America, today," McGavran wrote. He borrowed this language from the seventh chapter of John's Revelation, the apocalyptic conclusion to the Christian scriptures. In other words, McGavran wanted American Christians—through their interracial worship—to present to the world nothing less than a foretaste of the end of time.⁵³

Growing the Movement

In 1961, McGavran took up a new position at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, as the founder and director of the Institute of Church Growth. He set up shop at a desk in the library and called his one-man operation an "Institute." But the small size of the venture belied the growing scale of McGavran's influence. His Board of Advisors included the President of the University of Oregon, and the state's governor,

⁵³ Donald McGavran, "End Segregation in the Churches Now," CN 178 Box 47 Folder 8, BCGA.

Mark Hatfield.⁵⁴ During the 1960s he forged close ties with two of the largest evangelical missionary agencies responsible for well over half of the total number of Protestant missionaries sent from the United States. Annual church growth seminars at Winona Lake, Indiana, in partnership with the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association brought together dozens of missionaries and mission agency executives each year. Growing numbers of evangelical seminaries were using McGavran's books in their curriculums and some denominations made his work required reading for new missionaries.⁵⁵ Eerdmans, the major evangelical publishing house, launched a church growth book series. In 1964 McGavran's Institute received a grant from the Lilly Endowment to promote the study of church growth in Latin America.⁵⁶ McGavran also founded the *Church Growth Bulletin*, a new monthly periodical initially delivered free to thousands of key missions leader and missionaries around the world.

Though McGavran's work was primarily associated with the evangelical wing of American Protestantism, in the early 1960s he still hoped to influence a broad cross-section of Protestants, both evangelical and mainline. He had some temporary success. In the summer of 1963, the World Council of Church's Department of Missionary Studies held a consultation on "The Growth of the Church" and asked McGavran to lead some of the sessions. The consultation produced a statement that advocated church growth and

⁵⁴ "The Institute of Church Growth" promotional pamphlet, CN 178 Box 27 Folder 3, BGCA.

⁵⁵ Donald McGavran to Kenneth Johnston, April 28, 1965, CN 178 Box 27 Folder 10, BGCA.

⁵⁶ "Foundation Grant," *NCC Bulletin*, January, 1965, 2, CN 178 Box 28 Folder 2, BGCA.

evangelism in terms remarkably similar to McGavran's, and explicitly praised McGavran's "pioneering work" at the Institute of Church Growth.⁵⁷ But this was the high water mark of McGavran's influence in liberal Protestantism. By the end of the 1960s, as the World Council of Churches emphasized social action over evangelism, McGavran would write off liberal Protestants and focus all his energies on the evangelical movement.

In 1965, McGavran moved to the influential Fuller Theological Seminary in California, an institution closely associated with efforts to renew an evangelical intellectual tradition and gain mainstream respectability.⁵⁸ He was invited to serve as the founding dean of the new School of World Mission, with a mandate to hire a faculty. There was competition in the world of evangelical seminaries to catch a big fish like McGavran. A comment one missions executive made to another as McGavran sought a new home for his institute might just as well have summed up the restless energy of McGavran's entire career. "Actually," Clyde Taylor wrote to Norman Cummings, "you and I know that we do not have any real control over Dr. McGavran."⁵⁹ The move to Fuller meant that McGavran had more resources at his command and could dramatically expand the scale of his church growth operations. He was perched in an important role at

⁵⁷ "The Growth of the Church"; "Consultation On Church Growth," CN 178 Box 28 Folder 1, BGCA.

⁵⁸ George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); John A. D'Elia, *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵⁹ Clyde W. Taylor to Norman L. Cummings, March 5, 1965, CN 165 Box 9 Folder 34, BGCA.

one of the most powerful evangelical institutions in the country. He did not intend to let the opportunity go to waste.

The Church Growth Movement that was poised to go mainstream was now an identifiable body of thought, still closely associated with McGavran in particular, but embraced by a growing cross-section of American evangelicals active in foreign missions. It was a movement that might seem paradoxical at a glance.⁶⁰ It put a great deal of hope in both quantification and the working of the Holy Spirit. It criticized individualistic missions strategies but insisted that the goal of missions was the salvation of individuals' souls. It paid attention to the latest scholarship in the fields of anthropology and sociology, but did so in service of an evangelical conversion agenda. Yet in all these ways the movement was not as unprecedented or paradoxical as it may have appeared to some observers. Evangelicals had always been eager capitalizers on the latest trends and the CGM was no different. Indeed, the movement bore a striking resemblance to what Timothy Gloege has called the "corporate evangelical framework" and "consumer" religion pioneered decades earlier by figures such as Henry Crowell and James Gray.⁶¹ Despite being embedded in this tradition, McGavran came to believe he was launching nothing less than a new academic discipline. He told his students he was

⁶⁰ The definition of "church growth" used at Fuller during the 1980s is instructive: "Church growth is that science which investigates the planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implantation of God's commission to 'make disciples of all nations' (Matt. 28:19-20). Church growth strives to combine the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference, the foundational work done by Donald McGavran." C. Peter Wagner to Elmer Towns, October 12, 1981, CN 178 Box 81 Folder 2, BGCA.

⁶¹ Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*, 1-9.

teaching them the “science of church growth.”⁶² The factors that caused some churches to grow and others to stagnate could be measured. Best practices could be standardized and reproduced, leading to more converts. Mysterious supernatural processes revealed through divine revelation in the scriptures could be advanced through scientific and sociological principles. This melding of spirit and strategy, of piety and pragmatism, did not make the CGM an outlier in evangelicalism. On the contrary, this Christian modernism was characteristically evangelical and was key to the movement’s success.⁶³

By the time McGavran moved to Fuller, the civil rights movement was reaching its apex. Whatever blind spots might have been reflected in his cross-racial member exchange scheme, McGavran was far ahead of most his fellow white evangelicals in his enthusiasm for the civil rights movement. During the height of the Selma campaign, he wrote a letter to Martin Luther King with an idea. Dr. King ought to commission an artist to paint a scene of Jesus Christ’s arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. Make it large, make it public, and put it on public property next to the courthouse in Selma. This would be no ordinary painting. Christ would be “darkskinned,” his opponents “white skinned” and “leading police dogs.” In the faces of disciples beaten to the ground the viewer would recognize the “martyrs” of the civil rights movement. And in the faces of Christ’s oppressors, one would discern the likeness of Bull Connor of Birmingham and Jim Clark

⁶² Donald McGavran, “Advanced Church Growth,” Winter 1979, CN 178, Box 31, Folder 3, BGCA.

⁶³ On evangelicals as modernists and adopters of cutting-edge business and marketing strategies, see in addition to Gloege, B.M. Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Nicole C. Cook, *Wanamaker's Temple: The Business of Religion in an Iconic Department Store* (New York: New York University Press), 2018.

of Selma. “Expect it to be cut to ribbons,” McGavran wrote. After white racists destroyed the first attempt, the art project would resume at an out-of-the-way black-owned property. It would become a “pilgrimage place” and a site of “educational pressure” and “international attention.”⁶⁴ On another occasion he urged King to distribute a pro-civil rights pamphlet via an “air drop.” The pamphlets would be tucked in envelopes marked “AIR MAIL FROM GOD,” and hurled from planes over strategic cities.⁶⁵ Alongside these whimsical suggestions, McGavran offered more tangible supports: financial contributions to King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, prayer, and assurance of Christian solidarity across the color line.

Besides sending supportive letters to Dr. King, he sent scathing letters to King’s opponents. After white mob violence against school integration in Grenada, Mississippi in September, 1966, McGavran wrote to the town’s mayor. The white residents of Grenada were bringing “shame and disgrace” on the South. “You have no chance to win,” he declared. “God Himself wars against you. Turn from your evil ways while there is yet time.”⁶⁶ These letters marked McGavran as an unusual white evangelical leader and revealed his crusading spirit.⁶⁷ Once he took up a cause as his own, there were very few

⁶⁴ Donald McGavran to Martin Luther King, March 14, 1965, CN 178 Box 4 Folder 2, BGCA.

⁶⁵ Donald McGavran to Martin Luther King, April 7, 1964, CN 178 Box 3 Folder 8, BGCA.

⁶⁶ Donald McGavran to the Mayor of Grenada, MS, September 22, 1966 CN 178 Box 4 Folder 4, BGCA.

⁶⁷ He even appears to have been friends with Allan Knight Chalmers, the president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Allan Knight Chalmers to Donald McGavran, June 17, 1963, CN 178 Box 5 Folder 3, BGCA.

shades of gray in his mind. His strong support for the civil rights movement showed the ongoing influence of his early grounding in liberal Protestantism, and of his decades of missions work which had brought him face to face with the oppression of marginalized groups around the world. These complexities defy attempts to paint him as a reactionary conservative or a closet segregationist. Indeed, he was much more progressive on questions of race than most white evangelicals of his time, and far more comfortable with cultural diversity than most white Americans. But nothing mattered more to McGavran than converting people to Christianity. He was always ready to pick up any tool to accomplish that end. New developments in liberal Protestantism's approach to global missions and profound changes in American culture and politics were about to turn McGavran in a more conservative direction and open the door for the Church Growth Movement to come home to the United States.

Bringing the Movement to the United States

When McGavran finally soured on the kind of liberal social activism the civil rights movement represented, it was not primarily because of events at home—the rise of black power, urban riots, protests against the Vietnam War—though these did affect him.⁶⁸ Much more concerning to McGavran were the changes in American missionary activity abroad. The fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Uppsala,

⁶⁸ By 1970, in the face of rising crime rates and the militant protest tactics of anti-war and leftist groups, McGavran joined the law and order chorus. He wrote, “We are now reaping the bitter fruit of defining civil liberty in ways which permit tiny, well-organized minorities of extremists to tyrannize huge good-natured and bill-paying majorities. This must cease.” Donald McGavran to Mr. Abernathy and Br. Brokaw, March 1, 1970, CN 178 Box 4 Folder 8, BGCA.

Sweden in 1968 was the decisive turning point. He believed the liberal churches were “quietly scuttling” the historic mission of the church, which was evangelization.⁶⁹ Liberal Protestants were still using the language of Christianity, but now “salvation” meant political and social liberation, and “mission” meant doing good works.⁷⁰ McGavran would write of 1968 as the moment the scales fell from his eyes and he realized how dire the cause of world evangelization had become. He had long had his differences with liberal Protestants, but he had not realized just how far they had moved from a traditional evangelistic missionary enterprise. McGavran had always insisted that Christians ought to do good works and care about injustice. It was precisely on that basis that he supported Dr. King’s desegregation campaigns. But Uppsala left him shaken and fearing the spread of a form of Christianity emptied of its supernatural evangelistic heart. He described the “capture” of the World Council of Churches “by men who are not in the least interested in disciplining the nations.” After Uppsala, McGavran would more or less give up on reaching mainline Protestants. He was determined not to “water down” his church growth message to try to appeal to Protestants who did not even agree on what the church’s mission was.⁷¹ Henceforth, McGavran would become an advocate of evangelism at almost any cost.

⁶⁹ Donald McGavran, “The Entrepreneur in Modern Missions,” January 5, 1979, CN 178 Box 31 Folder 3, BGCA.

⁷⁰ Donald McGavran, “Two Theologies of Mission Battle for Control,” *The Church Herald*, November 28, 1975, 10-12.

⁷¹ Donald McGavran, “not sent,” December 14, 1968, CN 178 Box 4 Folder 6, BGCA.

McGavran echoed the conservative turn in American politics after 1968, but for him the root of the shift was the theological battle between evangelism and social justice. As he critiqued liberal Protestants, he more forcefully insisted on the absolute priority of evangelism over social concern. “Where Christ is enthroned in the heart,” he declared, “social amelioration follows.”⁷² The man who had so enthusiastically supported the campaigns of Martin Luther King in 1965 was harder to recognize after 1968. This crucial turning point, rooted in international missiology rather than domestic politics, paved the way for McGavran to fully support the use of his church growth ideas in the United States. If, in 1958, segregated churches were a “satanic condition” that undercut the authenticity of the gospel, by the early 1970s Protestantism’s emphasis on social justice seemed ready to drown out entirely the message of the gospel. McGavran increasingly began to frame evangelism and social justice not as complementary but as dichotomous. The implications were stark. If evangelism and social justice were at odds, then attacking racism as McGavran had in Indianapolis and Des Moines in the 1950s might harm church growth. Maybe racial loyalties in the United States could, instead, be used to make evangelism more effective.

For the Church Growth Movement to become a major force in American churches, it was not enough for McGavran and other evangelicals to be concerned about the missiology of liberal Protestants. Their view of American society had to change. The cultural and political convulsions of the civil rights movement provided ample material for this change. As early as 1963 Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer had

⁷² Donald McGavran, “Two Theologies of Mission Battle for Control,” *The Church Herald*, November 28, 1975, 10-12.

declared that the great American melting pot was an old-fashioned idea. The rise of black power shifted perceptions about race-consciousness and assimilation. As the 1970s dawned a new era of cultural pluralism seemed to be at hand. In 1971 Michael Novak described the “unmeltable ethnics” who weren’t WASPs and didn’t want to be. This so-called “ethnic revival” made the United States look a lot more like the rest of the world than McGavran had imagined just a decade earlier.⁷³ Perhaps Americans’ enthusiasm for ethnic consciousness and origin stories indicated that a deep-seated sense of peoplehood remained operative even in the United States.

In 1967 Wade Coggins of the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association, noted that “Up to now, church growth research and training have been aimed toward the missionary front. What about pastors in the U.S.? Should they not be equally interested and equally in need of this philosophy and emphasis?”⁷⁴ M. Wendell Belew, of the Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board, was asking the same question. Belew attended a McGavran-organized church growth symposium in 1964. He found the principles electrifying but was “disturbed” that they were not being applied to the United States. From Belew’s perspective, much of Church Growth Movement thought aligned with what Southern Baptists were already doing. In the 1950s the Home Mission Board had established a Language Missions Division to provide funds and missionaries to

⁷³ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1963); Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1971). I rely here on Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁷⁴ Quoted in C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976), 15-16.

establish Southern Baptist churches in immigrant and foreign-language communities. Southern Baptists were well aware of peoples' felt attachments to their group identity. Belew became a key figure synthesizing CGM thought and translating it for the nation's largest Protestant denomination. In books like *Churches, and How They Grow*, and *Missions in the Mosaic*, he engaged with McGavran's ideas while seeking to approach church growth from a distinctly Southern Baptist perspective. While McGavran increasingly brooked no compromise on his core ideas, Belew adopted a more moderate tone, praising the CGM as a positive force but cautioning that there was more to the life of the church than numerical growth, and that the church needed to minister to physical as well as spiritual needs. For his part, McGavran called Belew "one of the great leaders of missions."⁷⁵

McGavran, who in the 1950s had described the United States as "homogeneous," in the 1970s joined Belew in speaking of American society as a "mosaic" rather than a melting pot. And he forged connections with Southern Baptists who were trying to reach that mosaic. As early as 1963 he led a church growth seminar focused on growth within the United States. The Language Missions Department of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, a part of the Southern Baptist Convention, held a conference focused on Latino church growth. McGavran encouraged the audience of Latino pastors to be unabashedly different from the white Southern Baptists who had helped start their churches. "God has called you Latins to serve the 1,100,000 Latins," McGavran declared. "God calls you to make your churches much warmer, more friendly, more Latin than the Anglos, more

⁷⁵ Donald McGavran to Cal Guy, October 10, 1969, CN 178 Box 4 Folder 7, BGCA.

Spanish, more Mexican, more tortilla, sombrero.” But “What about the Anglo Churches and Anglo Christians? Forget about them!...Act as if they did not exist...Do not follow Anglo patterns.”⁷⁶

By 1978, Southern Baptists claimed over 2,200 congregations of “minority ethnic identity.”⁷⁷ In a convention that prided itself on the independence of the local church, Southern Baptist efforts could promote the cultural autonomy of ethnic churches. During the 1970s McGavran praised Southern Baptists as the most successful practitioners of cross-cultural evangelism. While many denominations had little success diversifying, Southern Baptists were adding new ethnic congregations at a rapid clip. McGavran’s Homogeneous Unit Principle—the idea that people liked to worship with people like themselves and should not have to cross boundaries of race, class, or language in order to become Christians—seemed intuitive to Southern Baptists. But such praise inadvertently highlighted the ambiguity of Southern Baptists’ multiethnic turn. The SBC had long been a quintessential expression of segregationist Christianity and white southern identity. Did the embrace of church growth principles represent a repudiation of that segregationist past, or a refinement of it as the era of ethnic revival and multiculturalism dawned?

It was perhaps because of intimate acquaintance with the long history of Southern Baptist segregation that some Southern Baptist leaders found much to be cautious about in Church Growth Movement thought. They didn’t want church growth ideas to enable overt racism. Francis Dubose, Professor of Missions at Golden Gate Baptist Theological

⁷⁶ “The Shepherd Role and Soul Winning in Texas,” March 8, 1963, CN 178 Box 32 Folder 3, BGCA.

⁷⁷ M. Wendell Belew, “Church Growth,” 1978, AR631-10 Box 44 Folder 17, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

Seminary, called the Homogeneous Unit Principle downright “Machiavellian,” an approach to evangelization in which “the ends justify the means.” Dubose admitted that the principle did seem to work, and allowed that it could be helpful in some cases, especially for minority groups. “The situation of the majority is fundamentally different,” he insisted. The separation into homogeneous units was built on an ongoing history of “ostracism.” Despite such concerns, some Southern Baptist leaders were wholeheartedly enthusiastic about McGavran’s thinking. In *Design for Church Growth*, Charles Chaney and Ron Lewis encouraged churches to be “absolutely ruthless” in pursuit of numerical growth. Every church growth initiative was to be evaluated by a single pragmatic question: “Does it work?”⁷⁸ A 1981 Home Mission Board report put the racialized reality of this question in perspective when it admitted, “the overall church expansion of Southern Baptists is dependent upon trends in white population.”⁷⁹

As the nation’s largest Protestant group variously adopted, resisted and repurposed McGavran’s ideas for their use, McGavran was eager to see church growth principles applied to the cities from which so many white Protestants were fleeing. His “overriding conviction” about such work was that the populations of America’s cities should be treated as distinct peoples. “[I]t is of vital importance,” he wrote to Southern Baptist missions professor Cal Guy, “that black populations, Porto Rican populations,

⁷⁸ Quoted in David T. Britt, “Concepts of Church Growth in the Southern Baptist Convention,” Research Division, June 1980, AR 631-10 Box 46 Folder 18, SBHLA. Major Southern Baptist church growth books of the era include Francis M. Dubose, *How Churches Grow In An Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978); Charles L. Chaney and Ron S. Lewis, *Design for Church Growth* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1977); C. Bill Hogue, *I Want My Church To Grow* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1977).

⁷⁹ Orrin D. Morris, “Comparison of Racial Ethnic Change to SBC Growth By States, 1970-1980,” July 1981, 19, AR 631-10 Box 46 Folder 17, SBHLA.

Portuguese populations, etc., be regarded as special sub-cultures and churches which fit those cultures be planted amongst them – led by their leaders, operated at their level of culture...”⁸⁰ Here were early indications that McGavran was willing to think of American minority groups in terms similar to “peoples” in the global south. But it is telling that McGavran first thought in these terms about people of color in the United States, not white Americans. Soon enough, his disciples would apply the same logic to the white majority.

The idea that homogeneous churches were effective vectors of Christianization was not new to the American context. White Christians beginning in the 1880s had sounded the alarm about the supposed threat of mass immigration and proposed home missions, complete with foreign-language churches for distinct ethnic groups, as a solution. Leading proponents of these home missions efforts often justified the work in explicitly xenophobic and racist terms as a nation-building project.⁸¹ Getting the

⁸⁰ Donald McGavran to Cal Guy, October 10, 1969, CN 178 Box 4 Folder 7, BGCA.

⁸¹ For contemporary examples see Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis, revised edition* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1891); Joseph Bourne Clark, *Leavening the Nation: the Story of American Home Missions* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1903), 262-282. As one historian has described Southern Baptist Home Missions efforts in this period, “For immigrants, conversion was a call to become not only a Christian but an American as well.” This would supposedly have the additional benefit of dispelling the attraction of radical political ideologies. See Keith Harper, *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 23-24. Another historian wrote, “Home mission workers were agents of Christ, but they were also protectors of the state. ‘The home mission problem...[was] to American and Christianize’ immigrants, and frequently in that order.” John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Women’s Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 69. For a broad overview of the Protestant encounter with immigration, see Lawrence B. Davis, *Immigrants, Baptists, and the Protestant Mind in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973). See also Derek

immigrant masses into churches was a form of quarantine on the way to eventual assimilation and Americanization. McGavran and the leading CGM theorists exhibited no institutional or personal memory of these American antecedents. In contrast to the overt Anglo-Saxon Christian nationalism of earlier American home missions advocates, the CGM described homogeneous churches as a purely evangelistic enterprise. CGM theorists consistently located the origins of their movement overseas and showed remarkable disinterest in questions of American decline or ascendance. For them, homogeneous churches were not instruments of national renewal or assimilation; they were ends in themselves because they understood them to be effective at converting people to Christianity. And while an earlier generation of mission churches had been launched in an era in which white supremacy was the avowed ideology of American public life, the CGM gained its ascendancy in a dramatically different context, in the aftermath of a civil rights movement that made integration and diversity the supposed American creed.⁸² Because of this, CGM advocates imagined homogeneous churches not as waystations to assimilation, but as healthy expressions of pluralism.

Chang, *Citizens of a Christian Nation: Evangelical Missions and the Problem of Race in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Mark R. Teasdale, *Methodist Evangelism, American Salvation: The Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1860-1920* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 88-126.

⁸² The CGM's rise to prominence in the 1970s does suggest, however, an echo of the earlier period. Immigration led to anxious efforts to convert the immigrant masses, efforts that lost their urgency at midcentury as American society became more homogeneous. The CGM gained prominence as Americans took note of a new era of immigrant-led diversity after The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 removed some of the most onerous restrictions of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. Though CGM leaders did not speak in the hysterical tones of racial panic and nation-building of the earlier era, they did stress the need to reach these new immigrant groups.

At Fuller Seminary, McGavran began gathering around him a team of followers who would spread his ideas. Among these, no one was more important than C. Peter Wagner. He was a missionary in Bolivia when he first heard the name Donald McGavran. He read *The Bridges of God* and concluded that “this fellow McGavran is a fanatic.”⁸³ After all, if McGavran was right, much of the modern missionary enterprise was a waste of time. But Wagner gradually came to embrace McGavran’s thought and in 1971 joined him on the faculty at Fuller. McGavran and Wagner established a close working relationship and friendship. Wagner, ever the loyal pupil, jealously guarded McGavran’s reputation as the founder of the Church Growth Movement and defended him against his critics. In his voluminous writings, Wagner interpreted the CGM for an American evangelical audience of pastors, professors, and church planters. As comfortable quoting Moynihan as the Apostle Paul, Wagner combined sociological analysis and spiritual revelation in an effort to make church growth theory the dominant methodology of the evangelical church in the United States.

In the fall of 1972, Wagner and McGavran co-taught a church growth class designed for leaders of American churches. Among the attendees was Win Arn. Inspired by the teaching, Arn promptly quit his job and founded the Institute for American Church Growth. Arn and other self-styled church growth experts taught church planters to conduct demographic analyses of local communities, taking note of factors such as per capita income and racial composition. A new church ought to have a clear idea of the sort of people it was trying to reach. They encouraged established churches to examine their membership records, graph changes over time, and set targets for future growth. Church

⁸³ “Testimony: C. Peter Wagner,” CN 178 Box 34 Folder 3, BGCA.

growth manuals taught pastors how to create mathematical charts and calculate their “Annual Growth Rate (AGR)” and “Decadal Growth Rate (DGR).” These graphs were “as important to a student of church growth as a compass is to a sailor or a stethoscope to a physician,” the manuals lectured.⁸⁴ Wagner suggested a “rule of thumb” that membership growth of 25% in a decade was “poor,” while 100% was “good,” 300% was “outstanding,” and 500% was “incredible.”⁸⁵ Church growth experts taught that in theory any church anywhere could grow. In practice, as American cities continued to hemorrhage middle-class residents, locating new churches in growing suburbs was an obvious path to success.

By the middle of the 1970s when evangelicals used the phrase “Church Growth Movement” with capital letters, they were talking about a specific network of people and institutions. The institutional Church Growth Movement had its locus at Fuller Seminary and included organizations like Arn’s Institute for American Church Growth and magazines like *Church Growth America* and *Church Growth Bulletin*. From there the Movement’s influence spread to many evangelicals who embraced the ethos of “church growth,” if not the jealous movement-building prickliness of a cadre of Fuller professors. Some denominations, like the Nazarenes, embraced McGavran’s teachings wholesale and aggressively trained their pastors in it, while others selectively adopted strategies they

⁸⁴ Bob Waymire and C. Peter Wagner, *The Church Growth Survey Handbook*, Second Edition (Santa Clara: The Global Church Growth Bulletin, 1980).

⁸⁵ Quoted in Paul R. Orjala, *Get Ready To Grow: A Strategy for Local Church Growth* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978), 23.

found useful.⁸⁶ As if the growing influence of their movement wasn't enough, church growth theorists had a tendency to take credit for success wherever they found it. Though superstar pastor Robert H. Schuller founded his Garden Grove Community Church in Orange County, California in 1955 without the influence of McGavran, CGM materials tended to describe Schuller as a man who made them look good, a successful religious entrepreneur who had "intuitively" understood their principles before they were widely known.⁸⁷

It is not surprising that the movement would want to claim Schuller as its own. His church boasted thousands of members and innovative methodologies. Attendees were welcome to come inside or enjoy the service in the comfort of their cars parked in the "drive-in area."⁸⁸ Schuller's influence radiated outward through his national "Hour of Power" television show and his Institute for Successful Church Leadership. Among Schuller's most famous trainees was Bill Hybels, who went on to found the influential megachurch Willow Creek in suburban Chicago. Schuller's first book, for which Wagner wrote the foreword, was a veritable alphabet soup of self-help and positive thinking pep talk from the very first page. Schuller promised readers "results...optimism...success...higher levels of accomplishment than you ever dreamed of..." all brought to life by "real possibility thinking!" With chapters like "Seven

⁸⁶ Raymond W. Hurn, "Nazarenes...Is the Third Wave of A Religious Movement Commencing?" July 27, 1981, CN 178 Box 85 Folder 2, BGCA.

⁸⁷ C. Peter Wagner, foreword to Robert H. Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1974).

⁸⁸ This description is found on the back cover of the paperback edition of Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*.

Principles of Successful Retailing,” “How you Can Sell Your Ideas Successfully,” and “Three Keys to Certain Success,” Schuller invited pastors to jump into the religious marketplace and make their dreams come true. The CGM’s positive appraisal of Schuller is a striking indicator of its comfort with the use of sleek marketing and business practices to sell the gospel. In these moments the Movement looked like nothing so much as an invitation to treat religion as another consumer good in the modern capitalist economy.⁸⁹ American consumers had high standards and many options on a Sunday morning. Churches needed to sell themselves or they would lose market share.

As Wagner, Arn, and other popularizers of church growth theory extended McGavran’s “peoples” approach to the white American middle-class, the missiological language of McGavran’s earlier work took on a more scientific sound. They talked about “homogeneous units” rather than “peoples.” Though the Homogeneous Unit Principle sounded technical, it was an elastic term that could refer to numerous kinds of group affinities. Win Arn’s organization stressed this principle as the axiomatic foundation for church growth. “Almost without exception,” proclaimed *Church Growth America*, “a common characteristic of healthy, growing churches is a membership composed of basically one kind of people, be it defined culturally, ethnically, economically,

⁸⁹ Consumption—religious and otherwise—increasingly ordered Americans’ lives and identities in the second half of the twentieth century. See Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). For an evangelical critique of the nexus of consumerism and evangelicalism, and the Church Growth Movement that fostered it, see Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in A Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

educationally, linguistically, occupationally.”⁹⁰ Arn warned against a church mismatching a pastor and its congregation. “People want their pastor to be ‘like’ them,” he explained. Those desiring a “successful ministry” ought to make sure the “pastor and church fit the same basic homogeneous unit.”⁹¹ Though church growth theorists insisted they opposed segregation and racism, these instructions were all but explicit warnings against the danger of integration and cultural pluralism in a local church. Wagner and Arn made no distinction between, say, a poor immigrant congregation that did not speak English and a wealthy white congregation in a prosperous suburb. Both were equally entitled to homogeneous worship with people like themselves. Both were positive expressions of the diversity of the kingdom of God. In effect, if people like W.A. Criswell and Montague Cook existed, Wagner and Arn did not want to know.

Some church growth literature openly described racial integration as a threat to the health of American churches. C. Peter Wagner’s 1976 book, *Your Church Can Grow*, devoted a chapter to an “autopsy of a dead church.” Zion Evangelical Free Church, a white congregation of several hundred in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago, closed in the summer of 1969. It had appeared healthy just a few years before. What went wrong? Wagner declared that he had examined the “corpse” and had the “diagnosis” in hand. Zion Free Church came to a sorry end because of a terminal case of “ethnikitis.” Church leaders had failed to “understand and apply the homogeneous unit principle” before it was too late. As a result, the church became a “victim” of the changing racial

⁹⁰ “Revalidating the Homogeneous Principle,” *Church Growth America*, summer 1977, 2, AR 631-10 Box 15 Folder 10, SBHLA.

⁹¹ Win Arn, “The Pastor and Church Growth,” *Church Growth America*, September-October 1977, 4, AR 631-10 Box 15 Folder 10, SBHLA.

demographics of the Austin neighborhood. As white residents moved out, the church's attendance rapidly dwindled from 350 to 30. In a desperate bid to save itself, Zion partnered with Circle Church, a new multi-racial church in the neighborhood. This effort was doomed, Wagner informed his readers, because it involved a mixing of homogeneous units. Trying to merge a young, hip, multicultural church and a staid, traditional, white church produced "symptoms" of disease "almost as inevitably" as a blood transfusion mixing type A and B. A worship leader with sideburns showed up at Zion, causing offense. Some young women from Circle Church arrived in mini-skirts, causing an uproar. And "The heaviest donor in the church left as soon as he heard that blacks would be welcome."⁹² Wagner grouped all these phenomena together as examples of cultural incompatibility. The white supremacist, like those who objected to mini-skirts and long sideburns, apparently deserved a homogeneous unit congregation. Over twenty years after McGavran wrote that the racial prejudices of "tribal peoples...can be understood and should be made an aid to Christianization," Wagner was directly transferring this pragmatic use of racism to American churches in an age of white flight.

As the Church Growth Movement burst on the American scene, evangelical opponents quickly emerged. Paul D. Simmons, Professor of Christian Ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, castigated church growth experts for pursuing evangelism at the expense of social justice. He pointed to Schuller's "Hour of Power" TV show as a characteristic example of how evangelicals had gone wrong. Schuller's show "has all the sweet smells of success but no hint of the scandal of the cross. It seems pure Hollywood

⁹² C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of A Healthy Church* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976), 124-134.

rather than the simple but demanding Gospel.” Schuller offered “style but little substance, preaching comfortable Christianity and substituting middle-class morality for disciplined service.” And with this the church growth experts seemed perfectly content, because it brought bodies into the pews. But Simmons believed evangelicals ought to demand more of themselves and their potential converts. “We get our credentials not from the Chamber of Commerce,” he archly observed, “but from the Lord of the Cross. We must not produce churches without souls, programs with conscience, love without justice, religious experience without conversion, salvation with a cross.”⁹³ For some evangelical critics, the Church Growth Movement represented nothing less than a perversion of the gospel.

Another trenchant critic was the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.⁹⁴ In a 1973 symposium, Yoder faulted the Church Growth Movement for what he viewed as overconfidence in methodological innovation and lack of concern for social ethics. Paraphrasing the humorous critique of the Latin American evangelical C. Rene Padilla, Yoder wrote, “Church Growth people assume that you can make Christians the way you make cars and sausages.”⁹⁵ The drive to measure and analyze and systematize made some

⁹³ Paul D. Simmons, “The Pastor As Change Agent,” Churches in Racially Changing Communities Conference, April 23-25, 1979, AR 631-10 Box 18 Folder 15, SBHLA.

⁹⁴ Since Yoder’s death in 1997, his legacy has been the subject of significant reappraisal. Over a period of decades, Yoder engaged in sexual and spiritual abuse of dozens of women. Yet during this period, he influenced a generation of evangelicals with his writings on pacifism and other topics, and he was one of the most vocal critics of the Church Growth Movement. See especially Rachel Waltner Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (2015): 7-80.

⁹⁵ John H. Yoder, “Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective,” in *The Challenge of Church Growth: A Symposium* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 29.

evangelicals concerned that the spiritual process of evangelization was being turned into a mass production enterprise. Yoder also directly tackled the racial and theological implications of the homogeneous unit principle. “Building the church in a racist culture in southern Mississippi, you can only win people if you accept racism,” he argued. But “If you have accepted the institution of racism as the condition of your operating,” was such a church even Christian?⁹⁶ Yoder argued that the message of the New Testament was that God broke down the wall of division between Jews and Gentiles. This was not a singular historical event; it was the essential ongoing ethical and theological principle of Christianity. “The breaking down of the wall between two ethnic groups,” Yoder argued, “*is* the gospel. It is not a fruit of the gospel; it is not an *object lesson* in the gospel; it is not a *vehicle* of the gospel, it *is* the gospel.” A church that was not growing “across cultural barriers...to incorporate people of all kinds” was not being true to God’s purposes.⁹⁷

Black evangelicals spoke up too. Howard Jones argued that “many white Christians” were using supposed cultural differences between black and white Americans to “excuse themselves from accepting blacks into their churches.” He believed Wagner’s arguments for homogeneous churches in an age of pluralism gave room for unchristian segregation to continue. Jones described a New Testament church that was united together without losing its God-given diversity. “Our churches today need to exhibit that same racial oneness if they are to effectively meet the spiritual and social challenge of this hour.” Bill Pannell wrote that Wagner’s methods seemed to be a recipe for a church

⁹⁶ Yoder, “Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective,” 35-38.

⁹⁷ Yoder, “Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective,” 43-44.

that followed social change rather than leading it. Evangelicals were good at making converts, but they didn't challenge them to be countercultural, "and so a good Christian remains a 'good American.' And 'good Americans' do not believe in intermarriage."⁹⁸

Criticisms of the racial implications of CGM methods were only part of a broader critique of the Movement as a trendy but vacuous phenomenon more concerned with success than faithfulness. In a satirical take appearing in *Eternity* in 1976, "Pilgrim and his family" visit the "Chapel of the Winns," otherwise known as the "First Church of the American Dream." The church's ample parking lot has its own pastor. The former used-car salesman "groups people together by type of car," thus creating a sense of "togetherness" even before escalators whisk the visitors up to the enormous sanctuary. The founder and senior pastor of the church, a certain Wyatt W. Winn, is a tv-preaching globe-trotting salesman for Christ who is rarely present at his own church. The administration of such a large congregation requires the formation of a "Consortium of Church Management," a body made up of Dr. Winn and his seven sons. It is duly called "the Board of Winners." As the service begins, Pilgrim and his family are overwhelmed. The music is grand, and the sermon is delivered with all the polished flair of a Hollywood performance. By the time the service is over Pilgrim is feeling ambivalent. He asks an official "welcomer" if a sense of personal human connection is lost amid the bigness and efficiency of a gigantic church. The welcomer assures Pilgrim that each new convert is assigned to a group called a "Winner's Circle," thus satisfying the need for connection. The family, somewhat dazed, leave the First Church of the American Dream carrying

⁹⁸ "Four Spokesmen Answer Wagner," *Eternity*, September 1972, 18-19, 60.

their copy of Pastor Winn's autobiography, *Winning Is the Name of the Game*. It was like the welcomer said: "You just can't argue with success."⁹⁹

The managerial ethos, the relentless drive for numerical growth, the accommodation of visitors' comfort—all these made some white evangelicals nervous. Yet in ways that even many critics of the CGM often didn't realize, these concerns had racial implications. Black evangelicals such as the community organizer and "racial reconciliation" activist John Perkins were particularly concerned about how the pursuit of success in a racist society came at great cost to black people.¹⁰⁰ What did it mean for a church to be successful in a moment in which the white middle-class was willing to sell their houses, start new private schools, and build new churches to maintain their advantages over—and distance from—African Americans? From a pragmatic church growth perspective, locating churches in communities bearing the brunt of the middle-class exodus was a fool's errand. If pastors wanted their churches to grow the simplest bet was to locate them where populations of middle-class potential donors were growing. Whether white evangelicals admitted it or not, this was a racialized bet.

McGavran believed this was a bet worth making. When he wrote that "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers," he meant it prescriptively as well as descriptively.¹⁰¹ Homogeneity was what people wanted, and evangelicals ought to give it to them. It was a fact of human nature that evangelicals

⁹⁹ Donald L. Robert, "The Meteoric Rise of the First Church of the American Dream," *Eternity*, June 1976, 24-26.

¹⁰⁰ For more on Perkins' criticisms of the CGM, see chapters 6 and 7.

¹⁰¹ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

could embrace and use for their purposes. This was not to say that racial prejudice aligned with Christian ethics. McGavran believed there was a clear distinction between what he called “discipling” and “perfecting.” In the discipling stage the new convert heard and accepted the message of Christ’s death and resurrection for sins. The “perfecting” stage, in which the new believer gradually learned and embraced Christian ethics, was chronologically and theologically secondary to the first priority of discipling. Insofar as white evangelicals embraced this thinking, it meant that the life and death struggles of African Americans against systemic oppression were in the secondary category.

McGavran’s pragmatic efforts to defend the priority of evangelism in the 1970s took him into some dark waters. In a forum debating the homogeneous unit principle, he imagined that “if all the whites in Tennessee were pagan and all the blacks were Christian, and if ‘becoming Christian’ meant joining a black Church and giving up white culture, whites would become Christians very slowly, if at all.” The principle of this unsettling hypothetical scenario was that “All men should be able to become Christians without feeling they are betraying their race.” McGavran drove the point home further, clarifying that he was thinking specifically of white Americans’ investments in their racial identities. “We do not want white men to feel that the only way they can follow Christ is in multi-racial and multi-language congregations.” He warned that “People movements all around the world languish and often die” because mixing homogeneous units created “mongrel” congregations. In contrast, a homogeneous unit church “liberates its own people without raising difficult questions of cross-race dining, marriage and the

like.”¹⁰² McGavran’s evocative use of the word *mongrel* aligned with longstanding white supremacist rhetoric about the dangers of racial mixing and interracial marriage.¹⁰³ In the white supremacist imagination these practices spoiled so-called racial purity and invited communist infiltration or a one-world government. In McGavran’s imagination, these practices were mortal dangers to church growth. On their face, McGavran’s words could give aid and comfort to white nationalists in the United States. But his mind was still back in India. He understood himself to be defending a peoples-based approach to evangelism, not a hateful American political ideology.

Conclusion

By the end of the 1970s, the Church Growth Movement had completed its surprising journey. Launched by American missionaries in the 1930s and imagined as an ally of the cultural integrity of “tribal” peoples, it was now being deployed in the quintessentially modern consumer culture of the world’s capitalist superpower. Despite white evangelicals’ often oppositional rhetoric toward American culture, they proved to be eager capitalizers on the latest trends. The ethnic revival gave to church growth experts a language to justify whiteness as pluralism and a certain cachet as religious

¹⁰² Donald McGavran, “The Genesis and Strategy of the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” CN 46 Box 13 Folder 24, BGCA.

¹⁰³ The use of the word “mongrel” or “mongrelized” was such a staple of white supremacist rhetoric that it seems incredible that McGavran could be unaware of its connotations. One example will suffice. Amid the tumult of 1968, the Southern Baptist evangelist Vance Havner complained that Christians were living in “a day of unholy mixtures.” Churches, religions, nations, even races—all seemed to be mixing, and this “opens the door to mongrelization.” As in the days of Noah, the terrible judgment of God surely was not long in coming, he warned. Vance Havner, “As It Was...So Shall It Be,” *The King’s Business*, May, 1968, 11-13.

anthropologists attuned to the cutting edge of demographic and cultural change. Yet the CGM did not usher in a truly multicultural American evangelicalism. Instead, it helped to create the evangelical mainstream as white, middle class, and suburban. For colorblind Christians, the CGM enabled the ongoing invisibility of race in church spaces. And here, perhaps, was the core irony of the CGM's embrace of whiteness as peoplehood. Race conscious church growth leaders offered a language of justification for local congregations where whiteness was an unmarked category, an identity so normative it seemed not to exist.

In the decades after the civil rights movement, as white evangelicals turned to the new "science" of church growth, they were dealing in race whether they knew it or not. The church growth theorists mistakenly believed it was possible to capitalize on white identity apart from racial hierarchy. While whiteness as a benign piece of the American mosaic sounded appealing to some, it was an obtuse reading of the very meaning of whiteness in a society so long structured on white supremacy. Amid national backlash to the gains of the black freedom struggle, white evangelicals described their pursuit of church growth as an expression of their faith in the power of the gospel. It was also a solid investment in the enduring advantages of whiteness. But even as the CGM catalyzed white evangelicalism's suburbanization, there were other evangelicals who believed God had called them to go to the American city. Their efforts to deal with urban problems in the 1960s and 1970s marked the next phase in the struggle to define Christian colorblindness.

CHAPTER 5:
A MISSION FIELD NEXT DOOR: COLORBLIND CHRISTIANS AND THE
URBAN CRISIS

In the Spring of 1968, Messiah College, the small higher education institution of the Brethren in Christ Church, announced it was about to add a distinctive feature to its portfolio: a campus in the heart of Philadelphia. At a glance, Messiah might have seemed like an unlikely candidate for a venture into the city. The college was located in the farmlands of southcentral Pennsylvania ninety miles west of Philadelphia. Most students came from rural white communities and continued to nurture close ties to their Anabaptist roots. In the 1950s and early 1960s students portrayed the college as a rural idyll whose wholesome atmosphere “can be felt floating through the air here on our beautiful campus.”¹ The campus was a refuge, a sanctuary. Just a few years later the civil rights movement and urban riots had given new meanings to the cloistered campus. By 1966 one student wrote that the “beauty and tranquility” around them only served as a “reminder of a clamoring, tumultuous world” beyond.² The President of Messiah College, D. Ray Hostetter, came to believe that the events of the 1960s marked a decisive shift demanding new approaches in evangelical higher education. Hostetter forged a partnership with Temple University to establish a Messiah College satellite campus in North Philadelphia. The new facility proudly opened its doors in the fall of 1968. Just as

¹ Bill Allen, “Messiah’s Atmosphere: Springboard for the Good Life,” *Ivy Rustles*, March 2, 1960, 3.

² Donald Keener, Untitled Editorial, *Ivy Rustles*, September 9, 1966, 2.

most white Americans, evangelical and non-evangelical alike, were escaping the city, Messiah sought to move toward it.

Rather than uniting evangelicals around a common vision for the American city, Messiah's initiative became a flashpoint of intra-evangelical conflict. President Hostetter's efforts to expand the horizons of evangelical education intersected with a moment in which small groups of radical evangelicals were coalescing into what historian David Swartz has called "the evangelical left."³ The evangelical left critiqued the white evangelical church's role in systemic racism and called on evangelicals to learn from the city and its people. At the center of the evangelical left was the Canadian-born and Yale-educated Dr. Ronald Sider. Sider did not merely theorize about a more progressive brand of evangelicalism; he sought to enact its principles in an institutional context. He served as director of the Philadelphia campus during its crucial formative years. Swartz has attributed the decline of the evangelical left in the later 1970s to identity politics splintering the nascent coalition, but the Messiah College story reveals a more basic dilemma for left-leaning evangelicals like Dr. Sider: from the start, their commitment to assailing racism alienated them from the vast majority of white evangelicals and produced conflict within their institutions. Swartz is right to observe the fractiousness of the evangelical left, but equally important was its marginality from the power-centers of colorblind Christianity. Sider imagined experiments like Messiah's new Philadelphia campus as opportunities not merely for the cultural and academic

³ David Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). See also Brantley W. Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

opportunities Hostetter envisioned, but for aggressive anti-racist activism. Such views provoked strong negative reactions from the colorblind Christians who made up the backbone of evangelical institutions. The anti-racist possibilities of evangelical activism in the city proved fundamentally incompatible with the priorities of the white evangelical mainstream.

Messiah's embrace of the city bucked the postwar trend for white evangelical colleges. Institutions such as Calvin College, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, and the Philadelphia College of the Bible moved from city centers to more spacious campuses, usually in the suburbs. Through white evangelical eyes, cities were the epicenter of a palpable descent into moral chaos and anarchy. Watts 1965, Chicago 1966, Newark 1967—as uprisings shook one city after another, the racial crisis appeared to be a crisis of the American city.⁴ *Christianity Today* editorialized, “We are appalled at watching metropolitan areas roar into ruin while human pack rats carry off people’s hard-earned property, joking with each other as they do it—and police stand by under orders to hold their fire... We are sick of hearing that civil-rights injustices triggered all this insane violence.”⁵ The uprisings were the explosive exclamation points on the quieter reckonings happening every day on residential streets: A new next-door neighbor; sudden signs on neighbors’ lawns; urgent calls to sell before it was too late; declining attendance

⁴ For a contemporary evangelical perspective on this point, see David L. McKenna, editor, *The Urban Crisis: A Symposium on the Racial Problem in the Inner City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969).

⁵ “We Are Sick,” *Christianity Today*, September 29, 1967, 34.

at the local church as congregants headed for the suburbs. In white evangelical eyes the modern city had become a fount of wickedness, a place to be feared.⁶

But the city was also the place where white evangelicals could make good their professions of Christian love. It was not unusual for white evangelicals to describe the city as a new mission field. A Messiah College brochure for a program at the Philadelphia campus justified the work on precisely these grounds. “As foreign mission fields are less open to American personnel and as the desperate need of American cities becomes increasingly obvious,” the pamphlet stated, “the possibility for increased service in the city will arise.”⁷ White evangelicals were sending thousands of missionaries to foreign lands to share the gospel. What about the mission field next door? This was not an easy challenge for white evangelicals to answer because the American city seemed to challenge the orthodoxies of Christian colorblindness. The city confronted white evangelicals with systemic racial problems, and in doing so called into question the adequacy of their theology. Enacting an evangelical anti-racist agenda in an urban setting proved to be more difficult than Sider and others had imagined. When challenged with the racial realities of the American city, many white evangelicals doubled down on their colorblind commitments. As a result, the radical anti-racist possibilities of the early 1970s gave way later in the decade to the cultivation of diversity and cross-cultural experiences.

⁶ See for example, Mark T. Mulder, *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Darren Dochuk, “‘Praying for a Wicked City’: Congregation, Community, and the Suburbanization of Fundamentalism,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 13 (2003): 167-203; Harvie M. Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

⁷ “A Seminar on Urban Problems,” XI – 2 – 7.1 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus.

For colorblind Christians, engaging diversity as a consumable experience, a kind of Christian tourism in the city, was far more acceptable than Sider's vision of Christian anti-racism.

Contesting Christian Colorblindness in the City

Messiah's plan to expand into Philadelphia drew on both its evangelical sensibility and its Anabaptist tradition. On the one hand, as Messiah's ethno-religious distinctiveness began to break down and the college entered an emerging white evangelical mainstream in the 1950s and 1960s, students absorbed the assumptions of colorblind Christianity.⁸ On the other hand, the pacifist theological tradition of the Brethren in Christ Church and its history as a persecuted minority continued to encourage a critical distance from American nationalism.⁹ This ambivalent posture toward the American project had far-reaching implications. In contrast to fundamentalist-influenced white evangelicals at institutions such as Wheaton College, Messiah's leaders were more likely to question the claims of the American state, and less likely to reflexively oppose radical forms of protest. As members of a religious minority that recalled a history of state repression in Europe, Brethren in Christ leaders tended to be cautiously supportive of the civil rights movement. Yet, as in other evangelical denominations, the civil rights

⁸ On the Brethren in Christ becoming more like other evangelicals, see Devin Manzullo-Thomas, "Born-Again Brethren in Christ: Anabaptism, Evangelicalism, and the Cultural Transformation of a Plain People," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016): 203-237.

⁹ On the early history of Anabaptists as a radical sect in Reformation-era Europe, see Hans- Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. by Trevor Johnson (New York: Routledge, 1996).

era exposed a significant divide between leaders and laity. While some Brethren in Christ leaders engaged the rapidly changing racial and social context of the 1960s, most ordinary Brethren in Christ folk in the pews felt the influence of fundamentalism and the strong pull of colorblind theology. If Messiah's Anabaptist heritage made it possible to imagine the creation of a Philadelphia campus in a moment when most white evangelicals wanted nothing to do with urban areas like North Philadelphia, Messiah's evangelical inheritance also shaped the boundaries of the project and ultimately oriented it toward a colorblind vision that proved difficult to sustain in the American city.

Messiah College began planning its Philadelphia campus early in 1967. After holding talks with several universities in Pennsylvania, President Hostetter chose Temple University because of its urban location and its commitment to the project. It was the first partnership of its kind between a state university and a private Christian college. Messiah secured a large grant from the U.S. Office of Education to purchase and renovate several rowhouses on North Broad Street adjacent to the Temple campus. In the earliest years of the Philadelphia campus over 300,000 dollars of federal funds poured into the project. The influx of federal money suggested the potential some observers saw in this innovative experiment. Hostetter believed the world had changed, and Messiah had to change with it. He wrote that it was "absurd" to think that Messiah was providing adequate education for its students if it did not prepare them to be "where the action is" in modern America. Despite the problems of the nation's urban cores, Hostetter believed America's increasingly diverse metropolitan areas were going to drive the nation's economy and culture in the decades to come. The college had long been committed to instilling an ethic of Christian service in its students, but Hostetter believed the changes

of the 1960s had rendered that effort “farcical” if it did not prepare students to face the “great problems in urban society.” The new Philadelphia campus would be an academic boon for Messiah College, and a means of exposure to the so-called “inner city.” Messiah could no longer stay behind the ivied walls of the rural campus.¹⁰

The choice of location was audacious. It meant that Messiah College—an overwhelmingly white and rural institution—would be entering an urban neighborhood shaped by a recent history of systemic oppression and severe racial tension. In the fall of 1963, a white rookie patrol officer had shot Willie Philyaw to death outside a white-owned discount store about half a mile from the future site of the campus. The officer claimed the young black man lunged at him with a knife, but community members pointed out that Philyaw was handicapped and suffered from epileptic seizures. One eyewitness even claimed Philyaw was experiencing a seizure in the moments before the shooting. The slaying sparked two nights of violence as black residents broke store windows along Susquehanna Avenue and attacked white pedestrians. The officer was cleared of any wrongdoing. The exoneration infuriated many black Philadelphians, who were already battling pervasive employment and housing discrimination. One longtime resident said, “This community is like a lighted stick of dynamite. It could blow at any minute.” The spark came the following summer. On the night of August 28, 1964, police arrested Odessa Bradford after she refused to get out of her stalled car at 22nd Street and Columbia Avenue. After the officers dragged Bradford to a police wagon, gathering

¹⁰ “The ‘Satellite’ Campus: A Unique Program for College Education in the United States,” Box XI – 2 – 7.1 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus; D. Ray Hostetter, “Study Prospectus for a Messiah College Urban Center or College,” October 10, 1967, Box XI – 2 – 7.1 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus, Archives of Messiah College.

crowds pummeled them with bricks. That night, a false rumor swirled through the community that Bradford was pregnant and had been beaten to death in police custody. Rioting spread through a large swath of North Philadelphia in the following days as black residents systematically targeted hundreds of white-owned stores along Columbia and Ridge Avenues. All told, two people died in the uprising, hundreds were injured, and white-owned properties sustained millions of dollars in damages.¹¹

Into this charged environment, rural white students from Messiah's main campus would come and experience an "urban semester." The rowhouses would be both a residence and academic center for Messiah students. After spending their first two years at Messiah's main campus, students could attend the Philadelphia campus and take courses at Temple to finish their studies. The partnership allowed Messiah to dramatically expand its offering of academic majors. President Hostetter believed this would increase enrollments at both campuses.¹² Messiah's planning for the Philadelphia campus demonstrated its institutional commitment to Christian colorblindness. President Hostetter and other leaders used coded language and made no explicit mention of race in written documents. This was remarkable in light of the realities of the neighborhood

¹¹ Fred Bonaparte, "Epileptic Cripple Has Fit During Alleged Theft and Is Slain by Cop," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 29, 1963, 1; "Tourigian Back On Duty In Police Radio Room," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 15, 1963, 33; Art Peters, "North Phila. Tension Seethes In Wake of Youth's Shooting," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 29, 1963; Chris J. Perry, "False Killing Rumor Triggered Riot," *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 1, 1964, 1; Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 154-164.

¹² "The 'Satellite' Campus: A Unique Program for College Education in the United States," Box XI – 2 – 7.1 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus; D. Ray Hostetter, "Study Prospectus for a Messiah College Urban Center or College," October 10, 1967, Box XI – 2 – 7.1 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus, Archives of Messiah College.

around the proposed campus. While it was possible for the program to work, it was clearly a complicated venture fraught with potential for misunderstandings, fear, and counterproductive exchanges. How would Messiah students feel about living in the neighborhood? How would residents feel about the students' presence in their community? The extant planning documents do not address these sorts of questions and appear remarkably sanguine about the potential challenges.

In the Philadelphia campus Hostetter invested grand hopes. Alongside the academic and cultural benefits, a characteristic evangelical missionary impulse animated Hostetter's vision. Students from "rural backgrounds" would awaken to "the social problems of the inner city" and become involved in ministry in the community around them. They would take their faith and learning and apply it to the real-world problems of the modern city.¹³ Dr. Hostetter envisioned rapidly increasing enrollment, with support from foundations that would be eager to invest in such an innovative experiment. More enrollments would mean more "prestige," which in turn would lead to more donations. He proposed the construction of a new high-rise to house 150 students at the Philadelphia campus.¹⁴ For Hostetter, the campus was nothing less than a new way to do Christian higher education in the United States. Through its partnership with Temple, Messiah

¹³ "The 'Satellite' Campus: A Unique Program for College Education in the United States," Box XI – 2 – 7.1 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus, Archives of Messiah College.

¹⁴ "Philadelphia Faculty Minutes, September 25, 1970, Box T-13, Faculty Meeting, Archives of Messiah College. At the time of my visit to the Messiah College Archives, archival material from the Philadelphia campus was housed in large temporary boxes awaiting more systematic cataloguing after the 2014 closure of the Philadelphia Campus. I cite the temporary box number in the hope that future researchers will be able to trace the materials if they have been moved.

could offer the academic resources of a large university combined with the tight-knit Christian community of a small evangelical college. The campus at once expanded Messiah's academic imprint and engaged social problems with evangelical conviction.

The Philadelphia campus officially opened its doors in September of 1968. Dr. Hostetter's upbeat vision belied small beginnings. The student newspaper described the campus as a "pilot program" in which all of 12 students were enrolled for the fall semester. Some of these students promptly wrote an article describing their culture shock—the smells, the noise, the subway, the anything-goes atmosphere of Temple University, and "black people...lots of black people."¹⁵ On the other hand, students commented that the rowhouse living-learning environment made for a close community and sense of camaraderie, all the more so because the poor black neighborhood and large secular university just steps away from their front door seemed so different from home. After visiting the campus for a couple of days, one student described it as a "family" atmosphere and declared that he had "never been more impressed or proud of anything this college has undertaken."¹⁶

Positive reports helped to grow enrollment at the Philadelphia Campus, which reached 43 by the fall of 1972.¹⁷ Students consistently described their experience as an opening up to the world: the pluralistic atmosphere of Temple together with its myriad

¹⁵ Floyd Stoner and Paul Heisey, "Cultural Virginity Undone," *Ivy Rustles*, October 3, 1968, 1.

¹⁶ E.A.P., Editorial, *Ivy Rustles*, February 20, 1969, 2. See also, Paul Heisey and Floyd Stoner, "Repentance Attempted," *Ivy Rustles*, October 31, 1968, 1,4.

¹⁷ "Messiah College Philadelphia Campus Enrollment," Box T-13, Folder "Advisory Board: Davis' Oral Reports," Archives of Messiah College.

academic offerings, the cultural opportunities of center city, the social needs of the community around them. The uniqueness of a rowhouse campus made the entire experience intense, immersive, and, for some, life-changing. While students in rural Grantham attended class in a staid, homogeneous environment, the Philadelphia students often felt that they were experiencing real life—and doing it together. “Students practically run the Center,” one student noted. “They do all the cooking, maintenance, and secretarial work,” and lived alongside professors and their families. “Being together so much and having to pull together to keep the Center running smoothly helps to foster a real sense of community.” Some students had the sense that they were not just getting an academic degree; they were experiencing “a kind of community-style living not quite available” at the main campus.¹⁸

Ronald Sider, who became acting director of the Philadelphia campus in 1971, envisioned Messiah’s program as a model that dozens of evangelical colleges could follow.¹⁹ Indeed, Messiah helped to inspire other evangelical urban education initiatives across the country, and some administrators seeking to establish urban training programs at their own institutions wrote to Sider for advice.²⁰ But more than direct imitation, the proliferation of such programs reflected the tenor of the time, a moment in which experimentation seemed possible. In 1968, Barrington College in Rhode Island partnered with Crosscounter, Bill Iverson’s ministry in Newark, to establish an “Urban Field

¹⁸ Marian Landis, “Come to Temple,” *Ivy Rustles*, November 29, 1971, 3.

¹⁹ Ronald Sider, “Christian Cluster Colleges—Off to a Good Start,” *Christianity Today*, March 24, 1974, 12-15.

²⁰ Box T-11, Folder “Phila Campus Correspondence About This Model,” Archives of Messiah College.

College” that would give students “the gut experience of living and working in the city.” The student newspaper reported that “Much of the work involves intimate contact with the black community and with social and poverty problems of the inner city.”²¹ The program, though small, drew evangelical students from as far away as Taylor University in Indiana, Davidson College in North Carolina and Covenant College in Tennessee to experience a semester of urban ministry and gain college credit in the process.²² In 1970, a small group of evangelical activists and college students, primarily from Wheaton and Trinity colleges, founded the “Urban Life Center” in Chicago. This program, too, drew college students from around the region to “work and live among minorities in order to feel the heat of oppression and discrimination” while gaining course credit through a partnership with Roosevelt University.²³ In 1971, Westmont College launched an “Urban Semester” program in nearby San Francisco to provide “vital educational experiences” for evangelical students while “exposing them to the multiple needs and potential” of the city.²⁴ Though different in their particulars, these programs had common features: a residential center in an urban neighborhood that white evangelicals would ordinarily try

²¹ Linda Uhseman, “Experiences in Newark,” *The Forum*, October 13, 1972, 1, 7; “Urban Field College Program, *The Barringtonian*, May, 1968, 1; “Barrington Urban Field College,” *Barrington College Bulletin*, October, 1971; “Newark Adventure for B.C. Students,” *The Barringtonian*, January 8, 1971, 1. For background on Bill Iverson, see Glenn Kittler, “Side Order of Love Reaches Teen-agers,” *Lenten Guideposts*, 1968. This syndicated column appeared in *Simpson’s Leader-Times*, April 11, 1968, 4.

²² P. Reilly, “Inner-city worker Iverson to be here,” *The Bagpipe*, November 17, 1970, 1.

²³ Eunice and Donald Schatz and Lucille Dayton, “The Urban Life Center,” in *The Urban Mission*, edited by Craig Ellison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 100-101.

²⁴ Ronald M. Enroth, “The Westmont Urban Semester,” in *The Urban Mission*, edited by Craig Ellison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 109.

to avoid; hands-on ministry experience across boundaries of race and class; and accreditation. Such immersive education experiences would, it was hoped, raise up a new generation of evangelicals prepared to constructively engage modern urban America.

But back at the Philadelphia campus, Messiah College was discovering how difficult the implementation of such projects could be. In the fall of 1972, Messiah's growing cohort of black students put racism on the school's agenda more than ever before. The Black Student Union's demands for institutional reform at Messiah included immediate changes at the Philadelphia campus. The BSU demanded that the college hire a black director for the Philadelphia campus, subject to their veto.²⁵ Administrators responded that they had been looking for a black director for over a year, but that the market for black evangelical educators was extremely competitive. The Board reiterated its commitment to pursuing a black candidate with "greater vigor" but also cautioned that the search depended on finding a "qualified candidate." The BSU also demanded that the Philadelphia campus do more to serve the needs of the community around it. President Hostetter responded that this was a great idea, but "not something that happens by fiat." He counseled that ministry to the community was an individual decision for each student to make. "White students have failed here," he admitted, "but have the Blacks as well become oriented to service?" He encouraged them to take the lead in ministering "in the inner city."²⁶ While the resource constraints Messiah operated under were real enough,

²⁵ Philadelphia Campus Faculty, Minutes, September 27, 1972, Box XI – 4 – 1.5 Faculty Minutes (1968-1973) Folder Faculty Minutes 1972-1973, Archives of Messiah College.

²⁶ D. Ray Hostetter to James Dove and Tony Bryant, February 6, 1973, Box XI – 4 – 1.5 Faculty Minutes (1968-1973) Folder Faculty Minutes 1972-1973, Archives of Messiah College.

some of the BSU's demands were controversial not because they were expensive but because they represented a different way to think about racial consciousness and Christian responsibility in the city. Hostetter transformed the BSU's call for a systemic change in the operation of the Philadelphia campus to an invitation to individual students to volunteer for service.²⁷

Dr. Sider was more sympathetic to black students' demands. Though he was not the black director the BSU wanted, he was eager to use the campus as a center for anti-racist training. Animated by his Anabaptist tradition, Sider was anti-war, anti-racist, and an irrepressible advocate for evangelical forms of social justice activism. He went on to write popular books, such as *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, challenging the orthodoxies of American capitalism and its nexus with evangelical Christianity. While serving as director of the Philadelphia campus, Sider sought to awaken white students and faculty to the cause of racial justice. His approach was confrontational; he believed it was productive to make white students uncomfortable and expose their own racism. Such tactics produced strong reactions from colorblind Christians. In contrast to most Messiah administrators, he wrote very directly about the fraught racial context of the campus. He viewed the campus's location—amid “the excitement and confrontation of the black inner city”—as “ideal for ‘consciousness raising.’” He believed “Church and society desperately need a new generation of young people with the courage to confront racism, structural injustice, and the still festering urban crisis.” But this wouldn't happen by

²⁷ Minutes of Faculty Meeting, January 29, 1973; Minutes Special Faculty Meeting, January 31, 1973; Minutes of Faculty Meeting, February 5, 1973, Box XI – 4 – 1.5 Faculty Minutes (1968-1973) Folder Faculty Minutes 1972-1973, Archives of Messiah College; Jacqueline Gibson, “B.S.U. Silent Minority Becomes Loud,” *Ivy Rustles*, February 16, 1972.

reading books in the comfort of the classroom “safely isolated from both black persons and the urban ghetto.” The way to produce real change was to push evangelical students into face-to-face encounters with the realities of urban injustice and the lived experiences of people unlike themselves. Sider’s own experience living in a majority-black neighborhood shaped his perspective. “Most of what I know about oppression,” he said, “I’ve learned from black Americans.”²⁸ He wanted other white evangelicals to have similar learning opportunities, and the Philadelphia campus seemed ideally situated to provide them.²⁹

In the summer of 1972, Sider began to implement this vision in earnest. He and Philadelphia campus administrator Merle Brubaker led an eleven-week “seminar on urban problems” at the Philadelphia campus. 19 black and 13 white students from a dozen colleges around the country enrolled in a 4 credit course, “Models of Christian Ministry in the City.”³⁰ Reverend Randy Jones, a black evangelical, taught the class. A draft of introductory remarks for the summer seminar has Jones declaring, “I have heard Christian blacks say to white audiences: ‘If it were not for the love of Christ, I would take a gun and shoot every white face in this room.’”³¹ A skit continued this confrontational theme. For the students to succeed in the summer program, Sider and Jones insisted, they

²⁸ Quoted in Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, 78.

²⁹ Ronald J. Sider, “The Messiah Urban Satellite Campus,” in *The Urban Mission* edited by Craig Ellison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 93.

³⁰ Messiah College Interoffice Correspondence, Merle Brubaker to Ray Zercher, June 24, 1972, Box T-13 Folder Summer-1972, Archives of Messiah College.

³¹ Summer of 72, Box T-11 Folder Summer Seminar – Advertising, Archives of Messiah College

would have to confront white racism and black anger. Reading requirements included the autobiography of Malcom X and James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*. A midterm exam encouraged students to use black liberation theology to critique Christian colorblindness.³² In addition to confronting racism, a wide-ranging curriculum of field trips, service-learning opportunities, and lectures exposed students to both individualistic and more structural approaches to Christian ministry in Philadelphia.

In an attempt to awaken the broader white evangelical community to racism and urban problems, an interracial group of students in the summer seminar conducted programs at seven suburban and rural churches. These confrontational performances used skits, personal testimonials, and music to try to implicate white congregations in the problems of the city. Putting an evangelical twist on the Kerner Commission report, the speakers told these evangelical congregations the church bore special responsibility for the ghetto.³³ It had disengaged from the city and failed in its mission. Most churches responded positively to the program, but the directness with which it confronted white racism offended at least one of the congregations. Dr. Sider felt compelled to defend the program to the pastor of the church and to Messiah administrators. In a letter to

³² "Models of Christian Ministry in the City;" "Models of Christian Ministry in the City – Mid-term Exam," Box T-13 Folder Summer – 1972, Archives of Messiah College.

³³ President Johnson established the Kerner Commission to explore the roots of the 1967 urban uprisings. The Commission's report famously declared, "What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that the white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." See Malcolm McLaughlin, *The Long, Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Thomas J. Hrach, *The Riot Report and the News: How the Kerner Commission Changed Media Coverage of Black America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).

President Hostetter, Sider implied that the congregation was only offended because it was racist.³⁴ He continued to believe “confrontation and vigorous honesty can be instruments of the risen Lord, who is still in the business of converting the worst of sinners – like white evangelical racists.”³⁵

The summer program’s confrontational style was surprising because the advertising for the seminar featured evangelical clichés and racial paternalism. The brochure cast the American city as a space analogous to a foreign mission field, allowing students to imagine themselves as spiritual superiors to a needy population.³⁶ While the text noted the seminar would feature black lecturers, the accompanying images made white evangelicals appear as rescuers for a child-like and helpless black population. On the front cover, a white woman posed with two small black girls. Innocent and endearing, the female children allowed prospective students to visualize the objects of their ministry in the most non-threatening and ego-boosting terms. On the opposite page of the brochure, a skinny black boy, perhaps ten years of age, gazed out over a rubble-strewn empty city lot. The exclusion of black adults in the brochure pictures was probably not a conscious decision, but the message communicated was unmistakably paternalistic. Though the brochure likely appealed to some of Messiah’s white evangelical constituency, it fell far short of the tone Sider wished to convey. Rather than challenging

³⁴ Ronald J. Sider to Rev. Robert Reasey, October 11, 1973, Ronald J. Sider to President Hostetter, October 1, 1973, Box T-13 Folder Correspondence—Ronald J. Sider Phila. Campus 1973-1974, Archives of Messiah College.

³⁵ Sider, “The Messiah Urban Satellite Campus,” 94.

³⁶ “A Seminar on Urban Problems,” XI – 2 – 7.1 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus.

colorblind Christians to learn from black perspectives, the brochure seemed to invite white evangelicals to minister across the color line in a way that reaffirmed white leadership in evangelical spaces.

The summer program had been small and voluntary; Sider wanted to do something bigger that would affect Messiah's whole student body. Beginning in the fall of 1972, he led a program that brought the entire freshman class of Messiah College to the Philadelphia campus for weekend seminars on racism. This effort to implement an anti-racist vision on the still-fledgling Philadelphia campus ultimately produced a backlash against the Philadelphia campus and what it seemed to represent. Titles of lectures included "Racism and Its Effects," "Black Power," "Black Consciousness," and "Black Evangelicals."³⁷ Students watched black films and had the opportunity to attend black churches in a whirlwind weekend of racial education and exposure to the unfamiliar city. According to Merle Brubaker the goals of these weekend seminars were two-fold: to make students "aware of the problem of white racism both institutional and personal" so that they would see anti-racist work as a Christian imperative; and to get students interested in enrolling at the Philadelphia campus. But the more Sider and Brubaker pushed the first goal, the more the second goal seemed to suffer. The seminar program took a confrontational approach. Speakers denounced white racism and demanded that white students repent. Many students, fresh off a bus from rural Pennsylvania and in the city for the first time, were bewildered to say the least. In a review of the freshman visits, Brubaker reported that many students seemed to feel

³⁷ Samuel Magesa, "Intercultural Experience," *Ivy Rustles*, November 21, 1972, 10.

“threatened” by the experience.³⁸ The outcome of the freshman seminars was so ambiguous that faculty were soon debating whether the weekends in Philadelphia made the students “more or less racist.” One freshman wrote, “I think this was a total waste of time. I was sick of being called a white racist all weekend.” Another student was “VERY DISGUSTED!” by the “black bias” of the program. Others had positive feelings about the experience, and some were ambivalent. “At first I thought it was great that we were bringing [racism] out in the open,” one student wrote. “By now, I’m almost sick of talking about it.”³⁹

Challenging the assumptions of white students could have unpredictable effects, leaving them confused by the experience and more committed than ever to their colorblind theology. Some continued to insist that the racial consciousness they experienced in Philadelphia was evidence of a lack of Christian maturity. As one student declared, “Black Christians are more like Black Panthers with a little Christ thrown in.”⁴⁰ For students who had never had occasion to think much about their whiteness, just forty-eight hours in North Philadelphia could be enough to make them “sick” of race talk. Though most of them came from backgrounds of racial exclusion typical of the 1950s and 1960s, their personal experience in those environments was one of innocence, not animus. They had barely had any contact with black people their whole lives and now they were suddenly being told to repent of their racism. Many responded with

³⁸ Merle Brubaker, Review of the Freshmen Weekend Seminars, Fall Semester, 1973, Box T-13 Folder Freshman Weekend, Archives of Messiah College.

³⁹ Minutes, Messiah College Philadelphia Faculty Meeting, December 4, 1973, Box T-13 Folder Freshman Weekend, Archives of Messiah College.

⁴⁰ Pam Bender, “Freshman Experience,” *Ivy Rustles*, December 5, 1973, 10.

defensiveness. For colorblind Christians, it was often hard to believe racism was a serious ongoing problem, much less *their* problem.

The weekend seminars proved to be a short-lived experiment for the freshman classes of 1972 and 1973. In the face of white students' discomfort, the administration at the main campus backed down. Freshman would no longer be required to take a trip to the Philadelphia campus. Sider admitted that the anti-racist nature of the weekend seminars "clearly conflicted" with the goal of making the Philadelphia campus appealing to Messiah students, but he complained that the main campus should not have unilaterally made the decision to end the trips without his input. He insisted that something needed to replace the seminars. "[I]f the college is serious about attracting more black students," he wrote, "then there has to be serious, massive effort made to get to the racism which incoming freshmen inevitably bring with them." But, he concluded, he wasn't sure the college was actually "serious" about increasing black enrollment.⁴¹ The decision to shut down Sider's anti-racist training for Messiah freshman indicated the core tension at work: while Sider wanted to build an anti-racist program and let the chips fall where they may, Messiah could not risk an open rupture with its constituency of colorblind Christians.

Sider in this period was something of a bull in a china shop, one minute launching bold initiatives on the Philadelphia campus, the next embarking on a new project to organize a left-wing evangelical coalition nationwide. His growing profile as a national leader of progressive evangelicals added to the radical reputation of the campus and risked embarrassing Messiah in the eyes of its constituency. In 1972 he led a quixotic

⁴¹ James W. Skillen to Ronald J. Sider, May 23, 1974; Ronald J. Sider to James W. Skillen, July 8, 1974, Box T-13 Folder Correspondence—Ronald J. Sider Phila. Campus 1973-1974, Archives of Messiah College.

“evangelicals for McGovern” campaign. In the fall of 1973, he organized an interracial gathering of progressive evangelical activists in Chicago that resulted in the “Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern.” The declaration critiqued American nationalism, materialism, racism, and militarism, and the evangelical church’s complicity in all these forces. The large contingent of black evangelicals, including John Perkins, Bill Pannell, Ruth Lewis Bentley, and Clarence Hilliard, pushed for a particularly strong statement against racism. “We deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism and the conspicuous responsibility of the evangelical community for perpetuating the personal attitudes and institutional structures that have divided the body of Christ along color lines,” the declaration announced. “Further, we have failed to condemn the exploitation of racism at home and abroad by our economic system.” With its attention to structural injustice and the reality of white racism in the evangelical church, the declaration was a direct challenge to the colorblind theology of most Messiah students.⁴²

Though Sider’s efforts produced a backlash, extended immersions in black neighborhoods were more likely to produce lasting change in young white evangelicals’ attitudes about colorblindness and the American city. Some students embraced these experiences and became newly conscious of their status as white people. For one white Messiah College student, news headlines about racial controversies were abstractions until she spent the summer of 1971 in a black neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. “I encountered situations which made me very much aware of my ‘whiteness,’” she wrote.

⁴² On the 1973 Chicago Declaration, see Ronald J. Sider, ed., *The Chicago Declaration* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1974); Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 170-184, and Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, 47-51.

“Feelings of uneasiness and insecurity were strong and continuous,” she admitted. “I clearly did not fit in with the people of this urban community.” Now she could imagine how it felt to be a person of color in the United States, or at her own college campus. She wrote that her summer in Brooklyn changed her “attitude toward black people and their demands.” She no longer believed black students were stirring up unnecessary racial trouble. Instead, she saw that her colorblind assumptions did not describe the reality black students experienced.⁴³ A Westmont’s student’s journal entry while in San Francisco said it all: “I felt a tiny wave of what it was like to be black in white America...” Wrote another, “Today I found myself swimming in an ebony sea for the first time in my life.”⁴⁴

Students often felt the tension of trying to align these new experiences with their colorblind theology. One veteran of the Urban Field College in Newark wrote about how touched she was when a girl hugged her and said, “We’re going to miss you.” From her experience she concluded that “no matter who you are or what color you are...love and concern overcome all barriers.” She had forged friendships with people in the city, “and that was very precious to those of us who had, previous to our experience in Newark, little contact with blacks.” These personal encounters weren’t just feel-good stories; they were the basis for reevaluating her beliefs. In Newark, “You actually see the vacant tenement buildings, the poverty, the prejudice and the injustice that you have heard so much about...” and you learn “how our society has built in prejudice into our institutions.” If she had come with a paternalistic intention to save benighted people, she

⁴³ Debbie Heacock, “The Summer of ’71,” *Ivy Rustles*, October 6, 1971, 4.

⁴⁴ Enroth, “The Westmont Urban Semester,” 112.

had quickly learned that “The blacks are getting it together by themselves.” Now that she had become aware of racial injustice, her job was to go back to her own people and “inform and change the attitudes of the white community.”⁴⁵

Some white Messiah students had similar awakenings at the Philadelphia campus. After just a month in Philadelphia in 1971, Jan Whitworth described how she had wished she was “a couple of shades darker.”⁴⁶ Randy Rhoad wrote that simply going across the street to McDonald’s on his first night in Philadelphia made him understand “how it felt to be in the minority!”⁴⁷ Though uncomfortable, such feelings compelled students to examine their colorblind theology from new perspectives. Some of these students described their experiences in Philadelphia as life-changing. Rather than acting as saviors bringing the light of the gospel into the darkness of the modern city, they found that they had much to learn from urban America.

Sider and his leadership team were learning, too. In advance of the 1973 summer seminar on urban problems, they sought to discard the paternalism that had affected the program in 1972. A planning document stated, “Seek opportunities for whites to work with whites...avoid the superiority complex.” For the advertising brochure, the right pictures would help prospective students to expect black leadership. The 1973 brochure used more egalitarian images and declared, “painfully honest black-white confrontation is

⁴⁵ Uhsemann, “Experiences in Newark,” 7.

⁴⁶ Jan Whitworth, “Messiah At Temple In Philadelphia,” *Ivy Rustles*, November 2, 1971, 4.

⁴⁷ Randy Rhoad, untitled article, *Ivy Rustles*, December 20, 1977, 8.

a basic ingredient of the summer!”⁴⁸ As might have been predicted, it turned out that the market for this kind of honesty was painfully small. Individual positive experiences of Philadelphia did not overcome the broader sense of alienation from the city that most members of the Messiah community felt. A 1974 survey of hundreds of Messiah College students found that fully half the student body had “no interest” in the Philadelphia campus, and seventy-five percent had no intention of enrolling there. “I hate city life,” one student admitted.⁴⁹

Faculty and administrators’ attitudes often matched those of students. Though the Philadelphia campus had strong support from President Hostetter, much of the faculty and administration was unsupportive or actively hostile. Year after year, Philadelphia administrators brainstormed how to get faculty and administrators at the main campus on board with the Philadelphia project. One Philadelphia administrator wrote that “rumor” and “innuendo” about the Philadelphia campus flourished in rural Grantham. “The Campus gained a reputation, not completely undeserved, as being a ‘dangerous place’ where persons were verbally put up against the wall and confronted with their racial views.” Such tactics left students “angered, frightened, and resentful.” Enrollment was low throughout the 1970s, reaching 45 in 1976. Staff turnover was high. In the spring of 1974, Jay Basler, the Director of Student Development at the Philadelphia campus, noted that he was the fifth person to hold the position in just six years. The resources invested in the campus were not commensurate with the expected outcomes. Administrators lived

⁴⁸ “For 1973 Summer Seminar”; “Seminars on Urban Problems,” Box T-13 Folder Summer 1972, Archives of Messiah College.

⁴⁹ “You Are Messiah College,” *Ivy Rustles*, April 16, 1974, 10-11; Magesa, “Intercultural Experience,” *Ivy Rustles*, November 21, 1972, 10.

on-site in a dorm-like atmosphere that often felt cut off from the black neighborhood around it. For most white evangelical educators, it was no place to settle down with a family. Basler believed the college needed to make a more intensive effort to find people willing to live at the center, or commit the resources to provide alternative housing arrangements. “My family wishes to leave at the earliest possible date,” he concluded.⁵⁰ As Messiah’s venture into Philadelphia risked foundering on colorblind Christians’ hostility to it, whether the campus could be sustained remained an open question.

The Imagined Mission Field Next Door

As Messiah grappled with the challenges of running an institution in North Philadelphia, most white evangelicals continued to pull away from the city. This withdrawal was a matter of concern for white evangelical leaders, who wondered what it meant for the credibility of their movement. Even if most white evangelicals didn’t find much to like in Sider-style activism, they were certainly worried about the urban crisis. What could be done about the mission field next door? As *Christianity Today* put it, “Our words are empty when we talk to the black man about love and brotherhood and then withdraw into our all-white churches to pray for the lost in the Congo.”⁵¹ One evangelical scholar lamented that in the predominant evangelical mindset “It is almost as if God had abandoned the city or never had anything to do with it.”⁵² The city was the place where

⁵⁰ Jay C. Basler, Director of Student Development, Campus at Philadelphia, Annual Report, 1973-1974, XI – 14 – 7.1 General Files, Annual Reports: St. Dev. Archives of Messiah College.

⁵¹ “Love With Skin On It,” *Christianity Today*, December 19, 1969, 23.

⁵² Enroth, “The Westmont Urban Semester,” 109.

God was not. Evangelicals might bring God into the city, but God was not indigenous to it. And that meant that the people living there were lost and without hope. This imaginary city was a crucial impediment to constructive evangelical engagement with urban problems. When white evangelicals like Sider promoted structural notions of injustice and racism, they found themselves isolated from the very constituencies they most wanted to influence. Colorblind Christians might pity the city, but they didn't want to learn from it.

Sider saw the city as the launching ground for the construction of an anti-racist evangelicalism. Drawing on the same biblical texts colorblind Christians used, Sider imagined them as a call for a "a glorious oneness in the multiracial body of Christ." Rather than assuming racial identities ought to dissolve in this union, Sider wanted "the black Christian" to be "proud of his blackness and African heritage." He insisted that making this a reality required "incredibly difficult work." Instead of declaring unity to be so, white Christians had to do the hard work of preventing "their churches from fleeing to suburbia when neighborhoods change." They had to confront "white racism" and provide resources for "black Christians like Tom Skinner."⁵³ Sider's invocation of Skinner was indicative of the role the black evangelist occupied in evangelicalism by the early 1970s. Black evangelicals like Skinner faced a conundrum: how to mobilize white evangelical help without ratifying negative stereotypes of the city and the people who lived there. Black evangelicals challenged, accused, and confronted white evangelicals, but they also deliberately played on white evangelical pity to garner resources for their ministries. No

⁵³ Ronald J. Sider, "Does the Bible Teach the Equality of All Men? (Part II)" Ivy Rustles, November 21, 1972, 10-11.

one managed this balancing act more adeptly than Tom Skinner. His relationship to white evangelicalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s can be read as an embodiment of the white evangelical connection to the mission field next door.

Tom Skinner gained a national profile in 1966 as a black evangelist white evangelicals could trust. Just 24 years of age that summer, Skinner's meteoric rise owed much to his ability to leverage his childhood experiences into an inspirational tale of uplift from the rough and tumble streets of New York. He described himself as the former hardened leader of a notorious Harlem gang of 129 members. Skinner boasted that his mixture of toughness and strategic thinking had "every one of them eating out of my hand" and they never lost a gang fight. He claimed he enforced discipline in the gang with brutal efficiency. He "had personally broken the arms and legs" of two would-be quitters, and claimed to have 22 notches on his blade, one for each of the people his knife had cut.⁵⁴ All of this supposedly happened before his sudden conversion to evangelical Christianity at the age of 14!⁵⁵ Exaggerated or not—Howard Jones didn't believe Skinner was telling the entire truth⁵⁶—evangelicals ate up this tale of redemption. As Skinner traveled the country speaking at Messiah and other white evangelical colleges the sensational details of his biography were widely repeated. The doubtful veracity of all the particulars is wonderfully symbolic: whether or not Skinner really was a sadistic teenager

⁵⁴ Tom Skinner, *Black and Free* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 54-65

⁵⁵ McCandlish Phillips, "Evangelist Finds Harlem Vineyard: Son of Pastor Denounces Sin at Series of Rallies," *New York Times*, August 16, 1964, 78.

⁵⁶ In private, Jones wrote that he deliberately kept his distance from Skinner, in part because "I have not been able to accept the exaggerated version of his testimony concerning his conversion as a former gang leader in Harlem..." Howard Jones to Walter Smyth, February 24, 1968, CN 17 Box 80 Folder 34, BGCA.

breaking bones and slashing flesh in a ruthless urban jungle, that's exactly what white evangelicals imagined the ghetto must be like. To white and black audiences alike, gritty Harlem roots signaled the authenticity of Skinner's blackness and his identification with black struggles.⁵⁷ And it fit comfortably into a tradition of evangelical conversion narratives. The more gratuitously sinful one's former life could be shown to be, the more glory abounded to the grace of God.⁵⁸ For white evangelicals, the evil escapades of Skinner's adolescence testified to the power of the gospel and signaled that when they supported Skinner they were tapping into an authentic conduit to the ghetto.

Skinner offered a bridge between white evangelicalism and the black city. It had long been the case, as Bob Harrison complained, that black Christians were encouraged to minister among their own people and steer clear of challenging white entitlement to spiritual authority. But white evangelicals did not imagine Skinner's evangelistic crusades in the ghetto through the traditional parameters of segregated ministries. In fact, when Skinner came to town for a crusade, local white evangelical college students were encouraged to help out.⁵⁹ Simply by supporting Skinner they were doing something meaningful about the nation's racial troubles and the urban crisis. He was less an outcast from white evangelicalism, as Harrison had sometimes felt himself to be in the 40s and 50s, and more an envoy. Said *Christianity Today*, "Skinner has created a great deal of

⁵⁷ Skinner's ministry produced a colorful autobiographical comic book titled, "Up From Harlem." Tom Skinner, *Up From Harlem* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1975).

⁵⁸ Said one reviewer of Skinner's first book, "The power of the gospel was never more clearly seen than in this amazing transformation." David R. Enlow, "New Insights on the Race Problem," *The Alliance Witness*, November 6, 1968, 10.

⁵⁹ "What Will You Contribute?" *Moody Student*, March 25, 1970, 2.

interest among evangelicals who worry vaguely that they might be missing the boat.”⁶⁰ In this project Skinner’s blackness was crucial, enabling him to act as a liminal figure, white evangelicalism’s black ambassador to the ghetto.⁶¹ By the summer of 1967, *Christianity Today* was telling its readers that Skinner deserved their “fullest support.”⁶²

To get that support, Skinner knew which buttons to press. While trying to raise funds from white evangelicals, he portrayed the black ghetto as a site of pity and desperate need.⁶³ In a major address before an audience of thousands of evangelicals at the 1969 U.S. Congress on Evangelism, Skinner described black urban dwellers as “a crippled people, a people who are crippled economically, socially, politically, and psychologically.”⁶⁴ And in his 1968 book, he described black churches as bastions of excessive emotionalism and spiritual immaturity, led by ministers given over to sexual immorality and hypocrisy.⁶⁵ As a result, he claimed, “There is hardly any Christian witness in the ghetto.”⁶⁶ There’s little reason to suppose Skinner’s hostility toward the

⁶⁰ “The Gospel with Candor,” *Christianity Today*, October 14, 1966, 53-54.

⁶¹ One advertisement for Skinner’s ministry featured a young black man behind prison bars. Beneath this striking image was a photo of Skinner himself. “Not everyone can reach him,” the ad declared, “But this man can.” *Eternity*, July 1978, 7.

⁶² “Summer of Racial Discontent,” *Christianity Today*, July 21, 1967, 27

⁶³ “A Crippled People Cry Out!” blared an ad for Skinner’s ministry in *Eternity* magazine. The ad promised “CRUSADES in black communities, penetrating to the back alleys.” *Eternity*, June 1970, 1.

⁶⁴ Tom Skinner, “Evangelicals and the Black Revolution,” *Christianity Today*, April 10, 1970, 10-15.

⁶⁵ Skinner, *Black and Free*, 45-53.

⁶⁶ Skinner, *Black and Free*, 32.

black church was insincere, but it also proved useful. It flattered white evangelical views of the city. Skinner did not doubt that white evangelicals had the correct theology on the point that mattered most—salvation through faith in Christ—and he asked them to help him bring their theology to the ghetto. And the beauty of it was that they wouldn't have to go there themselves. They could just support Skinner, confident that he wouldn't go off on any wild social causes. *Christianity Today* approvingly noted that Skinner “plays down social insurgence in his sermons because he feels that reform may take ‘sixty years’ but that regeneration through Christ can help now.”⁶⁷ To put it baldly, converted Negroes were not rioting Negroes.

None of this meant that Skinner made white evangelicals comfortable. In fact, his cultivation of white evangelical sympathy gave him a platform from which he launched increasingly scathing criticisms of white evangelical racism and indifference. It wasn't every day that a black evangelical got extended speeches printed in *Christianity Today*. With his blending of entreaty and confrontation, Skinner did. In the same speech in which he asked for help for a “crippled people” he declared, “Large numbers of us as black Christians have discovered that in the minds of some of our brethren ‘fellowship’ usually means a paternal relationship; if we act as they expect us to act, and if we say what they want us to say, and if we believe what they want us to believe, then we can have fellowship. My friend, that is not fellowship; that is psychological slavery.”⁶⁸ Skinner's increasingly radical tone was evident at InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's 1970 conference in Urbana, Illinois. Messiah students were among the 12,000 young people

⁶⁷ “The Gospel with Candor,” *Christianity Today*, October 14, 1966, 53-54.

⁶⁸ Skinner, “Evangelicals and the Black Revolution,” 10-15.

gathered where Skinner famously challenged students to embrace Jesus Christ as liberator, a militant revolutionary Christ who brought spiritual and social liberation. The problem was that “most evangelicals in this country who say that Christ is the answer will also go back to their suburban communities and vote for law-and-order candidates who will keep the system the way it is,” Skinner declared.⁶⁹ One Messiah student wrote that Skinner “almost forced one to consider his own life style and the necessity for change in a radical way.” For at least some Messiah students, Skinner offered an inspiring call to dedicate their lives to “the One true revolutionary—Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰

While Skinner called for revolution and Sider urged white evangelicals to resist white flight and confront their own racism, most white evangelicals acted to protect their economic and institutional investments. The urban crisis was the occasion for major statements of evangelical concern from bodies such as the National Association of Evangelicals and the Southern Baptist Convention, but neither group had the power, nor the inclination, to coerce their constituencies to implement the statements at the grassroots level. The SBC, at its 1968 annual meeting, adopted “A Statement Concerning the Crisis In Our Nation.” It called on Southern Baptists to “undertake to secure opportunities in matters of citizenship, public services, education, employment, and personal habitation.” The statement blandly acknowledged “our share of responsibility” for the racial crisis, and concluded with a call for “courageous actions for justice and

⁶⁹ Tom Skinner, “The U.S. Racial Crisis and World Evangelism,” <https://urbana.org/message/us-racial-crisis-and-world-evangelism>

⁷⁰ “Inter Varsity Convention,” *Ivy Rustles*, January 20, 1971, 3.

peace....Words will not suffice. The time has come for action.”⁷¹ The NAE, too, tepidly suggested that “we must find ways of expressing our interest in our neighbor’s physical welfare as we express our welfare for his soul.” The rest of the statement hedged and qualified this grudging admission of the need for social action. Evangelicals must remember, the NAE declared, that all the outward manifestations of crisis were only “symptoms of a deeper disease...” Evangelicals knew what that disease was—“man is a sinner inclined to evil”—and they knew its cure—“Jesus Christ as the only savior of sinners.”⁷²

Calls for action were aspirational. Implementing them was not easy. A 1968 in-house survey of Southern Baptist churches in “transitional areas” of racial change found “negligible” outreach to African Americans despite deliberately designing the study to find churches engaged in such outreach. “The overwhelming majority of respondents did not feel that a ministry to Negroes was a reasonable possibility for their church,” the report concluded. “Churches have written off the Negro as not their responsibility.” In a paradox characteristic of colorblind Christianity, white evangelicals paired these overtly racial decisions with a profound inability to see their own racial investments. The report charged that “Many Southern Baptists are no more aware of...the importance of race in their actions and attitudes than fish recognize that they swim and survive in water.”⁷³

⁷¹ “A Statement Concerning the Crisis In Our Nation,” June 5, 1968, AR 795-221 Box 59 Folder 31; Draft of “A Statement Concerning the Crisis In Our Nation,” May, 1968, AR 631-3 Box 26 Folder 8, SBHLA.

⁷² “The Crisis in the Nation,” *Covenanter Witness*, May 29, 1968, 344, 352.

⁷³ Philip Leung, “Summary of Tentative Report of ‘Churches in Transitional Areas’ Study” September, 1969, AR 631-3, Box 26 Folder 7, SBHLA.

While evangelical leaders called for action, many laity resented efforts to make them think about race. One man no doubt spoke for untold numbers of white evangelicals with his frustrated response to yet another sympathetic article on the racial crisis in an evangelical publication: “There is too much propaganda about Negroes. I’m tired of reading about them.”⁷⁴ Another man in a Chicago suburb was incensed when some evangelicals pushed for racial integration. “Where am I supposed to go now?” he asked. “I moved here to get away from them...If you people are going to be shoving this down our throats, I’m not going to church anymore. My house is my God. I have \$20,000 invested in that house, and my house is my God.”⁷⁵ C.W. Scudder, a professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, deplored this abdication of evangelical responsibility. “As long as people run from Negro neighbors,” Scudder warned, “the black wave will continue to move across our cities, engulfing churches and other institutions. And as long as the black wave keeps moving, our churches will have to keep on moving.” Though Scudder evoked racial panic with his metaphors, it was the white evangelical flight from the city that really scared him. He questioned “how long...God could keep on blessing a church that ran from people.” He feared the answer.⁷⁶

Black evangelicals continued to try to implicate white evangelicals in the urban crisis. They insisted that white evangelicals were not bystanders to it, but creators of it. In February 1969, Southern Baptist leaders held a meeting with black pastors from Atlanta

⁷⁴ Frank George, letter to the editor, *Campus Life*, May 1969, 16.

⁷⁵ “By Their Fruits Shall Ye Know Them,” *Chimes*, October 3, 1969, 5-6.

⁷⁶ C.W. Scudder, “Southern Baptists and Changing Racial Patterns,” February 14, 1966, AR 627-1 Box 2 Folder 26, SBHLA.

and New York to dialogue about the Crisis Statement. Pastor Earl Moore of New York said the only word he could think of when reading the Statement was “duplicity”: the duplicity and “pious platitudes” of a “white church that has tied its destiny with the destiny of the nation.” Moore deliberately provoked discomfort in his listeners by invoking the circumstances of his parishioners back in New York City. Though he was unimpressed with the Statement, at least he could *read* it. Many in his church could not. They were products of schools that “annihilated them before they had a chance to come out and face the world.” Until Southern Baptists acted as “prophet” against, rather than enabler of, a racist nation that destroyed black lives, “this Crisis Statement won’t mean a thing.” Toward the end of the meeting, a black layman from New York spoke up. John Grant had grown up in Savannah, Georgia. He had made it out and done well for himself. But on a recent visit to his childhood home he encountered old friends who had not been so fortunate. Grant felt an overwhelming “anger” and “hate” boil up inside. “How is it, he asked himself, “that people who are supposed to be so religious, and so righteous and so God-loving and so kind, and who can say as they read the Bible, ‘how could they do this to Christ’, and in the meantime these same people are crucifying Christes [sic] everyday of their lives.”⁷⁷

Many white evangelicals resisted such images. They saw the city through the lens of pity and spectacle, not injustice. After a visit to an evangelical “rescue mission” in Chicago, a Moody Bible Institute student described the “fleshy body-shells” of the men,

⁷⁷ “Dialogue With Home Mission Board Staff and Negro Pastors,” February 13, 1969, AR 631-10, Box 24 Folder 8, SBHLA.

whose “Dull eyes peer out from skulls once occupied by operative minds...”⁷⁸ A 1967 photo essay in the student newspaper titled “Tares Among the Social Wheat” offered a “graphic portrayal of social decay” in the neighborhoods around Moody.⁷⁹ The title, ripped out of context from a parable of Jesus, implied that physical impoverishment made one a “tare” that would be burned up in the final judgment.⁸⁰ At MBI, students saw the urban crisis up close as the neighborhood around the Institute deteriorated. The Cabrini Green Homes, just a couple blocks from the MBI campus, would become nationally notorious as an example of public housing gone wrong. Yet MBI’s institutional culture was one of siege, a white Christian oasis amid the disorder of the city. Moody hired a private security force and did little to advocate for its neighbors.⁸¹

Paternalism continued to inflect much of white evangelical urban ministry. While every Moody student had a “Practical Christian Work” assignment with a ministry in the city, many of these activities were focused on evangelism and work with children. Social action to ameliorate physical hardship was more controversial. Some students thought MBI did a lot of ministry in the “inner city” black community, but students were thrust into such work without cultural awareness or preparation.⁸² The social distance between

⁷⁸ “Rescue Is Still Aim of City Missions,” *The Moody Student*, November 12, 1971, 3.

⁷⁹ “Tares Among the Social Wheat,” *The Moody Student*, May 12, 1967, 3.

⁸⁰ The parable of the wheat and tares is found in Matthew 13:24-30.

⁸¹ Dean Berto, “Pinkerton Men Patrol Campus, Providing Security for Campus,” *The Moody Student*, February 25, 1966, 5.

⁸² Carol Stine and Rachel Goecking, “Can We Be More Effective?” *The Moody Student*, May 24, 1968, 2.

campus and neighborhood remained vast. This troubled some students. One student wrote perceptively about the culture shock MBI students experienced when they got to the city and urged students to become true “citizens of Chicago” rather than sequestering themselves on campus. There were periodic calls to move beyond their “stained-glass ghetto” and reach out to the “slum world, not 100 feet from MBI.” Moody students were being trained to “reach lost people—everywhere... Yet our own neighbors are left untouched.”⁸³

The disconnect between white evangelical institutions and the city was so stark that sincere efforts to move toward the city sometimes fell comically short. Houghton College, in western New York, had ambitions remarkably like Messiah’s. Though a rural institution, it wanted to forge connections to the city. In 1969 Houghton merged with Buffalo Bible Institute, creating a new extension campus closer to Buffalo. Houghton’s leaders had high hopes for what the so-called Buffalo campus would accomplish. The initial long-range plan called for rapid expansion to accommodate 1,200 students.⁸⁴ Like Messiah, Houghton imagined the campus as a means to enhance both its academic curriculum and opportunities for rural white students to gain valuable urban experiences. “The emphasis envisioned will provide broad opportunities for social service – Christian

⁸³ “An Urban Anachronism—Fourth Pres,” *The Moody Student*, March 14, 1969, 3; Gary Havens, “Should We Overlook Our Own Neighbors?” *The Moody Student*, May 21, 1965, 2; Denny Hollinger, “Small Town versus Chicago,” *The Moody Student*, November 1, 1968, 2.

⁸⁴ “Buffalo Suburban Campus Report,” September 25, 1981, Box 96-16 Folder Buffalo Campus Development, Houghton College Archives.

concern confronting the ills of urban society,” one fund-raising document stated.⁸⁵ In reality, Houghton’s new campus was not located in Buffalo at all. Instead, it was in the leafy suburb of West Seneca. Five years after the 1969 merger, Houghton College had 1,200 students on its main campus and only 80 at the so-called Buffalo campus. The college began to scale down its plans. Rather than a full-fledged branch campus, the West Seneca location would be an “extension” site providing an “urban laboratory” for students from the main campus with relevant majors such as social work. It could also serve as a continuing education site for non-traditional students in the Buffalo region.⁸⁶

In a 1974 application to the U.S. Office of Education, Houghton’s President noted that the college was trying to follow the example of Messiah’s Philadelphia campus, which had secured significant federal funding.⁸⁷ Among Houghton’s goals, the application explained, was to “Explore the needs and create the corresponding programs for the black community” in nearby Buffalo.⁸⁸ In light of the stated intentions at the time of the merger, one might have assumed that such program development would have occurred years earlier, but the barriers were formidable. Houghton was a rural college catering to the evangelical Wesleyan Church and its overwhelmingly white constituency. It lacked cultural and institutional ties to the more diverse population of Buffalo. The

⁸⁵ “Buffalo Campus: The Shape of Things to Come,” Box 93-9 Folder 1969-1968, Houghton College Archives.

⁸⁶ “Houghton College – A Developing Institution (Institutional Narrative), 3, Box 93-9 Folder 1970-1980, Houghton College Archives.

⁸⁷ Wilber T. Dayton to Willa B. Player, July 31, 1974, Box 93-9 Folder 1970-1980, Houghton College Archives.

⁸⁸ “Houghton College – A Developing Institution (Institutional Narrative), 3, Box 93-9 Folder 1970-1980, Houghton College Archives.

attention to difference that successful programming required did not come naturally to these colorblind Christians. Worse, Houghton's students tended to see the city as a godless place. When one student dared to suggest they might "see God's glory" in the city, he had to overcome entrenched negative attitudes. He assumed that for his audience the city evoked the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and all manner of evil associated with them. "Few of us like the city," he admitted.⁸⁹

Messiah College, too, found that pulling back from its mandatory anti-racist education did not solve the problems of the increasingly embattled Philadelphia campus. Even if students no longer had to worry about being "put up against the wall and confronted with their racial views," longstanding fears of the city continued to hold them back. One veteran of the Philadelphia campus remembered how rumors about the dangers of the city made him "ready to crawl under my bed and stay there." When he first arrived, in his imagination "Everyone who passed me was a mugger or worse."⁹⁰ Students who dared to go to Philadelphia sometimes pushed against stereotypes of the "big bad city." As one Philadelphia student put it, "you won't get mugged. Come on, folks, give the city a chance before you condemn it." Another student admitted that those accustomed to the bucolic Grantham campus might at first be taken aback by the "fortress" character of the Philadelphia campus, with its "barred windows" and "careful locking" of all the doors. But this was more than made up for by the close-knit community the living environment

⁸⁹ J. Craig Henry, "What Good Can Come out of Cleveland?" *Houghton Star*, February, 1986, 2.

⁹⁰ Henry Renn, "You Can Survive City Life," *Ivy Rustles*, March 12, 1973, 14.

fostered.⁹¹ Another student had heard bad stories from the Philadelphia campus that made her “very apprehensive” about going there. But she found the reality less frightening than she imagined. She came to believe that the Philadelphia experience was a vital opportunity for Messiah students to “achieve social awareness.”⁹² These students knew their endorsement of the Philadelphia experience was pushing back against a rising tide of hostility.

Rather than unifying the Messiah community, the Philadelphia campus became a fault line that produced recurring controversies about Christians’ role in the modern city. For President Hostetter, the campus promised to make Messiah more competitive in the marketplace of higher education and reduce white students’ cultural isolation. These goals did not necessarily align with the anti-racist agenda of the evangelical left. For Sider, the campus was a center for anti-racist education and an urban training ground for the evangelical community nationwide. These priorities competed and were often at cross-purposes. Sider imagined the Philadelphia campus as the leading wedge that would remake the main campus in a new multiracial and anti-racist image, shorn of its investments in whiteness. As he contemplated this vision, he knew “There would be questions from the traditional constituency and, alas, changes in it. But is it too much to hope that there are also many evangelical parents who would like their children to attend a college that gives flesh to the biblical view of the body of Christ?”⁹³

⁹¹ Kathy Brode, “The City,” *Ivy Rustles*, December 13, 1976, 7; Chuck Burkett, “The Campus,” *Ivy Rustles*, December 13, 1976, 6.

⁹² Debbie Houghton, “The New Cross-Cultural Courses,” *Ivy Rustles*, February 19, 1974, 3.

⁹³ Sider, “The Messiah Urban Satellite Campus,” 99.

It was too much to hope. As faculty resistance and student defensiveness undercut efforts to turn the Philadelphia campus into a major evangelical center for racial education and urban ministry, the grand ambitions for the Philadelphia campus seemed to be in danger. A 1976 internal evaluation of the Philadelphia campus reported grave concerns. While most of those who actually attended the campus characterized their experience as positive, the program lacked staffing and funding, and enrollment still had not met expectations. The problems of resources and logistics seemed to reflect a deeper theological and ideological disconnect between the two campuses. The report admitted that “a bad image” of the Philadelphia campus as “a center for radical ideas” had emerged on the main campus at the outset. The weekend racism seminars for incoming freshman reinforced that perception and had “negative effects,” the report declared. Moreover, fears of North Philadelphia were pervasive. Parents of Messiah students expressed “anxiety” for the safety of their children in the city. It seemed that an “urban institution” had “little or no appeal” for most Messiah College families. Most remarkably, the report declared that many Messiah students and administrators viewed the Philadelphia campus as a “threat” instead of an opportunity. While Messiah tried to run an urban campus, most of its white evangelical constituency wanted to avoid the city. The ideal that white students would be missionaries to the black neighborhood around them while pursuing their academic goals gave way to the realities of isolation and mistrust. There was “very little interaction between the students and the members of the community,” the evaluators admitted. Much of these negative dynamics might have seemed predictable, but the colorblind commitments of Messiah and its white evangelical

stakeholders made it difficult to reverse course. In 1975, Ron Sider stepped down as director of the Philadelphia campus.⁹⁴

Conclusion: Managing Diversity in an Age of Fear

The same radical moment that opened space for black students to protest conditions on white evangelical campuses in the early 1970s made room for creative urban experiments in evangelical higher education. But the closing of that sense of experimentation in the second half of the decade was palpable in evangelical settings, as in the nation at large. In the 1980s, the Philadelphia campus became not a center of evangelical anti-racism but a site where students could consume urban experiences and gain cross-cultural exposure as part of a liberal arts education. Diversity was domesticated for white evangelical students. These practices were more in line with the original moderate vision of cultural engagement espoused by President Hostetter than the radical anti-racist hopes of Sider. But in an era of urban decline and rising crime rates, even these more modest goals were difficult to sustain in the face of pervasive fears and stereotypes of the dangerous American city. Among colorblind Christians, a theology that imagined the city as a place of darkness devoid of God's presence gave added urgency to these fears. Enrollment peaked at 80-odd students, only a little more than half the number Hostetter's aborted high-rise proposal alone would have housed.

At Messiah, the declining academic rationale for the Philadelphia campus hastened the turn toward diversity as a consumable experience. As the main campus

⁹⁴ "1976 Evaluation of Philadelphia Campus of Messiah College at Temple University," Box XI – 2 – 7.1 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus, Archives of Messiah College.

expanded its offerings, growing numbers of academic majors could be completed without ever attending the Philadelphia campus. Even majors that seemed to be a natural fit for the campus, such as social work, faced challenges. A student survey revealed that large numbers of Messiah students did not even consider majoring in social work because it required attending the Philadelphia campus for two years.⁹⁵ When the college relocated the engineering program to Grantham in 1991, in a single stroke a quarter of the students at the Philadelphia campus no longer had an academic reason to be there. Rumors circulated that the campus would close down.⁹⁶

In response to these changes, the college cast about for ways to keep the Philadelphia campus relevant. Messiah continued to offer black and Puerto Rican cross-cultural courses in a short January term that combined academic instruction with a 12-day stay in a black or Puerto Rican home. Some students enjoyed these immersion experiences while others felt deeply uncomfortable. Philadelphia campus director Don Wingert nurtured dreams of refocusing the campus toward outreach to the North Philadelphia community, or perhaps an urban training and conference center for evangelicals nationwide. Of course, these ideas were not new, and they remained only dreams. Rather than embracing these more ambitious goals, the college doubled-down on making the Philadelphia campus an outpost for cross-cultural experiences for Messiah students. Students would come to Philadelphia for cultural enrichment and a broadening

⁹⁵ Susan Fredericks, "Social Work at the Center of God's Will," *The Swinging Bridge*, January 28, 1993, 5.

⁹⁶ Brent Fulton, "Philly Campus Celebrates!" *The Swinging Bridge*, October 28, 1984, 1,5; Sarah Wendell, "Plusses of Phila. Campus Not Threatened," *The Swinging Bridge*, September 22, 1988, 4; Kristin A. Johnson, "Changes at Philadelphia Campus support new outward focus," *The Swinging Bridge*, November 16, 1989, 2.

of their horizons. Rather than being directly confronted with charges of white racism, as in the early 1970s, they would be invited to explore an unfamiliar culture.

Students who attended for these purposes were frequently very glad they had done so, but their tales of adventure and cultural awakening in the big city rested uneasily alongside reports of crime and danger. As crime rates reached new highs in the 1980s and early 1990s students and their parents were as fearful of North Philadelphia as ever. One student who enjoyed the January cross-cultural course in 1987 criticized fellow students who were so afraid of the city they “wouldn’t go anywhere out of reach of the Messiah facilities.”⁹⁷ But this fear ought not to have been surprising. Articles in the student newspaper featuring racialized reporting of crime against Messiah students fueled fears.⁹⁸ The administration did not adequately address the Messiah community’s fears of the city, leaving students ill-prepared to make an informed decision about attending the campus, or what to do when they got there. One student described being “thrown into the atmosphere” after a “lackadaisical” orientation of one hour.⁹⁹ In 1991, the director of student life at the Philadelphia campus said the “apprehension of parents and students” continued to be one of the major challenges he faced. But the reality of life in North Philadelphia was almost always less scary than students imagined. “I expected to see a good deal of crime and violence” one student reported, but “I haven’t seen as much as I expected.” In the absence of adequate institutional support, students relied on spiritual

⁹⁷ Kim Barge, “J-Term in Philly Offers Rewarding Experiences,” *The Swinging Bridge*, March 26, 1987, 2.

⁹⁸ Martha MacDonald, “Students Express Concern About Philly Safety,” *The Swinging Bridge*, April 9, 1987, 1.

⁹⁹ MacDonald, “Students Express Concern About Philly Safety,” 1.

resources to overcome their fears and assure anxious friends and relatives. “I just told [my mom] that this is where I feel God wants me to be right now,” one Philadelphia student declared.¹⁰⁰

Messiah students’ colorblind understanding of the city continued to be a formidable obstacle to productive action in it. Colorblind theology’s emphasis on face-to-face interaction mediated through evangelical institutions too often rendered invisible the systemic inequality and discrimination of America’s metropolitan areas. Colorblind Christians looked to the city and saw pitiful people caught in a web of bad habits, broken families, and despair. In a passionate plea to reach out to the city, Messiah student Howard Tripp described his experiences. “I’ve driven through Camden a few times,” he declared, “and I’ve been deep into the heart of Harrisburg many times.” He had even taken a walk in Harlem! “If you have been to one inner-city, you have been to them all,” he informed his readers. They were all “crying out for love and hope.” Tripp called on Messiah students to sacrificially expend their resources on behalf of these poor people. “The[y] all need to experience the love of Christ, and that can only come from interaction with Christians.” In Tripp’s imagination, the residents of places like North Philadelphia would not encounter Christians until people like him ventured into their neighborhood.¹⁰¹

In the early 1970s, as Americans of means left cities in droves, Messiah moved toward it. As most white evangelicals sought to put a lid on the uncomfortable tensions

¹⁰⁰ Melanie Corey, “How Safe is Philly Campus?” *The Swinging Bridge*, October 3, 1991, 3; Amy Blough, “To Philly or Not to Philly,” *The Swinging Bridge*, September 24, 1992, 3; Michelle Camp, “New faces on Broad Street,” *The Swinging Bridge*, February 6, 1992, 3.

¹⁰¹ Howard Tripp, “Healing the inner city,” *The Swinging Bridge*, February 12, 1993, 5.

raised by the civil rights movement, Dr. Sider and black Messiah students put white racism at the top of the agenda. In the aftermath of Sider's tenure Messiah consigned the radical moment to the past but found itself in possession of an urban campus and partnership with a major university that was unique among evangelical colleges in the United States. Rather than leveraging this institutional distinctiveness into a chance to be a leader in evangelical urban higher education, Messiah let the campus wither on the vine. The 1976 evaluation had called the Philadelphia campus a "threat" in the minds of many Messiah students and faculty. And, indeed, it was. Raising the specter of race in explicit and systemic terms put the Philadelphia campus out of step with the construction of a colorblind Messiah College. Though Messiah began the campus with ambitious hopes, it did not provide sufficient institutional support to the fledgling program. The campus relied on personalities—notably the backing of Dr. Hostetter during his long presidency—rather than broad-based investment from ordinary white evangelicals. Turning the campus into the major evangelical urban center it might have been would have moved the College away from its core constituency of colorblind Christians. Ron Sider had tried to make white evangelicals see that the urban crisis was also a crisis of evangelicalism. Colorblind Christians defeated Sider's efforts and, in doing so, turned away from the city.

CHAPTER 6:
TWO GOSPELS ON A GLOBAL STAGE: FROM LAUSANNE 1974 TO
HOUSTON 1985

In July 1974, over 2,700 evangelicals from all over the world gathered in Lausanne, Switzerland for the International Congress on World Evangelization. The Ecuadorian theologian C. René Padilla spoke for evangelicals from the global south who longed for social justice in societies ravaged by poverty, Cold War conflicts, and decolonization struggles. Padilla confronted the American delegation and attacked what he called “Culture-Christianity” based on “the American way of life.” He accused American evangelicals of selling a cheap brand of Christianity that called individuals to salvation without placing the ethical demands of Christ upon them. In this system, “The racist can continue to be a racist, the exploiter can continue to be an exploiter.” Padilla understood the gospel differently. He argued that the purpose of the gospel was to produce a “radical reorientation” of one’s entire life, not only the salvation of one’s soul. The gospel challenged the oppressive systems of society—including those of the United States—creating “an open break to the status quo of the world.”¹ Padilla’s speech was a sensation. For some observers, it seemed that a global, socially concerned evangelicalism was ascendant and would make its mark on the United States.

A very different conference over a decade later indicated the surprising trajectory of the Lausanne Movement in North America. On April 15, 1985, the Convocation on Evangelizing Ethnic America began in Houston, Texas. This Lausanne-sponsored

¹ C. René Padilla, “Evangelization and the World,” CN 46, Box 20, Folder 26, “Papers Delivered at the Congress; July, 1974” BGCA.

conference deliberately excluded black evangelicals who might have echoed Padilla's words. It focused on a different understanding of the gospel: the salvation of individual souls through faith in Christ. Dominated by the agenda of the Church Growth Movement, the Houston conference sought to use ethnic loyalty as an evangelistic tactic to reach America's increasingly diverse population. If Lausanne stirred hopes for an antiracist and socially concerned evangelicalism, Houston symbolized the emergence of an evangelicalism that could be multiethnic without being antiracist.

This tale of two congresses suggests the ways in which issues of race and class had become integral to the most basic question evangelicals could ever ask: what is the gospel? Dueling answers to this question played out at Lausanne and in the decade beyond. On one side were the radical contingent of global south and black evangelicals who argued that the gospel announced the creation of a new countercultural community. The evangelistic task incorporated both the proclamation of salvation to all *and* liberation for the oppressed. Padilla called it "integral mission." The black evangelical pastor and activist Clarence Hilliard called it "theological blackness." They insisted that the gospel, when faithfully embodied in the Christian community of the local church, created a concrete redistribution of power that challenged the dominant social system. For these evangelicals race was a central concern because the gospel announced a new community of God that was fundamentally incompatible with racial oppression. Racial justice was a matter of fidelity to the gospel. On the other side were colorblind Christians, led by the American Church Growth Movement, who argued that the gospel was the announcement of salvation for sinners. The evangelistic task was to proclaim this message. Its social implications were chronologically and ethically secondary. For these evangelicals, race

could be used as a method to enhance the evangelistic enterprise insofar as it proved useful. But racial commitments ought not interfere with the proclamation of the gospel. The Lausanne Congress served notice that in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and the rise of liberation theology, to talk about the gospel was to talk about race.²

Many observers thought that Lausanne signaled a new day of social concern had arrived for global evangelicalism. But in the ensuing decade colorblind Christians in the United States would fight to commandeer and control the legacy of Lausanne and its institutional powers. These elite debates mattered because they set agendas for whole denominations and priorities for the use of concrete resources. The dispute was contentious because all involved knew how much was at stake: the outcome would shape the course of evangelicalism for decades to come. The promise of an evangelicalism that viewed race through the lens of justice and Christian community gave way to an evangelism-first approach that viewed race opportunistically, as an evangelistic tool. Colorblind Christians could accommodate, or even embrace, these episodic uses of race because they did not challenge whiteness or make antiracism a core matter of Christian discipleship. As the Church Growth Movement expanded its reach across more institutions and denominations in the late 1970s and 1980s, Lausanne-sponsored events

² On the genealogies of liberation theology in the United States and Latin America see Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). The most extensive account of the influence of liberation theology on Latin American evangelicals is found in David C. Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor: Global Social Christianity and the Latin American Evangelical Left* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). For black evangelical engagement with liberation theology, see William H. Bentley, "Factors in the Origin and Focus of the National Black Evangelical Association," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 313-318.

with prominent church growth influence became yet another source of tension between white and black evangelicals in the United States. As the CGM reached the peak of its popularity in the 1980s and groups like the Southern Baptist Convention took an increasingly multiethnic turn, it furthered the suspicion among some critics that white evangelicals had a seat for everyone at the table—except black evangelicals.

Lausanne '74: A Victory for Evangelical Social Activism?

The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization is widely regarded as a vital moment in the history of modern evangelicalism. The evangelical historian Mark Noll puts its importance for evangelicals on par with Vatican II's role in the reshaping of Catholicism.³ Billy Graham conceived the Congress as an evangelical counterpoint to the

³ Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Third Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 287-306. See also David Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left In An Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 113-134; Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 151-179; Darren Dochuk, "Lausanne '74 and American Evangelicalism's Latin Turn" in *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism*, edited by Heath W. Carter and Laura Rominger Porter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 247-281; Melani McAlister, "The Global Conscience of American Evangelicalism: Internationalism and Social Concern in the 1970s and Beyond" *Journal of American Studies* 51 (2017): 1197-1220. For an admiring account from a Church Growth Movement activist that places the Movement at the center of Lausanne, see Gary L. McIntosh, *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist* (Boca Raton, FL: Church Leader Insights, 2015). Brian Stanley describes Lausanne as the moment American evangelicals reckoned with evangelicalism as a "multicultural global community." Similarly, Grant Wacker and Fred Breuttler describe Lausanne as the dawning of a global evangelicalism that was more diverse and equal than its western-led antecedents. Darren Dochuk and David Swartz emphasize the decisive influence of social justice-oriented Latin American evangelicals at Lausanne. Melani McAlister has perceptively argued that Lausanne had a contested legacy, with multiple actors claiming victory. The Latin Americans could point to the strong social justice plank the Congress produced; the Americans could point to the strong emphasis on evangelizing unreached people groups. Lausanne was all those things

1968 Upsala meeting of the World Council of Churches. Like Donald McGavran, the direction of missionary activity in liberal Protestantism disturbed Graham. In his view, radical political action seemed to have replaced the preaching of the gospel. The Lausanne Congress would attempt to cast an alternative global evangelical vision for the mission of the church. There had never been such a large and diverse meeting of evangelical leaders. The leading lights of the Church Growth Movement were there, and so too were their critics. If the theme of Lausanne was the future of global evangelism, the most controversial vector for that theme was the growing influence of the cadre of church growth activists based at Fuller Seminary.⁴ The CGM arrived in force at Lausanne, prepared to spread its message of evangelistic pragmatism, which, in the United States, had come to mean accepting whiteness as a legitimate form of peoplehood (see chapter 4). Padilla and other radicals were determined that the CGM would not

at once. But to a much greater extent than historians have appreciated, all these features of Lausanne were directly connected to the ideas of the Church Growth Movement.

⁴ Brian Stanley allows that Lausanne “deserves to be remembered...as the occasion at which the single-minded emphasis of Donald McGavran and Ralph Winter...on the need to remember the ‘unreached peoples’ of the world first imprinted itself indelibly on the global evangelical conscience. Nonetheless,” he continues, “the question of the relationship of social justice to Christian mission was the dimension that attracted most press comment and provoked the most vigorous debates among participants.” This dichotomous framing does not account for the ways the question of unreached peoples and the question of social justice were directly linked together, with CGM thought at the center of both themes. Many participants saw these questions as two components of the same debate rather than separate issues. See Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, 165. Similarly, Melani McAlister has framed Lausanne as a debate between Graham’s “evangelism-first” approach and Latin Americans’ “social-concern.” This interpretation misses the point that what Latin American leaders most objected to was not Graham’s crusade evangelism as such but the implications the Church Growth Movement’s strategies had for the nature of the gospel and the unity of the church. See McAlister, “The Global Conscience of American Evangelicalism,” 1197-1199.

become an American export that reinforced the ruling status quo in their own countries. At stake was the very meaning of the gospel in a world of racial and economic oppression.

The Church Growth Movement was involved in the early planning stages of the Lausanne Congress.⁵ At a meeting in August 1972, Ralph Winter, McGavran's colleague at Fuller, urged planners to focus on evangelism from the church growth perspective. The planning committee promptly assigned to McGavran's School of World Mission at Fuller and the Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center (a Winter-led cooperative project of Fuller and the evangelical charity World Vision) the task of preparing data for conference participants on "unreached populations" around the world. This all but guaranteed that the CGM's priorities would play a major role at Lausanne.⁶ The sheer size of the Lausanne conference presented political and logistical challenges. With thousands of participants and just as many perspectives and priorities, whose voices would be heard? The most coveted assignment was a plenary speech from the main stage with the entire Congress assembled to hear it. Organizers distributed some plenary speakers' papers to participants in advance so that their spoken addresses could build on the feedback they received from hundreds of interlocutors all over the world. Only eleven speakers were honored with this opportunity—all of them men.⁷ Two of them—Donald

⁵ Donald McGavran to Donald E. Hoke, February 5, 1973, CN 358 Box 10 Folder 3, BGCA.

⁶ Leighton Ford, "International Congress on World Evangelization Report by Leighton Ford," November 1974, CN 46 Box 35 Folder 3; Billy Graham, "Why Lausanne?", CN 46, Box 20, Folder 26, "Papers Delivered at the Congress; July, 1974" BGCA; McAlister, "The Global Conscience of American Evangelicalism," 1205.

⁷ Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, 165.

McGavran and Ralph Winter—were CGM activists from Fuller. No African Americans were granted plenary speaking roles. Two others—the Latin American missiologists C. René Padilla and Samuel Escobar—used this high-profile stage to attack the Church Growth Movement. In the aftermath of the congress, both these factions sought to claim victory.

Billy Graham’s congress-opening speech on July 16 pleased Church Growth Movement advocates. Graham was far too much the politician to place himself in a narrow corner associated with a particular school and movement. But the broader theological thrust of his message positioned him firmly on the side of the CGM. In recent years, McGavran had been sounding the alarm not only about the threat of theological liberalism from without, but of the danger of social concern within evangelicalism. Graham’s speech parroted McGavran’s concerns, even if Graham did so in a style more winsome and ecumenical than McGavran could ever muster. Graham sought to connect Lausanne to a long and noble history of missionary activity that he believed liberal Protestantism had derailed. He described the New York and Edinburgh missionary conferences of 1900 and 1910 as great moments of evangelistic enthusiasm. But a “small cloud on the horizon” at Edinburgh would soon become a “cyclone that swept the world.” That cyclone was the social gospel.⁸ Christians became preoccupied with the here and now, with people’s stomachs more than their souls, and turned away from the most important task of the church. Instead of proclaiming the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins, Christians sought to redeem social structures.

⁸ On the social gospel see Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

Graham's declension narrative cast the Lausanne Congress as a restoration. Lausanne, Graham said, must recapture the theological clarity of Edinburgh and the evangelical conviction that the social gospel had squelched. To be sure, Graham believed that evangelicals ought to do a better job caring for material needs and addressing social problems. But he insisted on the priority of evangelism. Converting human beings to faith in Christ was the church's core mission. Positive social effects would follow conversion.⁹ McGavran could not have put it better himself.

The day after Graham opened the congress, McGavran took center stage in the evening plenary session. He had received over 1,000 responses to his written paper, but he was not one to back down in the face of criticism. He used his speech to defend the theological, ethical, and chronological priority of evangelism over against social action. "The most potent forces for social change," McGavran emphasized, "are Bible reading, Bible obeying churches." Conversion was the wellspring of social justice. Focus on evangelism, and you'll get social justice too. Focus on social justice to the detriment of evangelism, and you'll get neither. He insisted that "Calling people to repent and become disciples...is the most important political act that anyone can perform." As he addressed a crowd of evangelicals from every continent, McGavran positioned himself as an ally of the global south. He urged missionaries to be attuned to the diverse "mosaic" of peoples around the world, and said he took special pleasure in the recent rise of missionaries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Instead of a one-directional flow from Europe and the United States to the global south, there was a growing multi-directional evangelical

⁹ Billy Graham, "Why Lausanne?", CN 46, Box 20, Folder 26, "Papers Delivered at the Congress; July, 1974" BGCA.

expansion across the world. This was all for the good, because “God accepts all cultures as equally valid vehicles for the Gospel.” Americans and Europeans did not have a corner on Christianity. The gospel did not wash out cultural integrity and advance western colonialism; instead, it brought to the fore the “latent beauties” inherent in every culture.¹⁰

McGavran’s defense of non-western cultures was a creative way to defend the primacy of evangelism in opposition to the Latin American radicals. If every culture had good and bad in it, missionaries ought to think very carefully about the ethical demands they placed on potential converts. Were their instructions essential to Christianity or were they cultural norms the missionaries brought with them? McGavran reminded his audience that the New Testament seemed to present a very simple set of requirements for conversion: repent, believe, and be baptized. But missionaries were constantly coming up with additional obligations of personal piety (“quit drinking, stop smoking”) and social justice (“attack slavery, renounce child labor, stop segregation”). McGavran believed this was unbiblical and counterproductive. Let people trust in Jesus. The ethical improvement would come later.¹¹

The next morning, C. René Padilla issued a blistering denunciation of McGavran’s perspective. The Ecuadorian-born Padilla reflected the growing links between Latin American evangelicals and evangelicals in the United States. He had attended Wheaton College in the 1950s and became involved in Intersociety Christian

¹⁰ Donald McGavran, “The Vast Dimensions of World Evangelization,” CN 46, Box 20, Folder 26, “Papers Delivered at the Congress; July, 1974” BGCA.

¹¹ Ibid.

Fellowship, the evangelical college ministry. After his undergraduate years Padilla returned to South America with the task of launching Intersity chapters there. In 1970, he became a founding member of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, an evangelical organization that sought to join evangelism and social justice together, avoiding the poles of left-wing liberation theology and right-wing American evangelicalism.¹²

Padilla matched form and substance in his speech, choosing to deliver his broadside in Spanish.¹³ His English-speaking listeners would have to make do with a translation. Because Padilla did not name names or engage in personal attacks, the full significance of his celebrated speech has often been misunderstood. He did not merely critique a broadly defined American evangelicalism. He attacked the Church Growth Movement as a particularly influential and damaging incarnation of American Culture-Christianity. Padilla critiqued McGavran's theology because he believed it undergirded an unholy alliance with American ways of being. Instead of providing a comprehensive alternative to the problems of American society, American "Culture-Christianity" was so captured by the American way of life that it was blind to its evils. This blindness caused American evangelicals to use for their own evangelistic purposes social ills which they ought to have been resisting. In a tone of incredulity, Padilla said Americans even tried to "to integrate racial and class segregation into [their] strategy for world evangelization."

¹² On C. René Padilla, see Dochuk, "Lausanne '74 and American Evangelicalism's Latin Turn," 257-281; Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 118-125; David C. Kirkpatrick, "C. René Padilla: Integral Mission and the Reshaping of Global Evangelicalism," The University of Edinburgh, PhD diss. 2015; Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor*.

¹³ Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, 165.

Lest anyone doubt he was talking about McGavran, Padilla went on to attack the homogenous unit principle as just another name for segregation: “The idea is that people like to be with those of their own race and class and we must therefore plant segregated churches, which will undoubtedly grow faster...” Padilla did not call these views misguided. He called them profoundly unchristian. He turned to the rhetoric of unity in Christ and the classic texts of Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28 to support his position.¹⁴ While many colorblind Christians used these same texts to express their desire to transcend race, Padilla’s deployment of these verses was quite different. Rather than pointing only to a changed consciousness and a future heavenly state, he saw in these verses a picture of the church as a prophetic counterculture that transcended social divisions in the here and now.¹⁵

While McGavran argued that conversion to Christianity should take place without any sense of social displacement, Padilla believed if conversion did not change one’s relationship to society it was not real conversion. Churches that did not reorient the social life became “an instrument of the status quo.” They preached “a gospel that the ‘free consumers’ of religion will want to receive because it is cheap and it demands nothing of them.” This was a particularly acerbic image: the sacred evangelical faith reduced to another item in an endless marketplace of American consumption. Instead of challenging society, the CGM was trying to “produce the greatest number of Christians at the least

¹⁴ Padilla quoted the scriptures as follows: “Here there cannot be Greek and Jews, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free men, but Christ is all, and in all” Colossians 3:11. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” Galatians 3:28.

¹⁵ Padilla, “Evangelization and the World,” BGCA.

possible cost in the shortest possible time!” For Padilla, the drive for quantification and efficiency was more than just a problem of giving undue attention to material forces at the expense of the Spirit’s work. The deeper danger was that this kind of consumer religion came with dire social costs. As far as Padilla was concerned, the Church Growth Movement failed to realize that some churches did not deserve to grow. Some compromises were not worth making. Questions of race and class could never be reduced to mere evangelistic tactics without doing violence to the oppressed. McGavran described a chronological progression from conversion to ethical development, but Padilla insisted that “Without ethics there is no repentance.” The gospel was tangible and earthy, affecting every dimension of life and society. He believed reconciliation with God and reconciliation between people were two inseparable parts of the gospel. To sacrifice one for the sake of other was to fatally undermine the whole gospel.¹⁶

The other major Latin American critic to deliver a plenary address was the Peruvian Interservice Christian Fellowship leader Samuel Escobar.¹⁷ Like Padilla, Escobar understood the church as “a radically different community” that ought to have “a revolutionary effect” in society. The call to follow Christ was an invitation to join a distinct community that stood on the side of the poor and offended the powerful. As Escobar saw it, the Church Growth Movement seemed to turn this distinctiveness on its head. Instead of being an alternative community, it gave in to “the demonic forces at work” in society that caused “racism, prejudice,” and “oppression.” Escobar suggested

¹⁶ C. René Padilla, “Evangelization and the World,” BGCA.

¹⁷ On Escobar see Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor*; Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 113-134.

that accommodating segregation to achieve faster church growth amounted to a denial of the true nature of the church. Then, in an extremely confrontational rhetorical move, he paraphrased the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: “Woe to you zealous evangelists, hypocrites, for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”¹⁸ While the CGM prided itself on protecting the true task of evangelization against the inroads of liberal social concern, Padilla and Escobar insisted that the decoupling of evangelization and social justice produced a distorted gospel not worth peddling.

The intensity of these criticisms must have been disconcerting to McGavran and his allies. They thought of themselves as standing apart from Americans who imposed a cultural Christianity on the rest of the world. They understood themselves to be allies of the global South. They wanted people to be able to become Christians without giving up their cultures or becoming western. McGavran had spent decades critiquing American missionary practices. Now his movement stood accused of being an exporter of American Culture-Christianity. The severity of the blowback surprised Wagner. Everyone, he believed, had come to Lausanne with an agenda. For the church growth theorists, the agenda was clear. McGavran wanted to focus on the “3 billion” globally who were not Christians. Winter wanted to provide a sense of urgency for cross-cultural evangelism. Wagner wanted better “goal setting and measurement” in the task of evangelization. But it turned out others had agendas too. Wagner ruefully noted that he had “Assumed Cong.

¹⁸ This is a paraphrase of Matthew 23:15. The subject of Jesus’ wrath is usually rendered “scribes and pharisees,” but Escobar changed it to “evangelists.”

of evangelization would agree that evangelism was top priority.” But this was not the case, or at least, not evangelism in the way Wagner understood it. In fact, Padilla and Escobar were just as committed to evangelism as was Wagner. They just disagreed about what the message was.¹⁹

Forty-eight hours after Padilla’s address earned a standing ovation, it was Ralph Winter’s task to try to turn the congress back toward the Church Growth Movement’s priorities. His speech was influential in popularizing the idea of “unreached people groups” and drawing evangelicals’ attention toward the need for cross-cultural evangelism to convert them.²⁰ He envisioned a global evangelistic effort using the homogeneous unit principle. But in a world full of ethnic hatreds and strife, Winter’s call for homogeneous unit evangelism and the Latin Americans’ call for social justice seemed directly at odds. Winter spent the whole second half of his address defending the homogeneous unit principle as a legitimate method that did not betray the unity and purpose of the church. What Padilla and Escobar described as sinful accommodation of racism, Winter called smart strategy.²¹

Winter pointed to his own biography to make his case. The former engineer turned missiologist described himself as a typical white American Christian raised on the dogma that integration was good. In his mind, that meant that everyone should become

¹⁹ C. Peter Wagner’s handwritten notes on Lausanne, CN 358 Box 4 Folder 9, BGCA.

²⁰ On Winter’s enduring influence, see Dochuk, “Lausanne ’74 and American Evangelicalism’s Latin Turn,” 247-248; McAlister, “The Global Conscience of American Evangelicalism,” 1204-1209.

²¹ Ralph Winter, “The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism,” CN 46, Box 20, Folder 26, “Papers Delivered at the Congress; July, 1974” BGCA.

like him and go to a white Christian church. But God had taught him that unity in the body of Christ did not mean conformity. Now he stood before his diverse audience as a humble convert to cultural pluralism in the body of Christ. By framing the question in this way—integration as conformity and homogeneity as pluralism—Winter described the homogenous unit principle as the only way to protect diversity. Through local homogeneous congregations the rich tapestry of the body of Christ would be preserved.

Winter claimed that his view forbade segregation or any attempt to promote a sense of superiority among one group of Christians against another. Instead, it protected “Christians of one life style” from being “proselytized to the cultural patterns of another.” He believed there was nothing wrong with churches that “deliberately seek to attract a certain social level.” It was wrong to exclude people outright, but “it is a fact that where people can choose their church associations voluntarily, they tend to sort themselves out according to their own way of life pretty consistently. Some call this de-facto segregation. And if it is necessarily an evil, 99 out of 100 churches are involved in this evil.” Winter insisted that evangelicals ought to see this phenomenon as a healthy sense of peoplehood rather than “wringing our hands about the fact that the worship services of the world Christian community are ‘the most segregated hour of the week.’”²²

Winter seemed unaware that he was perilously close to repeating—almost word for word!—decades-old arguments in support of racial segregation. In fact, one of the most pervasive tropes white evangelicals employed before the civil rights movement was that segregation implied no indignity to black people and was consistent with spiritual equality. W.A. Criswell’s famous speech to the South Carolina legislature (see chapter 4)

²² Winter, “The Highest Priority,” BGCA.

was a characteristic example of these claims. He said that he did not have an attitude of superiority and the segregation of First Baptist did not insult African Americans. For evidence, Criswell had pointed to the thriving black religious scene in Dallas. Didn't he know many black preachers, and couldn't some of them preach even better he could? Let them do it over there, in their churches. Didn't the pastor of St. John's Baptist Church, colored, drive a fancy black Cadillac? Good for him. Let him do so, over there.²³ Winter appeared to be unable or unwilling to explain how his vision differed substantially from segregationist stances of old. Predictably, some of the white South African delegation at Lausanne appropriated Winter's speech as an endorsement of apartheid. Winter claimed he was appalled, but he had little reason to be surprised.²⁴

The South African controversy was an embarrassingly pointed example of the problems the radicals saw in the gospel of personal salvation. In their view the homogeneous unit principle was just dressed up segregation. They did not bother responding to the church growth activists' claims that they were actually promoting pluralism. Perhaps the claim was hard for them to credit based on their own experiences. For instance, Padilla and Escobar were at the founding meeting of the Latin American Theological Fraternity when Wagner showed up with a pre-written constitution in hand that he urged the group to adopt.²⁵ Such efforts to promote American leadership could easily be read as theological and cultural imperialism. At a time when many evangelical

²³ "An Address by Dr. W.A. Criswell, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas to the Joint Assembly," February 22, 1956, AR 795-221 Box 59 Folder 12, SBHLA.

²⁴ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 169.

²⁵ This story is related in Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 120.

churches remained functionally closed to African Americans, church growth theorists insisted that homogeneity was benign. They did not explain how their vision was meaningfully distinct from the longstanding theological logic of evangelical segregationists who argued that spiritual equality need not imply social equality.

Neither side got all of what it wanted at Lausanne. The Church Growth Movement could be pleased with the focus on unreached people groups, while the Latin Americans could claim victory for the stronger-than-expected social justice emphasis. As much as the social justice message of Padilla and Escobar thrilled many participants from the global South, many were also intrigued by what the Americans had to offer. As Brian Stanley has written, “Many delegates might have left Lausanne more enthused by the sharply statistical vision of ‘unreached people groups’ adumbrated by Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner than by the pleas of the radical evangelicals for an integration of ministries of justice, mercy and evangelism.”²⁶ Wagner claimed over 600 people showed up for his workshop on goal setting and measurement.²⁷ The consensus of the Congress was expressed in the Lausanne Covenant, a declaration of global evangelical principles. A five-man committee, including Escobar and headed by the British evangelical John Stott, was responsible for drafting the Covenant. Though all Congress participants had an opportunity to submit amendments, much of the hard work of reconciling competing demands fell to the tactful diplomacy of Stott. Over successive drafts, the Covenant’s language on social justice became stronger. In its final form, the Covenant affirmed that

²⁶ Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, 173.

²⁷ C. Peter Wagner’s handwritten notes on Lausanne, CN 358 Box 4 Folder 9, BGCA.

“faith without works is dead” and expressed “penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive.” Still, the document read like the committee-made compromise it was, embracing a series of qualifications: “Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.” This was not enough for the self-styled Theology and Radical Discipleship group, a cross-section of some 500 participants drawn disproportionately from the Global South. This group released its own statement “repudiate[ing] as demonic the attempt to drive a wedge between evangelism and social action.” The gospel was “Good News of liberation, of restoration, of wholeness, and of salvation that is personal, social, global and cosmic.” Stott, ever the diplomat, announced that he intended to sign both the Covenant and the radicals’ declaration.²⁸

Black evangelicals were at Lausanne too, though they seemed to make little impression on the proceedings. Representing only around 4% of the 600 American attendees, African American evangelicals did not become major players at the Congress in the way Padilla and Escobar did. Major black evangelical names who might have joined the radical contingent, such as John Perkins and Bill Pannell, were not in attendance. But there were a few black evangelicals present who were more than happy to rock the boat, no one more so than Clarence Hilliard, a pastor at Circle Church, a

²⁸ “Theology Implications of Radical Discipleship,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, edited by J.D. Douglas (Minneapolis: Worldwide Publications, 1975), 1294-1296. On the drafting of the Covenant and Stott’s crucial role see Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, 169-173.

predominantly white but interracial congregation on the west side of Chicago.²⁹ Born and raised in Buffalo, Hilliard attended Buffalo Bible Institute then earned his B.A. from Houghton College after its 1969 merger with BBI. Hilliard moved to Chicago to attend Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and not long thereafter was hired to replace Melvin Warren as the black pastor on Circle's leadership team.³⁰ At Lausanne, Hilliard helped lead a workshop on "Urban Evangelization Among the Poor" in which he joined other participants in urging evangelicals to develop systemic solutions to social problems.³¹

Hilliard was among the radicals who declined to sign the Lausanne Covenant. Despite the unexpectedly strong social justice plank, he could not in good conscience endorse the document. He believed the Covenant did not take a strong enough stand against the "false dichotomy" of evangelism and social justice, a dichotomy that he believed promoted injustice against African Americans and other oppressed people. He also took aim at the Congress's treatment of the South African delegation. According to Hilliard, some of the South Africans at Lausanne suggested they should agree on a statement of "unity and brotherhood," a simple step that "the overwhelming number of

²⁹ This was the very church Wagner faulted for mixing with Zion Evangelical Free Church in his 1976 "autopsy" of a "dead" church. C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of A Healthy Church* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976), 124-134.

³⁰ For these and many other details of Hilliard's life, I am indebted to Soong-Chan Rah, an evangelical theologian at North Park University, who has done more than anyone to recover the overlooked story of Hilliard's career. To date, Rah's most extensive treatment of Hilliard is found in his dissertation. See Soong-Chan Rah, *In Whose Image: The Emergence, Development, and Challenge of African-American Evangelicalism* (PhD. Dissertation, Duke University Divinity School, 2016), 254-286.

³¹ Clarence Hilliard, "Urban Evangelization Among the Poor," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 920-922.

whites” was unwilling to take. From Hilliard’s perspective, even as the Congress produced a statement about reconciliation and social justice, it failed to deal forthrightly with a case of “dehumanizing and demonic attitudes” among white South Africans right in its midst. For Hilliard, this was disqualifying. The lack of black evangelical participation also disturbed him. He did not believe the Graham-aligned black evangelicals could be trusted to advocate for the interests of the poor and the oppressed. Hilliard pointed out that major black evangelicals who might have challenged Graham’s perspective were conspicuously absent.³² Lausanne leaders pushed back against Hilliard’s claims, claiming ignorance of the South African controversy, and suggesting that every possible effort was expended to get African Americans to attend. But black leaders seemed unresponsive. Letters went unreturned. The major figures Hilliard had in mind had in fact been invited but chose not to come. Their absence, and the debate over the meaning of that absence, was a telling indicator of the distance between black and white evangelicals. Where white leaders saw a planning committee that had done all it could to secure black attendance, Hilliard saw a white-controlled process that reeked of “plantation politics.”³³

The Battle to Claim Lausanne’s Legacy

In the years after the Lausanne Congress, evangelicals competed to define its legacy. Everyone seemed to agree that something important had happened there, but what

³² Clarence Hilliard, “Open Letter to the Committee on the Lausanne Covenant,” October 7, 1974, CN 590 Box 1 Folder 4.1, BGCA.

³³ John Stott to Clarence Hilliard, November 14, 1974; Donald E. Hoke to Clarence Hilliard, October 23, 1974, CN 590 Box 1 Folder 4.1, BGCA.

was it? If Lausanne came to be seen as an endorsement of the radicals' gospel of a new community, it would boost the prospects of a more socially concerned and antiracist evangelicalism. If it was seen as favoring Colorblind Christians' gospel of individual salvation, the Church Growth Movement's evangelism-first approach and racial pragmatism would gain additional credibility. The struggle for legitimacy between these two visions overlaid practical questions of how the new resources and networks Lausanne established would be used. Colorblind Christians had absorbed some tough criticisms at Lausanne, but in the ensuing years they regrouped and spun the Congress in their favor.

In the immediate aftermath of Lausanne, news reports tended to portray it as a win for the Latin Americans. "Lausanne in '74 marks a strong turning of the evangelical tide toward the importance of sociopolitical involvement as an indispensable part of proclaiming the Bible message," wrote Russell Chandler of the *Los Angeles Times*. "The third world flexed its muscles" and "stole the show" said *Eternity*.³⁴ But by the fall of 1974, Samuel Escobar worried that Wagner and other American evangelicals were already commandeering the meaning of the Lausanne Congress. The Continuation Committee formed during the Congress notably declined to include Escobar and Padilla. In October, a larger permanent Committee was announced, made up of forty-six people from twenty-eight countries. Regional quotas ensured a diverse group. Included among the nine-member North American regional committee were Wagner and Manuel L. Scott,

³⁴ Russell Chandler, "Evangelical Protestants Organize," *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1974, D14. William J. Petersen, "Lausanne: Third World Speaks Out," *Eternity*, September 1974, 12.

an African American pastor from Boston.³⁵ Though the Latin American challenge had been heard loud and clear at the congress itself, Escobar believed the selection of people to serve on the committee showed a determination to “silence some trends and voices.” He thought “It would be a pity if the impact of the Congress is manipulated by the more closed and triumphalistic sectors of Evangelicalism.”³⁶ A. J. Dain, the Anglican assistant bishop of Sydney and chairman of the committee that planned the Congress, agreed that Lausanne’s emphasis on social justice had “shattered some of our North American brethren,” but believed the message had resonated among evangelicals all around the world. It was to be expected that “whenever a prophetic word is spoken there will always be some opposition and some misunderstanding.”³⁷

While Escobar viewed Lausanne’s sense of global evangelical unity and concern for social justice as the essential legacies of the Congress, Wagner was busy trying to portray these same concerns as “torpedoes” that nearly sunk the evangelical ship. At a follow-up Lausanne meeting in Mexico City in 1975, participants sparred once again over the meaning of the gospel. Wagner wrote that he and his allies had successfully beaten back the initiatives of the radicals and preserved the priority of evangelism at the

³⁵ “Continuation Committee Set Up,” October 24, 1974, CN 358 Box 10 Folder 9, BGCA; A. Jack Dain to C. Peter Wagner, October 28, 1974, CN 358 Box 4 Folder 9, BGCA.

³⁶ Samuel Escobar to A. Jack Dain, October 10, 1974, CN 46 Box 30 Folder 5, BGCA.

³⁷ A. Jack Dain to Samuel Escobar, March 17, 1975, CN 46 Box 30 Folder 5, BGCA.

center of the Lausanne movement.³⁸ Escobar wrote that Wagner’s article “really upset” him. In his view it represented a “concerted effort on the part of the conservative elements that are in charge of *Christianity Today* to change the meaning and direction of Lausanne.” In this they would fail, Escobar believed, because evangelicals around the globe were so affected by Lausanne precisely because it was not “an American jamboree, but rather a world form of evangelicalism. And this is what our friends from Pasadena [i.e., CGM leaders] cannot accept.”³⁹ Padilla took to *Christianity Today* to fire back at Wagner. “Some observers are concerned about what they regard as a ‘Lausanne backlash,’” Padilla wrote. American evangelicals had faced strong criticism at Lausanne, and Padilla suggested they still needed to learn how to listen. “It is high time for American evangelicals...to face the criticisms that are being leveled outside the United States against their ‘successful’ techniques for evangelism and church planting.”⁴⁰

The critiques were coming from inside the United States too. In the aftermath of Lausanne, Clarence Hilliard became a vocal critic of the Congress and the CGM leaders who sought to use it for their evangelistic purposes. Hilliard’s dissatisfaction stemmed from theological concerns similar to those of Padilla and Escobar. But Hilliard approached the problem from the perspective of African American Christianity and the new black liberation theology. Hilliard grounded his theology of the gospel in two key

³⁸ C. Peter Wagner, “Lausanne Twelve Months Later,” *Christianity Today*, July 4, 1975, 7-9.

³⁹ Samuel Escobar to A. Jack Dain, July 29, 1975, CN 46 Box 30 Folder 5, BGCA.

⁴⁰ C. Rene Padilla, “Christianity American-Style,” *Christianity Today*, October 10, 1975, 73-74.

passages of scripture. In the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus announced his purpose by quoting Isaiah the prophet: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."⁴¹ And the Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the church at Corinth, described Christ's death on the cross as a counterintuitive demonstration of God's power; a weakness beyond any human strength, a foolishness beyond any human wisdom. Not many of the Corinthian believers, the Apostle wrote, "were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."⁴² Hilliard's innovation was to insist that these passages must be translated and applied to the American system of white supremacy. What did Christ's liberation mean in a racist society? What did it mean to "shame the strong" in a society in which whiteness was advantaged and blackness stigmatized? With questions like these, Hilliard gave a relentlessly racial cast to these beloved passages of scripture.

For Hilliard, only a racial gospel could call a racist society to repentance. In a system built to dehumanize blackness and uplift whiteness, Americans couldn't know what it meant to take up their cross and follow Jesus unless they confronted race. More

⁴¹ Luke 4:18-19. Hilliard quoted the Revised Standard Version, used here.

⁴² See 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, RSV.

than any other major evangelical figure, Hilliard embraced James Cone and black liberation theology. “To be black,” Cone had written, “means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are.” Hilliard agreed. He looked at Jesus proclaiming liberty for the oppressed and concluded that blackness was the most potent symbol Americans had to understand Jesus and his message. Jesus, Hilliard said, was “theologically black.” Jesus Christ “came into the world as the ultimate ‘nigger’ of the universe. He moved to the bottom of the social order, and his people and his culture rejected him. Christ’s situation sounds like that of Any Black Person, Anywhere, U.S.A....” More scandalous still, Hilliard insisted that “we as his followers are...to become niggers with him...The black Christ calls the world to become black, to deny everything for what can only be a nigger’s death—the cross.”⁴³

This was not a form of black self-loathing. It was a theological mandate for every Christian in America, regardless of their phenotype. Theological blackness was a choice, not a birthright. One became black by following Jesus. One became white by pursuing success and turning away from the poor. It was the responsibility of all Christians to resist “the siren call of the system to move up the social ladder.” The status quo-affirming, success-oriented way of life was the “theological whiteness” Jesus struggled against. When Jesus said “deny thyself and follow me” the message translated to white Americans was “deny their theological whiteness.”⁴⁴ A church “true to their Lord” would “so identify with oppressed blacks that they would, in the eyes of the system, cease to be

⁴³ Clarence Hilliard, “Down with the Honky Christ—Up With the Funky Jesus,” *Christianity Today*, January 30, 1976, 6-8.

⁴⁴ Hilliard, “Down with the Honky Christ,” 6-8.

white.”⁴⁵ Hilliard’s casting of Christ as black drew on a long African American tradition that associated black suffering with the sufferings of Christ, that linked the Roman cross to the American lynching tree.⁴⁶ The shocking imagery at the end of Countee Cullen’s “Christ Recrucified” (1922) is suggestive of the tradition in which Hilliard operated:

Christ’s awful wrong is that he’s dark of hue,
The sin for which no blamelessness atones;
But lest the sameness of the cross should tire,
They kill him now with famished tongues of fire,
And while he burns, good men, and women too,
Shout, battling for black and brittle bones.⁴⁷

The life and death stakes, the tangible and intractable reality of black suffering in a white supremacist country, made Hilliard unable to accept the tactics of the Church Growth Movement and their allies in the white evangelical mainstream. Hilliard’s lens cast whiteness and blackness not as mirror-image racial identities, but as *theologically* significant categories. Whiteness was nothing less than a heresy. Those who parleyed with it in an effort to make Christian converts were perverting the gospel. Hilliard wrote, “it is harder for the average white person to receive the purposeful call of God than it is for a camel to go through eye of a needle. But although the gospel of Jesus Christ will

⁴⁵ Clarence Hilliard, “How Black Is Our Valley,” *The Other Side*, March 1984, 24-26, originally published December 1976.

⁴⁶ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011). Long before James Cone wrote *Black Theology and Black Power*, W.E.B. Du Bois, among others, anticipated these themes with stories, especially “The Riddle of the Sphinx” and “Jesus Christ in Texas,” featuring a countercultural black Christ. See Edward Blum, *W.E.B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁴⁷ “Christ Recrucified” first appeared in *Kelley’s Magazine*, October 1922, 13. See Anne P. Rice, editor, *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 220-222.

still send the rich, white, young ruler away sorrowful, most prominent evangelistic efforts take him in.”⁴⁸ Here Hilliard alluded to the famous story of the rich young ruler who was unwilling to sell his possessions to follow Jesus.⁴⁹ In Hilliard’s version, crucially, the story is racialized. The wealthy man becomes white, and to find salvation he must divest from his racial entitlement in addition to his wealth.

While Hilliard remained within the evangelical camp and insisted on the necessity of conversion through faith in Jesus Christ, he believed white evangelicals were cheapening its meaning, turning it into a selfish personal transaction between the individual and God. Hilliard’s targets were not hard to identify when he described the scene: “Specialists in getting quick, easy decisions for a strange, mystical, theologically white Christ are rapidly increasing,” he wrote. “These persons peddle a Jesus easy to accept, a Jesus who demands very little commitment of energy, money, life.” Hilliard directly connected a transactional gospel to the denigration of racial justice. In a racist society like the United States, “a Jesus easy to accept”—a Jesus easy to sell—was inevitably a racist Jesus. In the evangelical mainstream, “The horizontal dimensions of the Gospel are presented as optional, not intrinsic to it,” he complained. “That is what frustrated some of us who attended” the Lausanne Congress. Hilliard called out McGavran by name and criticized his gospel of personal salvation for failing to disrupt the social order.⁵⁰ The idea that a single-minded focus on evangelism could be harmful to

⁴⁸ Hilliard, “How Black Is Our Valley,” 26.

⁴⁹ A version of the story appears in each of the synoptic gospels. See Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, Luke 18:18-30.

⁵⁰ Hilliard, “Down with the Honky Christ,” 6-8.

African Americans was not new. In the nineteenth century, the anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells criticized the famous evangelist Dwight Moody for accommodating white racism in his popular revival meetings. “Our American Christians are too busy saving the souls of white Christians from burning in hellfire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians,” she wrote.⁵¹ Now, Hilliard charged Moody’s spiritual descendants with much the same crime.

Hilliard’s claims were not original. But they were shocking. White evangelicals usually operated at a distance from such critiques. It was easy to dismiss the liberals for their latest theological adventurism. But now a self-described evangelical was bringing a black Christ to the pages of *Christianity Today*, the flagship publication of white evangelicalism. Colorblind Christians did not like what Hilliard had to say. Hilliard’s critique was so far outside the evangelical mainstream that few people, certainly not McGavran, bothered to listen to him. Dr. John Gratton, a professor at Wheaton, wrote that Hilliard “seems to have merely moved Christ from one social level to another and in the process lost sight of him as the Son of Man who meets all men where they are.”⁵² Colorblind Christians were comfortable imagining God reaching out to all people equally. They rejected the idea that God stood especially on behalf of the oppressed—and the disturbing notion that in the United States this was a racial category.

At the very moment Hilliard brought his message of a black Christ to a national evangelical audience, events at his church had become an object lesson in how contentious the message was. Indeed, by the time *Christianity Today* published “Down

⁵¹ Quoted in Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 132.

⁵² “Eutychus and His Kin” *Christianity Today*, March 12, 1976, 30.

with the Honky Christ,” Clarence Hilliard had been fired. The trouble started some months before, when Hilliard presented a sermon draft very much like the article that would later appear in *Christianity Today*. If anything, the sermon was more scathing, calling out Billy Graham by name. Hilliard saw the battle in American evangelicalism as nothing less than a struggle between two different gospels. “[O]ne must realize,” the sermon draft reads, “that another gospel is being preached – the gospel of the system, the gospel of the status-quo, the ‘honky’ gospel.” He accused Graham’s evangelism of being “nebulous, almost contentless,” presenting a “Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” who didn’t actually place demands upon self-satisfied defenders of the status quo. As was the custom at Circle Church, the entire leadership team pre-approved sermons. But the white leadership of the church refused to allow Hilliard to preach such an explosive sermon. This opened up a broader debate about authority in the church and the nature of the interracial project. In the ensuing conflagration, both the white Senior Pastor David Mains and Hilliard told the church board they could not continue as pastors under the circumstances. The white-dominated board made its choice. Mains was asked to stay on, and Hilliard was asked for his resignation. Hilliard left Circle, and the entire black membership of the church left with him. Hilliard soon started a new church on the west side, but the fallout from Circle Church lingered. If even a progressive evangelical church that was deliberately trying to be interracial could not abide Hilliard’s theological blackness, what hope was there for evangelicalism writ large?⁵³

If Hilliard’s racialized gospel suggests some of the diverse possibilities inherent in evangelical theology, it also stands as a marker of the road not taken. The Church

⁵³ I rely here on Rah, *In Whose Image*, 264-275.

Growth Movement was much more successful than radicals like Hilliard in gaining bureaucratic control of Lausanne functions. In 1976, the Lausanne Committee formed four “working groups” to continue its mission. C. Peter Wagner was named the chair of the “Strategy Working Group” whose mandate was to include “investigating the growth of evangelization worldwide; continuing to gather information about unreached peoples and making it available to church and mission leadership for study...and the convening of consultations to develop and share strategies for evangelization among particular peoples or groups.”⁵⁴ Wagner could not have asked for a better assignment to use the infrastructure of Lausanne to promote his church growth ideas. Meanwhile, the Theology and Education Working Group began planning a consultation on the homogeneous unit principle. Remarkably, after all the attention given to social justice at the Congress, the first major Lausanne-sponsored event in the ensuing years was not only about evangelism rather than social justice; it was about the Church Growth Movement’s most controversial evangelistic method! With Wagner at the helm of one working group and church growth priorities dominating the deliberations of another, the CGM was effectively using the resources of Lausanne to advance a gospel that invested in whiteness.⁵⁵

Held from May 31 to June 2, 1977 in Pasadena, California, the consultation on the homogeneous unit principle featured a five-man Fuller team including McGavran, Wagner, and Winter arguing on behalf of the HUP. Five invited scholars took the

⁵⁴ Leighton Ford form letter, October 11, 1976, CN 358 Box 3 Folder 5, BGCA.

⁵⁵ Memorandum from John Stott, “Lausanne Theology and Education Group Consultation on the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” CN 46 Box 13 Folder 23, BGCA.

opposing view. Padilla came to reprise his criticisms, as did John Howard Yoder. John Stott agreed to serve as chairman and worked to resolve differences between participants.⁵⁶ In advance of the meeting, the Fuller team produced a description of the homogeneous unit principle that can reasonably claim official status: “Men like to become Christians within their own homogeneous units, without crossing linguistic, class, or race barriers. [The homogeneous unit principle] affirms that far from being contrary to Christian practice, that mode of becoming Christian is normal, Biblical and should be allowed and encouraged.”⁵⁷ It was this idea—and the far reaching ethical implications of it—that the participants would be debating.

The basic rhetorical move of the Fuller team was to cast themselves as defenders of the rights and cultural integrity of minorities while describing their opponents as paternalistic at best. Wagner suggested that “much of the ethical opposition” to homogeneous unit congregations “may turn out to be a subtle and thinly-disguised manifestation of racism.”⁵⁸ Wagner and Winter accused their opponents of expecting everyone to join their own white churches and become carbon copies of themselves. Yet, even as church growth theorists described whiteness as a force for assimilationist racism, they also continued to imagine whiteness as a part of the American mosaic entitled to its own autonomy. If whiteness should not assimilate, neither should it be diluted. Despite

⁵⁶ “Consultation on the Homogeneous Unit Principle Second memo to participants from John Stott,” March 8, 1977, CN 46 Box 4 Folder 19, BGCA.

⁵⁷ “The Homogeneous Unit Principle: Definition and Clarification,” CN 46 Box 13 Folder 23, BGCA.

⁵⁸ C. Peter Wagner, “How Ethical Is The Homogeneous Unit Principle?” CN 46 Box 13 Folder 24, BGCA.

the manifest risk of white nationalists appropriating such logic, church growth activists continued to insist on whiteness as peoplehood. This sensibility was most clear in McGavran's remarkable paper, in which he argued that white solidarities in the United States were every bit as ethically legitimate as black solidarities. It was this paper in which McGavran warned against "mongrel" congregations and advocated homogeneous congregations so Christians could worship "without raising difficult questions of cross-race dining, marriage and the like."⁵⁹ McGavran's description of "cross-race dining" as something to avoid was surprising. As all the consultation participants knew, the New Testament described the sharing of meals between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus as a major point of contention in the early church. When Peter refused to eat with Gentiles, Paul famously rebuked his actions as contrary to the Gospel.⁶⁰ McGavran appeared to believe Peter was in the right after all. The rest of the Fuller team followed McGavran's lead. Ralph Winter repeated precisely the same claims that had appealed to South Africa's apartheid defenders three years before, and Wagner insisted that if a church mixed homogeneous units, the community around the church would probably not find the gospel very appealing. "If, on the other hand, the congregation decides to remain homogeneous, the evangelistic potential will increase accordingly."⁶¹

⁵⁹ Donald McGavran, "The Genesis and Strategy of the Homogeneous Unit Principle," CN 46 Box 13 Folder 24, BGCA.

⁶⁰ This incident is described in Galatians 2:11-21.

⁶¹ Ralph Winter, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle in Historical Perspective"; C. Peter Wagner, "How Ethical Is The Homogeneous Unit Principle?" CN 46 Box 13 Folder 24, BGCA.

The opposing team assembled for the consultation struck a moderate tone in response to the Fuller cohort. In light of McGavran's explosive racial commentary, it is notable that the critics did not push back more forcefully. Black evangelicals who might have critiqued McGavran more vehemently were not invited, though Bill Pannell, a fellow professor at Fuller, was present as a consultant. Harvie Conn, a former missionary to Korea and professor at Westminster Seminary, argued that McGavran and his colleagues were glossing over the overwhelming theological thrust of the New Testament: the creation of a new people of God drawn from every culture and nation. This new kind of community at once honored diversity and transcended it. The critics faulted the Fuller team for turning the sociological *fact* of group affiliation into an ironclad *prescription* for church growth. When Fuller professor Charles Kraft wrote that "homogeneity is, to my way of thinking, a fact," John Stott drily noted, "So is sin!"⁶² For Robert Ramseyer, a longtime missionary to Japan, the spread of the gospel along ethnic lines might make strategic sense but was theologically and ethically fatal. "When the boundaries of a church are identical with those of a previously existing ethnic unit, it becomes very difficult to talk of the new people of God, of the newness of life which frees and liberates." At times McGavran and his colleagues imagined the homogeneous unit as an elastic concept; it might be based on race or language, or even common occupation or educational level. These human solidarities were so strong that they formed an organic unity broken only at great cost. Yet the community of God that the New Testament described did not constitute a new organic unity. Nothing was more important

⁶² Stott's handwritten notes on Charles H. Kraft, "Anthropological Perspectives on the Homogeneous Unit Principle," CN 590 Box 1 Folder 4, BGCA.

than salvation through Jesus Christ, but the shared experience of salvation did not create a homogeneous unit. In two brutal sentences Ramseyer cut to the heart of church growth activists' paradoxical claims. "Our friends from Fuller speak a great deal about those who would reduce the church to a drab cultural sameness and uniformity. Yet it is precisely this school of thought which seems unable to think of the congregation except in terms of cultural sameness--homogeneity."⁶³

Though everyone seemed to agree that the homogeneous unit principle raised profound ethical questions in the American context, and those questions were at the center of the consultation, the people with the most at stake were not invited to participate in a meaningful way. How different the consultation might have looked if someone like Clarence Hilliard had been invited to offer his critique. The consultation produced a written statement for public consumption that celebrated "substantial areas of agreement" while acknowledging "points of tension and disagreement which still remain."⁶⁴ The statement endorsed homogeneous congregations as acceptable in certain contexts but declared that any kind of apartheid or denial of membership on cultural grounds was impermissible. Participants agreed that homogeneous churches often grew faster, but seemed no closer to agreeing about whether such churches exacerbated hatreds or helped

⁶³ Victor E.W. Hayward, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle and the Record of Worldwide Missionary Expansion," CN 46 Box 13 Folder 23; Robert L. Ramseyer, "Anthropological Perspectives on the Homogeneous Unit Principle, II," CN 46 Box 13 Folder 24; Harvie M. Conn, "Reactions and Guidelines: The Praxis of A Covenant Ethnos," CN 46 Box 13 Folder 24; BGCA.

⁶⁴ Gottfried Osai-Mensah, "Memorandum Re LCWE Consultation on the 'Homogeneous Unit Principle,' of Church Growth," June 9, 1977, CN 46 Box 4 Folder 19; Russell Chandler, "World Evangelism Group Tallies Results," June 4, 1977, *Los Angeles Times*, A29; "The Pasadena Consultation (a colloquium on the Homogeneous Unit Principle)," CN 46 Box 4 Folder 19, BGCA.

to resolve them. The statement described a “painful dilemma” of trying to choose between “the struggle for reconciliation” on the one hand, or “numerical church growth” on the other. Nonetheless, it affirmed that it was wrong to try to grow a church in a racist homogeneous unit without challenging the racism of the group.⁶⁵ Leighton Ford, brother-in-law of Billy Graham and chairman of the International Lausanne Committee, invited the global evangelical church to build on what the consultation had accomplished. Now, Ford believed, “the homogeneous unit principle, properly interpreted and carefully implemented, can be translated from the realms of musty theory to dynamic strategy.”⁶⁶ The CGM’s most controversial tactic—the very one the Latin American radicals had blasted in their celebrated speeches at Lausanne—now had the official imprimatur of the Lausanne movement.

The consultation on the homogeneous unit principle did nothing to dim church growth experts’ enthusiasm for using race as a strategic tool of evangelism. In 1979, C. Peter Wagner published the most robust defense of the principle ever produced. Building on the rhetorical strategies deployed at the 1977 consultation, Wagner opportunistically positioned himself against colorblind Christians. He argued that it was time for evangelicals to discard their ostensibly “colorless” theology and embrace the flourishing of multiple “colorful” theologies. He urged them to see that they were culturally located,

⁶⁵ “The Pasadena Consultation (a colloquium on the Homogeneous Unit Principle),” CN 46 Box 4 Folder 19, BGCA.

⁶⁶ “Theologians Debate Place of Ethnic Churches,” June 13, 1977, CN 46 Box 4 Folder 19, BGCA.

“Western,” not bearers of a universal theology unencumbered by culture.⁶⁷ Wagner even quoted James Cone in his defense.⁶⁸ For theology to have integrity and meaning, it had to be contextualized in culture. Wagner argued the homogeneous unit principle provided space for healthy theological pluralism to flourish and assimilation to western norms to be resisted. He suggested that the spiritual unity of the church could be expressed at the supra-congregational level. Interracial and cross-cultural fellowship between congregations rather than within them preserved the essential unity of Christians without harming church growth.

Because of its seemingly paradoxical embrace of diversity and homogeneity, *Our Kind of People* could provoke whiplash in its readers. As one reviewer wrote, the book was so “schizophrenic” that he “hesitates to criticize it for fear of having completely missed the point.”⁶⁹ Wagner’s deployment of liberation theology and cultural pluralism to bolster his own vision of evangelical conversion could easily come off as opportunistic rather than sincere. Tom Nees, a white pastor of a church in Washington D.C., savaged the book for “reducing conversion to a personal, private religious experience” that allowed Christians to ignore the social demands of Christianity, including its call to break down racial divisions. Nees condemned the homogeneous unit principle as an ecclesial version of the old Supreme Court doctrine of separate but equal. Nees wrote, “The

⁶⁷ C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 107.

⁶⁸ Wagner’s use of Cone was opportunistic. On other occasions, Wagner saw “the paradigm or language of liberation theology” as something evangelicals ought to avoid. C. Peter Wagner to John Stott, June 29, 1982, CN 358 Box 10 Folder 5, BGCA.

⁶⁹ Kenneth L. Smith, *Review of Religious Research* 22 (1980): 100.

answer is neither assimilation nor homogeneous units, but groups of Christians whose differences are celebrated and whose lives are enriched by a unity within diversity.”⁷⁰

Wagner’s professed concern for the cultural integrity of American minorities might have come as a surprise to an ordinary white evangelical who picked up the book after glancing at its cover. The publisher of *Our Kind of People*, John Knox Press of Atlanta, promoted it as a kind of salve for white evangelical guilt. The back cover of the original paperback edition offered this extraordinary description of the book’s contents:

OUR KIND OF PEOPLE attacks the Christian guilt complex arising from the civil rights movement and puts it to rest with a skillful mixture of scriptural precedent and human psychology. In doing so, Wagner transforms the statement that “11 A.M. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America” from a millstone around Christian necks into a dynamic tool for assuring Christian growth.

In this framing, Wagner’s defense of homogeneity was important not because of what it did for evangelicals of color but because it helped white evangelicals feel better about their segregated churches. Wagner’s thoughts within the book were more nuanced, but the slippage between Wagner’s argument and the selling and use of that argument is precisely the point. While Wagner theorized about cultural pluralism and contextual theology, ordinary white evangelicals could interpret it as license to *not* think about race. So long as they were not practicing deliberate exclusion, their local homogeneous church was good. Wagner’s sunny optimism about church growth and unyielding focus on individual conversion smacked of the kind of success orientation and privatized religion that, in Hilliard’s view, epitomized theological whiteness.

⁷⁰ Tom Nees, “Evangelism Without the Gospel: Church Growth in *Our Kind of People*,” *Sojourners*, 1980, 25-29.

By 1981 Wagner admitted the homogeneous unit principle was “risky” and “can support racism” but insisted that when “properly applied” it could “be an effective force to reduce racism.”⁷¹ The caveat of proper application was doing a lot of work in Wagner’s writing. When Tom Nees went to a Church Growth Movement seminar, he reported his experience:

During the seminar we used a medical analogy to describe impediments to church growth: Healthy churches grow, sick churches do not...If a church is not growing it must be because of certain diseases which church growth diagnosticians have identified. The first disease, and the one afflicting more churches than any other ailment, was defined as “ethnicitus,” the disease that begins when a congregation finds itself in a racially changing community. Rather than being seen as an opportunity to demonstrate the universalism and cross-cultural possibilities of the Christian faith, integration was described as a deadly threat to normal congregational life and certain death to church growth.⁷²

This was not a rogue popularization of Church Growth Movement thought.⁷³ Despite its claims of Christian pluralism, the CGM was effectively supporting an all-too-familiar feature of the white evangelical imagination: racial integration as spiritual threat. The homogeneous unit principle was not in fact being widely used to promote the flowering of diverse colorful theologies. Instead, young and energetic white pastors, armed with church growth principles, looked with strategic eyes to prosperous suburban communities and sought to target white middle-class families as their growth demographic. This was the era in which some of the most influential churches of the 1990s and early twenty-first century got their start. Bill Hybels, founder of Willow Creek church in suburban Chicago, received training and fundraising support from superstar pastor Robert Schuller. Rick

⁷¹ Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 168-169.

⁷² Nees, “Evangelism Without the Gospel,” *Sojourners*, 25.

⁷³ The language of disease and “ethnikitis” came directly from Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 124-134.

Warren, after training under C. Peter Wagner at Fuller, chose Orange County as the site of his Saddleback church. From the start, he dreamed that his church would one day have 20,000 members.⁷⁴ Warren and his leadership team created a composite character representing the precise kind of person they wanted their church to reach. He was an upper-middle class white man.⁷⁵ To someone like Clarence Hilliard grappling with impoverishment, violence, and racism on the west side of Chicago, these strategies and dreams appeared to have little to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The evangelism-first efforts of the Church Growth Movement and its successful cooption of the North American wing of the Lausanne Movement led to growing disenchantment among evangelicals around the world. At a 1980 Lausanne Consultation in Pattaya, Thailand, many delegates expressed their alarm at what historian Brian Stanley has called “a resurgent strategic pragmatism” that slighted social concerns.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, in the United States, the CGM all but ignored the concerns of black evangelicals. In a 1981 interview for the movement magazine *Church Growth America*, McGavran discussed the Church Growth Movement’s successes and its prospects. The

⁷⁴ Lynne Hybels later wrote that before starting Willow Creek, Bill read Schuller’s book, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (see chapter 4). He later took his church staff to one of Schuller’s pastors conferences. Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 51, 68-71. Rick Warren described his debt to McGavran in his bestselling *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 25-30. On CGM influence and the early days of Warren’s church, see Jeffery L. Sheler, *Prophet of Purpose: The Life of Rick Warren* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 139-141.

⁷⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 170.

⁷⁶ Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, 177; “A Statement of Concerns on the Future of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation,” CN 358 Box 10 Folder 5, BGCA.

movement had already had a profound effect on American evangelicalism. It had influenced the nation's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, and smaller denominations such as the Nazarenes. But so far, most of the Movement's influence was concentrated in white churches. McGavran explained that this was because "most devout believing pastors" were white, and as they learned about church growth principles they "naturally" tried to convert "their own kind of people" first. McGavran saw a great future ahead for the movement as it spread to other groups making up the diverse "mosaic" of the United States. "The minorities," McGavran explained, "are virtually untouched by the church today." He urged Christians to pray for the "penetration" of all these "untouched" groups. He declared that African Americans and other people of color in the United States were "growing up unchurched" and were effectively "Christo-pagan." At no point in this astonishing interview did Donald McGavran acknowledge the existence, much less the value, of black churches and other nonwhite expressions of Christianity.⁷⁷ John Perkins had seen enough. At the height of the Church Growth Movement's influence, he blasted the evangelical mainstream for "not bothering with breaking down racial barriers, since that would only distract us from 'church growth.' And so the most segregated, racist institution in America, the evangelical church, racks up the numbers, declaring itself 'successful,' oblivious to the...dismemberment of the Body of Christ..."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Conversation with a Legend," *Church Growth America*, 1981. CN 178 Series IV Box 62, BGCA.

⁷⁸ John Perkins, *With Justice for All: A Strategy for Community Development*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982), 108.

Houston '85: Evangelizing Ethnic America, Excluding African Americans

McGavran's denigration of the black church was not anomalous, and Perkins' criticisms proved prophetic. Indeed, the leading lights of North American evangelicalism were about to embark on a new evangelistic project from which they would deliberately exclude African American Christians. Early in 1982, the North American Lausanne Committee began planning a "National Convocation on Evangelizing Ethnic America" to be held in Houston in the spring of 1985. Conference planners turned to the Southern Baptist Convention, widely regarded as leading practitioners of evangelism to people of color, for expertise. As Wagner put it, "The Southern Baptist Home Missions Board has more experience and a better track record for evangelizing minorities than any other denominational agency in the U.S."⁷⁹ But the Home Mission Board of the SBC had longstanding contrasting approaches to ministry among African Americans as opposed to other groups. One division worked with Black Baptists, and the entirely separate Language Missions Division worked with all other people of color and foreign-language groups, an organizational structure first set in place during Jim Crow. The Lausanne Committee asked Oscar Romo, the Hispanic longtime leader of the Language Missions Division, to chair the Planning Committee, and organizers promptly reproduced the logic of the Home Mission Board's organizational structure. The initial steering committee "unanimously agreed that the principal focus of the Convocation should be those ethnic groups whose language and/or culture is other than English." This meant that the Conference would include a focus on "Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Europeans,

⁷⁹ C. Peter Wagner to Leighton Ford, October 24, 1984, CN 358 Box 6 Folder 4, BGCA.

Middle Easterners, Internationals, Caribbean, and Deaf,” as well as “Non ethnics” who were interested in cross-cultural evangelism. It would *not* include African Americans. Reflecting the influence of the Church Growth Movement (Wagner was on the steering committee), the proposed conference would “Research the ethnic realities of the United States” and “provide data...discuss models, methodologies and progress” in evangelizing “American ethnics.” The ultimate goal was “greatly increasing the evangelistic ministry to unreached individuals and people groups in the United States.” The steering committee set up a diverse Central Planning Committee made up of Hispanic, Asian, European immigrant, and “Anglo” Americans (including one woman!). There were no African Americans on the Committee.⁸⁰

In effect, organizers chose to exclude black evangelicals from the conference, then created an after-the-fact definition of “ethnic America” to fit their discriminatory decision. As early as April 1982, before a permanent planning committee was established, Wagner explained to Lausanne Chairman Leighton Ford that he and other leaders determined it was necessary to exclude African Americans not only from the Convocation’s definition of “Ethnic America,” but from the planning of the event entirely. Wagner claimed he initially “had no idea at all of excluding American blacks” but as he talked with other leaders “all except one” believed in “the wisdom of keeping them separate.” Wagner explained, “experience has shown that whenever a joint project is conducted with all included, the American blacks almost inevitably take control of the project.” Wagner and his fellow white Christians would, of course, never dream of

⁸⁰ “LCWE National Convocation on Evangelizing Ethnic America Minutes,” May 15, 1982, CN 46 Box 97 Folder 18, BGCA.

controlling a project. Black Americans, he warned, “understand power and know how to use it.” It would not be fair to the other ethnic groups to have them dominating the agenda. Besides, African Americans were already a “reached” people group, with large numbers of Christians, and they did not seem to be interested in cross-cultural evangelism. White evangelicals were very interested in it, so it was only proper that they should plan the Conference. Behind the baldly discriminatory logic of the decision was the ongoing debate about the meaning of the gospel. Wagner feared that black evangelicals would get in the way of the evangelistic focus of the conference and didn’t want persuasive voices for social justice to be present in the planning process.⁸¹

As planning for the conference began in earnest, some black evangelicals heard about it and protested their exclusion. In September 1983, Bill Pannell, Wagner’s colleague at Fuller, wrote to Paul Landrey, a member of planning committee, to protest. “As could be expected,” he wrote, “there was no Black evangelical speaking for this conference and I suspect there were none in any significant leadership positions either.” Tongue in cheek, Pannell noted that this seemed curious in light of the fact that “Dr. C. Peter Wagner...reports to be sensitive to the contribution the Civil Rights Movement made to our understanding of ethnicity.” Pannell called for an end to the exclusion and for “significant Black involvement in this important event.”⁸² The following month Wagner wrote that the North American Lausanne Committee “needs to move fairly rapidly” on a plan for a separate “Convocation on Evangelizing Black America” to

⁸¹ C. Peter Wagner to Leighton Ford, April 10, 1982, CN 358 Box 6 Folder 2, BGCA.

⁸² William E. Pannell to J. Paul Landrey, September 22, 1983, CN 46 Box 97 Folder 18, BGCA.

“defuse some of the potential criticism of Houston ’85 from black leaders who may feel that [the North American Lausanne Committee] is ignoring them.”⁸³ Such a scheme raised as many questions as it answered. Why did black evangelicals need a separate conference? And why were white evangelicals trying to plan that one too?

A year after Pannell first raised the issue of black exclusion, with no substantive action taken to remedy the problem, Leighton Ford wrote letters to Oscar Romo and Robert Coleman. As the Chairmen of the Houston ’85 Planning Committee and the North American Lausanne Committee respectively, these men had the ability to change course if they wished. Ford reiterated the suggestion that “We probably should have a consultation on evangelizing black America.” Ford wrote that his “main concern is that our black evangelical brothers and sisters feel confident that they are important to us and we to them in the total task of world evangelization.” He was “concerned lest the perception of our black evangelical friends be that intentionally or otherwise they have been left out.”⁸⁴ Had black evangelicals been privy to the discussions taking place behind the scenes in the planning of Houston ’85, they would have been anything but confident that they were important to their white brothers and sisters.

As the controversy threatened to spill into the open, Wagner expanded on his justifications. He explained that the decision about whether to include blacks was extensively discussed because the steering committee knew it could generate controversy. Some of the “denominational executives” described past “unpleasant experiences” trying

⁸³ C. Peter Wagner to Bill Hogue, October 11, 1983, CN 46 Box 97 Folder 18, BGCA.

⁸⁴ Leighton Ford to Oscar Romo; Leighton Ford to Robert Coleman, September 27, 1984, CN 46 Box 97 Folder 18, BGCA.

to work with African Americans. “The black American culture,” Wagner declared, “is by nature far more aggressive than that of most other minorities and as a result committee meetings tend to be dominated by the blacks.” Other ethnic groups, “even top leaders,” were “intimidated by outspoken blacks.” It was better to simply exclude them than to try to work together under these circumstances. Incredibly, Wagner sent this incriminating letter to Ford, Romo, Coleman, and Landrey. It does not appear to have generated pushback.⁸⁵ Here was a telling picture of what could happen when colorblind Christians opportunistically deployed race-conscious strategies. Though happy to assemble a diverse board and promote ethnic evangelization, they pointedly excluded the very people whose experiences as racial minorities might cause them to have meaningful disagreements with the conference agenda. This would be an evangelism-focused conference, and justice-focused black evangelicals were deemed such a threat to it that they had to be quarantined.

Wagner’s anti-black sentiment aligned with rather than contradicted his enthusiastic embrace of the ethnic revival in American life. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, the ethnic revival facilitated a redefinition of whiteness around immigrant roots and diverse ethnic identities, at once decentering black struggles and claiming white innocence.⁸⁶ Wagner’s actions seemed to reflect a genuine feeling of hostility toward African Americans that he did not possess toward other groups. He kept in his files a *Time* magazine article describing the more progressive turn of the National Baptist

⁸⁵ C. Peter Wagner to Leighton Ford, October 24, 1984, CN 358 Box 6 Folder 4, BGCA.

⁸⁶ See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Convention, USA, after the replacement of its longtime conservative leader, Joseph H. Jackson. The comedian Dick Gregory declared, “You’re the strongest, biggest, blackest organization there is. Use it!” Wagner underlined this quote and scrawled across the top of the page, “Why isn’t this a racist statement?” Despite Wagner’s explicit praise for a “colorful theology” and declaration that race consciousness was positive, he seemed to recoil when he saw these same attitudes in African American Christians. “Are US blacks,” he wondered, “more racist than other US ethnic groups?”⁸⁷

In an attempt to defuse controversy, the planning committee decided to ask each of the participating denominations to “send one key black pastor to come as an ‘observer’ to the Convocation.” These black pastors would gain the benefits of seeing “how this sort of thing is done,” and would “hopefully accept the challenge of holding a similar convocation” for black America. At the conference these black pastors would hold their own meeting to explore this possibility. Wagner, Ford, and other leaders had specific ideas about which black leaders should be invited and who should be in charge. Wagner also wanted to make sure that he and Robert Coleman opened the meeting and explained “how previous similar events have been handled.”⁸⁸ Leighton Ford, wanting to avoid an open break between Lausanne and black evangelicals, seems to have been the driving force for setting up a black caucus at Houston. Wagner was determined to humor him for political reasons if nothing else. “I’m sure you can see what Leighton is after,” Wagner

⁸⁷ Wagner handwritten notes on *Time* article, CN 358 Box 6 Folder 4, BGCA.

⁸⁸ Executive Committee minutes with Wagner cover letter, December 7, 1984; Leighton Ford to C. Peter Wagner, December 11, 1984; C. Peter Wagner to Robert Coleman, February 13, 1985, CN 46 Box 97 Folder 18; C. Peter Wagner to Bill Hogue, October 11, 1983; Bill Hogue to C. Peter Wagner, October 24, 1983; Robert E. Coleman to Leighton Ford, February 21, 1985, CN 358 Box 6 Folder 4, BGCA.

told another committee member, “and that we must do what is necessary to support him.”⁸⁹ After writing to a few black evangelical pastors to ask them to come to Houston, Wagner could breathe a sigh of relief. “I think,” he told Romo, “we are in the clear as to our black situation.”⁹⁰

On April 15, 1985, the Convocation on Evangelizing Ethnic America began. After all the controversy in the planning process, the conference itself seemed to be a roaring success. Like the organizers of the conference, evangelical media portrayed it as a groundbreaking opportunity for evangelicals to come to grips with the new America—a multi-ethnic mosaic of cultures in need of the gospel in their communities.⁹¹ With nearly 700 registered attendees and over three dozen denominations represented, it was an unprecedented gathering of a broad cross-section of American evangelicalism. In his keynote address, Wagner declared, “The teeming multitudes of all colors, languages, smells, and cultures are not just a quaint sideline in our nation. They *are* America.” The

⁸⁹ C. Peter Wagner to Billy Melvin, December 21, 1984, CN 358 Box 6 Folder 4.

⁹⁰ C. Peter Wagner to Oscar Romo, December 21, 1984, CN 358 Box 6 Folder 4, BGCA.

⁹¹ This rosy view of the conference as a multi-ethnic celebration has influenced historians. Darren Dochuk has described Houston ’85 as an example of Latin American influence on American evangelicals. Dochuk argues that Wagner’s “endorsement of a “signs and wonders” theology and ambitions to restructure evangelicalism itself in accordance with the multiethnic dynamics of his day placed him within Escobar’s and Padilla’s theological purview.” While Dochuk is right to suggest the turn toward Pentecostalism reflected Latin American influence, Wagner’s ethnic evangelization strategies were predictable outgrowths of his McGavran-inspired church growth beliefs. These beliefs placed him firmly in *opposition* to Escobar and Padilla. Dochuk also erroneously concludes that Houston ’85 was “co-led” by “Hispanic and African American pastors.” While Hispanic leaders played important leadership roles in the conference, African Americans did not have any such positions. See Dochuk, “Lausanne ’74 and American Evangelicalism’s Latin Turn,” 274-275.

task at hand, Romo said, was to “evangelize” these groups, not “Americanize” them. The venue hosting the Convocation, South Main Baptist Church, illustrated what Wagner and Romo had in mind. Amid a changing neighborhood in the 1960s, the white leadership of South Main determined not to flee the city. Now, the church was made up of four congregations: Korean, Cambodian, Hispanic, and white. A few times a year the congregations came together for a combined worship service. It was stories like this that convinced Wagner the homogeneous unit principle could be a positive force for social ethics as well as evangelism.⁹²

The conference celebrated evangelical denominations making major strides in ethnic outreach. The growing numbers of Asian and Hispanic Southern Baptist congregations were held up as a model. The Assemblies of God, too, had over 1,000 Hispanic churches by the end of 1987.⁹³ The Nazarenes, a small and historically white denomination, were another example of what evangelicals could accomplish if they committed themselves to church growth. In the face of stagnating membership numbers, the denomination had gone all in on church growth theory, seeking training from McGavran and Wagner in the 1970s.⁹⁴ By 1987 the Nazarenes reported that over half of

⁹² Randy Frame, “Church Leaders Challenge the Notion that America Is a Melting Pot,” *Christianity Today*, May 17, 1985, 40-42; Michael Tutterow, “Reaching the Real America,” *The Mandate*, volume 1 number 5, 2-3.

⁹³ Dan Moul, “A Look at Ethnic Representation Within NAE Denominations,” June, 1988, SC113 Box 99 Wheaton College Special Collections.

⁹⁴ Raymond W. Hurn, “Nazarenes...Is The Third Wave of A Religious Movement Commencing?” July 27, 1981, CN 178 Box 85 Folder 2, BGCA; Raymond W. Hurn, “The Oregon Experiment,” *Church Growth America*, January-February 1980, 6-7, 14, AR 631-10 Box 15 Folder 12, SBHLA; Paul R. Orjala, *Get Ready To Grow: A Strategy for Local Church Growth* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978).

their recent church plants—some 250 congregations—were “ethnic.” This included 94 black churches, making the Nazarenes a leader in adding black churches to a historically white denomination. What the conference leaders did not say is that the Nazarenes were the exception that proved the rule. Most evangelical denominations remained overwhelmingly white. And despite the Nazarenes’ rapid turn toward ethnic church planting, the denomination reported that only 4% of its total membership was “ethnic.”⁹⁵

The one discordant note in the Houston conference was the ongoing tensions borne of the exclusion of African Americans. Black pastors duly held a meeting to begin planning a black convocation, but not without demanding a “formal apology” from Houston ’85 leaders. Leighton Ford allowed that he was “grieved and sorry for any misunderstanding.” Wagner said, “I don’t think we realized it would be this controversial.” Neither man publicly owned their deliberate actions. Bob Harrison, now a veteran of more than three decades of ministry in white evangelical spaces, noted that the whole episode was symptomatic of the disconnect between black and white evangelicals. African Americans, Harrison pointed out, did not just want to be invited to events. “What we’d like is to be in on the ground level.”⁹⁶

In the ensuing months, as the “black task force” formed at Houston began planning a black convocation, its first order of business was to seek accountability for the mess at Houston ’85. It promptly drafted a scathing resolution condemning the exclusion of African Americans from the Convocation. The resolution declared that planners had

⁹⁵ Dan Moul, “A Look at Ethnic Representation Within NAE Denominations,” June, 1988, SC113 Box 99 Wheaton College Special Collections.

⁹⁶ Randy Frame, “Church Leaders Challenge the Notion that America Is a Melting Pot,” *Christianity Today*, May 17, 1985, 40-42.

“deliberately” chosen to exclude black Christians, a decision that was “insensitive” and “unchristlike.” The Bible demanded that “Black Americans and other minorities be accepted and treated as peers.” The failure to do this produced a sense of “rejection” and “abandonment” and could only “weaken the sense of unity and equality in the body of Christ.” The resolution demanded that the North American Lausanne Committee take “immediate conscious steps to counteract an apparent philosophy and attitude which treats Black Americans and other minorities simply as a appendage.”⁹⁷ Houston ’85 had exposed a divide in evangelicalism that, a generation after the height of the civil rights movement, appeared to be growing. Evangelical elites, in pursuit of a gospel of personal salvation, were eager to make their movement multiethnic. But an anti-racist gospel remained outside of most evangelical imaginations. An evangelicalism in which black evangelicals could participate *as black people* with distinctly black concerns remained only a distant dream.

Conclusion

The period between Lausanne 74 and Houston 85 coincided with surging church attendance in many evangelical denominations, a growing trend of large congregations that would come to be called mega-churches, and the increasing visibility of evangelicals in the nation’s culture and politics. Steven P. Miller has called this “the age of evangelicalism.”⁹⁸ It might more accurately be labeled the age of *white* evangelicalism.

⁹⁷ “The Atlanta Response to Houston ’85,” November 22, 1985, CN 548 Box 3 Folder 12.

⁹⁸ Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America’s Born Again Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Even as more Americans claimed the evangelical label, African American evangelicals felt increasingly beleaguered and alienated from the community with which they had so much in common. They saw the national retreat from the ideals of the civil rights movement, but little evidence of concern from their fellow Christians. As white evangelicals celebrated a revival and helped usher in the Reagan Revolution, the heady mixture of growing churches and growing influence signaled the ascendancy of investments in evangelical whiteness.

Black evangelicals remained the mirror that exposed these commitments. Bill Pannell wrote that by the end of the 1980s, “The North American version of the Lausanne movement was widely perceived to be racist to the core.” When yet another Lausanne Congress took place in Manila in 1989 with little black evangelical participation, Pannell called it “the most telling insult to our sense of Christian selfhood in all the years we have ridden in the back of the white evangelical bus.” What was behind this pattern? “Was this exclusion of black evangelicals at a conference overwhelmingly represented by people from the two-thirds world a mere oversight? A matter of culture?” Pannell thought not. “Perhaps there was a concern about power and a related fear that if black evangelicals from North America got themselves together and made some alliances with other men and women of goodwill from other parts of the globe, a new network might emerge, one closer to the ethos of the oppressed than is currently represented by any Euro-American association.”⁹⁹

⁹⁹ William Pannell, *The Coming Race Wars? A Cry for Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 85.

By the end of the 1980s, black and white evangelicals alike harbored a growing sense that the questions raised by the civil rights movement had not been successfully resolved. Token integration here and homogeneous growth there seemed to have left black and white evangelicals as far apart as ever. Power remained in white hands. Theology was still colored white. For most ordinary white evangelicals, racial justice seemed like a distraction from the pure message of the gospel. Pannel wrote:

They were especially upset that I would insist that kingdom of God has something to do with justice and that a ‘theology that does not liberate is no theology at all.’ When we have engaged in debate over some of this, it has become clear that some of these Christians have never forgiven Martin Luther King, Jr., for dispelling their cozy view of themselves or the value system of their parents. No one to this day has been able to process for them just what happened in those great years when democracy crept up on this country, led by a black Baptist preacher from the Deep South. All some of these saints can tell me, with some heat in the telling, is, ‘We lived through all that.’”¹⁰⁰

Black evangelicals’ claims about a gospel that “has something to do with justice” added to their reputation as trouble-makers. Their priorities disrupted the logic of what Clarence Hilliard called theological whiteness. Obvious signs of disunity, growing black evangelical impatience—and colorblind Christians’ discomfort with both—would help lead to a new movement of “racial reconciliation” in the 1990s. But whether this movement would be any more successful at severing the link between Christian colorblindness and the evangelical investment in whiteness remained to be seen.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 86.

CHAPTER 7:
THE TURNING POINT THAT WASN'T: COLORBLIND CHRISTIANS AND
“RACIAL RECONCILIATION”

In the summer of 1995 hundreds of thousands of white Christian men were filling American football stadiums and, to nearly everyone's astonishment, publicly repenting for racism. The black evangelical writer Edward Gilbreath offered a vivid portrait of the atmosphere at these events. "The legion of masculine voices sings, shouts, chants, cries. Frisbees, footballs, and plastic-foam planes constantly zoom overhead...And between speakers, the stadium spontaneously breaks out into deafening macho chants: 'We love Jesus; yes, we do! We love Jesus; how 'bout you?'"¹ This was Promise Keepers (PK), an organization that had suddenly become one of the most popular phenomena on the American religious scene, and the leading exemplar of what many commentators were calling the "racial reconciliation" movement.² PK urged men to live by seven promises, including a pledge to "reach beyond racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity."³ When a PK conference came to Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh in the summer of 1996, a local black columnist went to see what all the fuss was about and found the sight "surreal." From the stage, "a multi-racial cadre of speakers confronted 45,000 mostly white males with the legacy of racism and their complicity in maintaining it." Remarkably, the men seemed to listen. They promised "to take the spirit

¹ Edward Gilbreath, "Manhood's Great Awakening," *Christianity Today*, February 6, 1995, 21-28.

² "Movement Generating Big Numbers," *Christianity Today*, September 11, 1995, 59.

³ Gilbreath, "Manhood's Great Awakening," 22.

of racial reconciliation back to their neighborhoods and their all-white churches were serious soul-searching has to begin.” The columnist didn’t have to be an evangelical Christian to believe that the sight of 45,000 men engaging in “handwringing and spontaneous male bonding across racial lines was an inspiring image in an age of racial polarization.”⁴

Many evangelical commentators, and some scholars, have regarded this “racial reconciliation” phenomenon as the most salient feature of evangelical racial engagement in the 1990s and an important turning point in which the desire to take racism seriously finally entered the evangelical mainstream.⁵ As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1997, “Across the country, conservative congregations and denominations...are embracing a concept called ‘biblical racial reconciliation’ – a belief that...they are required by Scripture to work for racial harmony.” The paper marveled that conservative Christians seemed to be “the most energetic element of society addressing racial divisions...”⁶ But from the broader vantage point of the history of Christian colorblindness, the so-called

⁴ Tony Norman, “Promise Keepers Echo Troubles and Triumphs of Million Man March,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 16, 1996, D-1.

⁵ The historian Seth Dowland writes, “conservative evangelicals in the 1990s saw the civil rights movement as a heroic moment in the nation’s history. Most acknowledged white Christians’ complicity in racial discrimination, and *they repented and set about trying to redeem their forebears’ racial sins*” [emphasis mine]. Dowland aptly describes the views of some Promise Keepers’ leaders and white evangelical elites, but offers an exceedingly generous reading of mainstream white evangelical opinion. Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 208. See also, Judith Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men’s Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 241-257.

⁶ Douglas A. Blackmon, “Racial Reconciliation Becomes a Priority for the Religious Right,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 1997, A1.

racial reconciliation movement appears less as a turning point and more an appropriation. Before “racial reconciliation” became an important part of evangelical discourse in the 1990s, its most prominent advocates were black evangelicals like the community organizer John Perkins. He used the concept to promote a kind of radical Christianity that called for spiritual, social, and economic liberation. But most evangelical racial reconciliation initiatives in the 1990s sidestepped Perkins’ demand for social justice. Instead, they focused their efforts on friendship.⁷ In colorblind Christians’ vision, the key measure of racial progress was not the eradication of racial oppression, but the bridging of social and psychological divides between Christians. The new prominence of racial reconciliation in the 1990s did not show the declining influence of Christian colorblindness. On the contrary, it signaled that colorblind Christians successfully coopted the language of racial reconciliation for their own purposes.

To understand why the racial reconciliation moment failed to disrupt the dominance of Christian colorblindness, this chapter traces the contested meaning of the very idea of “racial reconciliation.” By the time racial reconciliation became popular, it looked less like Perkins’ call for radical Christianity and more like a traditional evangelical call for spiritual revival. While the racial reconciliation era produced a lot of buzz and media coverage, there was less to it than met the eye. It was a trend, not a groundswell. Racial reconciliation found its most devoted adherents among educated evangelicals, writers, clergy, professors, and administrators. These were important actors

⁷ Michael Emerson and Christian Smith made this point in their foundational study of evangelical racial attitudes in the 1990s. They write, “As the message of reconciliation spread to a white audience, it was popularized. The racial reconciliation message given to the mass audience is individual reconciliation.” *Divided by Faith*, 67.

in the evangelical world, but as in every previous decade since the 1960s, their interest in racial matters risked putting them out of step with ordinary white evangelicals. In the 1990s, it was easy for some observers to believe a turning point had been reached. It seemed evangelicals were discarding their reticence and becoming leaders in healing America's enduring racial wounds. In fact, the racial reconciliation wave crested and receded without overcoming colorblind Christians' core commitments to a gospel colored white.

The rise of racial reconciliation discourse in the 1990s owed to two related trends. First, there was growing concern about racial divisions in American life. The alienation of black evangelicals from major evangelical movements like Lausanne and the Church Growth Movement seemed to some evangelical leaders like a problem that could hamper the growth of evangelicalism and threaten its credibility. To prevent this possibility, black evangelicals had to be made to feel more welcome than they had been thus far. To a greater degree than ever before, leading evangelicals turned to the arguments Howard Jones and other black evangelicals had been making for decades: that interracial fellowship was essential as a demonstration of the truth of the gospel; that church segregation harmed Christian credibility; that unity in Christ—now called racial reconciliation—was no longer optional for faithful Christians.⁸ At the same time, a series of surprising events—from Klansman David Duke's candidacy for the governorship of Louisiana in 1991 to the Los Angeles riots of 1992—reminded Americans of the

⁸ While passages about unity in Christ, such as Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28, had been major texts for colorblind Christians since the civil rights movement, in the 1990s they increasingly turned to 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 as a text with racial implications. In this passage the Apostle Paul described God reconciling humanity to himself and entrusting to Christians "the ministry of reconciliation."

continued power of race and racism. Racially polarized reactions to the Nation of Islam-sponsored Million Man March and the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995 added to fears that the nation was dividing into hostile racial camps. These racial divisions in evangelicalism and in American society motivated white evangelical leaders to act.

The second key trend, directly correlated with the first, was the growing dominance of a bipartisan, theologically-infused colorblind consensus in American politics. Most white Americans believed a firmly colorblind approach to policy and public life—where character rather than skin color counted—would be the surest path to ending racial division.⁹ If there was more racial tension in the 1990s, the solution was not more racially conscious policies (to reduce inequality), but fewer (to reduce racial consciousness). Precisely because Americans were skeptical of government solutions in a neo-liberal age, they looked to churches and other civic institutions to promote racial progress. Much has been made of white evangelicals' growing power in the Republican Party in these years. This partisan story overlooks the deeper synergy taking place in the 1990s between Christian colorblindness and the colorblind consensus in American political life. Evangelical racial reconciliation movements were the perfect fit for an era of diminished expectations. The racial wealth gap might be stubbornly impervious to change, but Americans could rid prejudice from their hearts. The characteristic patterns of Christian colorblindness remained at the center of the racial reconciliation movement.

⁹ On this colorblind consensus, see Jesse Curtis, "Remembering Racial Progress, Forgetting White Resistance: The Death of Mississippi Senator John C. Stennis and the Consolidation of the Colorblind Consensus," *History & Memory* 29 (2017): 134-160; Dylan Gottlieb, "Sixth Avenue Heartache: Race, Commemoration, and the Colorblind Consensus in Zephyrhills, Florida, 2003–2004," *Journal of Urban History* 39 (2013): 1085–1105.

What was different in the 1990s is that these values aligned white evangelicals with the tenor of the times. When they said racial healing was a matter for the heart, not the state, their message rang true. The racial reconciliation decade would prove to be not the turning of the tide for racial and theological reform in evangelicalism, but the crowning achievement of Christian colorblindness.

Racial Reconciliation as Radical Christianity: John and Vera Mae Perkins

Before racial reconciliation became a common turn of phrase in the 1990s, it was a challenge to white evangelicalism coming from the margins. By the early 1970s, John and Vera Mae Perkins had already been ministering among the poor in Mississippi for over a decade, and John was using their story as “a testimony to the ministry of reconciliation between white and black people carried on today by God’s Holy Spirit.” John wanted white evangelicals to know that “yes, you can do something; yes, there can be racial reconciliation,” and his own life proved it.¹⁰ Both John and Vera Mae had been indelibly shaped by the extraordinary oppression of the Jim Crow Deep South. Born in depression-era Mississippi of a family of sharecroppers, John saw a limited set of choices. “We could stay, accept the system and become dehumanized niggers; we could

¹⁰ John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution: The Christian Response to Human Need: A Strategy for Today* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976), 10-11. Other scholars have also cited Perkins as a crucial vector of influence for later racial reconciliation movements. Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers*, 248-249; Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 51-59. On Perkins' career and the Christian Community Development Association that grew out of his work, see Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 160-177; Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 153-188.

go to jail or get killed; or we could leave for the big city.”¹¹ While the Perkins’ clan was known around town for their bootlegging and quick resort to violence, Vera Mae’s family owned a little piece of property and led a more stable existence. Vera Mae recalled a childhood under the protective umbrella of her parents, mercifully shielded from the full realities of the Jim Crow system. But looking back, she saw how the twin forces of racial and economic oppression had “molded and formed everything, what we ate, what we thought, how we acted, how we prayed.”¹² John’s path was rockier. His mother died when he was an infant, and his father left the children with their grandmother. When he was a teenager, a police officer killed his older brother. Seeing no future in Mississippi, Perkins escaped to California. He found a good job and married Vera Mae, who joined him in Pasadena. Then he had an evangelical conversion experience. Over the next few years John wrestled with a growing conviction that he should go back to Mississippi and share in the struggles of his people. At first he didn’t want to. He and Vera Mae were well-situated in California and had a growing family to care for. But in the Spring of 1960 they packed up their life in Pasadena and returned to Mississippi.

John and Vera Mae initially understood their task in characteristically evangelical terms. As John put it, “I believed that if people would come to know Christ their lives would be changed and everything would be okay.”¹³ The first project they started was a Bible study. But their experiences living alongside poor black Mississippians broadened their view of their mission. The Bible study morphed into an educational institute. When

¹¹ John Perkins, *With Justice for All* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982), 17.

¹² Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution*, 26.

¹³ Perkins, *With Justice for All*, 21.

John realized that many of their neighbors couldn't read, the institute offered remedial education. When Vera Mae saw the need for childcare, she started a day care center, which became a Head Start program in 1966. From there their ministry—called Voice of Calvary—expanded into an ever wider array of programs and activism, from food co-ops to voter registration drives. For 10 years, they worked to bring a gospel of spiritual and economic liberation to poor black people in Mississippi. Though distinctly Christian in his approach, John's efforts to build black economic self-sufficiency through co-ops were in keeping with the temper of the times. A friend said, "He's a Bible-believing fundamentalist, but he's for black power."¹⁴ John said he was "using a Black Muslim approach to reaching people," instilling an ethic of self-help and self-respect in a poor black community.¹⁵ "I have often thought," Vera Mae said, "if [John] had never become a Christian, he would have been a Muslim, with their strict devotion and discipline and he would have risen right to the top."¹⁶

John Perkins had never been a separatist, however, and he made use of white volunteers at Voice of Calvary. An important turn in what racial reconciliation meant to John Perkins began in a Mississippi jail cell in February, 1970. Just a few days before Christmas, 1969, John Perkins and others associated with Voice of Calvary launched a spontaneous boycott against white-owned stores in Mendenhall. The boycott dragged on for weeks as the white community resisted black demands for paved streets, employment,

¹⁴ Will Norton, "A Day in the Life of a Black Fundamentalist," *Eternity*, September 1971, 23.

¹⁵ "The Mendenhall Model Answers the Black Muslims," *Christianity Today*, January 30, 1976, 13.

¹⁶ Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution*, 29.

an end to police brutality, and integrated schools. One February evening when Perkins went to pay bail for jailed boycotters, he was arrested. White police officers hauled him into the jail and beat him there for hours. As he passed in and out of consciousness, he saw the faces of the police officers “twisted with hate. It was like looking at white-faced demons,” he recalled. For all the bitterness Perkins had toward white people, he looked into those faces of hatred and discovered “I just couldn’t hate them back.”¹⁷ As Perkins recovered from his physical wounds in the ensuing months, he believed God was healing him of the invisible wounds of white supremacy. He found a new capacity to forgive. As he thought about white police officers who couldn’t find their worth without beating a black man, he realized in a new way how damaging white supremacy was to white people. As the years went by, his vision increasingly focused on bringing people of all backgrounds together to experience solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

Perkins drew on these experiences to articulate a comprehensive evangelical vision for racial reconciliation which he shared in his books and in speeches around the country. For Perkins racial reconciliation was embedded in a broader ethic of Christian community development and grassroots activism rooted in a theology of incarnation. As Jesus Christ had emptied himself of his power and made himself flesh to draw sinners to himself, so Christians had to be incarnate—physically present in the place of need. This was the principle of relocation. Rather than separating themselves from the poor, buying the best house they could afford, Christians must live in the communities they sought to help. Once there, guided by an organic sharing of needs, Christians could give freely of

¹⁷ Perkins, *With Justice for All*, 98-99. On the boycott and the story of Perkins’ arrest see John Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down: John Perkins Tells His Own Story* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976), 131-177.

their resources and skills. This was the principle of redistribution. Poor communities needed more than money. They lacked businesses, social capital, educational attainment, and more. Through the body of Christ these resources were to be redistributed from those who had to those who lacked. Only in the context of these demanding principles—relocation and redistribution—could the third component, reconciliation, truly occur.¹⁸

Perkins never claimed any of this was easy. Christian love, he liked to say, was not “a smile” and a “lollipop.” It was measured by one’s willingness to lay down one’s life for the good of the community, much as Christ had laid down his life. Instead of pursuing a comfortable existence within the confines of the American Dream, all Christians were called to a life of sacrifice, to “love our neighbor in a way that liberates him from poverty and oppression, either spiritual or physical.” Perkins wrote in quite arresting terms about how demanding this Christian life could be. “Responding to the call of God is like a trap,” he wrote. “It’s like walking into a closet and shutting the door and finding out that there is no doorknob on the inside. You just can’t get out.”¹⁹ Perkins wasn’t one to sugarcoat things—neither the costs of reconciliation, nor how badly white evangelicals were failing to bear those costs. For evangelicals who thought they could bypass the problem of race, Perkins always had the same message. “Our day calls for a gospel that reconciles black and white, for unless we preach a gospel of reconciliation we preach no gospel at all,” he declared.²⁰

¹⁸ Perkins, *With Justice for All*, 59-188.

¹⁹ Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution*, 1976, 33-38.

²⁰ Perkins, *With Justice for All*, 56.

In John Perkins' theology, racial reconciliation was much more than friendship across the color line. It was a kind of radical Christianity, a strategy for liberation that was at once spiritual, social, and—most controversially—economic. When Perkins called for racial reconciliation he was declaring war on the American Dream. He believed Christianity turned the normative aspirations of middle-class Americans on their head. Americans pursued upward mobility; Christians chose solidarity with the poor. Americans valued safety and security; Christians chose to share in the suffering of the marginalized. Americans sought personal success; Christians sacrificed for the good of the community. No wonder this demanding message of racial reconciliation had trouble catching on. He admitted that real examples of the racial reconciliation he envisioned were few. After decades of reconciling work on the margins of American evangelicalism, Perkins sometimes wondered if much had changed. By 1993, he would say “Something is wrong at the root of American evangelicalism.”²¹

The Black Evangelical Demand for Racial Reconciliation

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, black evangelicals made a renewed push for racial reform in white evangelical institutions. Often carried out under the banner of racial reconciliation, black evangelicals challenged white evangelicals to accept a vision that had much in common with John and Vera Mae Perkins' brand of radical Christianity. As they had for several decades, black evangelicals linked justice, power, and economics in evangelical institutions to more subjective measures of racial harmony. They insisted

²¹ John Perkins, “Something Is Wrong at the Root,” *Christianity Today*, October 4, 1993, 18.

that reconciliation required real reform. Some white evangelicals embraced this critique; many rejected it and appropriated the language of reconciliation to restate their colorblind commitments and protect the status quo in their institutions.

By the end of the 1980s, leaders in the National Association of Evangelicals and the National Black Evangelical Association were grappling anew with the alienation between their constituencies. As the NAE sought to interface with black evangelicals, it sent Darrell Anderson of the Social Action Commission to attend Atlanta '88, the black evangelism conference that had grown out of the exclusion of African Americans at Houston '85. Anderson took his role as liaison seriously and reported back his observations of an "excellent convention." He was quite pleased with the prevailing attitude of the black leaders in attendance, though he noted Tom Skinner was still causing mischief. What Anderson meant by this can be gleaned from a similar report he wrote when he attended Destiny '87, a separate conference which featured many of the same African American leaders. Some of the speakers were still "rehashing the past," Anderson complained. "For some reason," he reported, "there seems to be a need for blacks to address these feelings, even in 1987. They still feel discriminated against." Mystified, Anderson noted that he had "no way of determining how much" of this feeling of discrimination "is real and how much is feared." In any case, he resented their misuse of Christian language. "Some insist on making 'righteousness' into 'social righteousness' and reconciliation a term to balance all things." He wished they would be quiet about their "slavery days" and tales of mistreatment; such talk was counterproductive. On the bright side, though, Tony Evans' sermon was "absolutely outstanding, and never once

brought up the subject of black/white or any reference to it whatsoever.”²² Anderson was an ironic liaison, unwittingly exemplifying the gulf between the two groups. And his report contained an ominous suggestion of disagreement about the very meaning of racial reconciliation. Did it have redistributionary intent, as in Perkins’ vision—a force to “balance all things”—or was it merely a new way of saying that what white evangelicals had been saying for decades: that racial identities ought to be submerged in Christ?

In the Spring of 1989 representatives from the Social Action Commissions of the NAE and the NBEA began planning a gathering to discuss racism in the church.²³ The brochure for the event—tagline “Unity in Christ: A Consultation on Racism”—repudiated Anderson’s reactionary colorblindness and described racism as a serious and growing problem in church and society that “undermines the Body of Christ and the reconciling spirit of the Gospel.” The consultation was scheduled to begin immediately after the NAE board meeting so board members could attend, an opportunity every one of them declined.²⁴ The consultation had some tense moments as black evangelical leaders spoke about their frustrations with the evangelical movement. A follow-up meeting in January finalized the language of a public declaration against racism. The document cast a vision for reform that would be all but unrecognizable in the friendship-based racial

²² Darrel Anderson, “Report: Atlanta ’88,” August 22, 1988; “Report: Destiny ’87,” July 20, 1987, SC113 Box 99, Folder “Social Action 1988-1989,” Buswell Library, Wheaton College Special Collections.

²³ Darrel Anderson, “Report – Consultation on Racism,” June 14, 1989, SC113 Box 99, Folder, “Social Action 1988-1989,” Buswell Library, Wheaton College Special Collections.

²⁴ Darrel Anderson, “Report – Consultation on Racism,” October 19, 1989, SC113 Box 99, Folder, “Social Action 1988-1989,” Buswell Library, Wheaton College Special Collections.

reconciliation popular later in the decade. The statement called on “The white evangelical church” to “repent of its sin of racism”; to “examine its doctrine, policies, institutions, boards, agencies and para-church entities”; to “exert pressure for economic justice by witnessing within its own power structures”; to “remove the institutional barriers which hinder progress for blacks and other people of color,” and “to make restitution and repair as soon as possible.” This was nothing less than a direct assault on the precepts of Christian colorblindness. In this black evangelical vision, racial reconciliation was *a result* of justice. The absence of top NAE leaders from the meeting had allowed black evangelicals and their progressive white evangelical allies to craft a blunt statement against white evangelical racism, but it also raised obvious questions about how much support such a statement had at the top of the NAE, much less among ordinary white evangelicals.²⁵ The NAE and the NBEA would continue to dialogue throughout the decade, but the practical changes the 1990 statement called for remained elusive.

The call for racial reconciliation gained a wider hearing after the Los Angeles riots in the Spring of 1992. The riots seemed to provide a wakeup call and an important object lesson in the dangers of racial division. But they did not unite evangelicals. Robin McDonald, a black evangelical and director of the Capitol Hill Crisis Pregnancy Center in Washington, D.C., wrote that L.A. exposed the church’ failure to practice the ministry of reconciliation God had entrusted to it. Not for the first time or the last, black evangelicals found the pain of a racial crisis compounded by the indifferent or insensitive responses of white evangelicals. As McDonald faced the fallout from the trial of the

²⁵ “NAE, NBEA Groups Join to Condemn Racism,” *Christianity Today*, March 5, 1990, 35; “Statement on Racism A Catalyst for Dialogue,” *Christianity Today*, June 18, 1990, 57.

police officers who beat Rodney King, she found that her white friends' "subtle denial of the racial implications of the incident cut deeper than the verdict itself."²⁶

The riots opened old wounds and new opportunities. In temporarily making the state of American race relations front-page news, the riots led to publishing platforms for black evangelical authors. The following year, 1993, brought a flood of evangelical racial reconciliation books with black authors or co-authors, including Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein's *Breaking Down Walls*; Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice's *More Than Equals*; Bill Pannell's *The Coming Race Wars? A Cry for Reconciliation*, and John Perkins' *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development*. Though the books were quite different in their particulars, each of them used the unrest in Los Angeles to emphasize the urgency of the racial reconciliation task. *Breaking Down Walls* and *More Than Equals* served as bridges between the more radical vision John Perkins had espoused since the 1970s and the more popular forms of racial reconciliation emerging in the 1990s. Rather than castigating white evangelicals as the most grievous bastion of American racism (as Perkins did in 1982) these books insisted that the evangelical church was the nation's only hope for racial progress. They challenged white evangelicals, to be sure, but their predominant focus was reconciliation one friendship at a time.

Bill Pannell and John Perkins, however, continued to promote a more comprehensive vision of racial reconciliation that challenged dearly held white evangelical commitments. No evangelical of the era wrote with more clarity and

²⁶ Robin Y. McDonald, "Stretch Your Racial Comfort Zone," *Christianity Today*, June 22, 1992, 14.

sophistication about the tangled intersection of race, evangelicalism, and politics than did Bill Pannell. He perceptively diagnosed an American society caught in an “in between moment” in the 1990s. A generation after the civil rights movement, Americans were eager to believe the country had made a great deal of racial progress, yet feared the undeniable evidences of ongoing racial animosity. Especially after L.A., Pannell believed that the “fundamental contradiction” between the promise and reality of American life had made “the theme of reconciliation...a dominant one in our time.” Pannell believed his ought to be an opportunity for evangelicals. If met boldly, the challenge of reconciliation could be “the finest hour for the church. Reconciliation is a biblical word. It is *our* word, and its ministry *our* enterprise.”²⁷ But because Pannell had a more comprehensive vision of reconciliation than most evangelicals, he took a bleak view of what the church was doing with its opportunity. The evangelical movement had allied itself with “conservative, fundamentally racist politics,” becoming “more American than Christian.” The Church Growth Movement had expanded evangelicalism’s numbers but led to an ethical dead end. “After all the turmoil of the past twenty-five years at home and abroad, and after all the noise about evangelism and growing churches,” the “unfinished agenda of North American evangelicals was to deal with our own version of Reconstruction.”²⁸ Reconstruction was a potent metaphor, implying a reordering of power and resources. Most colorblind Christians didn’t see it that way. Pannell was a voice crying in the wilderness.

²⁷ William Pannell, *The Coming Race Wars? A Cry for Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 64, 136.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19, 85.

In October 1993, black evangelicals had a surprising opportunity to bring their concerns directly to the white evangelical mainstream. *Christianity Today* published a cover story featuring interviews with dozens of black evangelical leaders under the provocative headline, “The Myth of Racial Progress.” Black evangelicals took the chance to try to explain to their counterparts how their understanding of racial reconciliation differed. J. Deotis Roberts, a professor of philosophical theology at Eastern Baptist Seminary, explained that many black Christians stayed away from the evangelical label because “it usually refers to a one-dimensional view of Christianity—a spiritual, privatized, vertical view. The term usually carries with it the idea that race relations are expected to be based on a sentimental love without real consideration for social justice.” Black Christians could not embrace that agenda. They had “known the Bible as a means of oppression as well as a source of liberation.” They could not “assume that all Christians get the same message from reading the Bible.” They needed more than sentimental love. “There can be no genuine reconciliation without liberation and social transformation.”²⁹

Black evangelicals also challenged white evangelicals’ self-image as people who desired racial harmony. In fact, declared Morris E. Jones, pastor of Immanuel Evangelical Baptist Church in Indianapolis, “White evangelicals have done little or nothing to help America heal the wound of racism.” Glandion Carney of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship agreed. “There has been very little fruit from the pledges of racial reconciliation.” Evangelical “organizations continue to be white in their structure and

²⁹ J. Deotis Roberts, “Black Christians Love the Bible,” *Christianity Today*, October 4, 1993, 27.

avoid issues that concern the cities. Nothing has come from our great words.” Peggy L. Jones, senior pastor of Macedonia Assembly of God Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, sometimes wondered why God wanted her to minister in the painful world of evangelicalism. She wrote, “my heart still cries out to God. When will my people no longer be seen by white evangelicals as a threat? As less than? When will we be allowed to be equal with you and not oppressed by you? It is expected that the secular world continues to oppress, but not the body of Christ.” Tony Warner of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship wrote that “White evangelicals are more willing to pursue a white conservative political agenda than to be reconciled with their African-American brothers and sisters. It raises a fundamental question of their belief and commitment to the biblical gospel.” Robert Suggs of Grand Rapids Baptist College agreed. He recalled that when he was the pastor of a black church in Rochester, New York, he “frequently got a call from the white pastors in the area.” Another black family had visited a white church and the pastor was trying to steer the family to Suggs’s church. To Suggs, practices like these were nothing more than sin. In his view white evangelicals hadn’t repented, and it appeared they didn’t intend to do so.³⁰

Ironically, the difficulty white evangelicals had in submitting to this black evangelical critique could be seen in the pages of the same issue. Alongside black evangelical voices, *CT* offered “models of reconciliation,” inspiring and hopeful stories of the evangelical church in action. One of these profiled a wealthy, white, suburban

³⁰ Morris E. Jones, “No Substitute for Love”; Glandion Carney, “I’m Pessimistic”; Peggy L. Jones, “Why Are We a Threat?”; Tony Warner, “Learn from Us”; Robert Suggs, “The Issue Is Sin,” *Christianity Today*, October 4, 1993, 19-20, 24, 26.

Atlanta church that had committed half a million dollars and 600 volunteers to help “revitalize the low-income African American neighborhood” of Summerville. As part of the effort, one Sunday morning a busload of wealthy white suburbanites attended an African American church service. “When the service is dismissed,” *CT* reported, “a question hangs over everyone: Will people connect over cookies and coffee in Fellowship Hall?” As the bus headed back to the suburbs, its riders unanimously agreed that a connection had indeed been made (readers could only guess how the ordinary members of the black church felt about it). One of the white visitors said, “I was surprised at how much we had in common. They’re people just like us. They seem to have the same concerns we do, such as wanting their kids to be the best they can be or wanting to learn more about God.” In a story ostensibly about the commitment of concrete resources to produce positive racial change, the focus shifted to the white suburbanites’ subjective sense of reconciliation—“Will people connect over cookies and coffee in the Fellowship Hall?”—and sympathy—“They’re people just like us.” Possibly the initiative would become a long-term partnership producing tangible changes in power and resources in metro Atlanta. But *CT* appeared to be remarkably uninterested in such questions. Instead, it used the very frame of sentimentality that black evangelicals critiqued.

Because colorblind Christians did not conceive of race as a system of power in a social hierarchy, it seemed to them arbitrary and unfair for black evangelicals to single out white evangelicals in a call for repentance. As one reader put it, there wouldn’t be any progress without both sides realizing “There’s enough sin to go around for all of us.” Another reader allowed that black evangelicals had made “a convincing call for action to the White church.” But he was “struck by an equal failure or blind spot in the Black

church: that of grace. When are we Whites to be forgiven?” he asked. “Black church, where is your grace?” In these responses colorblind Christians deployed cherished theological concepts—it was by grace, evangelicals knew, that people are saved—and reinterpreted them to express entitlement to forgiveness apart from restitution. “The resentment expressed in your article toward white evangelicals was unchristian,” another reader wrote. “The church is not perfect,” he admitted, “but the real enemy” was the “elite voices of liberalism” which slandered evangelicals as racist while “pretending to be the savior of society and the black community, persuading them to resent ‘white evangelicals.’” Though black evangelicals spoke in the evangelical idiom of sin and repentance, the reader saw lurking behind them the specter of liberal politics.³¹ Black evangelicals had forcefully argued their case. Was anyone listening?

Church Growth and Racial Reconciliation

As the push for racial reconciliation began to influence evangelical churches, it did not overturn the decades-long focus on church growth. Though there were glimmers of an emerging interracial church movement, largely homogeneous churches remained the overwhelming norm.³² Racial reconciliation drew a great deal of attention in the

³¹ Ken Lewis, Richard E. Walton, Letters to the editor, *Christianity Today*, January 10, 1994, 14, 12; Joel Solliday, Letter to the editor, *Christianity Today*, December 13, 1993, 6.

³² On the rise of interracial churches—and their ambiguous effects on racial attitudes and racial inequality—see Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Nancy D. Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles: Evangelicals and the Politics of Racial Healing* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014); Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards, and Michael O. Emerson, *Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organizations* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); J.

1990s because it appeared to be a new phenomenon. Observers often overlooked the profound influence of the Church Growth Movement precisely because it had become so widespread and uncontroversial. Insofar as churches embraced racial reconciliation, they often did so in the name of evangelism and church growth. The Southern Baptist Convention's turn toward racial reconciliation received much comment. The reason for it—the imperatives of evangelization in a diversifying America—was less widely understood. Talk of homogeneous units seemed increasingly out of step with the times; more and more church leaders spoke the language of reconciliation. But they did so not in pursuit of the black evangelical vision of justice and liberation but as the latest innovation designed to defend and grow the evangelical movement.

On July 10, 1990, Donald McGavran passed away at the age of 92. His death marked a symbolic end to the heyday of the Church Growth Movement. But if CGM activism no longer had a clear institutional locus, that was partly because its basic approach had become so broadly accepted. *Christianity Today* reported in 1991, “After a wave of church-growth bashing in the seventies, many of the movement’s ideas have become virtual givens in today’s discussions of church vitality. Demographic charts and membership projection graphs have found their way into pastors’ studies and board meetings in churches of almost every description.” Overlooking black evangelicals’ consistent criticisms of the CGM, *CT* falsely reported that “Outright critics are now hard to find.” It took a while, *CT* explained, for evangelicals to “become comfortable with

Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, eds., *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion After Divided by Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

success.” But the CGM had helped evangelicals join the “successful mainstream,” and they were now getting used to it.³³

The priorities of the CGM had carried the day, even if some of its most strident language had increasingly come to be seen as toxic. By the last years of his life, even McGavran became wary of the phrase “church growth.” It had become encrusted with connotations of ruthless pragmatism and an implied insult to small churches. McGavran’s principles didn’t change, but his followers’ words did. As racial discourse shifted, evangelical observers modified the history of the CGM to suit the needs of the time. *Christianity Today* falsely claimed that McGavran’s homogeneous unit principle was only ever meant as descriptive; it was the critics who had supposedly misinterpreted McGavran and turned it into a prescriptive plan for homogeneous church growth. Such claims were baseless, but not without purpose. The CGM’s influence was undeniable; it had effectively won. But by the 1990s, it was deeply inconvenient to admit that such a popular movement had so aggressively resisted church integration. Celebrity pastors trained in CGM principles modified its most controversial features in the 1990s and helped to diffuse its principles across the evangelical mainstream. Rick Warren, whose Saddleback Church had grown to ten thousand members, spoke now of “church health” more than “church growth” and dedicated his best-selling *Purpose Driven Church* to “bi-vocational” pastors of small churches. Bill Hybels of Willow Creek disavowed the homogeneous unit principle and naturalized the whiteness of his congregation, almost as

³³ Ken Sidey, “Church Growth Fine Tunes Its Formulas,” *Christianity Today*, June 24, 1991, 44.

if he had located the church in a wealthy suburb by accident.³⁴ Hybels spread his “seeker sensitive” church growth approach through the Willow Creek Association, which boasted over seven hundred affiliated churches by the summer of 1994.³⁵ These developments garnered less news coverage than the racial reconciliation turn, but they were perhaps more indicative of where the white evangelical mainstream was going.

The nation’s largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, took the lead in embracing the language of racial reconciliation. But the process was more ambiguous than its boosters admitted, reflecting continuity with church growth principles and the ongoing priority of growing the evangelical ranks. In 1988, Richard Land took the helm of the convention’s Christian Life Commission. Land was thoroughly on the conservative side of the battles that had roiled the convention through the 1980s. Moderates called it the conservative takeover. Conservatives called it the resurgence, a return to the solid foundation of the Bible. As head of the Christian Life Commission, Land would have the power to nudge Southern Baptists toward engaging issues he deemed important. When he announced that “race relations” was the first item on his agenda it came as a surprise. Land explained it this way: “only Nixon could go to China.” Just as Nixon’s anti-communist bona fides gave him space to craft an opening to communist China, so Land’s credibility as a staunch conservative in the SBC allowed

³⁴ Michael G. Maudlin and Edward Gilbreath, “Selling Out the House of God?” *Christianity Today*, July 18, 1994, 20-25.

³⁵ Edward Gilbreath, “The Birth of A Megachurch,” *Christianity Today*, July 18, 1994, 23.

him to “speak about racism and the conservatives cannot dismiss me as a wooly-headed liberal.”³⁶ If Land had his way, the SBC’s future would be multi-ethnic.

The following year, the Home Mission Board of the SBC began a new initiative to start black Baptist churches. As late as 1981 the HMB had frankly admitted that the convention was hostage to demographic trends among white Americans. It assumed that in areas where the white population was stagnant, “the prospect for church expansion...will be much slower than was possible in earlier decades.”³⁷ But by the early 1990s the HMB was launching some 150 new black churches each year and projected that the convention’s future growth would come primarily from people of color.³⁸ The CGM’s logic of homogeneous churches continued to inform these efforts. In the SBC, planting black churches was particularly fraught. Did it demonstrate racial progress, or did it reflect the convention’s long history of segregation and discrimination? The growing numbers of African Americans in the convention raised new doubts about the sufficiency of a homogeneous growth strategy. Did the Southern Baptist Convention have to answer for its racist past? Were white Southern Baptists ready for a multiethnic convention, and could black Americans trust the SBC? For the sake of the gospel and the future of Southern Baptist life, wasn’t racial reconciliation required?

³⁶ James C. Hefley, “Richard Land on Racism,” *Indiana Baptist*, April 11, 1989, 4.

³⁷ Orrin D. Morris, "Comparison of Racial Ethnic Change to SBC Growth By States, 1970-1980," July 1981, 19, AR 631-10 Box 46 Folder 17, SBHLA.

³⁸ Joe Maxwell, “Black Southern Baptists,” *Christianity Today*, May 15, 1995, 27-31.

Questions like these led Southern Baptists to adopt a historic “Resolution on Racial Reconciliation” at their 1995 annual meeting, acknowledging the Convention’s ties to slavery and apologizing for racism perpetrated “in our lifetime.” The 150th anniversary of the Convention’s founding provided the occasion for the apology, but it was not the cause. The roots of the racial reconciliation resolution were in the work of Southern Baptist church planters who deemed an apology necessary to promote evangelization in urban black communities. An October 1993 meeting of Directors of Mission who worked in areas with large African American populations crystallized the need for action. They appointed a “racial reconciliation task force” to draft a statement of repentance. Jere Allen, the Executive Director of the Washington, D.C. Baptist Association, spearheaded the effort. Seeking to drum up support for a “Declaration of Repentance,” Allen argued that “if we, as Southern Baptists, are to effectively evangelize Blacks we need to publicly declare our repentance in regard to our beginning and our lack of bold and significant involvement in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.”³⁹ In a separate letter to Richard Land, Allen pointedly noted that he and his colleagues ministering in cities such as Washington D.C. were “affected by what some Blacks perceive as racism on the part of people related to the SBC.”⁴⁰ An apology, he thought, combined with an explicit mention of slavery, could go a long way toward removing the distrust.

³⁹ Memorandum from Jere Allen to State Executive Directors, April 7, 1994, AR 933, Box 173 Folder 13, SBHLA.

⁴⁰ Jere Allen to Richard Land, April 6, 1994, AR 933, Box 173 Folder 13, SBHLA.

Apologizing to African Americans to better convert them was a reasonable motivation in the context of evangelical theology, but it hardly made for good press. Nonetheless, the early draft of the apology Allen circulated said the quiet part out loud: “Regardless of how much progress we think we have made in Race Relations, we are nevertheless perceived by many Blacks and non-Blacks as a racist denomination. This negative perception is an obstacle toward our efforts to evangelize, plant churches, and minister among Black people, especially for those called to minister in the metropolitan cities.” This was not a particularly auspicious beginning for an apology. The draft declaration went on to admit that “our relation to persons of African descent has been less than ideal.” The draft acknowledged Southern Baptist complicity in slavery and declared, “We publicly repent and apologize to all persons of African descent for condoning and perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime” and “we ask for the forgiveness of our brothers and sisters of African descent...”⁴¹

By the Spring of 1994 the statement had garnered widespread assent from Southern Baptist Directors of Mission in urban areas, but one of the members of the task force still thought it would be a miracle if the full convention passed it as a resolution.⁴² Just one month before the SBC’s 150th Anniversary meeting in June 1995, Land’s Christian Life Commission hosted a “racial reconciliation consultation,” which extensively edited and rewrote the Declaration of Repentance into a form Land and

⁴¹ “Declaration of Repentance,” April 6, 1994, AR 933, Box 173 Folder 13, SBHLA.

⁴² Dennis L. Sanders, “SBC to be Challenged to Adopt Racism Repentance Statement,” *Baptist Press*, May 24, 1994, 4-5.

others hoped would pass at the full convention meeting.⁴³ The Land-approved version removed some of the most overtly self-interested language of the earlier draft, and more bluntly acknowledged that Southern Baptists' embrace of slavery had "crippled from the beginning" the convention's relationship with African Americans.

On the floor of the convention, only one messenger (the term for SBC delegates) dared to speak fulsomely against the resolution. He felt the statement was an overly broad indictment of "the great men who founded the convention." Gary Frost, second vice-president and the first African American to hold such a high position in the SBC, said, "Our nation is being ripped apart by hatred. I believe it's up to the church of Jesus Christ to begin the process of true reconciliation." Observers estimated the resolution passed with 95% support.⁴⁴ After the vote, Frost spoke from the stage. "On behalf of my black brothers and sisters, we accept your apology and we extend to you our forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ."⁴⁵ Newspapers covered the story with the kind of headlines Southern Baptist leaders were hoping for. The SBC had taken "a bold step" and presented "a new face to the world."⁴⁶

Southern Baptist messengers passed the racial reconciliation statement with little drama, but reaction from around the country was mixed. An unusual volume of letters

⁴³ Bill Merrell, "CLC Consultation Yields Proposed Stance on Racism," *Baptist Press*, May 25, 1995, 1-2.

⁴⁴ Keith Hinson, "Resolution on racism one of eight approved by SBC," *California Southern Baptist*, July 13, 1995, 10.

⁴⁵ "SBC Renounces Racist Past," *Christian Century*, July 5-12, 1995, 671-672.

⁴⁶ Eric Frazier, "Southern Baptists repent; BOLD STEP," *The Post and Courier*, June 21, 1995, 1.

poured into the office of the President of the Convention. Many were positive, but others resented the idea that Southern Baptists were apologizing for their ancestors.⁴⁷ In fact, the resolution had pointedly only apologized for racism “in our lifetime” but this distinction was lost on some critics. One man complained that Southern Baptists seemed to be “elevating political correctness to the status of scripture.” If Jesus and Paul didn’t even denounce slavery, who did Southern Baptists think they were to get up on a high horse and condemn their ancestors? “Heaven forbid that all this was a ploy to recruit black churches,” he concluded. For others, the resolution was a turning point in Southern Baptist history. Rick Warren, whose books were shortly to blow up the religious bestseller lists, called it “our finest hour.”⁴⁸

Many African Americans remained wary. For black Southern Baptists who had labored within the convention for racial change, it was a moment to savor. One black pastor remarked that the statement would be an effective tool to overcome black distrust.⁴⁹ But others were more skeptical. E. Edward Jones, head of the National Baptist Convention, declared that black Baptists would “need more than an apology.” As far as he was concerned, the civil rights movement was still ongoing, and instead of helping,

⁴⁷ Greg Garrison, “SBC Plans to Pursue Race Edict,” *Birmingham News*, January 31, 1996, 3B.

⁴⁸ Rick Warren letter to the editor, *California Southern Baptist*, July 13, 1995, 14.

⁴⁹ Mark A. Wyatt, “200+ California messengers take part,” *California Southern Baptist*, June 29, 1995, 8.

the Southern Baptists were trying to steal their members. The apology came “pretty late in the day” said another black leader.⁵⁰

If in the months leading up to the meeting even many insiders in the Southern Baptist Convention had doubted such a resolution could pass, what accounted for the easy adoption of such a sweeping statement of racial reconciliation? It was of a piece with the larger turn toward black church planting in the 1990s. As *Christianity Today* argued, when push came to shove, the desire to spread the gospel to all communities was stronger than historic racial divisions. But those familiar with the nuances of Southern Baptist and white evangelical life in the United States knew there was more to the story than the near-unanimous approval the racial reconciliation statement implied. Even in 1995, there were still churches where black worshippers were not welcome. Eddie Jones knew as well as anyone the real state of play in the Southern Baptist heartland. He was an African American pastor who, in 1983, founded Mississippi’s first black Southern Baptist church. Jones believed that to at least some degree most pastors in the SBC had absorbed the message of racial reconciliation. The challenge now, he said, was “getting it down to their congregation in a way in which they won’t lose their job.”⁵¹

Racial Reconciliation and Evangelical Colleges

While major evangelical bodies like the Southern Baptist Convention and the NAE pursued racial reconciliation, white evangelical colleges were making new efforts to

⁵⁰ “News Briefs,” *Christianity Today*, October 23, 1995, 85; Timothy C. Morgan, “Racist No More? Black Leaders Ask,” *Christianity Today*, August 14, 1995, 53.

⁵¹ Maxwell, “Black Southern Baptists,” 31.

diversify. If in the 1960s and 1970s a sense of Christian responsibility caused some white evangelical colleges to seek to help African American students, by the 1990s a growing number of institutions saw their own futures at stake. If they could not recruit and retain African American, Hispanic, and Asian students in the twenty-first century, the outlook for their institutions would be bleak. The Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), an umbrella consortium of dozens of predominantly evangelical institutions, began to pay special attention to the racial progress of its member schools in the early 1990s. In these initiatives, a perception gap between college administrators and ordinary students paralleled the divide between clergy and laity seen in churches. While some college leaders sought to build more inclusive academic communities, many white evangelical students brought their colorblind assumptions to campus and reacted against these efforts. At other institutions, administrators expressed a desire for diversity and racial harmony but did not pursue concrete reforms to match their rhetoric.

In 1991 the CCCU launched a project aimed at “developing and strengthening comprehensive diversity plans” at member institutions.⁵² A survey of CCCU members indicated how much such plans were needed. Though black enrollment ticked up in the early 90s, it was from a very low base.⁵³ Some evangelical institutions had fewer black students than they had enrolled a generation earlier. While some colleges had made

⁵² “The Model Site Project” brochure. The institutional origins of the project date back to 1989. See Deborah Bailey, “College/Church Partnerships: A New Resource for Educational and Social Change. A Proposal to the Pew Charitable Trusts,” May 9, 1994, 3. SC-57 Box II B.1 Folder “CCCU Office of Racial/Ethnic Diversity (miscellaneous),” Wheaton College Special Collections.

⁵³ “Enrollment at 1993 Members of CCCU and U.S. Four Year Colleges,” SC-57 Box II B.1 Folder “Administrative Correspondence (etc) regarding diversity,” Wheaton College Special Collections.

significant gains in black recruitment, such as Howard Jones' alma mater Nyack College, many of the most prestigious evangelical schools stood out for their dismal record. At Wheaton and Messiah, black enrollment was 2%. At Calvin College, it was 1%.⁵⁴ The CCCU's diversity initiative devolved into controversy when the coalition suddenly shut down the office overseeing it in the summer of 1994 due to lack of funding. Some administrators of color believed the closure of the office "had betrayed their trust" and they vowed they would never work with the consortium again.⁵⁵ Administrators of color in white evangelical colleges were all too familiar with funding constraints. They viewed them as expressions of priorities.

Under new President Bob Andringa, the CCCU created a "Racial Harmony Council" to advance the cause of racial reconciliation at Christian colleges. In January, 1996 the Council sent a paper on "Affirmative Action and Racial Harmony in Christian Colleges" to all CCCU members. The document sought to build a theological and practical case for a distinctly Christian form of affirmative action among CCCU member institutions. The paper argued that restitution was a well-attested biblical principle that ought to bear on the affirmative action debate. It contended that individualistic responses were inadequate to problems of generational and systemic sin. The Council recommended that the CCCU issue a public "confession of the past and present sin of racism, and pledge to make every effort to remove any vestiges of the same from the

⁵⁴ "Minorities and Christian Colleges: A Peak at 20 Liberal-Arts Schools," *Urban Family*, Fall 1994, 35.

⁵⁵ Internal unsigned memo, August 31, 1994; Robert C. Andringa, "Our Ongoing Inclusiveness/Diversity Initiative," July 15, 1994, SC-57 Box II B.1 Folder "Administrative Correspondence (etc) regarding diversity," Wheaton College Special Collections.

campuses of its member institutions.” Each member institution should approve the statement, and “commit to carrying forward its implementation.” The paper called for “restitution,” but did not specify the form this ought to take. In an addendum of “optional recommendations,” the report advised college presidents to conduct “comprehensive evaluations” of their efforts, including “admissions and scholarship plans; residence hall strategies; retention programs; courses” and much more. The paper offered a model apology and pledge of “reconciliation, restitution...and affirmative initiatives” to create a “Christian community...where unity in diversity is a cherished virtue.”⁵⁶

Fully embracing such a plan would have been risky for most predominantly white evangelical colleges. Their primary constituencies remained white colorblind Christians. Reforms seen as too liberal or race-conscious could put at risk the financial and demographic underpinnings of the institutions. The responses to the Racial Harmony Council’s plan from white evangelical college administrators ranged from positive to ambivalent to hostile. Some colleges worried that a public confession of discrimination could open their institutions up to litigation. Others questioned the theological grounds of the project. In the end, few member institutions embraced the document wholesale as a viable model for their schools. The President of Campbell University in North Carolina didn’t think outsiders “understand racial relations in the South.” He claimed that “by not accentuating differences, we have been able to bring about a unified and harmonious campus.” The President of Eastern Nazarene College in Massachusetts said he was all for

⁵⁶ “Affirmative Action and Racial Harmony in Christian Colleges: A Discussion Paper and Recommendations by Racial Harmony Council,” SC-57 Box II B.1 Folder “Racial Harmony Council Discussion Paper & Recommendations,” Wheaton College Special Collections.

increasing ethnic diversity, but was adamantly against “quotas.” He also worried that the proposed statement of repentance was unfair to earlier generations of evangelicals, who were not necessarily racist. Northwest College worked on the recommendations quite seriously but removed the word “restitution” from its final statement for fear of legal ramifications. An ad hoc committee at Taylor University in Indiana warned that implementing the Racial Harmony Council’s plan could cause “further alienation” and “polarization” on their campus.⁵⁷ While national evangelical leaders spoke of restitution as a path to racial harmony, the closer one got to the ground in local contexts, the more resistance there was to such thinking.

More students and administrators on evangelical campuses were using the rhetoric of racial reconciliation in the 1990s, but its meaning remained contested. At times, students used the language of reconciliation as part of a vision of social justice that made more conservative evangelicals uneasy.⁵⁸ At other times, use of the term appeared almost farcical. At North Park College, even as the administration invited chapel speakers to call students to “reconcile” their “racial differences” and held a day-long event on “racial reconciliation,” controversy arose anew, for it turned out that the college still had

⁵⁷ Norman Adrian Wiggins to Robert Andringa, April 15, 1997; Kent R. Hill to Robert Andringa, May 12, 1997; Dennis A. Davis to Robert Andringa, May 16, 1997; Clintonia Barnes to Robert Andringa, April 24, 1997, SC-57 Box II B.1 Folder “Racial Harmony Council Discussion Paper & Recommendations,” Wheaton College Special Collections.

⁵⁸ Some black students embraced the term as well. At North Park, a black student helped launch a “Racial Reconciliation Bible Study.” Erika Carney, “4 students honored for achievements,” *The College News*, February 23, 1995, 2.

no black faculty.⁵⁹ A white faculty member claimed that the college was “trying to hire minority faculty but has been unable to do so” because of intense competition for evangelical professors of color.⁶⁰ The gap between the college’s rhetoric and action displayed the continued pull of Christian colorblindness. Hiring a black professor was hard, but in the meantime, students could be kind to each other. For many white evangelicals, racial reconciliation was a new term that rephrased rather than rethought their underlying colorblind theology. Talking about race was still controversial. Victor Mendoza, a Hispanic pastor of a suburban Chicago church, lamented that many racial reconciliation efforts were so shallow and slippery that they did not actually confront racism.⁶¹ Yet it was precisely this malleability that made racial reconciliation a viable discourse for the colorblind campus.

On some campuses, the same old battles replayed as if little had changed since the 1960s. At Malone College in North Canton, Ohio, a new student group called “Minority Students of Malone” formed in 1990. But the following year the group changed its name to “Unity Under Christ,” an almost comically earnest effort to check all the boxes of appropriate theological framing for evangelical discussion of race. The goal of the new name change was to “clearly state that it is not a club for minorities only.” Said black student Angie Kirtdoll, “Some white people think they shouldn’t attend meetings of

⁵⁹ “Chapel Speakers,” *The College News*, January 28, 1994, 2; Rebekah Eklund, “Community Day,” *The College News*, February 23, 1996, 1.

⁶⁰ Becky Eklund and Heidi Griep, “‘Millicent’ chapel fuels controversy: Faculty and students address issues,” *The College News*, November 18, 1994, 1.

⁶¹ Mark Erickson, “I’m not racist,” *The College News*, November 10, 1995, 7.

Unity Under Christ, but the organization is open to everyone.”⁶² Tensions between colorblind white students and black students seeking change played out across the country. Celebrations of black history month and Martin Luther King day became more prominent on white evangelical campuses, garnering predictable complaints from white students. One student at Houghton College grumbled that the school’s black history month commemorations did not feature enough white people.⁶³ Eastern College became an evangelical leader in recruiting students of color in the 1990s, but as it did so tensions on campus rose. “There’s a lot of talk about black and white, minority and majority,” wrote one white student. “That kind of talk simply does not belong in a Christian community.” He urged students to “realize that we are all blood relatives and *that* blood is the blood of Christ.” This theological knowledge was the key that would empower them to “transcend black and white.” But, in an echo of the 1970s radical moment, black students demanded changes in institutional culture and hiring of black faculty. “Most of you at Eastern profess to be Christians – how can you ignore the word of God and choose to be bigoted and prejudiced while claiming to be just,” asked two black women in an open letter to the student body.⁶⁴

While Eastern’s campus in suburban Philadelphia became increasingly diverse, the racial reconciliation era seemed to have little effect on the daily life of Messiah’s

⁶² Shelly Pruitt, “‘Unity’ Promotes Cultural Awareness,” *The Aviso*, February 22, 1991, 3.

⁶³ Jamie Lindsay, letter to the editor, *Houghton Star*, February 24, 1989, 8.

⁶⁴ Kevin Maness, “Transcend Black & White,” *The Waltonian*, February 23, 1990, 10; Kellie Goode and Jo Ann Logan, “African-American students voice concerns,” *The Waltonian*, April 30, 1993, 5.

Philadelphia campus. In 1995, Messiah hired five independent consultants to examine the urban campus with “fresh eyes.” Their reports were bracing. The atmosphere of the campus, one consultant wrote, was “reminiscent of old time ‘mission compounds’ overseas, a small Christian enclave surrounded by the big, bad city.”⁶⁵ Over two decades after Messiah had advertised the campus as a space much like a foreign mission field, these formative assumptions continued to shape the operation of the campus. Rather than seeing the campus as ideally situated for training in urban issues and social justice, the administration had allowed it to become a backwater. One consultant questioned why Messiah’s two-hundred-page college catalog featured the satellite campus for all of one paragraph.⁶⁶ Another consultant, Dr. Willie Richardson, a black evangelical pastor in Philadelphia, reported that “most advisors willfully try to discourage students from taking courses in Philadelphia.”⁶⁷ By the Spring of 2001, staff working on recruitment for the Philadelphia campus were reduced to pursuing a simple but daunting goal: “Persuade

⁶⁵ Consultant’s Report: Roger S. Greenway, “Preliminary Report of the Ad-Hoc Committee for Review of the Philadelphia Campus,” February, 1996, Box XI – 2 – 7.2 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus, Archives of Messiah College.

⁶⁶ Consultant’s Report: Carolyn Adams, “Preliminary Report of the Ad-Hoc Committee for Review of the Philadelphia Campus,” February, 1996, Box XI – 2 – 7.2 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus, Archives of Messiah College.

⁶⁷ Willie Richardson, “Analysis and Recommendation Concerning Philadelphia Campus of Messiah College,” June 16, 1995, 12, “Preliminary Report of the Ad-Hoc Committee for Review of the Philadelphia Campus,” February, 1996, Box XI – 2 – 7.2 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus, Archives of Messiah College.

President and other senior administrators of benefits of Philly Campus.”⁶⁸ Remarkably, three decades after the founding of the Philadelphia campus Messiah still did not actually have an urban studies major. Multiple consultants stressed the same factors that dogged the campus from its beginning: “anti-urban bias” and a pervasive fear among students and parents about safety.

Some observers tied the woes of the Philadelphia campus directly to the inadequacies of evangelicals’ turn toward racial reconciliation. Dr. Richardson bluntly warned that the program had to confront racial injustice directly in order to meet its potential. “I am not advocating racial reconciliation,” he declared. The term had become so pervasive that Richardson wanted to make a point of pushing back against it. In his view, popular but vapid talk of racial reconciliation seemed to have produced little real change. Colorblind Christians remained ignorant of systemic racial injustice and continued to scorn the perspectives of Christians of color. How could there be reconciliation without justice and understanding? “Messiah College,” Richardson argued, “could lead in educating white people in the truth about black people.”⁶⁹ This idea was not new. In many ways, Dr. Sider had pursued it 20 years before and had run into a buzzsaw of resistance. A generation after the radical moment of the early 1970s, the college seemed to be in no mood to try again.

⁶⁸ “Recruitment Strategies, Spring 2001” Box T-9, Folder Recruitment for 2001-2002, Archives of Messiah College.

⁶⁹ Willie Richardson, “Analysis and Recommendation Concerning Philadelphia Campus of Messiah College,” “Preliminary Report of the Ad-Hoc Committee for Review of the Philadelphia Campus,” February, 1996, Box XI – 2 – 7.2 Messiah College Board of Trustees, Messiah-Temple Campus, Archives of Messiah College.

As historically white evangelical colleges gradually became more diverse, some were beginning to realize that real racial reform in their institutions was the work of decades rather than a quick fix that could be implemented with a patina of racial reconciliation language. At Calvin College, after repeated failures to move beyond its Dutch heritage, a 1985 Master Plan called for turning the school into a truly “multicultural Christian community,” and established benchmarks for doing so stretching out to the new millennium. When Calvin’s 11 “minority” faculty members were interviewed in 1995, they described ongoing challenges. “This community demands assimilation,” wrote one professor. “There is little hope for integration.” A staff person of color wrote, “I feel that my skin color makes me a trophy or a showpiece.” Others pointed out that though Calvin claimed to desire diversity, it *required* its faculty to attend a Reformed church and enroll their children in Christian schools, a stricture rooted in the historically insular Dutch Reformed community, and one that carried significant “sticker shock” for some faculty.⁷⁰ The Christian schooling policy not only highlighted just how concrete the barriers to change could be, it revealed an institutional preference for one set of (white) Christian values over another. “Does Calvin appreciate what it can mean to have worked long and hard to integrate public schools and then being now told that I must stay out of them?” asked one staff member. Wheaton College, too, began trying to brand itself as a “Multicultural community,” even as administrators working on the

⁷⁰ “Survey of Minority Faculty and Staff,” April 26, 1995; on the schooling policy see “Clarification of Calvin College Faculty Membership Requirements and Procedures for Requesting Exceptions, November 1995, C11.24 Box 983, Heritage Hall, Calvin College.

Multicultural Affairs Committee admitted, “Unintentionally we are a racist college. The white student has no cultural awareness and needs it.”⁷¹

If it was difficult and time-consuming to bring about institutional reform in churches and colleges, perhaps the greatest progress toward racial reconciliation could occur by moving outside established channels altogether. By the middle of the 1990s, it seemed that the greatest energy for racial reconciliation was in a new mass movement operating outside traditional networks. Evangelicals had a word for the sort of uprising that might awaken a nation from spiritual slumber and bring racial healing to their land: it was a revival.

Racial Reconciliation as Revival

Promise Keepers was the most aggressive and ambitious evangelical effort to confront racial division in the 1990s. At a moment when Americans feared dividing into hostile racial camps, here was an organization that rejected separatism, promoted goodwill, and even called on white people to own up to racism. During PK’s meteoric rise and fall, it embodied the successes and failures of evangelical racial reconciliation efforts. PK’s sudden prominence produced an outpouring of commentary seeking to explain it. “Who are these guys, and what are they doing in our football stadiums?” asked the liberal Protestant *Christian Century*.⁷² *Christianity Today*’s first long-form profile of

⁷¹ Minutes of Multicultural Affairs Committee, October 14, 1986, RG-07-08, Box 27, Folder “Multicultural Affairs Committee Annual Reports 84-88”; “Multicultural Community” brochure, RG-07-08, Box 23 Folder 30, Buswell Library, Wheaton College Archives.

⁷² John D. Spalding, “Bonding in the Bleachers: A Visit to the Promise Keepers,” *The Christian Century*, March 6, 1996, 260.

Promise Keepers was titled, “Manhood’s Great Awakening.” The gendered aspect of the title was obvious, but alert evangelical readers would also notice the allusion to the 18th century age of evangelical revival. For such readers the title called to mind luminaries of the evangelical tradition such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. Did PK’s sudden success signal a new Great Awakening on the horizon? Though such hopes proved too optimistic, they correctly identified the animating impulse of Promise Keepers. It aspired to be an engine of mass revival. To those who worried PK was too political or not political enough, vice-president Paul Edwards had a simple message: “This is a revival movement, not a reform movement.”⁷³ This revivalist mode was a key factor in PK’s popularity, but also suggested its limits. PK did not envision a frontal assault on racial injustice. It sought to make better men. Those spiritually invigorated men would in turn go to their communities and there engage in the grassroots interracial friendships that would change the country.

Promise Keepers was the brainchild of Bill McCartney, the national championship-winning coach of the University of Colorado football team. He was an unlikely evangelical hero, or perhaps a quintessential one, given his rocky road to redemption. A hard-charging alcoholic who lived and breathed football, McCartney spoke openly about how his failures had harmed his wife and children. This autobiographical authenticity added to his appeal. He launched Promise Keepers as a local initiative of Christian men in Boulder, Colorado, in 1991. PK challenged men to live by seven promises. The commitments centered on an ideal of Christian manhood. They promised to “Honor Jesus Christ...Build strong marriages and families...Practice

⁷³ “Standing in the Mall,” *Christian Century*, October 22, 1997, 934-936.

spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity,” and so on. In 1992, the first national rally at the University of Colorado football stadium drew 22,000 men to participate in workshops with titles like “Healing the Masculine Soul.” The language of healing was suggestive of the peculiar brand of masculinity PK promoted. *Real* men were not only providers and leaders in their home; they were able to connect with their emotions and with others. They weren’t afraid to hug other men and form deep friendships with them. The following year attendance doubled. In 1994 the organization expanded with large rallies across the country. Evangelical media was enthusiastic. Promise Keepers had “the feel of a movement.” *Christianity Today* attributed the success to a dawning realization that American society was coming unglued and government couldn’t repair the breach. “Movements like Promise Keepers get closer to the heart of the problem” than any political program, the magazine opined.⁷⁴

From its earliest days, McCartney nursed a growing conviction that God had called Promise Keepers to end racism in the church. He liked to tell the story of how God spoke to him as he looked upon an all-white crowd at a 1991 rally. “The absence of men of color somehow hit me between the eyes, and in that moment, the Spirit of God clearly said to my spirit, ‘You can fill that stadium, but if men of other races aren’t there, I won’t be there, either.’” Driven by this experience, McCartney worked to make PK a multi-racial movement. This was reflected not only in the diverse cast of speakers on the platform, but in the organization’s staffing.

⁷⁴ Howard A. Snyder, “Will Promise Keepers Keep Their Promises?” *Christianity Today*, November 14, 1994, 20-21.

At the height of its popularity, Promise Keepers reported that 30% of its 437-member staff were people of color.⁷⁵ This was an unprecedented achievement for an organization founded by white evangelicals. Garry Blackmon, a black Houston man who joined the staff in 1995, testified of the lifechanging impact of PK. “No other ministry, no other political agenda or group had ever dealt with my source of pain until I saw [McCartney] deal with the issue of racism. It really brought tears to my eyes because everybody else had just sort of skated over it, covered it or found another way to sidestep it.”⁷⁶ Blackmon’s experience was not entirely atypical. McCartney spent a great deal of time networking with Christians of color and visiting their churches to try to get them to join the PK movement. Attendees heard talks with titles like “Uniting Together as Brothers in Christ” and “Walking in Your Brother’s Shoes: Embracing Diversity in the Body of Christ.” PK sought to convince evangelical men that authentic Christian manhood included interracial friendship and harmony.

The widespread sense that the country had descended into a dangerous age of racial division made Promise Keepers seem like a providential answer to the nation’s troubles. In October, 1995, Americans grappled in quick succession with the O.J. Simpson verdict and the Million Man March. The former suggested a huge gap in perception between white and black Americans, and the latter seemed to indicate that the appeal of racial separatism was growing. As one pundit wrote, these events warned

⁷⁵ Jeff Coen, “Promise Keepers Out to End Racial Friction,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 25, 1996, DA9; Ted Olsen, “Racial Reconciliation Emphasis Intensified,” *Christianity Today*, January 6, 1997, 67.

⁷⁶ Robbie Morganfield, “‘Each One, Reach One’: Growing Men’s Group Promotes Racial Reconciliation,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 29, 1995, 33.

Americans of “the dangers of segregated realities. We got an unvarnished glimpse into America’s balkanized heart, and it wasn’t pretty.” The *Dallas Morning News* reported that the Million Man March gave added urgency to the racial reconciliation movement, as Christian leaders tried to head off “an increasing desire among African-Americans to separate from white society.” News reports portrayed evangelical racial reconciliation efforts as signs of hope on the horizon. The SBC’s racial reconciliation resolution and the growing popularity of Promise Keepers indicated to some observers that a “shift of monumental proportions” was underway. Perhaps, amid all the animosity, a grassroots awakening, led by evangelical Christians, was reshaping the country. Indeed, PK quickly became, in the words of sociologist John Bartkowski, “a media darling” that received positive coverage from mainstream outlets. “What makes this racial reconciliation movement different from those of the past is that it is so widespread....[and] it is being spearheaded not only by so-called liberal church groups but also by those who would consider themselves religious conservatives.”⁷⁷ *Christianity Today* believed this evangelical leadership was as it should be. After the Simpson verdict, it was all too clear that Americans had lost that essential ingredient of social cohesion: trust. Government could not restore that trust; only the church, entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, could do the job.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Salim Muwakkil, “Churches Give Blessing To Racial Reconciliation, *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 18, 1996, 27; Christine Wicker, “A Vision of Harmony,” *Dallas Morning News*, January 6, 1996, 1A; John P. Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers, and Godly Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 2.

⁷⁸ Roberto Rivera, “Post-Simpson America,” *Christianity Today*, November 11, 1995, 14-15.

PK's rise and the growing prominence of racial reconciliation occurred against a backdrop of reaction against race conscious programs (such as affirmative action) and programs that were highly racialized in the public mind (such as welfare).⁷⁹ President Clinton had campaigned on the promise to "end welfare as we know it" and in 1994 Republicans swept into the House of Representatives pledging to shrink the size of government, ending the Democrats' 40-year reign in that chamber. In August, 1996 President Clinton signed welfare reform into law. In November, California voters passed proposition 209, banning affirmative action in state institutions.⁸⁰ The *Houston Chronicle* marveled, "At a time when so-called "angry white males" are publicly calling on government to repeal policies designed to heal historical effects of discrimination against minorities, a national movement of mostly white evangelical men...is promoting racial reconciliation in unostentatious fashion."⁸¹ These phenomena, interpersonal racial reconciliation and public racial reaction, were complementary rather than contradictory. Private initiative was to replace public bureaucracy.

Because most white evangelicals saw racism as interpersonal rather than structural, they perceived no conflict between their private and public posture. As the

⁷⁹ See Steven A. Tuch and Jack K Martin, eds., *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change* (Westport: Praeger, 1997); Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1707–91; Thomas Byrne Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991); Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

⁸⁰ Daniel Martinez HoSang, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

⁸¹ Robbie Morganfield, "'Each One, Reach One': Growing Men's Group Promotes Racial Reconciliation," *Houston Chronicle*, May 29, 1995, 33.

Dallas Morning News perceptively noted, “much of the [racial reconciliation] action is coming from groups that support the [proposed Republican] cuts” to government programs. *Christianity Today* described affirmative action as a failed experiment and called for racial reconciliation as a replacement for a government-driven “ideology of diversity.”⁸² Richard Land, who had done as much as anyone to push through racial reconciliation initiatives in the SBC, described welfare and affirmative action as “paternalistic” and “degrading to blacks.”⁸³ Friendship, eye to eye and man to man, not government handouts, was the only way forward. “[I]t’s got to start between two men,” wrote an evangelical pastor.⁸⁴

Though many liberal voices could still be heard making the case for activist government to redress racial injustice, the palpable trend was toward skepticism of these solutions, as the politics of affirmative action and welfare reform indicated. Even major social scientists, including black intellectuals such as the University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson and Boston University economist Glenn Loury, insisted that racism was no longer the decisive factor blocking black progress.⁸⁵

Evangelical media cheered on these trends. They saw American society coming around to their politics of church primacy. *Christianity Today* was not in the habit of doing major

⁸² David Neff, “Dare We Be Colorblind?” *Christianity Today*, February 3, 1997, 14-15.

⁸³ Wicker, “A Vision of Harmony,” January 6, 1996, 1A.

⁸⁴ Bob Price to Richard Land, May 6, 1996, AR 933 Box 173 Folder 18, SBHLA.

⁸⁵ William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1997); Glenn C. Loury, *One by One from the Inside Out : Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

interviews with economists. But Loury—black, Christian, challenger of liberal orthodoxies—was worth the exception. Loury said the solution to the nation’s problems was “the Christian faith.” He admitted it was unusual for intellectuals to admit they hoped for “revival”, but he believed “the circumstances require it” and the recent moves by the likes of the SBC and the Promise Keepers offered hope. “I really believe there’s tremendous power there to get Americans to transcend their communal differences.”⁸⁶ Joe Maxwell’s *Chicago Tribune* profile of evangelical racial reconciliation efforts in Mississippi was titled, “Beating racism, one friendship at a time.” “It sounds simple, maybe even simplistic,” admitted Maxwell, “but in Mississippi it seems to be working.”⁸⁷ Only voluntary, spiritually driven solutions could make the kind of lasting moral change that would bring healing to American society. While other institutions could help, who was better positioned to deliver on the promise of racial reconciliation than the tens of thousands of evangelical churches spread across the country?

Promise Keepers imagined the work of racial healing as belonging to men in particular. This was partly because much of evangelicalism was patriarchal in its form. Pastors were usually men, and many evangelicals taught that men should be the leaders of their home. But the push to make racial reconciliation *men’s work* connected to broader angst about the role of men in American society in the 1990s. Commentators fretted about the alienated American male adrift in a post-industrial economy shaped by

⁸⁶ Michael Cromartie, “Conquering the Enemy Within,” *Christianity Today*, January 8 1996, 17-20.

⁸⁷ Joe Maxwell, “Beating Racism One Friendship At A Time,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 3, 1993, 1. On the racial reconciliation initiative called “Mission Mississippi” see Peter Slade, *Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

feminist movements and new challenges to men's prerogatives. When Timothy McVeigh bombed the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in the Spring of 1995, killing 168 people, it became an occasion for some commentators to remark on the crisis of American manhood. Thomas Edsall declared, "The 27 years of Timothy James McVeigh's life have been the years in which Americans saw the end of the traditional culture of manhood."⁸⁸ "In deeply disturbing ways, he is a prototype of his generation," another article opined. He was a child of divorce who resented affirmative action and "began to feel shortchanged as a white male."⁸⁹ Maybe Promise Keepers could step in where all else had failed. Comparisons between PK and the Nation of Islam-sponsored Million Man March were unavoidable.⁹⁰ Both movements relied on an ethos of male leadership and called on men to take up the roles they had supposedly shirked from occupying, with disastrous effects for their families and communities. "We're looking for a few good men is no longer the exclusive claim of the U.S. Marines," wrote Edward Gilbreath for *Christianity Today*. "More than ever, the estrangement of men from their roles as husbands, fathers, and moral leaders is being cited as reason for the breakdown of family and society."⁹¹

⁸⁸ Thomas B. Edsall, "Masculinity on the Run," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 1995, 39.

⁸⁹ Dale Russakoff and Serge F. Kovalski, "An Ordinary Boy's Extraordinary Rage," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 1995, A1.

⁹⁰ See especially, Judith Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men's Movement* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 27-31; Deborah Gray White, *Lost in the USA: American Identity from the Promise Keepers to the Million Man March* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 54-64.

⁹¹ Gilbreath, "Manhood's Great Awakening," 21-28.

As its popularity grew by leaps and bounds, PK moved racial reconciliation to the very center of its efforts. The theme of the stadium rallies in 1996 was “Break Down the Walls.” The phrase came from the book of the same title by Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein. If there was a PK-approved racial reconciliation book, *Break Down the Walls* was it. Raleigh was black, Kehrein was white, and both men were veteran ministers who had forged a close bond through their work on the west side of Chicago. One was a son of the Jim Crow South, the other a child of privilege. Both had felt the reconciling power of God’s love and the transforming effect of interracial friendship. Published by Moody Press and blurb-ed by the likes of Chuck Colson and Bill Hybels, the book had the imprimatur of the evangelical mainstream.⁹² Washington and Kehrein shared their very different stories as testimonies of how God could take white racism and black bitterness and create racial healing. Thousands of books described the problem, they wrote. But this book was different: it offered the solution: individual friendships. “Neither congress nor the president can apply a remedy to cure our country’s ills. However, you, individually can apply the principles described in this book,” they wrote. “Christians who are willing to pursue reconciliation through cross-cultural relationships may be the only hope for this country and for the effectiveness of our churches to demonstrate God’s love in America today,” they declared.⁹³ After being a featured speaker at PK conferences, Washington

⁹² For a favorable review see Edward Gilbreath, “Desegregating Our Hearts—and Pews,” *Christianity Today*, November 8 1993, 67-68.

⁹³ Washington Raleigh and Glen Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Racial Strife* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 12, 30.

joined the organization as vice-president of racial reconciliation and became an enthusiastic proponent of its vision.⁹⁴

As major black evangelical leaders joined the Promise Keepers movement, others remained skeptical that its individualistic approach offered an answer for systemic injustice. When McCartney stopped by the 1995 convention of the National Black Evangelical Association he faced searching questions. “What is Promise Keepers going to say about the anti-affirmative action atmosphere in this country?” asked one black evangelical. Such questions directly confronted the individualistic theology of colorblind Christians. Some black evangelicals feared PK was blind to systemic issues. They believed it had good intentions—but precious few practical plans. Bill Pannell argued that the civil rights movement had shown that reconciliation needed to be paired with social justice. Without this anchor in the concrete experience of oppressed people, reconciliation could too easily devolve into sentimentality. He wondered how evangelicals could make racial reconciliation more than a “fad” so it wouldn’t “depend on getting 6 million guys in a stadium someplace...”⁹⁵

When black evangelical leaders accused McCartney of not having a plan, he pushed back with his boldest idea yet. He intended to bring 100,000 pastors together in a single conference. “If reconciliation can happen among God’s leaders,” McCartney said,

⁹⁴ Larry B. Stammer, “Men’s Group Strives for Racial Harmony,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1996, 4; Bob Phelps, “A Prophet In His Own Hometown Hopes to Inspire Racial Harmony,” *Florida Times Union*, October 18, 1996, A1.

⁹⁵ “Breaking the Black/White Stalemate,” *Christianity Today*, March 2, 1998, 26-29.

“it will happen in the church.”⁹⁶ It was an audacious plan. If achieved, a significant percentage of the entire clergy of the United states would gather under Promise Keepers’ banner of racial reconciliation. In the Spring of 1996, the conference kicked off in the Georgia Dome in Atlanta with 39,000 pastors in attendance. Though fewer in number than initially envisioned, it was by any measure a remarkable achievement. McCartney called it “the largest gathering of clergy in U.S. history.”⁹⁷ *Christianity Today* credulously reported “a real breakthrough” in Atlanta as pastors of all colors and denominations worshipped together. “Pentecostals and Baptists prayed together; Anglos and men of color embraced. Suspensions had given way to respect, even love, for fellow believers with different beliefs.” A Latino Pastor declared, “Better than any other national or visible movement, Promise Keepers is not only preaching racial reconciliation, but they are doing something about it.”⁹⁸

During the summer of 1996, every single Promise Keepers rally—all 22 of them—presented an astonishing display that many black evangelicals never imagined they would live to see. From the platform, speakers railed against the sin of racism and challenged white men to repent for their own sins and those of their ancestors. Then the white men—invariably the large majority of the crowd—were told to find a person of color and ask for forgiveness. “The men often embrace in tears,” reported one

⁹⁶ Kevin A. Miller, “McCartney Preaches Racial Reconciliation,” *Christianity Today*, June 19, 1995, 43.

⁹⁷ Bill McCartney, “Reconciliation Part of Promise Keepers’ Path,” *The Gazette*, September 25, 1998, 7.

⁹⁸ Gayle White, “Clergy Conference Stirs Historic Show of Unity,” *Christianity Today*, April 8, 1996, 88.

newspaper.⁹⁹ One reporter watched as “guys around me swarm on the only three African-Americans in our section,” and “I wonder what is running through the black men’s minds...”¹⁰⁰ When racial reconciliation was a matter of the heart, its meaning, and whether it had even occurred, was always up for interpretation. But McCartney’s sincerity was not in doubt as he spoke with growing candor against racism. He had traveled to dozens of cities, meeting with clergy of color in all of them. “What I have learned,” he declared, “is that there is a spirit of white racial superiority that has oppressed, suffocated and strangled men and women of color.”¹⁰¹ Such earnest rhetoric and unusually robust efforts to include people of color drew praise from some black evangelicals, notably including John Perkins. After decades of white evangelical indifference, here was a group that was at least trying to do something.

As PK intensified its racial reconciliation work, it probed the boundaries of Christian colorblindness. When McCartney bluntly used phrases like “white supremacy,” he didn’t just make white evangelicals wince. He operated outside the general tenor of 1990s white racial discourse entirely. When PK speakers called on white men to repent of racism and imagine themselves as inheritors of a generational legacy of racism, they challenged basic assumptions of white evangelical life. And PK leaders surely made other white evangelical leaders nervous when they boasted that their diverse staffing

⁹⁹ Ross Lilla, “McCartney: Racial Peace Soon Possible,” *Florida Times Union*, October 20, 1996, A1.

¹⁰⁰ John D. Spalding, “Bonding in the Bleachers,” 264.

¹⁰¹ Lilla, “McCartney: Racial Peace Soon Possible,” *Florida Times Union*, October 20, 1996, A1.

exposed the lie that qualified black Christians could not be found to serve in evangelical institutions.

And yet, for all its earnest efforts, PK had thoroughly embraced colorblind Christians' longstanding hostility to structural solutions. In the process, PK reframed the very meaning of racial reconciliation. Perkins' call for solidarity with the poor in opposition to the individualism and selfishness of the American Dream had become, in the hands of Promise Keepers, another evangelical call for revival. This revival—mediated through interracial friendships—would supposedly fuel profound social change. McCartney declared that “The enduring solution to society’s racial divisions lies in the conditions of our hearts, not laws alone.” The “spirit of racial reconciliation” was not “engineered in the government offices of Washington or Denver.” Jesus Christ was its source.¹⁰² PK President Randy Phillips said, “The key to reconciliation is relationships – and that means one at a time.”¹⁰³ The stadium rallies, though sensational in their numbers and media attention, were designed to jumpstart the quieter work of interpersonal relationships by which genuine change would occur. People who developed long-term interracial friendships as a result of PK spoke of how it transformed their lives.¹⁰⁴ But as a strategy for ending racism in the church, much less society, it was vulnerable to a familiar critique. As one black evangelical leader put it, “Tears and hugs and saying I’m

¹⁰² Bill McCartney, “Reconciliation Part of Promise Keepers’ Path,” *The Gazette*, September 25, 1998, 7.

¹⁰³ Robbie Morganfield, “‘Each One, Reach One’: Growing Men’s Group Promotes Racial Reconciliation,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 29, 1995, 33.

¹⁰⁴ See for example Martha Sawyer Allen, “Promise Keepers: Racial Reconciliation Made A Difference,” *Star Tribune*, May 9, 1996, 22A.

sorry is a good first step, but for me, the question is not one of changing the hearts of individuals as [much as] it is dealing with the systems and the structures that are devastating African-American people.”¹⁰⁵

In the racial climate of the 1990s, “dealing with the systems and structures” was a minority point of view. The message of racial reconciliation rang out from the halls of Congress as well as from Promise Keepers’ rallies. Republican congressmen Jack Kemp and J.C. Watts paired their limited-government vision of “community renewal” with a call for “real racial reconciliation—person to person, one heart at a time...”¹⁰⁶ For liberals who conceived of America’s racial problem as a matter of systemic injustice, these efforts sounded fatuous. But for colorblind Christians and Republican politicians alike, interpersonal solutions were effectively tailored to the nature of the problem. Friendship, personal responsibility, and local initiative were the best answers to a problem rooted in sinful human nature. They bet that Americans could be brought into a common moral and psychological world even if their economic circumstances remained far apart. And after all, the language of racial reconciliation had an almost intuitive appeal. Who didn’t want people to get along? In June, 1997, President Clinton announced that he wanted to promote a “national conversation on race.” He signed an executive order establishing an advisory panel that would, among other things, “advise the President on matters involving race and racial reconciliation.” American media adopted the phrase “racial reconciliation” as a generic descriptor of the President’s efforts and the

¹⁰⁵ Steve Rabey, “Seedbed for Revival?” *Christianity Today*, September 1, 1997, 90.

¹⁰⁶ Jack Kemp and J.C. Watts, Jr., “Better Than Affirmative Action,” *The Washington Post*, July 8, 1997, A15.

nation's need.¹⁰⁷ The widespread embrace of a term so thick with evangelical connotations was an astonishing development that revealed how successful colorblind Christians had become in influencing the terms of American racial discourse.

In 1997, Promise Keepers launched its boldest move yet, a massive rally on the national mall. PK leaders were quick to draw a contrast to the Million Man March and disavow any political purpose. "We are going to D.C. not to march," McCartney declared, "but to repent."¹⁰⁸ The goal of the "Stand in the Gap" rally was to start a national revival. "We're in a pre-revival state with little pockets springing up," said one PK vice-president. "If we would confess our sin and repent, perhaps God would ignite the church to be what he wants it to be."¹⁰⁹ Raleigh Washington said the final goal was nothing less than to "eliminate racism as we now see it in the church of Jesus Christ."¹¹⁰ The rally on October 4 was among the largest gatherings in American history. Conservative estimates put the crowd at over 400,000 men. For many, it was a memorable experience. "I cried my head off," said one man. "For the first time in our life, we could be real men of God."¹¹¹ The *Washington Post* reported that 14% of the crowd was black. PK faced criticism that it had conducted little more than a glorified

¹⁰⁷ For example, Sonya Ross, "President Seeks Road to Racial Reconciliation," *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 27, 1997, 1A.

¹⁰⁸ Ted Olsen, "Racial Reconciliation Emphasis Intensified," *Christianity Today*, January 6, 1997, 67.

¹⁰⁹ Steve Rabey, "Seedbed for Revival?" *Christianity Today*, September 1, 1997, 90.

¹¹⁰ Susan Hogan, "Promise Keepers Rally Around Racial Reconciliation," *Star Tribune*, January 18, 1997, 5B.

¹¹¹ Quoted in White, *Lost in the USA*, 23.

“pep rally” but McCartney insisted the “fruit” of the gathering was on the way. PK leaders spoke in increasingly grandiose terms about the revival they were ushering in, and the astonishing social effects that were just over the horizon. McCartney announced plans for mass rallies at every state capitol on January 1, 2000, to declare “that the giant of racism is dead in the church of Jesus Christ.”¹¹²

The success of the Stand in the Gap rally helped to mask ominous signs of declining attendance at other PK gatherings that year. One evangelical historian noted that there had been similar movements in decades past that had come and gone with little trace. But PK was different. “The thing that is noteworthy about Promise Keepers is that it is not fizzling.”¹¹³ He spoke too soon. The rallies at state capitols never happened. By the new millennium, Promise Keepers was a much-reduced organization. Declining donations and revenues, staff cuts, and diminishing interest from evangelical men left the organization a shadow of its 1994-1997 heyday. Positive talk of restructuring for a more focused mission only underscored the fact that the movement had not blossomed into the mass revival for which some evangelicals had hoped. Many causes have been proposed for the decline, but McCartney’s own explanation was as convincing as any: he believed the organization’s focus on racial reconciliation caused a backlash among white evangelicals.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Joe Maxwell, “Will the Walls Fall Down?” *Christianity Today*, November 17, 1997, 62-65.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹⁴ Bartowski attributes it to the “ephemeral character of American culture.” For a brief moment, PK tapped into the cultural zeitgeist, but “today’s novelties become yesterday’s news” with remarkable speed. Bartowski, *The Promise Keepers*, 151.

Even as the movement seemed to flourish, the warning signs of racial reaction were there all along. When McCartney told the first large gathering of men in 1991 that future rallies would have to be multi-racial, it caused, in his words, “a minor firestorm of hate mail and caustic letters.” Writers angrily demanded that McCartney focus on “the gospel” rather than racism. Looking back on the experience, McCartney said it provided his “first glimpse of the seething giant of racism lurking within the Christian church.” In the early 90s McCartney took his message of racial reconciliation on the road, visiting dozens of predominantly white churches. “I’d show up to churches filled with men eager to hear about the marvelous move of God called Promise Keepers,” he recalled. Audiences were disturbed when instead McCartney gave them a message about “how a subtle spirit of white superiority has unwittingly alienated and wounded our brothers and sisters within the church.” McCartney told white Christians to take responsibility for their own prejudices and the historic injustices of generations past. According to McCartney “it was the same story” in every church: “wild enthusiasm while I was being introduced, followed by a morguelike chill as I stepped away from the microphone.” Such experiences left him “shaken and dejected,” wondering if he was doing the right thing. After having the same experience in dozens of churches, one moment encouraged McCartney to remain faithful to the message of racial reconciliation. At a church in Portland, Oregon, he delivered his usual message to the stony-faced crowd, but before he left the stage, a black man with tears in his eyes approached him and said McCartney’s words—words he never expected to “hear a white man say”—had given him hope. But what brought hope to some black Christians offended white ones. As McCartney toured dozens of cities in 1996 and 1997, he found that pastors of color were “profoundly

encouraged...while some among the white clergy remained aloof.” In 1996, nearly 40% of complaints from conference attendees concerned the reconciliation focus.¹¹⁵

Racial backlash didn't account for the entirety of Promise Keepers' decline, but it did suggest the limits of Christian colorblindness. Even though most of PK's racial reconciliation work focused on friendship, *any* sustained attention to race raised the hackles of many colorblind Christians. When McCartney spoke of racism as a serious problem, he became a subject of suspicion in much the same way black evangelicals had been for decades. And he faced the same criticisms: if he was such a good Christian, why wasn't he focusing on the gospel? Promise Keepers was a Christian men's empowerment movement. As the racial reconciliation focus loomed larger and became more explicitly oriented toward white responsibility for racism, it began to threaten the core function of Christian colorblindness: the protection and perpetuation of evangelical whiteness. The vast majority of Promise Keepers attendees came not as white people to reckon with racism, but as *men* seeking a revival of Christian manhood in a peculiar moment of social change and dislocation. McCartney's enthusiasm for racial healing as an essential part of Christian masculinity left many white evangelical men cold. When sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith began asking white evangelicals about their opinions of racial reconciliation in the late-1990s, they found that the movement had not pierced the consciousness of many ordinary laypeople. “Despite the tidal wave of efforts to communicate the message of racial reconciliation, more than 60 percent of the white

¹¹⁵ Bill McCartney, “The Coach's Burden,” *Christianity Today*, May 18, 1998, 30-31.

evangelicals we interviewed had not heard of racial reconciliation or did not know what it meant,” they wrote.¹¹⁶

For decades, black evangelicals like John Perkins and Clarence Hilliard had called on middle class evangelicals—black and white alike—to choose to alter their material circumstances to such an extent that the concerns of the black poor would become their own concerns. In contrast, the interpersonal exchange envisioned in the popular brand of racial reconciliation was overwhelmingly a matter of consciousness and emotion. At Promise Keeper's rallies, men prayed together and asked for forgiveness. They promised not to overcome injustice as such, but to form interracial friendships that would bridge the alienation felt between black and white Christians. And yet even this revivalist and interpersonal approach couched in the language of evangelical theology was too much for the white evangelical mainstream. While evangelical elites swooned, ordinary white evangelicals asked why they should be made to think about race yet again, much less apologize for anything.

Conclusion

The politics of church primacy that animated evangelical responses to the civil rights movement thirty years earlier were still operative in the 1990s. The difference was that evangelicals were major actors in a social and political climate that was much more conducive to their message. When colorblind Christians took up the language of racial reconciliation, shorn of Perkins' radical edge, they found the perfect vehicle for their longstanding message of racial harmony through unity in Christ. The dominance of

¹¹⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 127.

Christian colorblindness had nudged white evangelicals toward more tolerant racial attitudes, but it had also shielded their movement from self-scrutiny. The career of Southern Baptist megachurch pastor Rick Warren was illustrative of the way Christian colorblindness had changed—and protected—evangelical whiteness. In contrast to an earlier Southern Baptist superstar, W.A. Criswell, the whiteness of Warren’s evangelicalism was ecumenical, suburban, upwardly mobile. It was comfortable with a little diversity rather than lily-white, national instead of southern, even cosmopolitan in some respects. And yet it was an evangelical whiteness that still balked at black demands for justice and real redistribution of power. “When I insist on being black,” Bill Pannell wrote, “I find myself once again a nonperson.”¹¹⁷ Black evangelicals had found through hard experience that when they read the Bible differently and found in its pages a call to liberate the poor from every form of oppression, they ran headlong into Colorblind Christians’ investment in a theology colored white. They might be literally excluded, as at Houston ’85, or more subtly silenced, as many black students at white evangelicals colleges felt themselves to be, or face the psychic and spiritual toll of having the sincerity of their faith called into question by fellow Christians.

Evangelicalism in the 1990s seemed to be rushing headlong into a promising future without asking whether it had learned the lessons of its past. In his influential 1995 book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren wrote that there were two great inspirations for his career. One was W.A. Criswell, who returned Warren’s admiration by writing the foreword to his book. Warren’s other hero was Donald McGavran.¹¹⁸ Warren might have

¹¹⁷ Pannell, *Race Wars?*, 20.

¹¹⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 25-30.

been bothered by Criswell and McGavran's most egregious statements, if he was aware of them. But Warren could mention these figures without any acknowledgement of their troubled racial histories, and the audience for his book found it unremarkable, precisely because white evangelicals had not reckoned with their past, nor accepted the critiques of black evangelicals. In the world of white evangelicalism, a long history of advocating white supremacy was not a serious mark against one's pastoral judgment. Indeed, Warren called Criswell "the greatest American pastor of the twentieth century." Maybe, in an unintended irony, Warren had found in Criswell an appropriate emblem for the evangelical movement after all. Americans rang in the new millennium without the promised crowds of evangelical men on fifty state capitol steps announcing the end of racism's reign. The racial reconciliation decade peaked with dreams of a Great Awakening and ended with the disillusionment felt after a fad has run its course.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In 2000, sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith released a book that sent shockwaves through elite evangelical circles. *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* explained that, despite white evangelicals' best intentions, their "cultural toolkit" of "accountable freewill individualism," "relationism," and "antistructuralism" actually exacerbated racial division in American life.¹ Bill Hybels later said that reading the book was an "embarrassing" experience that left him feeling "devastated." He admitted that at the time he launched Willow Creek, he had agreed with the church growth experts who said, "Don't dissipate any of your energies fighting race issues. Focus everything on evangelism."² Emerson and Smith's study was a sobering and nuanced snapshot of evangelical life in the 1990s. But some readers could also find grounds for optimism in it. Taking Emerson and Smith's language about good intentions and cultural tools at face value, readers might conclude that evangelicals meant well, wanted to deal with racism, and had good theology with which to do so. The problem seemed to be that white evangelicals had allowed the

¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 76. The most basic statement of their argument, found in the preface, makes no mention of theology as such, and asserts that "evangelicals desire to end racial division *and inequality*" [emphasis mine]. For a critical race theory critique of Emerson and Smith's optimistic view, see Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann, "Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical 'Race Problem': Extending Emerson and Smith's *Divided by Faith*," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47 (2008): 341-359.

² "Harder Than Anyone Can Imagine," *Christianity Today*, April, 2005, 38.

individualism of American culture to overshadow their theological commitments.³ The history of Christian colorblindness makes such a sunny view difficult to sustain. Colorblind Christians had not failed at creating racial harmony despite their best intentions. They had in fact succeeded at what was most important to them: growing the evangelical movement while keeping whiteness at its center in an age of colorblindness.

Christian Colorblindness and the History of Evangelicalism and Race

Historians have frequently asserted that white evangelicals brought up the rear in America's civil rights revolution, reluctantly acceding to its legal and cultural changes after the fact.⁴ Such claims are not wrong as far as they go, but they risk a broader distortion. Casting white evangelicals as principally southern and almost wholly reactionary—"the side of the conversation that lost"—inhibits our ability to see how evangelicalism helped to form the boundaries of change in the civil rights era.⁵ When scholars imagine white evangelicals as the people who are always on the sidelines coming to terms with the game after it has been played, it becomes difficult to understand how the colorblind racial order of the post-civil rights years has had so much staying power. Among the many reasons for colorblindness's enduring appeal, the vitality of

³ For evangelicals debating whether theology or culture was the culprit for the racial divide, see "We Can Overcome," *Christianity Today*, October 2, 2000, 43.

⁴ For example, Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 231; Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 209-210.

⁵ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 3.

evangelical religion—powered by a new theology of race that proclaimed equality while protecting implicit whiteness—was surely part of the answer.

In her exceptional study of southern white evangelicals in the civil rights era, Carolyn Renee Dupont wrote, “Rather than receiving the commands of God as fixed tablets of stone, people *make* and remake their religion, and white southerners crafted a faith divinely suited for white supremacy.”⁶ The story of Christian colorblindness in the decades after the civil rights movement reveals a religion that has indeed been remade, but not for white supremacy or for antiracism. Instead, white evangelicals made a faith divinely suited for white advantage in a colorblind era. Rather than thinking of winners and losers in the civil rights struggle, it is more useful to think of it as an inconclusive conflict in which both sides shaped the contours of change and the new order that emerged from it. It was not the beloved community of racial equality and opportunity for all for which many civil rights activists labored. Nor was it a new iteration of sacred white supremacy that many southern white evangelicals wanted. It was something else altogether: a religiously-infused colorblind order in which new opportunities went hand in hand with vast disparities; a colorblind evangelicalism in which whiteness had been dethroned in name but not decentered in practice.

The success of colorblind Christians indicates the need to rethink and retell the history of evangelicalism in the second half of the twentieth century. It is past time to consign to the historiographical dustbin superficial narratives of political mobilization, in which white southern evangelicals seem to stand in for the whole of evangelicalism and are the subject of much attention because they happened to become Republicans. The

⁶ Ibid., 7.

recent transnational turn in the historiography of evangelicalism is a welcome development that casts evangelicals as major global actors and treats the internal dynamics of diverse evangelical communities as having real importance.⁷ The story of the Church Growth Movement told here joins this transnational turn. Using race strategically, informed by transnational currents of missionary theory, evangelical denominations grew dramatically in the decades after the civil rights movement. Southern Baptists added over two million people to their member rolls between 1970 and 1985. The Assemblies of God and the Evangelical Free Church tripled their numbers.⁸ In short, white evangelicals appear not as baleful reactionaries but as successful racial entrepreneurs in a time of rapid change. Evangelical institutions thrived, not despite their failure to become truly multicultural antiracist communities, but partly because of their adept colorblind balancing act in an era of racial ambiguity.

This balancing act was not the result of far-reaching plans laid down in advance. It was the negotiated outcome of a contest among evangelicals with opposing ideas for how best to be faithful to the gospel in a time of racial upheaval. Though relatively small in number, self-described black evangelicals made themselves major players in pushing for reform of evangelical institutions throughout this period. Without the work of black evangelicals like John Perkins, there would have been no “racial reconciliation” movement to speak of. Though white evangelical efforts invariably fell short of what

⁷ For example, McCalister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*; Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor*, and David Swartz’ forthcoming book from Oxford University Press on American evangelicals and global Christianity.

⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 192-193.

black evangelicals desired, such efforts pushed further than white evangelicals themselves had been inclined to go. When scholars fail to account for black evangelicals' crucial role in this story, they reproduce the very exclusion and silencing black evangelicals fought against.

This study has explored some specific ways in which race and religion have shaped each other. It has attempted to show that such processes are complex and contested. White and black evangelicals alike believed that theology, properly applied, was a vital pathway to racial change. They weren't wrong. Given the essential role of Christian theology in creating race, it would be surprising indeed if Christian theology did not continue to sustain it.⁹ But when religion is removed from the picture of contemporary racialization, it is harder to understand the varieties and nuances of racist and anti-racist discourse in American life. Scholars may readily recognize "colorblind racism" when they see it. But the racism conditioned by evangelical religiosity is a different matter. Understanding how a statement as quintessentially Christian as "you are all one in Jesus Christ" could take on racist or anti-racist purposes requires careful attention to the intent of the speaker and the context in which the claim is made. Such an examination is fraught for evangelicals themselves, and for scholars who share their Christian faith. Because these claims are so rooted in scripture, there is, in some quarters, a strong presumption in their favor. But just as Martin Luther King's dream of a colorblind America was not inherently freeing, so too the Christian scriptures are latent with manifold possibilities that Americans have turned to their own contradictory

⁹ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

purposes. Ideas voiced with the intent to liberate in one context can be repurposed to oppress in another. To say that evangelical religion has shaped the American racial order is not to suppose that in the absence of this religious force a more enlightened order would necessarily prevail. Evangelicalism has influenced the contours of race in complicated ways, perhaps mitigating some of its darkest passions while entrenching more subtle inequalities. As some commentators have suggested, a post-Christian American racism may be even more harsh and unyielding in its hatreds.¹⁰

Christian Colorblindness in the Era of New Racism

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the fruits of Christian colorblindness were being put to the test. The elections of Barack Obama and Donald Trump and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement produced rapid change in Americans' racial opinions and in the character of American racial discourse.¹¹ For their part, white evangelicals continued to embrace the politics of church primacy that had guided their approach to explosive racial questions for decades. More than at any time since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, black activists put questions of systemic racial injustice at the center of national attention. But white evangelicals rejected the Black Lives Matter movement's claims. A 2016 survey by the Barna Group found that

¹⁰ Peter Beinart, "Breaking Faith," *The Atlantic*, April 2017, online edition.

¹¹ On Black Lives Matter see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). On the rapid shifts in American racial attitudes and their links to partisanship, see John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). On the rising salience of whiteness and decline of colorblindness, see Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

13% of evangelicals “support the message of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement,” while 94% believed “Christian churches play an important role in racial reconciliation.” Here was a perfect distillation of what colorblind Christians’ commitments to equality meant: yes to “racial reconciliation” enacted through the church; no to social equality enacted through mass protest and legal reform. Other surveys found that white evangelicals were much more likely than other Americans to oppose interracial marriage, and to reject the idea that African Americans continued to face significant discrimination in American society.¹²

Within evangelicalism, uncanny echoes of the 1960s and 1970s were everywhere to be found in the twenty-first century. Black evangelicals became increasingly radicalized and race-conscious as they watched footage of black people gunned down in the street. As in prior decades the driver of black evangelical radicalization in the new millennium was the particularly painful experience of seeing white evangelicals, the community they had imagined they were a part of, dismiss their concerns and tell them to stop talking about their racial experiences. Like their ancestors’ response to the civil rights movement, white evangelicals insisted that they too valued black lives but rejected the Black Lives Matter movement’s tactics and ideology. Debates that had raged in

¹² Barna Group, “Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America, May 5, 2016, www.barna.com/research/black-lives-matter-and-racial-tension-in-america/; Tobin Grant, “Opposition to Interracial Marriage Lingers Among Evangelicals,” *Christianity Today*, June 24, 2011, www.christianitytoday.com/news/2011/june/opposition-to-interracial-marriage-lingers-among.html; Robert P. Jones et al, “Who Sees Discrimination? Attitudes on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Race, and Immigration Status,” June 21, 2017, www.prii.org/research/americans-views-discrimination-immigrants-blacks-lgbt-sex-marriage-immigration-reform/

evangelicalism in prior decades—between social justice and evangelism, racial consciousness and Christian unity—were renewed with explosive force.

The popular black evangelical rapper Lecrae provided a very public example of the heightened tensions between black and white evangelicals. Since the release of his first album in 2004, he had enjoyed a large and growing white evangelical audience. In his early songs, Lecrae rapped about the unimportance of racial identity in comparison to the common bond believers had in Jesus Christ. In his 2008 song “Don’t Waste Your Life,” Lecrae wrote:

Your life ain’t wrapped up in what you drive
The clothes you wear, the job you work
The color your skin, naw you’re a Christian first

But beginning in 2014, Lecrae spoke out about police shootings. The blowback from his white evangelical audience was severe. By his own account, Lecrae sank into depression.

In “Can’t Stop Me Now” (2016) Lecrae wrote:

Another murder on the television
Man, somebody go turn it off
I spoke my mind, I got attacked for it
Thought these people had my back boy
Then they tellin’ me I asked for it
I guess I’m just another black boy
And then they killed Tamir Rice
And they just go on with they life
They tellin’ me shut up talking 'bout it
Like I should just talk about Christ

When Lecrae released a new album in 2017, it was marinated in black Christian consciousness. It was a declaration of independence from all those who wanted him to “shut my mouth and get my checks from evangelicals.” In the song “Facts” he explored the dramatic disconnect in historical experience and identity between black and white Christians: “You grew up thinkin’ that the Panthers was some terrorists, I grew up hearin’

how they fed my momma eggs and grits.” For Lecrae, the reconciliation he thought was happening between black and white evangelicals had been revealed as hollow. He rapped:

You want unity?
Then read a eulogy
Kill the power that exists up under you and over me.

This call to kill the power of white supremacy echoed Bill Pannell’s call for “reconstruction” a generation before. But most white evangelicals did not want to listen. The black evangelical pastor Bryan Loritts felt that he could manage the challenges of political disagreement with white evangelicals in the age of Black Lives Matter and Donald Trump. The deeper problem was the way white evangelicals insisted on exercising their power *within* evangelical institutions. He wrote, “White evangelicalism elevates the power of her limited perspective as a historical litmus test to vet the veracity of one’s faith.” It was a rigged religio-racial test. In white evangelical eyes, black evangelicals kept failing to pass it. “White evangelicalism has never played well, because she will only play with others by *her* rules,” Loritts wrote. “If she cannot sit at the head of the table, she won’t sit at all. She won’t even come into the house.”¹³ White evangelicals were prepared for black evangelicals to leave their churches before they gave an inch on their theological commitments. The *New York Times* reported on a “quiet exodus” of black evangelicals from predominantly white evangelical churches in a new era of racial

¹³ Bryan Loritts, *Insider Outsider: My Journey As A Stranger In White Evangelicalism and My Hope for Us All* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 130.

polarization.¹⁴ In the twenty-first century, black evangelicals remained the mirror that revealed colorblind Christians' investments in whiteness.

¹⁴ Campbell Robertson, "A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshippers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches," *New York Times*, March 10, 2018, A1.

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