

'God's on our Side, Today':
Lived Theology in the Civil Rights Movement in Americus, Georgia, 1942-1976

By

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Dedicated, with thanks,
to my family:
Paul and Stacy Quiros,
Courtney, Conrad, and Carson,
Stanley and Joanna Schuman,
And in memory of
Marilyn Miller Privette Quiros and Amanda Paul Miller Privette

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INTRODUCTION

“Sweet Jesus and Unbearable Madness”

“Beliefs always find expression in action.”¹

Upon touring America in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville commented, “there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”² From its imagined beginning as a “city on a hill,” through various Awakenings, new sects, and diverse manifestations, America and its history has always been closely bound up with the beliefs of its people. Often, of course, those beliefs have differed; sometimes they have clashed. When they have, Americans have engaged in a fight not only over religious orthodoxy but for the very soul of the nation. Such was the case in the civil rights movement. The American South of the 1960s was the country’s most religious region, and yet the most racially divided. It was the place where people prayed most fervently and where they beat their neighbors most brutally. As one commentator described, “it was a place of Sweet Jesus and unbearable madness.”³

This dissertation argues that the civil rights movement, rightly understood as a major social, cultural and political conflict, constituted a theological conflict as well. Whether in the traditional sanctuaries of the major white Protestant denominations, in the mass meetings in black churches, or in Christian expressions of interracialism, Southerners resisted, pursued, and

¹ Benjamin Mays, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations* (Friendship Press, 1964), 75.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, translated by Henry Reeve (New York: Scatcherd and Adams), 1839, 303. De Tocqueville also comments, “In the United States, religion is therefore mingled with all the

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, translated by Henry Reeve (New York: Scatcherd and Adams), 1839, 303. De Tocqueville also comments, “In the United States, religion is therefore mingled with all the habits of the nation and all the feelings of patriotism, whence it derives a peculiar force.” (*Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, Chapter 1).

³ William Hedgepeth, “The American South: Rise of a New Confederacy,” *Look*, Vol. 34, No. 23 (November 17, 1970), 19.

questioned racial change within various theological traditions. Examining the post-World War II South, I contend that Christian theology contributed both to the moral power of the civil rights movement and to the staunch opposition it encountered. But, how is it that integrated Christian communities, segregationist white churches, and civil rights activists all claimed the tenets of Christianity? How is it that all boasted that God was on their side? Why is it that Dr. King and the Ku Klux Klan each professed belief in God the Father, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Bible? As those on both sides of the civil rights struggle grappled with issues of race, they inexorably grappled with issues of religion. While many invoked Christian doctrine concerning the race question, many also invoked race concerning issues of religious orthodoxy. That struggle is the heart of this work. Uncovering the theological elements present in the conflict over civil rights clarifies not only the passion and anger felt during the 1960s, but also offers insight into the rise of the Religious Right and the continually vexing relationship between race and religion in America. While the presence of religion in the civil rights movement is often acknowledged, a specific, community-based study of the theological motivations and hindrances operating on both sides of the movement has not yet been undertaken. This dissertation undertakes such a study by analyzing the theological conflict over civil rights in Americus, Georgia.

The historical interpretation of the civil rights movement has long stressed the courage and resilience of its leaders and participants, the political changes it wrought, and the transformation it rendered in American life.⁴ The popularity of this view is evident in the social exaltation of the

⁴ For an insightful historiographical analysis of the civil rights movement, see Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 2 (Apr. 1991), 456-471. The traditional interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement began during the events of the 1960s and 1970s, intensifying immediately after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, as activists and intellectuals sought to understand the implications of this landmark legislation. Stemming from the nature of the Movement, in clamoring for voting rights and other equalizing legislation, the early scholarship emphasized these political gains. As Steven Lawson states, these early scholars "focused on leaders and events of national

civil rights movement--the holidays commemorating civil rights leaders, the inspirational photographs adorning the cinderblock walls of classrooms across the country, and the triumphant anniversary celebrations. From early interpretations that focused on the national political achievements of the movement, more recently, the historiography has expanded to include the stories of grassroots organizations and local movements and to extend the chronology and scope of the civil rights movement.⁵ These contributions focused increasingly on the cultural and social

significance” and characterized the Civil Rights Movement as “primarily a political movement that secured legislative and judicial triumphs.” Many of these studies focus on King himself. They chart his personal biography, his intellectual development, his political strategizing. Other prominent works in this school focus on specific institutional and legislative aspects of the struggle for rights, the ways in which desegregation and equality were secured through the American system. Though an array of sources were employed, most of them came from the presidential and organizational archives in Washington D.C. so that the focus remained on the political ramifications of civil rights. This singular emphasis on strict political and legislative victories from early civil rights scholars may be understood in terms of their own activism and involvement, as well as the fact that political enfranchisement and inclusion became the measurement of success. (See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965*, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988, 1998, 2006); (David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York), 1986; Lawrence D. Reddick, *Crusader Without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York), 1957; Lerone Bennett Jr., *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Chicago), 1968; David L. Lewis, *King: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Urbana, IL), 1978; and Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York), 1982; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (New York: Hill and Wang), 1981.)⁵ These scholars interrogated whether the narrative of national political gains captured the spirit and goal of the civil rights movement. In keeping with the more general push towards identifying agency in previously silenced or eschewed groups, these historians began to investigate previously forgotten individuals and organizations, producing microhistories, which enabled them to see both people and “process.” (Lawson 457; See Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press), 2009; Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1995; Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 1995; Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1995; and Steven G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 2001; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1981.) This historiographical impulse has also led to scholarly innovations that are broad in scope, both in terms of chronology and location. The rhetoric also shifted away from the limited notion of ‘civil rights,’ which contains an inherent institutional and political bias and towards grassroots efforts characterized instead by the phrase ‘black freedom struggle.’ (Clayborne Carson, “Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle,” in Charles W. Eagles, ed. *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson, MS), 1986, 23, 27). This inclination towards ideas of racial struggle significantly expanded the confining chronology of the civil rights movement, allowing scholars to identify elements of resistance and revolt much earlier. (See Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); *Let Nobody Turn us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal, An African American Anthology*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*

implications of the movement, seeking to free it from its strict political confines and neat chronology and locate a larger narrative of struggle for change. Curiously, though, the historiography has long underemphasized the religious convictions of ordinary people. While certainly acknowledging the organizational role of the black church and general religious influences, scholarship of the civil rights movement has tended to offer a mostly secular account of the struggle for political and social equality. Even when leaders' and activists' religiosity has been mentioned in vague ways, the content of their religious beliefs and the consequences of those beliefs have remained largely ignored. In short, the religious, and especially the theological, nature of the struggle for human equality has been diluted or at least not given its due. In addition to obscuring the motivation and inspiration driving much of the movement, the diminution of religion exposes, as one scholar put it, "the modernist conceit that what black people do and say in church cannot possibly be taken seriously."⁶ For this reason, there is a need

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1990, Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press), 1994; 1990; Barbara Diane Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1999.) It also allowed scholars to gaze outside of the American South, including both accounts of northern activism and global movements. (Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Penny M. von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.) Much of this literature contested the images of the civil rights movement as a sanitized, religiously centered impulse for inclusion into the American dream began to privilege radicalism, notably black power. (Peniel E. Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006). See also Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogbarr, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.) This broader turn has led to hopeful interpretations of agency and struggle even the face of insurmountable obstacles but also a deep pessimism about the continual presence of racial inequality. Some recent studies have reassessed the success of the civil rights movement altogether, employing a New Left interpretation that argues that the reforms enacted were empty and ineffective and asserts the pernicious power of race in American life and politics. (Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black American, 1945-1984* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984); James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), xiii. See also Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.)

⁶ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 4. Marsh asserts, "Too often historians and scholars have recast the civil rights movement as a secular movement that used religion to its advantage. In this reading, the movement leaders

to reconsider the presence and power of religious belief in the civil rights movement both for the movement's leaders and for the ordinary men and women in the struggle.

Frederick Harris' work *Something Within*, and particularly, David Chappell's *A Stone of Hope* have recently contributed to this long overdue shift.⁷ Chappell examines the revolutionary success of the civil rights movement, locating a spiritual collective power in the black prophetic tradition.⁸ Prophetic religion is what made the civil rights movement "move," Chappell argues, writing, "it may be misleading to view the civil rights movement as a social and political event that had religious overtones." Rather, "the words of many participants suggest that it was, for them, primarily a religious event, whose social and political aspects were, in their minds, secondary or incidental."⁹ Chappell's work rightly identifies the prominence of religious belief in the civil rights movement and points to the ongoing work to be done in uncovering the theological motivations and religious convictions of many of its grassroots participants. This dissertation contributes to that effort while also examining the theological motivations and religious convictions held by those on the other side of the civil rights struggle.

Just as the historiography of the Civil Rights movement has skirted the theological elements of the struggle, so too has literature on white resistance to civil rights. Unlike the

were crafty politicians invoking religion to inspire the troops to into action and fortify social hope." As early as 1984, there have been calls for the black church to be taken seriously in historical consideration. In his work "The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement," Aldon Morris insists that while "most accounts of the civil rights movement make reference to the importance of the black church," the "central and overpowering role that the church played in this movement remains largely a story untold." Thirty years later, it largely still is. (Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), xii.)

⁷ Frederick Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African American Religious Activism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1999; David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Harris, a political scientist, is concerned with the ways African American religion has affected formal political participation, from the 1960s into the present. But his first two chapters, dedicated to faith in the civil rights movement can help historians in their endeavor to link religious belief and action.

⁸"The black movement's nonviolent soldiers," Chappell argues, "were driven not by modern liberal faith in human reason" but by "a prophetic tradition that runs from David and Isaiah in the Old Testament through Augustine and Martin Luther to Reinhold Niebuhr in the twentieth century." (Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 3).

⁹ Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 87.

expansive and compelling histories of the civil rights movement, the historical scholarship on white conservative opposition to civil rights is more truncated, though that has begun to change in recent years.¹⁰ Much of the reticence to address white conservative resistance to civil rights in academic scholarship stemmed from a collective desire to forget a humiliating and shameful era of American history. However, the reemergence of conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s forced scholars to contend seriously with the ideas of southern conservatives who were suddenly occupying the nation's central administrative offices. Recently, historians have endeavored recently to uncover the roots of the New Right in massive resistance, the political battles over the role of the state in public education and private enterprise, and in the resurgence of religious fundamentalism. Still, too few scholars have dealt with Southern conservative resistance to civil rights on its own terms, and very few have considered its theological tenets.¹¹ Studies of

¹⁰ In the past, most of the scholars writing about Southern conservatism were Southern ideologues themselves or puzzled critics seeking to fathom a backward region. (See: W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf Press, 1941); Paul D. Escott, *W. J. Cash and the Minds of the South*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944). More recently, historians have waded into the murky waters of Southern conservatism with more interest (See: Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* ed. by Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Yet this scholarship, as helpful and interesting as it is, neglects the unsavory theological aspects of certain brands of conservatism, abandoning it as craziness rather than seeking to discover the roots and relevancies of religious belief in white resistance to the civil rights movement. These scholars usually draw a clean distinction between the Sunbelt and the South, between political conservatism and social conservatism, choosing to focus on the former. As Joseph Crespino adeptly writes in his work on Strom Thurmond, historians “make facile distinctions between Sunbelt conservatives, who are figured as modern, principled and broadly ideological, and Southern conservatives, who are figured chiefly as backward and racist.” Overlooking the complexity of Southerners’ belief system-- their “anticommunism, anti-labor politics, conservative religious beliefs and opposition to liberal church groups, criticism of judicial activism, and hypermilitarism”--these scholars make the South solely about race. This false dichotomy serves not only to create a “flattened portrait” of the South, but also a portrait of “Sunbelt conservatives as racially innocent, free from any taint of racial politics.” (Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill and Wang), 2012, 8-9).

¹¹ There are exceptions, including notably: Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007); Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred After Brown,” *Journal of American History*. 91, no. 1 (June 2004); 119-

theology and its ramifications for civil rights are hard to find. Even scholarship that has purported to stress the importance of religion in people's lives has, in most cases, made religion secondary to other political, social, or cultural forces.¹² This dissertation makes religious belief primary, on both sides of the civil rights struggle.

William Faulkner once wrote of a character that he described as a "bucolic, provincial, Southern Baptist," a man whose religion was simply "an emotional condition that ha[d] nothing to do with God or politics or anything else."¹³ Faulkner's description echoes through the historiography, especially in the "cultural captivity" thesis advanced by John Lee Eighmy and others. In this view, white southern churches refused to sincerely grapple with the teachings of Christ or the applications of the Gospel; instead, they unreflectively reinforced social hierarchies. In short, "compelled to choose between Christ and culture, Southerners chose culture."¹⁴ As a result, David Chappell has argued, "white supremacists failed...to muster the cultural strength that conservatives traditionally get from religion," concluding, "they did not have religious power."¹⁵ But they did, as the work of a new generation of scholars is now showing.¹⁶

144; Jane Dailey, "The Theology of Massive Resistance: Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*" in *Massive Resistance*. ed. Clive Webb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹² Very few historical works contain any interrogation of theology, a critique of deeper ideas that have transcendent power, nor a discussion of the ramifications of beliefs, whether laudable or dangerous. There have always been, of course, specific denominational histories and theological tomes, but these have hardly made it to a broader audience or into historiographical debate. See: Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994); Sledge, Robert Watson. *Hands on the Ark: The Struggle for Change in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914-1939* (Lake Junaluska, NC: Commission on Archives and History, United Methodist Church, 1975); Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930-1975*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Everett C. Goodwin, *Down by the Riverside: A Brief History of the Baptist Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2002).

¹³ Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 173, 189 as quoted in John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), xvii.

¹⁴ Paul Harvey, "God and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation: Racism, Racial Interchange, and Racial Interracialism in Southern Religious History" in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* edited by Beth Barton Schwerger, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 285.

¹⁵ Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 8.

¹⁶ As historian Mark Newman put it: "If the civil rights movement was a religious movement, opposition to it was, at least in part, a kind of religious movement as well." Mark Newman, *Getting Right With God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 48.

Historians Jason Sokol and Joseph Crespino have produced nuanced and complex portraits of conservatism during and immediately following the civil rights era that include the contributions of Southern Protestantism.¹⁷ For example, Crespino has argued that the civil rights movement forced Mississippians to go “in search of another country, a more conservative America, a more—in the view of many Mississippi whites at least—Christian nation committed to principles that white Mississippians and conservative Americans had defended all along.”¹⁸ He has acknowledged the importance of a certain brand of Christianity in strengthening white claims to superiority and separateness and has correctly understood that these religious claims were not merely manipulative moral coverings for sinister political and hegemonic aims. White Mississippians, he has contended, were legitimately religious and had religious criticisms of the civil rights movement that led them to a particular brand of political and social conservatism. While Crespino principally has told a story of Southern political, cultural, and social unrest, one of an emergent conservative “counterrevolution,” he also has succeeded in making important contributions to evaluating the religious beliefs of Mississippians and acknowledging the significance of those beliefs to Southern resistance to civil rights. In recent years, Crespino has been joined by others, particularly by religious historians, who have continued to assert the influence of white Southerners’ religious beliefs.¹⁹

¹⁷ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Vintage Books), 2007. While Sokol perceptively details the forgotten perspectives of Southerners facing massive changes --furious, ambivalent, repentant--he focuses less on the role of religion than Crespino.

¹⁸ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 3.

¹⁹ As historian Mark Newman states: “Scholars have often failed to appreciate the significance of religion in the segregationist worldview.” He further argues: “If the civil rights movement was a religious movement, opposition to it was, at least in part, a kind of religious movement as well.” Mark Newman, *Getting Right With God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 48. See also: Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). See also: Carter Dalton Lyon, “Lifting the Color Bar from the House of God: The 1963-1964 Church Visit Campaign to Challenge Segregated Sanctuaries in Jackson Mississippi,” Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Mississippi, 2010; Joseph Kip Kosek, “‘Just a Bunch of Agitators’: Kneel-Ins and

Charles Marsh has even more directly challenged assumptions of white Protestantism's powerlessness, writing that David Chappell's assertion "that segregationists in the South failed in their efforts to enlist their churches in opposition to integration" was "lacking in common sense." Far from being isolated individuals on the margin of society, he has claimed that segregationists were present in every church in the South, and they developed strategies to resist change that were both political and religious in nature. Even silence was a strategy. While usually seen as weakness, silence on certain issues comprised a carefully formulated position. "The decision to refrain from preaching about racial justice," Marsh has argued, "signaled a theological position, which stemmed from a coherent theological system." Often overlooked, this theological system justified segregation and ideas of racial difference "by means of an intricately disseminated theology of purity." Indeed, notions of a Christian racial purity formed a "theological influence to which most men and women who came of age in the white southern church can attest," a theology with "pervasive influence."²⁰

One of the most significant interventions into the historiography has come from Jane Dailey, a Southern and legal historian, who has emphasized the role of Christian theology in determining white Southern racial views. Dailey has claimed that while recent studies have contributed in expanding "the organizational and ideological genealogy of the civil rights movement" and have rightly acknowledged the significance of religion for black and white southerners involved, that still, "the religiosity of antiintegrationists has not fared so well in the

the Desegregation of Southern Churches," *Religion and American Culture* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2013), pp. 232-61; Bill J. Leonard, "A Theology for Racism: Southern Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement," *Baptist History and Heritage*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter 1999).

²⁰ Charles Marsh, "Reviews." *Political Theology* Vol. 6, No. 2 (2005) 259-271. Web. 12 Apr 2009.

<<http://www.politicaltheology.com/ojs/index.php/PT/article/view/994/605>>. For Chappell's argument about the disunity and weakness of religious segregationism, see: David L. Chappell, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," *Journal of American Studies* 32 (August 1998): 237-62; David L. Chappell, "Disunity and Religious Institutions in the White South," in *Massive Resistance*, ed Clive Webb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

scholarly literature.”²¹ Dailey has raised some crucial questions, among them: “If religion has been and continues to be so important to those arguing in favor of segregation as well as those resisting it, why have modern historians preferred to study scientific racism or white supremacist politics and ignored this more widespread and deeply held set of beliefs?” The answer, she has declared, “lies in a scholarly inclination to take the historical teleology of secularization so seriously as to distort.” The religion of the people has been rendered an “archaic vestige” and not “a coherent cosmology” broad enough to provide people with a functional worldview in modernity.²² Besides being poor scholarship, the marginalization of unsavory religious views by historians has perpetuated an overly simplistic, triumphalist narrative of the civil rights movement.²³ Scholars have largely missed, Dailey has argued “the titanic struggle waged by participants on both sides of the conflict to harness the immense power of the divine to their cause.”²⁴ Put another way, white segregationist Christians were not merely hypocrites. “To classify them as such implies that true Christianity would have required its believers to accept racial equality,” Dailey avers, which, in addition to staking a claim to “true” faith, is a “dubious mode of analysis for historians.”²⁵

²¹ Jane Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance: Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown” in *Massive Resistance*, 152.

²² Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 172.

²³ When historians overlook the power of Southern religious views, Dailey wrote, “they participate in what was perhaps the most lasting triumph of the civil rights movement: its successful appropriation of Christian dogma.” (Dailey “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 172).

²⁴ “Some of the historians most engaged with the religious beliefs of civil rights activists have, almost in the same breath, denigrated the religious faith of segregationists,” Dailey purported. She perceptively argues that this position makes the objective historian a religious believer, of sorts. Dailey asserts, “For the historian (as opposed to the believer), orthodoxy is the product not of revelation but of conflict, in which the victory of one interpretation over another is historically produced rather than divinely ordained. Historians of the civil rights era tend to pass over this conflict and, ignoring of condemning the testimony of many who believed that segregation was ‘the commandment and law of God,’ award the palm of orthodoxy to the colorblind universalist theology of the ‘beloved community.’” While understandable, “those scholars and students who uncritically treat King’s Christianity as ‘orthodox’ or ‘true’ not only lose a great deal of historical and theological complexity but also miss most of the real drama in the monumental conflict between the integrationist Christian theology of liberation and its venerable counterpart, the theology of segregation.” Historians must embrace the civil rights movement as also a theological conflict over orthodoxy, a conflict without a predestined victor. (Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 152-153, 172).

²⁵ Harvey, “God and Sin,” 285

When the theology of white Protestants in the South is taken seriously, it soon becomes evident how intertwined theology and segregation were in the minds of Southern Christians, how attacks on the racial order were often interpreted as attacks on the religious order.²⁶ Christian theology, in the hands of some, was harnessed to preserve the segregationist system; in the hands of others, it was used to defy that same system. Both sides claimed God was on their side. Thus, Dailey has suggested this new analytical lens: that scholars view the civil rights movement “as in part an argument about competing claims to Christian orthodoxy.”²⁷ The notion of orthodoxy reframes the civil rights movement, imbuing it with the same fervor and spiritual significance as the Council at Nicea or the Inquisition, and opens new avenues for scholars, especially scholars of American religious history. It also helps explain why both sides claimed to promote God’s way and how both employed the Bible to make their arguments. It was not just civil rights but Christian orthodoxy that was at stake. An interpretation of the civil rights movement as a struggle between and over definitions of orthodoxy and heresy takes historians into the hidden realms of significance that created layered and multi-faceted contestations over race and religion in the South.

While many have noted the slippery nature of metaphysical inquiry, there is a glaring need in the historical literature of both civil rights and white resistance to address the ways in which theological ideas have manifested in the lives and stories of the past.²⁸ In the everyday that

²⁶ Dailey writes, “As absurd as the argument for divine segregation may appear to today’s readers, it had great power in its day. Evidence of the political and social power of these ideas is everywhere--in legal decisions, in personal correspondence, in sermons, pamphlets, speeches and newspapers.”(Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 157).

²⁷ Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred.” Put another way, Dailey “considers white southern reactions to the civil rights movement...as a religious conflict over orthodoxy between two strongly held Christian traditions.” (Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 153.)

²⁸ Questions of religious belief are often dismissed as either unimportant or unanswerable by contemporary scholars. Historian John McGreevy commented that “historians of modern America give matters of faith and belief only fleeting attention.” John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) Echoing McGreevy, Jon Butler asserted,

becomes history, individuals embodied theological concepts and doctrine. They also adapted and created theologies to match their circumstances, a practice rife with consequences and significance. Certainly, it can be challenging to access these hidden realms of the soul, especially for a historian. But through oral histories and a careful examination of religious materials, sermons, and relevant theological works and trends, it is possible to recapture a sense of people's spiritual understandings and orderings. Despite the difficulties, there is a need to reexamine the social and political realities of racial division and reconciliation in light of the theological. My dissertation addresses this need, taking its inspiration from an emerging field that Charles Marsh has termed *lived theology*.²⁹

So what exactly is lived theology? Theology is most simply defined as the systematic study of God. Or, as St Augustine of Hippo wrote, theology, or *theologia*, comprised “reasoning or discussion concerning the Deity.”³⁰ While traditionally *theology* indicated a central discourse surrounding Christianity and the Christian tradition, from the 1500s on it has broadened to include not only Christian theology, but the study of other belief systems and religions.³¹ Even within these shifts, theology continues to indicate an intellectual engagement with notions of the Divine, occupying the realm of the mind and the soul. But, as Raphael Warnock cautioned,

“religion has not fared well in the historiography of modern America.” Jon Butler, “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History,” *Journal of American History*, 90 (March 2004). So too, Eugene Genovese wrote in 2003 that, “in this secular, not to say cynical, age few tasks present greater difficulty than that of compelling the well-educated to take religious matters seriously. (Eugene Genovese, “The Christian Tradition” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornell West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.)

²⁹ Marsh, through his own scholarship and through the founding of the Project for Lived Theology at the University of Virginia, has coined the term ‘lived theology’ and established it as a field of study for academics.

³⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, Part VIII, i. Though the term has its roots in the Christian tradition, it now extends to many other types of religious belief or even unbelief. Classic articulations of theology represent an attempt by mankind to find, interpret, and understand God, usually through a combination of reason and revelation.

³¹ In the United States, a nation boasting the primacy of freedom of religious belief, theology has mostly been the purview of the individual to devise for him or herself a system of belief or nonbelief. As one Georgia minister wrote in 1903, “there are as many theologies as there are people.” Rev. John Jabez Ranier, *Kinship of God and Man*, Vol. III The American Church, (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1903), 8.

“theology that is not lived is not theology at all.”³² The internal, ephemeral renderings of the mind and soul find their way into the external, tangible stuff of life. That brings us to *lived theology*.

According to Marsh, *lived theology* “might be considered a probing and careful narration of life inside the movement of God in the social world.”³³ It is the story people tell themselves and others about what God is doing in the world and how they are participating in that Divine action. For Marsh, *lived theology* involves studying the “patterns and practices” of communities of faith as “rich and generative material for theological inquiry.” These patterns and practices, he claimed, “are not just ways of ‘doing things,’ but they are also ways of ‘saying things,’ ...practices and patterns are ‘communicative.’”³⁴ Lived theology stands in contrast to the idea of lived religion, another field unto itself. Lived religion, sometimes also referred to as “popular religion,” focuses on concrete religious practices in the lives of everyday parishioners rather than on issues of belief. Students of lived religion tend toward “cultural and ethnographical approaches to the study of religion,” in the words of David Hall.³⁵ While it sometimes includes interrogation of theological beliefs, the study of lived religion does so with “an empiricist orientation to religion,” with a focus doing rather than believing. Lived religion, Robert Orsi explained, “points us to religion as it is shaped and experienced in...everyday experience.”³⁶ In short, lived religion examines action to understand belief while lived theology examines belief to understand action.

³² Raphael Warnock, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA, 2013 Parks-King Lecture, “Piety or Protest: Black Theology and the Divided Mind of the Black Church,” Yale Divinity School, 2013.

³³ Charles Marsh, “The Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage: A Collection of Essays,” University of Virginia, The Project on Lived Theology, 4.

³⁴ Charles Marsh, “The Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage;” Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

³⁵ *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, edited by David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), viii.

³⁶ Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” in *Lived Religion in America*, 8-9.

These descriptions of lived theology are certainly helpful, but a concrete definition remains necessary. Therefore, this dissertation defines lived theology as *an exploration of beliefs regarding the divine and how those beliefs inspire and shape actions in the world*. Lived theology therefore exists both in the unseen realms of belief, the hidden motivations and repetitions of the heart, and also in the external actions that individuals believe to have theological significance. An exploration of lived theology examines the internal substance of theological beliefs and their outward performance. For instance, a woman praying may be an example of lived theology in that her act of praying demonstrates a possession of belief; that is, the act of kneeling or bowing one's head is an outward performance of theological adherence. But she also may be an example of lived theology in that her act of prayer reveals specific theological presuppositions: namely, that there is a God, that God hears prayers, and that God's hearing matters in her specific situation. Those theological tenets, like her action itself, can be subversive and can challenge the status quo. In other words, it is not only the general presence of belief that is significant, but the specific content of that belief. This approach broadens the possibilities for what actions may constitute lived theology. Theology can be lived not only in conspicuously religious actions, like prayer, but in seemingly secular ones, like marching or even standing still. There are almost no boundaries for what actions may be theological, depending on the actor's state of mind or heart.

To study "lived theology" in the civil rights movement, then, is to examine marching and singing, shouting and shooting, voting and vitriol on the one hand, and the more hidden beliefs that animated those actions on the other. These are subtle prayers, internal hopes and fears, ways of imagining God and society. Though, as Marsh has cautioned, "there are no easy patterns for predicting the way religious ideas govern particular courses of action," there exists "in each case,

a theological sense or inner logic in these embedded theologies.”³⁷ For how people believe often animates how they act. To borrow a phrase from Dorothy Sayers, “The dogma is the drama.”³⁸

There is perhaps no greater instance of theological drama than the civil rights movement. In fact, Thomas Merton, the Catholic thinker and writer, once described the civil rights movement as “the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States.”³⁹ Since Christianity animated much of the movement, it must be reconsidered not only as a social, political, and cultural revolution, but as a theological one as well. To take this religious element seriously, Charles Marsh averred, is to re-envisage the civil rights movement “as part of the historical tradition of religious revivals, such as the so-called First and Second Great Awakenings, as much as it is a part of the tradition of protest movements such as abolitionism, populism, feminism, and the labor movement.”⁴⁰ Yet, at the same time that many activists put their faith in action in the protest movement, many segregationists invoked the divine in their attempt to maintain segregation. Therefore, historians must begin to re-imagine the civil rights movement as, in part, a theological struggle.

Seen theologically, the civil rights era emerges as a moment of opportunity. For a fleeting instant, the civil rights movement confronted evangelical America in its own language--the language of faith. But the moment passed by. Instead of listening and turning from racism, white Southern Protestants largely retreated back into old arguments, while the civil rights movement fragmented, with many abandoning the tenets of theological nonviolence. The dream that the movement espoused of the beloved community, of Christian cooperation, ended in division and dissension. The brief possibility Christian nonviolence offered the nation in the civil

³⁷ Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

³⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Dogma is the Drama,” (1938).

³⁹ Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 131.

⁴⁰ David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 87.

rights movement vanished, and by the late 1960s Southern Christians were as divided as ever. Theology lost. Americans refused to engage with Christianity's theological demands and chose to entrench themselves in the realm of reactive racial politics, though always under the guise of religious orthodoxy. Engaging with the lived theology of the civil rights movement not only promises a more nuanced understanding of the past, but also reveals the power of theology in American life and politics. This dissertation and its exploration of lived theology helps us to understand both the power of the civil rights movement and of white Southern resistance to it while telling the story of a town--Americus, Georgia.⁴¹

Tucked away in the pecan orchards and cotton fields of southwest Georgia's Sumter County, Americus may seem an unlikely place to root a historical study. But with around 13,000 residents, almost exactly divided between black and white, Americus was in many ways an archetypical town in the Deep South.⁴² Agriculturally based, community oriented, deeply segregated, and devoutly religious, Americus looked a lot like many other small cities scattered throughout the South in the 20th century. For all its ordinary-ness, Americus boasted a few particulars that make it an ideal place to position a theological interrogation of the civil rights movement.

The first was the presence of Koinonia Farm, an explicitly Christian endeavor in

⁴¹ Community studies are one of the most fruitful approaches to the civil rights movement. "Each community now has its own story to tell," historian Steven Tuck wrote, "and only when more of these stories are told will the Southern civil rights movement be understood." Telling the story of Americus contributes to this deep engagement with the local movements in the South. Additionally, the notion of lived theology has not yet been undertaken in a community study. (Steven Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 109)

⁴² Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 176. As Marshall Frady, a prominent Southern journalist recalled, Americus "had the appearance of having been abruptly dropped down intact, out of nowhere, into the negligibly inhabited spaces of South Georgia." (Marshall Frady, *Southerners: A Journalist's Odyssey* (New American Library, 1980). In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the 13,000 residents were almost exactly 50-50 percent black/white. According to the 2000 Census Record, Americus has 17,013 residents, 1,623 per square mile, with a population that is 39 percent white, 58 percent black, 2.49 percent Hispanic, .86 percent Asian, .23 percent Native American. The median income is 26,808 with 27.7 percent of those living below the poverty line.

interracialism on the outskirts of Americus. From its founding in the 1940s, Koinonia Farm existed as a demonstration of Christian racial equality, infuriating its segregationist neighbors and infusing racial questions with religious overtones. Secondly, Americus was an important site for the Southwest Georgia Freedom Project, an initiative of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. During the course of this project, activists clashed with recalcitrant local institutions, generating conflicts--harsh quashings of demonstrations, draconian legal sentences for dissenters, and attacks of arson---that frequently became brutal and drew national notoriety.⁴³ The story of the struggle over civil rights in Americus is compelling, and it has never adequately been told. Though a few historians have considered Koinonia Farm and others have examined the civil rights movement in Georgia, though accounts of SNCC and Martin Luther King, Jr. sometimes contain passing references to this little city, no comprehensive study of this community exists, certainly not one seeking to understand the larger context of both civil rights activists and their opponents. This dissertation attempts such a portrait.

Additionally, the fierce struggles over civil rights in Americus provide extraordinarily rich material through which to examine the theological dimensions of the civil rights movement. “To understand the world,” one famous Southerner notoriously commented, “you have to understand a place like Mississippi.”⁴⁴ By this, William Faulkner meant that to understand general human experience, one must reckon with its grotesque extremities. To know the glorious, one must also know the brutal. But he may have also meant that to know *something*, one must know it

⁴³ While the Mississippi Freedom Project is well-known and possesses a rich historical scholarship, its counterpart, sometimes called its “fraternal twin,” the Southwest Georgia Project, is much less acknowledged and studied, most likely because of its overall failure.

⁴⁴ According to legend, William Faulkner uttered these words, though the attribution is still disputed. (Willie Morris, *New York Times* Book Review, 1996.)

somewhere. The abstract must become real; the “apocryphal” must become “actual.”⁴⁵ In both of these senses, Americus, Georgia, is not unlike Faulkner’s Mississippi. The battle over race and orthodoxy in Americus was particularly contentious and intensely violent. Marches downtown, decisions in church boardrooms, kneel-ins and prayers, the persecution of Koinonia Farm: all contributed to an intensely charged atmosphere and repeated contestations over race, theology, culture, and politics. Americus’s characters also vividly demonstrated the theological and social conflict, from J.R Campbell, a devoted black minister, to Charles Crisp, a wealthy racist white business owner; from Clarence Jordan, a radically integrationist white Baptist minister, to Teresa Mansfield, a young black student who marched in demonstrations. Americus was a place of both profound Christian interracialism and vehement Christian segregation. Lofty ideas and clashing ideologies took on flesh and blood. To paraphrase Faulkner, to understand the theological civil rights movement, one must understand a place like Americus.

Part I of the dissertation describes the historical and theological landscape of postwar Americus. Examining national and regional patterns as well as local peculiarities, the dissertation analyzes Koinonia Farm, the city’s established white Protestant churches, and the black churches of Americus in order to uncover each group’s claims to theological and racial orthodoxy. Chapter 1 opens with the story of Koinonia Farm and an interrogation of Koinonia’s theological orthodoxy and racial radicalism. Like its founder Clarence Jordan, Koinonia Farm possessed an unusual theological foundation that emphasized Christian communalism, redemptive agrarianism, and racial reconciliation. The Koinonians’ radical Christianity and interracialism drew the ire of the local white community and revealed the sharp theological conflict between

⁴⁵ “Interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel,” *The Paris Review* (Spring 1956); reprinted in *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962*, ed. James Meriwether (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 255.

the Christianity of the Farm and that of its Americus neighbors. Occupying imposing churches on Lee Street, the white Protestant establishment in Americus is the subject of Chapter 2. These churches, particularly the First Baptist Church, First Methodist Church, and First Presbyterian Church, promoted a theological worldview marked by a commitment to biblical literalism, evangelism, and congregational autonomy. In the postwar South, these white Protestant congregations flourished as bastions of privilege and remained strictly segregated. Chapter 3 addresses the black church in Americus (with its different denominational affiliations and particularities) and the theological tenets of black theology. Inherited from generations of faithful black Christians as well as twentieth century black religious intellectuals, black theology encompassed the belief of all people as image-bearers of God, segregation as sinful and idolatrous, God as Deliverer and on the side of freedom, and Jesus as one who suffered for and suffered with his people. These beliefs not only sustained the black church throughout eras of oppression, but also imbued its freedom struggle with transcendent power. Koinonia Farm, white southern Protestants, and the black church represented distinct groups with particular theologies and competing claims to Christian orthodoxy and to the Christian view of race.

Part II traces how these theological contexts influenced and were influenced by the civil rights movement of the early 1960s. Chapter 4 locates the practice and performance of theology in the marches and demonstrations of the civil rights movement as it arrived in Americus, revealing how ideas, prayers, songs, and certain theological teachings anchored action. The theology learned over previous decades was unapologetically and confrontationally lived in the movement. Chapter 5 discusses the quiet but steely resistance of many white Southerners to the civil rights movement. Though the opposition to the civil rights movement in the 1960s turned away from acerbic public pronouncements and explicit racism, it nevertheless regrouped,

condemning the immorality of the civil rights movement, ostracizing dissenters, and abandoning public schools for private Christian ones. These white southerners changed their tactics but preserved their conservative theological beliefs; they preserved their theology but attached it to new issues. Chapter 6 explores the kneel-in phenomenon, examining the way that the civil rights movement approached the white church and the white church's fraught response. Through kneel-ins, the civil rights movement confronted segregated churches theologically, causing a theological crisis over the meaning of Christian orthodoxy that rippled outward from Americus. The conclusion wrestles with questions about the enduring significance of the theological battles of the 1960s and their consequences for Christian theology in America.

The civil rights era, while indisputably bringing remarkable change in the United States, also laid the social, cultural and theological groundwork for ongoing battles over race and religion. The fight over school vouchers, over nuns distributing contraception, over abortion and welfare and the First Amendment, had their roots in the tumultuous 1960s. And, just as the civil rights movement cannot be properly understood without an examination and consideration of the role of lived theology, neither can the decades that follow. By interrogating the theological contestations inherent and apparent in the civil rights struggle, this dissertation contributes to the historiography of both the civil rights movement and white resistance to it, lending understanding to the befuddling, persistent intersections between race and religion in the American South. It also, through the story of Americus, investigates how conflicts over orthodoxy occurred in real places, how "ordinary southern towns become theatres of complex theological drama."⁴⁶ It is to that drama that we now turn.

⁴⁶ Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 3.

CHAPTER 1

“Demonstration Plot for the Kingdom”: The Radical Orthodoxy of Koinonia Farm

“When time began, the Idea already was. The Idea was at home with God, and the Idea and God were one...In him was life, and the life was humanity’s light. And the light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness never quenched it...Well the Idea became a man and moved in with us. We looked him in the face--the face of an only son whose father is full of kindness and integrity.”⁴⁷

“Some of those hotheads had gotten a stomach full of Koinonia.”⁴⁸

The sun watched as the two men wandered across the dusty soil. Still blazing in Georgia’s early September, it bore fiery witness as one man bent to the scorched earth, grabbed a handful of parched dirt and let it slide through his calloused fingertips. With a peaceful energy and a sly smile, he turned to his friend and declared, “This is it.”⁴⁹ The man was Clarence Jordan, a Southern Baptist minister, a farmer, a native Georgian, and a radical visionary. The place was 440 acres of barren land eight miles southwest of Americus, a small city in Southwest Georgia’s Sumter County. This was not to be merely a prosperous pecan or peanut farm. No one looking at the forgotten and dusty expanse of earth would have bet on Eden flourishing there. But it was a different sort of Eden that Jordan and his friend, Martin England, were pursuing.

Unable to resolve the teachings of Jesus Christ with the social customs of the time, Jordan and England sought to create a place in Georgia in which the doctrines of Christianity

⁴⁷ “The Idea Made Flesh,” John 1:1-2, 4-5, 14, *Clarence Jordan: Essential Writings* edited by Joyce Hollyday (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1970), 37.

⁴⁸ Interview with Kelso Gooden and Marion Hicks, Windsor Hotel, Americus, GA, July 2012.

⁴⁹ Dallas Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence: The Story of Clarence Jordan and the Koinonia Farm Experiment (1942-1970)*, (Americus, Georgia: Koinonia Partners Inc.1971), 33. It is significant to note that Dallas Lee was a close personal friend of Clarence Jordan and actually lived at Koinonia for a time. His account is the testimony of a believer, a sometimes unquestioning, always engaging story as remembered by admirer of Jordan who witnessed much of the Koinonia story. Though these sorts of hagiographies can be historically problematic, his work is the most detailed account of the Farm, filled with first-hand accounts and stories, many documented by memory, that provide incomparable richness. While I use Lee’s work liberally, I have checked it by other sources, and challenge it with my own more critical interpretation of Jordan and Koinonia.

were enjoyed in purity. This Edenic experiment was called Koinonia Farm.⁵⁰ Its founders established Koinonia, a word meaning *fellowship* or *communion* in Greek, as a theological experiment, a space in which beliefs about the Fatherhood of God, brotherhood of man, dignity of work, and fellowship of the Spirit were lived and worked out. To put it another way, “the ideas of the new Testament either had to be rejected or incarnated.”⁵¹ Koinonia was to be this Incarnation.

Established in 1942 as a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God,” Koinonia imagined itself as an embodiment of Christian theology. Taking its purpose from the gospel of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament, Koinonia was to be a community characterized by unity, generosity, service and love, a place where the land would be redeemed and the barren places made fruitful. It was also a place where racial and economic barriers would be broken down. As Martin England expressed it: “the Christian religion can reconcile differences between people of different race, class, and economic opportunity.”⁵² Koinonia, then, by its very existence, exposed the hypocrisy of Southern Christians who persisted in speaking of love and brotherhood while cruelly oppressing black people in the South. By living in such a way on those acres of land in Southwest Georgia, the Koinonians, as they were called, believed they manifested their faith in Christ. Clarence and Florence Jordan, Martin and Mabel England, and the others who would come to live at the Farm “were unified,” historian Dallas Lee has written, “around the idea that the koinonia--the fellowship of believers--was the continuation in history of

⁵⁰ Koinonia is pronounced Coy-No-NEE-Ah and indicates *fellowship* or *communion* in Greek. The word is used in the Bible to refer to the bonds between believers in the early Church, as mentioned in the book of Acts. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the communion, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need...They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.” (Acts 2:24-27, *Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (ESV); all biblical references will be ESV unless noted).

⁵¹ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 5.

⁵² Martin England to Mack Goss, 15 July 1942, Clarence L. Jordan Manuscript Collection, Hargrett Rare Books Library, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA. Box 2340, Folder1. Hereafter MS2340, MS2341, MS756.

the incarnation, of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.”⁵³ The Word was made flesh; theology was lived. Though often derided as radical, the Koinonians insisted that they practiced orthodox, biblical, even Baptist, theology, and that any radicalism was Christ’s, not theirs.⁵⁴ The presence of Koinonia Farm, the teachings of its founder Clarence Jordan, its theology of radical orthodoxy, and its history in Sumter County, reveal that Christian principles and race relations had long been intertwined. Before the civil rights movement arrived in Americus, Koinonia Farm

⁵³ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence* 81. Though the focus in this paper is on Koinonia’s theological significance rather than the daily functioning of the Farm, a brief note on its sociological factors may be helpful. Beginning with 4 initial members, Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England, the fellowship blossomed when 6 couples signed the covenant for membership in 1952. Members committed themselves to the koinonia, holding their possessions in common and sharing all aspects of life. The Koinonian men and women worked together, ate together, worshipped and prayed together, experienced conflict and forgiveness together. They built more housing as more people came, stayed up late discussing war and nonviolence and eating popcorn, got angry when a comb disappeared from the bathroom, and added to their number. They got some chickens and began a poultry business, began harvesting peanuts and pecans. They interacted with their neighbors, helping them with farming, providing equipment and training and even beginning a ‘cow library’ where their poor neighbors could trade in a dry cow for a milking one. Koinonia “intentionally grew more vegetables and fruit for home consumption than it needed and shared the abundance with neighbors who needed it most.” With a membership of varying size and frequent visitors, it is difficult to estimate exactly how many lived at Koinonia at a given time, though Ernest Morgan estimated in a letter to Martin King that the Farm had around 50-60 members in 1956. (King, *The Papers*, vol. 3, 348) The fellowship included whites and blacks, though white members always outnumbered black members significantly. Koinonia also interacted with their neighbors, most of whom were poor, rural blacks, providing farming skills, equipment, school bus rides, vacation bible schools, and friendship. (MS 756 3:1, National Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, TN, AR 39 1:1).

⁵⁴ According to his biographer and friend Dallas Lee, Jordan did not place Koinonia in the lineage of American radicalism. He was “was no student of community,” Lee claims, “He did not review the history of the Hutterites or visit the Society of Brothers or read about the radical Oneida community, or investigate any other of hundreds of communities in the United States before he started his own community.” Rather, “He was moved solely by his immersion in the Scriptures.” (Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 88). Koinonia Farm was certainly not the only example of racial and/or religious radicalism. There is a long and fascinating history of radicalism and utopian communities. See: Donald E. Pitzer, *America’s Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Arthur E. Bestor Jr., *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950); Paul Boyer, “A Joyful Noyes: Reassessing America’s Utopian Tradition,” *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 1975,) pp. 25-30; Frank E. Manuel, ed., *Utopias and Utopian Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). In response to southern poverty, the ravages of war, slavery, agrarianism, and Jim Crow, many Southerners sought an alternative to proscribed society through increasing radicalism. The Highlander Folk School, with Myles Horton and Don West, Howard Kester and his belief in the redemptive possibilities of agriculture, Providence Farm, The Penn School, The Ruskin Community in Ware County, GA, The Bruderhof in Germany, North Dakota, New York, and The Hutterian Brethren are all examples of Southern radicalism. See also Andrew S. Chancey, “Restructuring Southern Society: The Radical Vision on Koinonia Farm,” University of Georgia Master’s Thesis, 1990; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008). Interestingly, Jordan did not conceive of Koinonia’s experiment as yet another example of American radicalism.

did, a prophetic “voice in the wilderness” in the segregated South. It was a voice that would be misunderstood and squelched.

Clarence Jordan, a ‘Prophet in Blue Jeans’

Clarence Jordan, “tall, high-hipped, hands jammed into blue jean pockets, floppy straw hat shading a grin--dusty from the peanut rows, bespectacled from persistent study,” was, in the words of Dallas Lee, a man “full of the unexpected.” In many ways, Jordan was a walking paradox. He was “a gentle man who thundered,” a homegrown son who took on the established tradition, a faithful Baptist who was hated by many of his fellow churchgoers, “a nonviolent man who was known to have stared down a Ku Kluxer or two,” an unassuming servant who believed God could use him to change the world.⁵⁵ He was a “prophet in overalls.”⁵⁶ This contradictory identity stemmed from Jordan’s traditional Southern upbringing and his radical encounter with Jesus Christ, his hope to preserve the South’s land and change its customs, his desire to love his neighbors and also confront them.

Jordan was born on July 29, 1912 in the small town of Talbotton, Georgia, 55 miles northwest of Americus.⁵⁷ His father, J.W. Jordan, was an “intense, puritanical” banker who founded the Bank of Talbotton and the general store in town and ensured that his family enjoyed relative prosperity and privilege. The seventh of ten children, Jordan enjoyed a full, social childhood, while displaying a certain reticence, seriousness, and independence from a young age. While he played sports and participated in school events, Jordan also spent hours by himself

⁵⁵ Lee *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 1. Jordan, Lee mused, “was a dirt-farming aristocrat, a good ole country boy with a doctor’s degree, a teacher with manure on his boots, and scholar with working clothes on his mind.” Or as another journalist remarked, “In his farm shoes and faded blue denims he looks like he could have stepped out from behind a gas pump in any station on the outskirts of 1,000 Georgia towns.” (Nicholas von Hoffman, “Clarence Jordan: A Rights Hero in Faded Blue Denim,” *Chicago Daily News*, August 7, 1965, MS2341 3:6)

⁵⁶ Henlee Barnette, “Clarence Jordan: A Prophet in Blue Jeans,” Speech to Southern Baptist Convention, 1983.

⁵⁷ Talbotton is a very rural, poor town, the county seat of Talbot County, west Georgia. As of 2000, the area claimed just over 1000 residents in its roughly 3 square mile area. (2000 US Census)

playing the piano, talking with his mother, and practicing typing on his father's typewriter.⁵⁸

Clarence developed a predilection for verbal sparring with his family and friends, disagreeing with them on some matter and proceeding to argue for hours. His brother Frank branded the argumentative Clarence 'Grump,' a nickname that endured throughout his childhood.⁵⁹

Like many Southerners, the family attended the local Baptist Church faithfully.⁶⁰ The church served as a social gathering place: the location of barbecues, picnics, choir rehearsals and holiday celebrations. The Baptist Church also represented a place of dogmatic religious and moral instruction. Sunday school lessons, prayer meetings, stern sermons, and steamy nights at summer tent revivals-- these traditional elements of Southern Baptist faithfulness marked Clarence's upbringing in Talbotton.⁶¹

But even in a culture where the tenets of the Baptist Church were as undisputed as the notion that chicken ought to be fried, the contrarian Clarence had moments of questioning. As a small child in church he had frequently sung the familiar melody: *'Jesus loves the little children/ All the children of the world/ Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight/ Jesus loves the little children of the world.'*⁶² "The question arose in my mind," Clarence recalled, years later, "'were the little black children precious in God's sight just like the little white children?' The song said they were. Why were they always so ragged, so dirty and hungry?"

⁵⁸ Jordan was always close with his mother, who died in YEAR, when Clarence was AGE. In a May 1928 letter, he refers to her as "the sweetest mother a boy ever had," and even remarks that "since God has blest me with such wonderful parents, certainly I can honor Him and keep his word." (MS 756 1:2; Sep 1929 MS 756 1:3.)

⁵⁹ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 6-7.

⁶⁰ The Jordans may have been Baptists, but Clarence "knew his culture before he knew his Bible." Christianity, for him, was simply part of proper Southern life. And the Jordans were proud Southerners. According to family history, the Jordan ancestors had arrived in the 1600s and settled in the Southern colonies, particularly Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. Family lore also boasts that Clarence Jordan's maternal grandfather actually stole a mule from General Sherman's army during the Civil War. While hardly a significant loss to the Union General, the anecdote provided the family with a sense pride at the effort. As a friend recalled, Clarence "looked southern, talked southern, walked southern, ate southern, dressed southern. He was the southerner of southerners." Note here the literary nod to the Apostle Paul's assertion that he was a "Hebrew of Hebrews." (Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence* 12).

⁶¹ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 5, 7.

⁶² This refrain is actually the chorus of a hymn penned by the Chicago preacher C. Herbert Woolston (1856-1927).

Did God have favorite children?” While admitting he “could not figure out the answers to these puzzling questions” at the time, Clarence nevertheless stated that from a young age, he “knew something was wrong.”⁶³

Another moment occurred a few years later, when Clarence was twelve. The Talbot County jail sat close to the Jordan’s house, and Clarence would often veer past it on his way home from school. Stopping to observe the convicts on the chain gang, he felt simultaneously repulsed and enamored by their sinewy muscles, their profane language, and the mystery of their punished lives. Almost all of them were black. Peering behind the barbed wire fences, Clarence watched men with chains binding their ankles, men whose spirits were worn down under shame and mistreatment, men whose bodies were scarred by the lash and bruised by the awful strain of the ‘stretcher,’ a primitive torture device.⁶⁴ So frequent were Clarence’s visits to the jail that he developed friendships with the men and even received cornbread from the jail’s cook on occasion. He knew their names, their faces, and their voices.⁶⁵ One swampy night in August, Clarence and his family attended a religious revival in Talbotton, singing hymns and praying for the Holy Spirit’s presence to enliven their hearts and shine through in their lives. The warden of the jail, Mr. MacDonald, participated in the revival, singing bass in the choir, and becoming particularly “carried away” during a rendition of the song ‘Love Lifted Me.’⁶⁶ With tears welling up in his eyes and his face contorted with feeling, the warden McDonald bellowed, “*Love Lifted Me! /Love Lifted Me! /When nothing else could help/ Love Lifted Me! /...Love so mighty and so true, merits my soul’s best song/ Faithful, loving service, too, to Him belong.*” Lying in bed that

⁶³ Clarence Jordan, *Journals*. He continues, “perhaps it wasn’t God’s doings but man’s. God didn’t turn them away from our churches--we did. God didn’t pay them low wages--we did. God didn’t make them live in another section of town and in miserable huts--we did...Maybe they were just as precious in God’s sight, but were they in ours?”

⁶⁴The stretcher was a structure that bound one’s feet to the ground while lifting the hands tied by a rope to, painfully stretching the body when extended.

⁶⁵ Lee *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 8.

⁶⁶ Walden Howard, “The Legacy of Clarence Jordan,” *Faith at Work*, April 1970, 15-18; AR 39.

night, the hymn still ringing in his ears, Clarence's sleepy reverie was interrupted by the sound of screaming. The "agonizing groans" persisted for what seemed an eternity, as a horrified Clarence lay awake in the darkness, listening intently. "I was sure I could recognize who it was, and I was sure I knew what was happening," Clarence remembered, "I knew not only who was in the stretcher, but who was pulling the rope"--the warden. Identifying with the tortured prisoner, Clarence burned with anger towards the warden who, only hours earlier, had proclaimed God's mercy and vowed his own loving service. "I got really mad with God," Clarence recalled, deciding, "if He [God] was love and the warden was an example of it, I didn't want anything to do with it."⁶⁷ This and other incongruities between the character of God and the reality of life in the Jim Crow South began to trouble a young Clarence, though he never mentioned this experience to his family or revealed his growing disillusionment. Rather, as Lee described, "it remained a secret, stuffed into the chemistry of his body and soul, where guilt abides, where fear is rooted, and where conviction slowly matures to action."⁶⁸

Clarence Jordan decided to become a farmer and to use the skills he would thereby acquire to strike a blow against the sharecropping system, equipping black farmers with the knowledge needed to maintain successful farms and lift themselves from poverty. With these hopes, Jordan left Talbotton in 1929 and enrolled at the Georgia State College of Agriculture at the University of Georgia in Athens. At UGA, Clarence shed his more antisocial tendencies and embraced the various opportunities afforded by college life. His siblings noticed the change and offered some classic sibling ribbing. "Still averaging seven dates a week with those debutantes?" his sister Cornelia wrote in one letter, while another warned against too much "popularity with

⁶⁷ Clarence Jordan, as quoted in Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 9.

⁶⁸ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 8-9. It is worth noting, about both of these incidents as his biographer does, that "whatever feeling troubled him at a young age, it probably was not as acute as his analysis in retrospect indicates. But the boy's simple registration of the discrepancy between what he was being taught and what he was seeing as fact derailed him at an early age from the mainline of tradition."

the fairer sex.”⁶⁹ “You don’t know how popular ‘Grump’ is until you follow him around awhile,” Clarence’s brother George remarked in a letter to their mother, noting, “he’s gone to some meeting tonight.”⁷⁰ It seems he was always going to some meeting. In addition to dating and studying diligently, Clarence pledged a fraternity, participated in the debate team, the drama club, the band, and the YMCA, served in the Officer’s training reserves, and wrote for the college’s agricultural newspaper.⁷¹ He also joined the Baptist Young People’s Union, which he eventually led, and attended Sunday School at the local First Baptist Church.⁷² For a while, his social activities and academic work overshadowed the persistent racial and religious questions of his youth. But they were not long forgotten. By his senior year, Clarence’s passion for farming was tempered by a mounting suspicion that improved agriculture could not address the real issues behind the South’s inequality. “Whites seemed to have the very things I wanted blacks to have,” Jordan mused, “and the whites were living in such a hell. Why should I feel that blacks would be in any less of a hell if they had these things?” He concluded, “there had to be something extra somewhere.” He began to seek out “spiritual resources,” and soon “felt a call to the ministry.”⁷³ In 1933, Jordan entered the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Though initially the lanky country boy felt out of place in such a “northern metropolis,” Clarence soon adjusted and threw himself into his studies, which he found both difficult and exhilarating. “I thought the work at the University was pretty hard but now I see it was only

⁶⁹ MS 756 1:1, MS 756 1:2. Though this no doubt continued in his college years, his sister’s letter came when Clarence was a high school senior.

⁷⁰ September 21, 1932 MS 756 1:6.

⁷¹ MS 756 1:4, MS 756 1:5; MS 756 1:6. Jordan proved to be a gifted leader, holding leadership offices in many of these organizations.

⁷² He commented of the nearly 100 students involved, “that’s a little different than Talbotton, isn’t it?” and noted the “fine pastor.” (MS 756 1:3, Letter to Mother, Sep 16, 1929; MS 756 1:6)

⁷³ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 11; Clarence Jordan, “My Call to the Ministry,” August 13, 1933; MS 756 1:7; Tracy E. K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South: The Story of Koinonia Farm*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

child's play compared to what it is up here," Clarence wrote to his mother in 1933, "Hebrew alone requires almost as much time as did all my subjects at Georgia, to say nothing of Greek, Biblical Interpretation, Old Testament, New Testament, Sociology and Music."⁷⁴ Though the workload exceeded his expectations, so did his enjoyment of the subject matter, particularly the study of Greek and Hebrew. In addition to theological study, Clarence also served at several local churches where he learned the skills of pastoral ministry and honed his preaching.⁷⁵

Clarence's increased workload had somewhat distracted him from the romantic pursuits of his Georgia days. But one day, Clarence visited the campus library and noticed, among the dusty volumes, a lovely young woman with blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Smitten, Clarence made increasingly frequent trips to the library, studying the library assistant, Florence Kroeger, as much as the books. In Florence, Clarence had met his match. She was bright and opinionated, willing to speak her mind and to defend her point of view.⁷⁶ Unconcerned with traditional domesticity, Florence expressed openness to a life of unconventionality and adventure. Clarence and Florence dated throughout Clarence's three-year tenure in Louisville and celebrated their engagement in the spring of 1936.⁷⁷ They married in July of that year, with the consent of her German-American family.⁷⁸

After completing his M. Div., Clarence opted to remain in Louisville and continue his studies of the Greek New Testament in a Ph.D. program. Interpreting the language could be tedious at times, with endless conjugations and syntax exercises, but Clarence was motivated by an insatiable desire to know what Christianity meant at its linguistic core, without the

⁷⁴ MS 756 1:7.

⁷⁵ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 15-17. The Spring of 1934, Clarence Jordan even began to travel to preach, as many itinerants of this period did. MS 756 1:7.

⁷⁶ One of Jordan's Seminary classmates recalled, years later, "I along with every other single man, possibly some married ones too, were envious of [Jordan] in dating the lovely creature who became his wife!" (MS 2341 3:8).

⁷⁷ MS 756 1:10.

⁷⁸ *Louisville Journal Courier*, July 26, 1936; wedding announcement; MS 756 28:5.

intervention of translation, denomination, or tradition.⁷⁹ What he found was startling. The Jesus he had learned about in Sunday school, Clarence discovered, was a mere shadow compared to the figure he now confronted--human, confrontational, controversial, relational, sorrowful, joyful. "I had thrown Jesus out because of Mr. Mac," he later reflected, but "Mr. Mac didn't really represent Jesus. I looked at the New Testament and it read differently than before."⁸⁰ In the person and teachings of Jesus, the issues that had so troubled Clarence as a Baptist boy in the segregated South were resolved. This close reading of the Greek New Testament not only led Clarence to "discover theological foundations for the human impulses already alive in him," but also propelled him to consider the application of the gospel for life in the United States, particularly in regard to race relations.⁸¹

His racial reckoning deepened in January 1939 when Jordan got involved with a ministry called the Sunshine Center (soon renamed the Fellowship Center), in Louisville's black West End, an area known for its extreme poverty and overcrowding.⁸² In this new position, Jordan taught Sunday School, organized community events, collaborated with local black clergy, founded a cooperative store, and distributed received donations.⁸³ He became convinced of the necessity of meeting people's physical as well as spiritual needs and also of the importance of

⁷⁹ This intense Greek study was the most profound influence on Jordan's life and theology. His wife Florence later commented on Jordan's influences in Seminary, saying, "As to books he might have read; he read so very widely that I would not attempt to name anything other than the Greek New Testament... In his study of the Greek, he did much research into the roots, derivation, and nuances of words. He also studied the papyri for the common usages of phrases and meanings. A single passage could take hours of study and meditation." She also mentioned some influential teachers, writing, "Some of his professors at the Southern Baptist Seminary had great influence on his study: Dr. A.T. Robertson, Dr. Wm. Hersey Davis, Dr. E.A. McDowell, and Dr. J.B. Weatherspoon." (MS 2341 2:8). He also corresponded with Liston Pope of Yale University about his concerns about Christianity and race relations as well as his plans for Koinonia. (MS 756 2:3).

⁸⁰ Walden Howard, "The Legacy of Clarence Jordan," *Faith at Work*, April 1970, 16.

⁸¹ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 17.

⁸² MS 756 1:11; MS 2341 3:8.

⁸³ MS 756 1:11. This was certainly not without its paternalistic elements. At one point Clarence thanks a group for the donation of Easter baskets, commenting, "if little colored faces can shine, they really did Sunday when they received those baskets." While progressive in many ways, Jordan still reflects some of the contemporary condescending racial attitudes. (1940, MS 756 1:11).

equality in interracial projects.⁸⁴ “The only way...constructive work, agreeable to both groups, can be done,” Jordan wrote, is if white workers “understand that they are helpers rather than bosses and put on equal footing with the other workers.”⁸⁵ While many Liberal Protestants before him had adopted the Social Gospel and sought to reduce the effects of poverty and ignorance, Jordan “unlike his Social Gospel forebears...became convinced that something had to be done about racial separation.”⁸⁶ Jordan noted that in the New Testament the early church’s fellowship extended to both Jews and Gentiles, as the resurrection of Christ having nullified distinctions between racial or ethnic groups. Historical Christianity reconciled difference, Jordan realized, and could be the foundation for improved race relations.

With this in mind, the Jordans began attending a black church in Louisville, much to the consternation of the white Baptist establishment. “Did not Jesus respect racial boundaries,” the white Baptist minister railed, upon receiving the Jordan’s membership transfer request, “and did not Paul maintain that he was a Hebrew of Hebrews?” He added, irately, that “white Baptists” were paying Jordan’s salary. With noticeable sarcasm and even bitterness, Clarence articulated the man’s theological position: “It was unethical and unchristian to join a Negro church because

⁸⁴ He made sure that the mission’s board was interracial. (MS 2341 3:8, MS 756 1:11). Jordan also recognized the paternalism rampant in such ministries where white seminarians and ministers worked and sought to have black ministers in leadership over white workers when possible. Jordan’s account of the Fellowship Center is quite colorful, sue not least of all to the fact that the building was formerly a brothel. (MS 756 1:13).

⁸⁵ .”(Letter to Brother (Rev. Arthur) Dailey April 3, 1939, MS 756 1:11).

⁸⁶ K?Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South* 32. Jordan himself attended a conservative Seminary and most likely did not consider himself an advocate of the Social Gospel. In a letter his wife Florence wrote after his death, she comments on this, writing, “Your assumption that my husband was influenced by Walter Rauschenbusch is entirely unfounded. Most of Clarence Jordan’s social philosophy was formed by his background and his reading of the Greek New Testament. No doubt my husband read some of Rauschenbusch when he was studying at seminary although the seminary at that time, Southern Baptist Seminary, was not a place that would emphasize such ideas. I do not recall any references or even approval of Rauschenbusch and his writings.” Though Florence is correct that Jordan probably did not consider himself a student of Rauschenbusch, he was undoubtedly influenced by the notions of the Social Gospel to some degree and he and the Koinonia experiment can be seen as an exercise of the social gospel, albeit unintentional. See historiography on the Social Gospel: Robert T. Handy, ed. *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940); Ronald C. White, *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel (1877-1925)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990); Ralph E. Luker, *Social Gospel in Black and White* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

it was a Christian principle to abstain from meat if it caused your brother to stumble, and surely this would cause many to stumble.” “I guess it is also a Christian principle,” he continued, “to tear out of the New Testament all those pages which proclaim the universality of Christian brotherhood and which so terribly upset our complacent social traditions.”⁸⁷ Clarence’s racial theology did indeed upset the social traditions of Southern Seminary. During the Spring of 1938, for instance, Clarence invited some seminarians from Simmons University, the historically black seminary in town, to lead a prayer meeting at Southern.⁸⁸ Typically, after these prayer meetings, visitors ate in the dormitory; Jordan assumed this hospitality extended to the black seminarians. However, days before the meeting was to occur, he was informed that some of the Seminary’s board members, including Florence’s boss, were outraged by the thought of blacks and whites eating together. In the end, wanting to spare the black seminarians humiliation, Clarence and Florence invited them to eat in their apartment.⁸⁹ Incidents like these exasperated Jordan, as he continued to wrestle with the principles of the New Testament and the unwritten laws of the South.

During his work with the Fellowship Center, Clarence learned that many black families in Louisville had relocated from Georgia and Alabama.⁹⁰ These were his people. Their urban plight was the result of their rural one, he realized, as the suffocating oppression of

⁸⁷ Clarence Jordan, Journals as quoted in Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 21-22.

⁸⁸ In addition to teaching New Testament at Simmons, Jordan was inspired to create a Negro Division of Southern Seminary, which began, amazingly, with the approval of everyone. (MS 756 1:11.)

⁸⁹ MS 2341 3:8. In extending this invitation, the Jordans were inviting not only criticism, but rebuke. When Clarence told the Seminary president that he and Florence intended to have the black students to their home, he concluded, “the Seminary can make up its mind about what to do with us.” Though there were not official ramifications, it is clear from this incident that segregation was so stridently supported that to disobey would be to incur a certain, not only social, but official punishment.

⁹⁰ See: Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and the Great Migration*, (Bedford St. Martin's Press, 2002); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003); Milton Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African Americans' Religion and the Great Migration*, (Duke University Press, 1997); Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, (New York: Random House, 2010).

sharecropping drove people to cramped cities where they hoped for industrial work. “The city was grinding them up,” he later recalled, “It drove me to get back to the areas that were vomiting these people up and see if we couldn’t reverse the trend from the farms to the city.”⁹¹ Clarence’s passion for improved race relations, which he was beginning to preach about publicly around the South, slowly began to converge with his interest and training in agriculture.⁹²

It was at this point that Clarence began to challenge not only the racism but the materialism present in American culture. Through his biblical study, particularly the in book of the Acts, Jordan discovered a strong correlation between shared belief and shared possessions. He read that in the early church “all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need”; that the sharing of material possessions stemmed from the sharing of faith, that “those who believed were of one heart and soul.”⁹³ Biblically, Jordan reasoned, Christian charity should not be formulated as paternalistic righteousness that gave extra to the poor, but as the result of a total sacrifice of life to Jesus and natural sharing of all things in grace.⁹⁴ Though in nascent form in the 1930s, Jordan’s theology of shared belief and shared possessions would flourish in the rocky red soil of Koinonia.

Rebelling against certain Southern Baptist traditions, Jordan envisioned himself recapturing an older, more authentic, more orthodox Christianity. He boldly claimed he had no desire to worship God “at the shrine of our ancestors nor of Southern traditions” but, rather, in

⁹¹ The Legacy of Clarence Jordan,” Interview by Walden Howard, *Faith at Work*, April 1970, AR 39.

⁹² MS 756 1:12

⁹³ Acts 2:44, Acts 4:32-33; Clarence Jordan, *Journals* as quoted in Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 25.

⁹⁴ This extended to interracial charity. As historian Tracy K’Meyer wrote, “His approach to improving race relations was not for whites to uplift or give anything to blacks but for the two groups of people to come together in common worship, work, and recreation.” (K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 34)

“spirit and truth.”⁹⁵ By extracting the familiar red letters of Jesus from the cross-stitched platitudes of Southern living room decor, Jordan understood them with all their powerful, uncomfortable implications.⁹⁶ He had harsh words for many of his peers in Seminary and in the Southern Baptist church, those who were characterized by, as he put it, a “fervent profession of faith in Christianity on the one hand and just as fervent refusal to practice it on the other.”⁹⁷ Jesus had been so “zealously worshipped, his deity so vehemently affirmed, his halo so brightly illuminated, and his cross so beautifully polished” that, Jordan claimed, he “no longer exist[ed] as a man.” He had, rather, been transformed into “an exquisite celestial being” who came to humanity “momentarily and mistakenly” and then promptly ascended back into heaven. In short, Jordan accused the church of, “harp[ing] on the deity of Christ in order to get rid of him” since “the church can’t face him as a man because they are afraid of what kind of man he might be.”⁹⁸ “By thus glorifying him,” Jordan concluded, “we more effectively rid ourselves of him than did those who tried to do so by crudely crucifying him.”⁹⁹ Separating Jesus from the flesh of humanity rendered him irrelevant in human relations. Instead of glorifying Christ into irrelevancy like many of his white Baptist peers, Jordan wanted to encounter the divine man Jesus in all his biblical radicalism.

Following Clarence’s graduation from Southern Seminary with a Ph.D. in Greek New Testament, the Jordans remained in Louisville where Clarence formed a group of students who met regularly to discuss his ideas. “I think back to those mornings, gathered around the table in that huge old house in the middle of the slums when he taught us,” one student remembered,

⁹⁵ Clarence Jordan, “Christian Community in the South,” *Journal of Religion and Thought*, AW 56-57, 27-36, National Southern Baptist Archives (Nashville, TN), 29-30.

⁹⁶ In many versions of the Bible, Jesus’s words are printed in red ink.

⁹⁷ “The Cotton Patch Translation,” *Bible Collector* (April-June 1965), *Koinonia Scrapbook*, as quoted in Chancey, “Restructuring Southern Society,” 79) Put in his colloquial style, Jordan claimed, “We’ll worship the hind legs off Jesus, but never do a thing he says.” (Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 45).

⁹⁸ “A Prophet Moves On,” *Home Missions*, (Atlanta: Home Missions Board), December 1969, 3.

⁹⁹ Jordan, *Essential Writings*, 33.

adding, Clarence “opened eyes too long naive.”¹⁰⁰ After several months, the students bonded in common study and began to call themselves Koinonia.¹⁰¹ Though the group was small and the students busy with their classes, Clarence imagined that it could embody his theology, especially regarding nonviolence, racial reconciliation, and the common possession of wealth. During these months of the student Koinonia fellowship, Clarence revealed his dream for creating an agricultural community in the South that would address poverty, deprivation, and racism.

That dream would soon become a reality. While reading one day, Clarence came across a letter from a man named Martin England expressing his “hope that a new community of believers might be gathered in which people of all races and classes might come together to work as equals,” the very hope that Jordan also possessed.¹⁰² Jordan arranged to meet with England and found in him a kindred spirit who understood the implications of the New Testament and was willing to try to embody that theology.¹⁰³ Both men were from the South, trained Baptist ministers, and had had their lives changed by a radical calling from God. Jordan’s clarity and his certainty were appealing to England and he was, in turn, a good balance for Clarence-- more

¹⁰⁰ MS 2341 1:11.

¹⁰¹ The Greek word Koinonia referred to the early community of Christians in the book of Acts and indicated a close-knit fellowship of Christians who shared in a common life.

¹⁰² Martin England, Letter to Walt N. Johnson, MS 2341 3:8. The letter further stated, “If the barriers which divide man and cause wars, race conflict, economic competition, class struggles, labor disputes are ever to be broken down, they must be broken down by small groups of people living side by side...wherein they can all contribute to the Kingdom according to their respective abilities.” With a racing eyes, Jordan read on, as England continued, “Suppose there were some Christian employees and employers, whites and Negroes, farmers and merchants, illiterates and school teachers, who were willing to enter into fellowship to make a test of the power of the spirit of God in eliminating the natural and artificial barriers that exist.” England was born in 1901 in Seneca, South Carolina, attended Furman University in Greenville, SC and then Crozer Theological Seminary. While at Crozer, England was racially progressive and even “had a little to do...in opening the Seminary to Negro students.”¹⁰² He was a thin, contemplative man, slow to speak but eloquent when he did in that graceful southern drawl. Upon graduation from Crozer in 1933, England served as a missionary in Burma, but, in 1939, while home on a brief furlough, World War II interrupted his plans to return to Asia and he and his family were forced to remain in the United States until the war’s end. After taking some courses on agriculture, a useful subject for missionaries in rural countries, England and his family settled on a cooperative farm in Kentucky. It was during this time in Kentucky that England had written the response that connected him with Clarence.

¹⁰³ They first connected at a meeting of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1941. Begun in 1914 in Europe during World War I the Fellowship of Reconciliation is an organization intended to encourage the brotherhood between Christians, regardless of nation or race. The group has been active in the United States since 1915.

introspective, more measured, and with substantial missionary experience. One night, while yet again discussing their potential community, Jordan turned to England and said, through a grin, “Well, what are we waiting for?”¹⁰⁴

Thus, in 1942 Jordan and England began to search for a place in the rural South to farm, live, and worship in interracial, intentional Christian community.¹⁰⁵ Initially the group decided on Alabama, as it was “fairly typical of the entire South,” but at the last moment, Clarence’s brother suggested a piece of land, “440 ordinary-looking acres of soil, slightly eroded and virtually treeless,” not terribly far from the Alabama line in Sumter County, Georgia.¹⁰⁶ When Jordan and England set foot on the dry expanse of land, they knew they had found their “demonstration plot.”

The Lived Theology of Koinonia Farm

From the moment they purchased the land in 1942, Jordan and England imagined Koinonia Farm as an incarnation of their beliefs, as lived theology. “The purposes of the farm,” they stated in their initial newsletter, were to relate “the entire life of the people to Jesus Christ and his teachings,” “to seek conserve the soil, which we believe to be God’s holy earth,” and to “undertake to train Negro preachers in religion and agriculture” as they studied and worked together. These three stated goals--community, farming, and racial reconciliation--characterized the Farm; each expressed a facet of the Koinonians’ theology.

¹⁰⁴ Martin England to Henlee Barnette, MS 2341 3:8. Before beginning the Farm, Jordan received offers to work in a church or even as a professor, eschewing them to pursue his radical vision. In a letter declining a position in the Bible Department at Bessie Tift College Jordan wrote that the job seemed wonderful, comfortable, stimulating and well-paid, “but, over and against all of that which beckons so strongly, Dr. McGinty, is the pleading voice of twelve million Negroes who are under the yoke of oppression, and over and above all that is the commanding voice of Christ, saying, ‘Go.’ I cannot, I dare not, forsake them of Him.” Letter from Clarence Jordan to Dr. McGinty, July 17, 1941, MS 756 1:13.

¹⁰⁵ The criteria for such a place included factors such as population, racial demographics, income levels, soil types, tenancy, and typical climate.

¹⁰⁶ Lee, *The CottonPatch Evidence*, 32-33. Jordan displays his sense of humor about the South in a letter to a friend, Howard Johnson, penned in 1943: “When the Negroes in Kentucky learned I was from Georgia, they would say, ‘I always thought that state was right next door to hell.’ I replied, ‘It is; right across the river from Alabama.’” (MS 756 2:4)

The first theological principle adopted by Koinonia Farm was that of *redemptive agriculture*. The agriculture part was relatively simple. Many organizations believed that improving economic and social life in the South hinged upon farming. In this way, Koinonia joined the work of some New Deal programs in the rural South.¹⁰⁷ But Koinonia also possessed “an interest in the spiritual side of life.”¹⁰⁸ Combining his theological and agricultural training, Jordan maintained that farming, “the enrichment and preservation of the soil--for the sake of the soil itself,” amounted to participation in the restoration of creation.¹⁰⁹ Creation, the Koinonians thought, was intended to produce an abundance that would provide for people, and humanity was to have dominion over the earth. But, because of sin and the fall of man as recorded in Genesis, the world was broken. This was not just a vague spiritual brokenness, but a physical brokenness, reflected in barrenness, famine, disease, and blight. Thus, work was hard and at times the soil did not provide.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Koinonians believed that Christians were called to act to repair and rebuild the broken creation, empowered by God’s spirit. As they tilled the soil, planted pecan trees, harvested crops, and sweated underneath the big Georgia sky, the Koinonians envisioned themselves working not just unto the prosperity of their Farm and their community, but unto the restoration and redemption of a fallen world.

The second theological premise, and the most self-evident, was that of *Christian community*. “The man Jesus was the example, the blood-sweat-and-tears illustration of what God

¹⁰⁷ Some other organizations that labored specifically in rural areas include: Delta Farms, Providence Farms, the Christian Service Foundation of Florida, Fellowship of Southern Churchmen and its Rural Reconstruction Committee and Brush Arbor Institutes, The Christian Rural Fellowship, American Country Life Association, the Rural Life division of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, The Commission for Interracial Cooperation, and the Southern Regional Council.

¹⁰⁸ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 48.

¹⁰⁹ Fellowship of International Communities newsletter 2(1), (October 1952), MS 756 22:4.

¹¹⁰ “And to Adam [God] said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’”(Genesis 3:17-19 ESV)

hoped for mankind,” the Koinonians averred as they strove to “embody the spirit of Jesus through a life together.” Embodying the spirit of Christ came through community. As Jordan wrote: “Christ apart from his Church is the Word apart from the flesh. The two belong together. We thereby make our surrender to Christ a concrete, objective act by turning over everything, including ourselves, to his church-community, or koinonia.”¹¹¹ This “total surrender,” patterned after the early church, included “surrender of self, vocation, possessions--everything” in order to fully know and experience Christ and live a common life unto God.¹¹² But unlike restorationist groups, which completely mimicked the early church, the Koinonians endeavored to live in Christian community in the context of the 20th century United States South.

Instead of pursuing the gleaming riches of the post-war economy or the suburban dream of nuclear families cocooned inside white picket fences, the Koinonians worked the land and lived in modest wooden cabins. Speaking of the dangers of greed and what Jordan later called “the worship of mammon,” he said, “America has become so success-conscious, so status-conscious, so materialistic! We tend to measure success in terms of possessions. This,” he lamented, “just devastates us.”¹¹³ In contrast, the incarnational theology of Koinonia rejected the pursuit of material wealth and individual accolades. Though they vehemently denied that they were communists, the Koinonians did advocate material parity and even redistribution unto that end.¹¹⁴ As Jordan reasoned: “If you’re taking more than your share, somebody is left with less

¹¹¹ Clarence Jordan, “Christian Community in the South,” *Journal of Religion and Thought*, A-W 56-57, 27-36, National Southern Baptist Archives (Nashville, TN), 29.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ “The Legacy of Clarence Jordan,” interview by Walden Howard, *Faith at Work*, April 1970, National Southern Baptist Archives, 17. Each of the theological principles are linked somehow. As Clarence notes about materialism, the “worship of material things...expresses itself in exploitation of all kinds. I’m quite sure the Negro, for example, is so terribly exploited because we want the benefits of his labor.”

¹¹⁴ “Let’s put it this way,” Jordan explained, “If I were the pastor of church and made \$15,000 a year, and the janitor at our church had more children than I, and greater needs, why couldn’t we trade salaries? I would get the five or six thousand he makes, which is all I need, and he would get the 15,000. That’s the Christian spirit. You have a brother

than his share.” This material equality was not in service to the State, but to God, not a material goal, but a spiritual one. “A person who is deeply satisfied at the spiritual level and has learned the deeper secrets of life,” Jordan explained, “can be happy with relatively few things.”¹¹⁵ Communal sharing stemmed from spiritual joy; social arrangements derived primarily from theological commitments.

The third theological aspect crucial to Koinonia Farm was *racial reconciliation*, which, in Jordan’s eyes, followed naturally from the theology of Christian community. A central premise of the Koinonians’ doctrine was that once Christians were redeemed in Christ they were then adopted by God, as sons and co-heirs with Christ.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the Koinonians determined to “joyfully accept as a brother anyone whom the Father begets as a son.”¹¹⁷ For this reason, the Koinonians did not envision community primarily as “structure,” but as “family,” theologically, “the Family of the Father.” In this theological family of God the Father, all were accepted who God had called, “brothers and sisters of all variations as sons and daughters of the same Father.”¹¹⁸ This notion of community as family buttressed the Koinonians’ desire for racial reconciliation in the South, since, in God’s family, there existed “no favorite children, whether they are blonds or brunettes, white or black.”¹¹⁹ The Koinonians believed that their Christian faith ruled over and above the man-made racial hierarchies of the South. “They weren’t concerned with segregation or integration as such,” one journalist commented, “only the

sweeping floors and a brother preaching the Word. There is no difference between them in the sight of Christ.”(Walden Howard, “The Legacy of Clarence Jordan,” AR 39).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ This theology largely comes from a passage in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” (Romans 8:16-17 ESV)

¹¹⁷ Clarence Jordan, “Christian Community in the South,” *Journal of Religion and Thought*, A-W 56-57, 27-36, National Southern Baptist Archives (Nashville, TN), 29-30

¹¹⁸ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 88. Clarence Jordan, “Christian Community in the South,” “What is the Kingdom of God?” “Thy Kingdom Come--On Earth,” Sunday School lessons published in *High Call*, Summer 1950, 29-32, MS 756:15:1 as quoted in K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South* 31.

¹¹⁹ Clarence Jordan, “Christian Community in the South,” *Journal of Religion and Thought*, A-W 56-57, 27-36, National Southern Baptist Archives (Nashville, TN), 29.

Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.”¹²⁰ Coretta Scott King understood this theological basis for interracialism, writing after Jordan’s death: “Clarence Jordan [and Koinonia Farm] had the courage to prove men and women of different races could not only work together, but live together in peace and harmony,” an “example of brotherhood at work.”¹²¹ As Alma Jackson, a black woman who worked at Koinonia for years, remembered: “Koinonia paid the best wages around for picking peanuts and sweet potatoes. ‘And you didn’t have to say ‘yes sir’ and ‘no ma’am’ and all that. We could sit down at the table and eat with them. We were one family out here.”¹²² This idea, embodied by the Koinonians and articulated by Alma Jackson, was both theologically orthodox and socially radical. While most Southern Protestants would have conceded that all Christians belonged to the family of God in theory, they were unwilling to live out that theology in practice.

The doctrine of adoption into God’s family was not the only theological premise that inspired the Koinonians’ stance on race. They also believed that all distinctions between people collapsed once the holy God reconciled sinful humanity to Himself through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. Integration was not just a familial requirement, but a celebration of, as Jordan put it, “that great fact that in Jesus Christ the ‘middle wall of partition’ was abolished.”¹²³ If God had removed the barriers between Himself and His people, the people should have no divisions amongst themselves; God “allow[ed] no partition walls which divide men into race, caste, or nation.”¹²⁴ “[Jesus] integrated us and abolished the segregation patterns

¹²⁰ Edward P. Morgan, ABC News Report, April 5, 1957, MS 2341 5:1.

¹²¹ Telegram from Coretta Scott King, October 30, 1969, MS 2341 2:5.

¹²² *Clarence Jordan: Essential Writings* edited by Joyce Hollyday (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1970), 15.

¹²³ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 33.

¹²⁴ Clarence Jordan, “Christian Community in the South,” *Journal of Religion and Thought*, A-W 56-57, 27-36, National Southern Baptist Archives (Nashville, TN), 29. It’s worth noting that while the Koinonians’ primary understanding of racial equality was theological, Jordan also expressed a secular justifications of integration and racial justice. In an example of this, Jordan writes, “I believe that there are three very good reasons why the intelligent Christian cannot retain the position that one race is superior or inferior to another. First, the penetrating

which cause so much hostility,” Jordan expounded, such that, “by his sacrifice on the cross he joined together both sides into one body for God... hostility no longer exists.”¹²⁵ Again, racial radicalism stemmed from a certain kind of theological orthodoxy. “Being Christians, orthodox Baptist preachers, and native-born white Southerners,” Jordan claimed, “we feel that at least we have the prerequisites to proclaim to the South the message of Jesus. We also believe that if Mr. Lincoln can give the Negro the right to go to the polls and vote, surely the Lord Jesus can break up a system that denies him the right to go to the table and eat.”¹²⁶ Reconciliation was to be first to God, through faith in Christ, and then to one another, as adopted brothers and sisters regardless of race.

In practicing *redemptive agriculture, Christian community, and racial reconciliation*, Koinonia Farm sought to embody Christ, to be an incarnation of His likeness, presence and Spirit, on those dusty 440 acres in Southwest Georgia. They were, quite simply, “devoted to the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the application of his teaching.”¹²⁷ They were living their theology.

eye of science has been unable to see anything in the human race to justify placing a blue ribbon upon any branch of it...From the purely scientific standpoint, then, we might well suspect that Southern tradition has been guilty of error. But there is a second reason of even greater importance, especially for those who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ. Nowhere in all the Scriptures can there be supported the notion that God has favorite children. True, the children of Israel are regarded as God’s Chosen People, but they were chosen not simply for their own sake but to be a blessing to all people. At the very beginning of the Jewish nation God incorporated all mankind in his covenant with Abraham. “In thee all families of the earth be blessed...In the New Testament we fail to find any instance where Jesus allowed himself to be swept along with the prevailing currents of racial antipathy...Thus, the serious Christian is faced with the question, ‘Shall the traditions of the world, or the teachings of Jesus Christ dictate my attitudes and conduct?’ A third reason why one race should not consider the other races inferior is that differences cannot always be interpreted as deficiencies. We readily admit that the white and colored races differ in many ways other than color of skin. But who can say that these distinguishing traits entitle either race to a claim of superiority? The squirrel may not be able to carry a forest on its back; neither can the mountain crack a nut. Then why should they look disparagingly upon each other?” (Racial Frontiers, *Baptist Student*, November 1941, National Southern Baptist Archives Nashville TN.)

¹²⁵ Clarence Jordan, as quoted in Robert Parham, “Reconciler from ‘Dixie’: Clarence Jordan,” *Baptist Peacemaker* July 1983, 6, National Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹²⁶ MS 756 2:3

¹²⁷ “Koinonia Farm,” promotional brochure, MS 2341 4: 9.

The experiment in lived theology began haltingly. The Jordans and Englands moved onto the Farm Christmas of 1942, and for months, Clarence and Martin sweated and toiled, planning the farm, planting trees, and repairing the dilapidated property. They raised the first building, affectionately dubbed the Treehouse, in the summer of 1943.¹²⁸ Slowly more people arrived, though the Englands left to go back to overseas missions.¹²⁹ By the time the Farm was ready, there were eight people willing to formally constitute the Koinonia: Clarence and Florence Jordan, Howard and Marion Johnson, Gilbert Butler, Con and Ora Browne, and Norman Lory. These original eight pledged their “total unconditional commitment to seek express and expand the Kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ,” as they “joyfully enter[ed] into a love union with the Koinonia” and “gladly submit[ed]” themselves to it.¹³⁰ **[Image I]**

Over the next ten years, additional people came to Koinonia, many attracted by Clarence’s message of community, pacifism and racial equality.¹³¹ Koinonia members built and inhabited small wooden cabins on the property, sometimes sharing these humble lodgings among several families. They took turns cooking and ate most of their meals together in a common area. They met together daily for prayer and worship meetings, with Clarence often leading, but with everyone sharing testimonies and devotionals. Meetings to discuss farm and communal governance occurred frequently, as members voted on how money should be allocated and

¹²⁸ Koinonia Archive.

¹²⁹ As early as 1944, the Englands were already hoping and planning on returning to Burma as international missionaries. (MS 756 2:6, MS 756 2:7).

¹³⁰ MS 2341 4:11. The Koinonia Commitment reads: “We desire to make known our total unconditional commitment to seek, express, and expand the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Being convinced that the community of believers who make a like commitment is the continuing body of Jesus on earth, I joyfully enter into a love union with the Koinonia and gladly submit myself to it, looking to it to guide me in the knowledge of God’s will and to strengthen me in pursuit of it.”

¹³¹ In 1954, Harry and Ailene Atkinson and Billie D. Nelson joined; In 1955, Iola Eustice and Margaret and Will Wittkamper; In 1956, Christian Drescher and Marguerite Reed. There were also countless short-term visitors during these years, with stays of various durations at Koinonia. MS 2341 4:11.

spent.¹³² The Koinonians also worked diligently--farming, building, cooking, cleaning--often dividing tasks by gender.¹³³ A schedule from December 21, 1949 reveals the Koinonia daily routine: “6am: rising bell, 6:15-6:45: devotional, 8:15-11:45: work [“field work, cattle, poultry, building and maintenance, household work, and cultural”], 11:45-1:00: dinner, 1:00-4:30: work, 4:30-5:30: chores, and 6:00-7:00: supper.”¹³⁴ After supper, there was usually free time to read, socialize, sing, and relax, though some nights the members conducted business meetings during that time. The Koinonians worked together, ate together, worshipped and prayed together. They also experienced conflict and forgiveness.¹³⁵ There were certainly tense moments as individual expectations collided with the decisions of the group, but there were also easier moments of staying up late discussing nonviolence and eating popcorn.¹³⁶ It was, to quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, simply “life together.”¹³⁷ **[Image II]**

¹³² In 1949, the group had a prolonged and vigorous discussion of whether or not to purchase insurance. Some opposed to it believed that their faith in God was “something bigger than insurance,” that “It’s a matter of whether you have to fall on the world to support you, or whether you can depend on God to meet your every need.” Others, though, claimed that they “felt other responsibilities.” When one person suggested that they “leave it up to the individual,” others objected that “leaving it up to the individual is not reaching a common mind.” Clearly, over issues as mundane as insurance, even, living in community proved difficult, if largely good. (MS 2341: 16)

¹³³ A 1949 document reveals the assignment of responsibilities: “Field Work- Howard, Cattle-Jack, Poultry- Clarence, Building and Maintenance- Harry” while “Household Work” fell to the women. Koinonia Archive.

¹³⁴ Though this schedule is fairly precise, it was most certainly more flexible than it appears. (MS 2341: 16).

¹³⁵ There were definitely moments of conflict in the community, both interpersonal and regarding the governance of the group. Many had to do with Florence Jordan appearing stand-offish and Clarence’s extensive travel schedule. At one point a member, Claud Nelson even said that he thought the problem was that Florence and Clarence “have a feeling that all you have contributed and are still contributing is not fully appreciated by the group.” He continues that that may be “justified,” but added that “at least several others feel you are not fully appreciative of their contributions and hardships.” There seems to have been resentment over the sacrifices required by living at Koinonia and also the notion that the Jordans were somewhat distant. Nelson wrote: “I never really saw Clarence as human just like myself until last night when he almost cried in admitting his frustration and his weakness. The thought that he is suffering because of us, and that he needs our help, was almost more than I could bear.” (MS 756 3:1).

¹³⁶ This describes the period from roughly 1942-1950, when farming and meeting people preoccupied the activities of the small Koinonia Farm.

See K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 43-45, 48; Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 39-57, 61.

¹³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*. (1939).

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Koinonia experiment grew. Young people, many of whom had heard Clarence speak, visited the Farm in droves, with many opting to stay.¹³⁸ Koinonia member Con Browne estimated that during these years the Farm welcomed around 8-10,000 visitors annually. With this increased population, Koinonia was able to expand its operations. The Koinonians began raising poultry, peanuts, and pecans. The farm functioned well and the soil, treated with care and diligence, began to produce. The Koinonians purposefully planted more fruits and vegetables than they could consume, sharing the excess with their poorer neighbors. They even came up with the idea of a ‘cow library.’ They would rent out cows to other Sumter County farmers and when these were all milked out, they would trade them in for fresh ones.¹³⁹

Through these activities, the group interacted with the other residents of the County. Most of Koinonia’s neighbors were poor blacks who lived outside of the Americus city limits, on Highway 49, and who were understandably puzzled at the experiment in Christian living on their doorstep. One such man was a former sharecropper who quickly joined Clarence and Martin as a farmhand. The three men worked alongside one another and even ate their meals together. Seeing that blacks were treated with unheard of dignity, more and more black neighbors began to participate in life at Koinonia, interacting with whites without fear. The Farm taught agriculture classes, attended by both black and white locals. It also conducted a Vacation Bible school and

¹³⁸ Clarence was a popular speaker from his seminary days, and had speaking engagement throughout the country at churches, college campuses, and Baptist meetings. It was often at these presentations that people were moved by his message and decided to move to Koinonia. Henry Dunn, Howard Johnson, Willie Pugh, Harry Atkinson, Con Browne, Jack Singletary, Millard Hunt were a few of these young people--all Southerners, all professing Christians, all of whom were opposed to racism in the South and wanted to protest through life at Koinonia. Several black families from the surrounding areas came to live at Koinonia during this period, such as the Johnsons and the Angrys.

¹³⁹ Clarence Jordan, National Southern Baptist Archives, AR 39 1:1. At one point, when funds were low, contributions from Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis supplied a “high producing milk cow” for a “certain Negro family.”

Sunday school for children, black and white.¹⁴⁰ In the mid 1950s, one black family came to live at Koinonia. Rufus and Sue Angry lived five miles from the Farm where they worked as sharecroppers. After hearing about the Farm through their older boys who went over occasionally, the Angrys were intrigued. They began visiting Koinonia, and “after much soul searching, and much prayer and meditation,” decided to live there.¹⁴¹ “The more we learned about the group,” Sue Angry recalled, “the more we liked the way of life that the group was living.” Rufus farmed with the men; Sue raised the children, worked grading eggs from the henhouse, and ran the Farm’s local consignment shop. Living at Koinonia, “you learn what it means to be a human being,” Sue stated, “You learn to see the other person as you do yourself. You see God in everyone.”¹⁴² Though the Angrys were the only black family living at Koinonia in those days, the Farm welcomed many black neighbors into their fellowship more informally through its service, activities and programs.

The most ambitious of these was Camp Koinonia, begun in 1955 and directed by Con Browne.¹⁴³ Usually held some point during the summer months following the harvest, Camp Koinonia brought together around eighty children, black and white, for a week of Bible study, craft time, singing, camping, and fellowship.¹⁴⁴ News of Camp Koinonia spread, with one woman writing from Orangeburg, SC that she had heard about the camp from a man at Morehouse College and wanted her 8-year old daughter to attend for several weeks.¹⁴⁵ In order to get the children to the Farm, Koinonians drove around in the early morning and evening, picking up and dropping off the children. They did the same thing not only for Vacation Bible School but

¹⁴⁰ MS 756 3:3.

¹⁴¹ Sue Angry, *My Life Changing and Growing*, (Kennet Square, PA: The Write Place, 2003), 11; Koinonia Farm Archive.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ MS 756 3:5.

¹⁴⁴ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 50. At first, local whites tolerated, and to an extent even supported, these interracial ministries.

¹⁴⁵ MS 756 3:3

for public school during the year. Since the school system under Jim Crow did not provide adequate transportation for black children, the Koinonians began to transport the children to and from school each day.¹⁴⁶ In hopes of fostering natural relationships, Koinonia also held interracial social events. Playing sports and enjoying themselves at dances and parties, people of all races and backgrounds came together at the farm, where the stifling barriers of Jim Crow did not trump the mandates of Jesus Christ. This was not merely a time to have fun and let loose, though it undoubtedly was. It was also a demonstration of equality, joviality, and familiarity within the family of God. This interracial fellowship and service was the vision of Koinonia. But not everyone liked it. As Martin England remembered: it “was something that just wasn’t done in Southwest Georgia. [It] was slapping all the good white Southern traditions in the face. For a farmer to mess up his truck taking nigger children to a nigger school was just too much...and our eating with them.”¹⁴⁷

Radical Orthodoxy as Southern Heresy

From the beginning, the presence of Koinonia had rankled its neighbors in Americus. One evening, for example, headlights broke through the twilight. Several “utterly menacing” men stepped from a car. “We understand you been taking your meals with the niggers,” a gruff voice accused, “We’re from the Ku Klux Klan, and we’re here to tell you we don’t allow the sun to set on anybody who eats with niggers.” Unfazed, Clarence reached forward and grasped the hand of the hostile Klansman. “I’m a Baptist preacher, just graduated from the Southern Baptist Seminary,” he began, with a mischievous smile, “I’ve heard about people who had power over the sun, but I never hoped to meet one.” Stunned and bemused, the Klansman replied that his father had also been a Southern Baptist preacher. The men then stood there, talking about being

¹⁴⁶ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 42.

¹⁴⁷ Martin England, Interview of Martin England by David Striklin, Baylor Institute for Oral History, July-September 1984, 43.

Baptist, farming, and life in the South, as the sun set over the expanse of farmland behind them. Though bothered by the Koinonians interracialism, in the early days, segregationist anger could be dispelled with a little good humor and appeals to old time religion.

Sometimes, however, appeals to Baptist heritage were not enough. Upon arriving in Americus in the Fall of 1942, Clarence Jordan and Martin England began attending Rehoboth Baptist Church, a local white Baptist congregation just a few miles down the road from the Farm. As more people came to live at Koinonia, many likewise chose to attend Rehoboth, offering faithful attendance and helpful service.¹⁴⁸ Clarence occasionally preached and often sang in the choir or played his trumpet in worship. Florence taught an adult Sunday school class. In 1948, when the leadership of Rehoboth realized that the Koinonians held some “radical” views on material possessions, war, and race, there arose some tensions, but these were diffused by the church’s decision that the Koinonians would not hold official leadership positions. However, two years later, in 1950, the Koinonians’ relationship with the church worsened. One Sunday morning, a group from Koinonia went to worship at Rehoboth, taking with them a young visitor to the Farm, an Indian exchange student studying agriculture who “had expressed an interest in attending an American Protestant worship service.” As Florence remembered, “we thought the people would be delighted to meet him. He was not a Christian but he had become interested and he wanted to go to church.” But the Rehoboth people were not delighted. “The presence of his dark skin miraculously chilled the hot, humid southern Georgia atmosphere,” as the congregation ignorantly assumed the visitor was black. “Obviously,” one commentator sarcastically intoned,

¹⁴⁸ The Koinonians, numbering around fourteen at that point in the late 1940s, attended churches of their choosing, though most went together to Rehoboth. However, some attended First Methodist occasionally, or another Methodist congregation, and the Angry family continued to attend a black church that they had been involved with before joining Koinonia. Because most Southern churches in Americus were strictly segregated, the Angrys would not have felt comfortable at a white church (nor would they have been welcome) despite the equality they experienced at Koinonia and the interracial fellowship the Koinonians would have certainly preferred to extend to Sunday mornings.

“Koinonia had disguised a nigger, called him an Indian, and sneaked him into divine worship.” This presumption infuriated the church and they immediately sought to expel the Koinonians from the congregation. When informed that they were being expelled for causing disunity and discomfort, Jordan offered to apologize, if the Church could “show, through the Scriptures, how any wrong had been committed.” “Don’t give me any of this Bible stuff!” the churchman replied angrily, throwing the Bible to the ground. Jordan purportedly responded, “I’m not giving you any Bible stuff. I’m asking you to give it to me.” While the church leadership wanted to discuss ecumenical etiquette, Jordan demanded a Scriptural basis for the church’s action. For Jordan, it was not merely an issue of church membership or preference, but of theology, of belief in and submission to the Bible. After suggesting that if the churchman “could not accept the Bible as the ‘Holy inspired Word of God,’” perhaps “he should get out of the Baptist Church himself,” the man left and Jordan slowly reached to pick up the Bible he had thrown from the dirt.¹⁴⁹ Rehoboth Baptist formally expelled the Koinonians on August 13, 1950 for their peculiar racial views and other “unchristian” beliefs.¹⁵⁰

The radical orthodoxy of Koinonia Farm grated against the racial orthodoxy of many white Southern churches. Following their expulsion from Rehoboth Baptist, the Koinonians sought entry into the Presbyterian Church, a Disciples of Christ congregation, several Methodist churches, and the local Episcopal Church, but were unable to gain acceptance anywhere.¹⁵¹ Their

¹⁴⁹ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 74-81, “Relationship with Community Churches,” MS 2340; “Koinonia Members’ Expulsion from Rehoboth Baptist Church,” 1950; Ira B. Faglier to Clarence Jordan August 9, 1950, MS 756 2:13; “Recommendation to the Board of Deacons of Rehoboth Baptist church,” 1950. Juanita Deatrick, “Koinonia: A Twentieth Century Experiment in Communal Living,” M.A. Thesis, The University of Georgia, 1968, 39.

¹⁵⁰ See Ira B. Faglier to Clarence Jordan August 9, 1950, MS 756 2:13.

¹⁵¹ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 81; Jordan, personal interview, 18 January 1967 in Deatrick, “Koinonia,” 42.

theological insistence on Christian racial equality “effectively banished” the Koinonians from the white churches of Americus.¹⁵²

Despite these church issues and occasional visits from Klansmen, during the early years of the Farm, the people of Americus largely tolerated the Christian experiment as the work of inconsequential crazies.¹⁵³ That dramatically changed in 1954. Following the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling and the subsequent mobilization of massive resistance, any racial leniency was interpreted as threatening to the social order of the South.¹⁵⁴ Koinonia was no longer seen as an odd, quaint experiment in Christian practice but as a radical, subversive, unchristian display of Southern heresy. Instead of being viewed as pacifists attempting to incarnate Christ, they were repainted as a dangerous group attempting to overthrow the social order. In some ways this latter view was correct; the Koinonians *were* trying to overthrow the old order of things as they sought to usher in ‘the kingdom of God.’ Their theology of radical orthodox demanded racial equality, and framed race as an inherently religious issue. For this reason, Koinonia’s opponents desperately tried to discredit their Christianity as insincere. When that proved largely unsuccessful, they turned to intimidation and violence. In the words of one Americus resident, Koinonia Farm “caught holy hell.”¹⁵⁵ But, though detractors tried to eradicate the Koinonians, they could not ignore them or their views. The presence of Koinonia Farm forced people to grapple with race as a theological issue, as well as a social, cultural, and political one.

¹⁵² K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 60.

¹⁵³ “In those days,” Jordan remembered, “we encountered little trouble about having Negroes living here with us mostly because the South thought it had another century to wait before it had to change.” (MS 2341 3:6, Nicholas von Hoffman, “Clarence Jordan: A Rights Hero in Faded Blue Denim,” *Chicago Daily News*, Saturday Aug 7, 1965.)

¹⁵⁴ See James T. Patterson, *Brown vs. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Bartley, *Rise of Massive Resistance*; In Americus, a States’ Rights Chapter was formed in February 1956, joining the KKK in an attempt to obfuscate any civil rights efforts. (*Americus Times-Recorder*, Feb. 4, 1956: “Sumter States’ Rights Chapter Is Organized - Becomes Seventh Over the District”).

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Teresa Mansfield, 7 July 2011.

In 1956, anger increased when Clarence Jordan offered support to two young black students, Thelma B. Boone and Edward J. Clemons, who sought to enroll in business school at the University of Georgia.¹⁵⁶ Jordan not only provided Boone and Clemons with the alumni endorsement required for applications, he traveled with them to Athens.¹⁵⁷ Though the integration attempt ultimately failed, Jordan's involvement activism earned him and Koinonia condemnation by the white community of Americus. When the *Americus Times-Recorder* ran a headline announcing, "Negroes Fail in Attempt to Enroll at Ga. College, Endorsed by Americus Man-White Minister Resident of Koinonia Farms," any hope the Koinonians sustained of peaceful relations with their South Georgia neighbors dissipated.¹⁵⁸ At a local States' Rights Council meeting, Sumter County Solicitor General Charles Burgamy mused: "what we need now is for the right kind of Klan to start up again and use a buggy whip on some of these race mixers. I believe that would stop them."¹⁵⁹ Jordan himself reported that "the White Citizens' Council said we were a cancer that would have to be cut out."¹⁶⁰ Suspicion of Jordan and Koinonia soon extended outside of Americus. Georgia Representative Paul Jones said that the very existence of

¹⁵⁶ MS 756 3:6. Jordan was to be one of two alumni to "vouch for their moral character," the other being Jim Weldon the pastor of the Oak Grove Methodist Church in Atlanta. "They had not been put up by the NAACP, nor were their motives to test any laws. They simply wanted the courses," Jordan said. "Their plan," he continued, "was to assume that they were American citizens like everyone else...to get in line with everyone else and register for the courses they wanted." Before trying to enroll at UGA, the students first considered attending the State College of Georgia (now Georgia State) in Atlanta.

¹⁵⁷ Oddly enough, the executive secretary of the state board of regents ruled that Clarence was ineligible as a signatory because he had technically graduated from a different school in the UGA system, the College of Arts and Sciences. So in the end, Clarence was unable to sign the paper and serve as the alumni sponsor. This incident reveals not only the inaccuracy of the accusations hurled by segregationists that he had in fact signed for the black students but, more importantly, the difficulty that many black students had, even after the Supreme Court ruling, in obtaining alumni sponsors and enrolling. Even when one was willing, like Clarence, they could be found unsuitable due to a bureaucratic technicality.

¹⁵⁸ *Americus Times-Recorder*, March 24, 1956.

¹⁵⁹ He continued, "I don't know how they feel about it down here in Dougherty County, but I had rather see my little boy dead than beside a Negro in the public schools." Charles Burgamy in *The Albany Journal*; Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 112. Conservative organizations, like the States Rights Council Burgamy addressed, gained momentum throughout the South, promising, "a social boycott of 'the scalawags and carpetbaggers of the modern era' who fail or refuse to join in the fight to preserve segregation." ("White Citizens Council Rally Attacks," *Americus Times-Recorder*, June 23, 1955.)

¹⁶⁰ MS 2341 3:6; Nicholas von Hoffman, "Clarence Jordan: A Rights Hero in Faded Blue Denim," *Chicago Daily News*, Saturday Aug 7. 1965.

Koinonia Farm “seems to weaken [Georgia’s] whole stand on segregation,” adding, “something ought to be done about it.”¹⁶¹ Georgia governor Marvin Griffin even contacted the local sheriff in Americus to inquire who “this Jordan fellow was.”¹⁶² With tensions rising in Americus and throughout the state, segregationists were angry and ready to mobilize. “All the feverish hostility needed,” historian Dallas Lee observed, “was a target.”¹⁶³ Koinonia gave them one.

Suddenly, Koinonia Farm epitomized “everything in the world that is foul, unSouthern and subversive,” as their theologically based integrationism was swiftly recast as a Communist ploy.¹⁶⁴ In this period, just the accusation of association with anything Red became a scarlet letter of guilt since communism was deemed inherently godless and decidedly unChristian.¹⁶⁵ The Georgia Attorney General, Eugene Cook, alleged that Koinonia was known to have welcomed and harbored communists, promoted subversion, and possibly planned to overthrow the government.¹⁶⁶ A formal investigation in 1957 became “an excuse to look into every nook and cranny of Koinonia,” culminating in a subpoena of Koinonia before the Georgia Grand Jury in the case *State of Georgia vs. C. Conrad Browne*.¹⁶⁷

C. Conrad, or Con, Browne, had been a resident of Koinonia since 1949, and was in charge of the Farm’s interracial summer camp, likely the reason charges fixated on him. Though

¹⁶¹ *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 29, 1958 as quoted in Koinonia Farm Newsletter #18, May 15, 1958.

¹⁶² K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 85.

¹⁶³ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 106. He continues, colorfully imagining, “Those who wanted to take out their emotions violently must have slapped their newspapers that morning and declared to themselves, ‘That’s it. That Koinonia Farm is perfect--it’s big, it’s defenseless, and it’s damn sure suspect!’”

¹⁶⁴ MS 2341 3:6, Nicholas von Hoffman, “Clarence Jordan: A Rights Hero in Faded Blue Denim,” *Chicago Daily News*, Saturday Aug 7, 1965.

¹⁶⁵ See Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The World of Joe McCarthy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Stanley I. Kutler, *The American Inquisition: Justice and Injustice in the Cold War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982); Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s Press, 1994); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1991).

¹⁶⁶ The investigation, of course, found no evidence of any of this. (*Americus Times-Recorder*, Feb 1957).

¹⁶⁷ Jordan, (MS 756 4:5); “Griffin Changes Mind and Signs Koinonia Bill,” *Americus Times-Recorder* March 27, 1958. Tracy K’Meyer claims that “Koinonia did not know exactly what the charges were against Con,” but several members of the community were asked to testify and all of the Farm’s documents presented. (K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 90.)

for years the Camp Koinonia had seemed merely a quaint exercise in paternalistic charity, in the post-*Brown* era, it represented, to many in Americus, a subversive attempt at racial mixing. After the camp received numerous injunctions from Americus authorities in the summer of 1956, Browne decided to accept the Highlander Folk School's invitation to hold the camp there, in Monteagle, TN.¹⁶⁸ Highlander's known Communist ties provided ample reason for the investigation of Con and thus, of Koinonia.

Throughout the proceedings, Clarence Jordan and others testified about the Farm's activities, and tried to use the attention to highlight the spiritual nature of Koinonia and to profess its incarnational theology. As Jordan recollected, "I tried to explain to them the difference between Christ and Marx, but soon it became clear that they didn't know anything about either one of them."¹⁶⁹ To a man who pointedly inquired if the Koinonians were communists, Jordan responded, "no, unless Jesus Christ was a communist--we follow His teachings."¹⁷⁰ The Koinonians presented their records and answered all charges with factual and theological justifications. "I don't think a Christian is worth his salt who hasn't been called a Communist today," Clarence Jordan reflected, adding, "trying to refute that epithet is about like running for your birth certificate when someone calls you a son of a bitch."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Officials in Americus had previously obtained an injunction against the Camp, claiming, that it was "detrimental to morals and purposes" since the children attending "will be shown live pigs being born" and "the camp and facilities shall be nonsegregated on the basis of sexes." (MS 756 3:7.) In a letter dated July 10, 1956, Con Browne wrote, "Things have been happening thick and fast here at Koinonia. I am sure you must have heard something of the two injunctions obtained against our camp, one by the county health dept. and the other by some neighbors charging, among other things, that we did such immoral things as allowing the children to witness 'live pigs being born.' The camp was moved bag, baggage, kids, and counselors to Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, TN. as they offered us free use of their facilities." The hearings kept being delayed by the county attorney with Browne suspecting, "they will find some other reason for further postponement and in this way prevent it from being moved back here at all this yr. and possibly enable them to drop it and get another injunction next year. It has caused quite a stir in town, appearing in the Atlanta papers, too, and has resulted in many vicious rumors and threats." These bizarre charges were obviously false, but succeeded in obstructing the operation of the Camp in Americus by tying it up in a prolonged legal dispute throughout the summer.

¹⁶⁹ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 131.

¹⁷⁰ Clarence Jordan personal interview, 16 January 1967 in Deatrick, "Koinonia," 61.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Following a week of testimony, on April 5, 1957, the Grand Jury declined to indict. However, it did issue a sixteen-page report, which painstakingly documented the unproven charges. These fabricated charges included that Koinonia owed tax money, knowingly harbored communists, kept blacks in a state of “brainwashed peonage,” planned conspiracy against the government, and that its Christianity was “sheer window dressing and its practice of Christianity has no precedent in the religious annals of the United States.” The Grand Jury even alleged that Jordan himself was a deceitful and immoral man.¹⁷² This unsubstantiated report not only was published in the local newspaper, *The Americus Times-Recorder*, but was also sent to various governmental officials throughout the state and to the U.S. Attorney General. Many in Americus and beyond thus concluded that Koinonia was a suspect organization and that its racial views were inspired by communism, not Christianity. As the Georgia Revenue Commissioner opined: “We think [Koinonia] neither charitable nor religious. It’s simply a move to integrate the races and I think it is a disgrace.”¹⁷³ George Mathews, the Chairman of County Commissions captured the prevailing sentiment, telling an editorial writer from the *Nation*: “That farm makes a lot more money than my farm does. They must be getting help from Washington... Washington wants a yellow race, anyway. As to being a religious colony, they don’t have no religion at all, and you can quote me on it. We got no room for people like them here, and we don’t aim to have them

¹⁷² MS 756 4:5; Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 110-130; Dora Byron, “Courage in Action: Koinonia Revisited,” *The Nation*, 184, March 16, 1957, 226-228, National Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, TN; “Georgia Grand Jury Statement,” Koinonia Archive. Koinonia wrote a detailed “answer” to the Grand Jury’s presentments, refuting them one by one, and sought to buy advertising space and publish it in the *Americus Times-Recorder*. (“Statement of Koinonia Farm: In response to Sumter County Grand Jury Presentments,” 1-7, National Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, TN.)¹⁷² When the paper refused to publish the apologetic, the Koinonians printed the document and mailed it to every address in the Americus-Sumter County phonebook. In this response, the Koinonians called the investigation “biased and unfair,” saying, “the Grand Jury showed no concern whatsoever for a fair and balanced presentation of the facts.” “On the contrary,” they continued, “it collected and interpreted to the discredit of Koinonia every possible piece of information that could be twisted” and “omitted all of those readily ascertainable facts which reflect to the credit of Koinonia.” (Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 136).

¹⁷³ *Americus Times-Recorder*, 1957; Koinonia Archive.

around much longer.”¹⁷⁴ Though Mathews’ statement was full of false allegations--Jordan was not from the North, the Farm was not making any money, and it was certainly not supported by the Federal government-- the most striking was the assertion that Koinonia was not really a religious community.¹⁷⁵ Koinonia’s insistent rebuttal fell on deaf ears. The circulated report tainted Koinonia as a communist organization and allowed white Americus residents to dismiss its theological interracialism and to remain satisfied in a system of sanctified segregation.

The full force of hostility soon descended on this small Christian community.¹⁷⁶ Menacing phone calls began. So did the suffocating boycott that would, in time, economically ruin the Farm.¹⁷⁷ Mechanics refused to fix the Koinonians’s equipment. They couldn’t get the hardware supplies they needed. Koinonia could not get its cotton crop processed and harvested. It couldn’t sell produce. The egg business evaporated as no one would buy hens or eggs any longer and the 4,000 laying hens that could not be given away had to be butchered, a cruel denouement for the farm that brought the poultry industry to Sumter County.¹⁷⁸ The Koinonians

¹⁷⁴ Dora Byron, “Courage in Action: Koinonia Revisited,” *The Nation*, 184, March 16, 1957, 226-228, National Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹⁷⁵ In a statement mailed to every address in Sumter County, the Koinonians responded to the Grand Jury report. “Like all human beings, we are subject to frailty,” they admitted but insisted, “we are earnestly striving to follow the teachings of Jesus as we understand them.” The statement concludes: “we wish to reaffirm our faith in God...it is our belief that the solution to the problem of the South--and the Nation--does not lie in violence, force and coercion. It lies in the redemptive love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.” For the Koinonians, the assertion that Jesus was the solution to political, social and spiritual unrest was the center of their mission and what inspired their radical experiment in interracial Christian community. (“Statement of Koinonia Farm: In response to Sumter County Grand Jury Presentments,” 1-7, National Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, TN.)

¹⁷⁶ See: MS 756 4:3; Koinonia Newsletters; “Local Ministers Attack Koinonia Farm Violence,” *Americus-Times Recorder*, 17 Jan 1957; “State Church Council Backs Americus Group,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 2 Feb 1957, CLJ MC 2340, “Churches to Back Anti-Bias Groups,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1957. “Violence Has No Place in Sumter’s Problem,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 February 1957; “Violence Must be Stopped,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 20 February 1957, Newsletter, 10 February 1957; “Special Report: Koinonia Updated,” *The Christian Century*, 868, National Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹⁷⁷ It was “tremendously tight.” (MS 2341 3:6; MS 2341 4:16.) Not only financially ruinous, the boycott had “become burdensome” in other realms, “clearly affecting the effectiveness of [the Farm’s] spiritual ministry.” (MS 2341 1:1) MS 2341 1:1; Nicholas von Hoffman, “Clarence Jordan: A Rights Hero in Faded Blue Denim,” *Chicago Daily News*, August 7, 1965.

¹⁷⁸ Edgar Stoess, a voluntary service director, who was solicited to offer financial advice to Koinonia, estimated in a letter to Jordan that the Farm had suffered a 10,000 dollar loss for the past three years due to the boycott. (MS 2341 3:6; MS 2341 4:16). On top of the economic distress caused by the boycott, the Farm had suffered severe financial

could no longer purchase insurance on their farm equipment and no one in the county would sell them fertilizer or other products. The bank abruptly cancelled the Koinonia's checking account and refused to make further loans, despite consistent and timely payment of loans in the past. Intimidation from the Americus community made it impossible for even those sympathetic to Koinonia to continue to do business with the Farm. As one supplier told Jordan, "Nothing personal, understand. It's strictly business...I can't afford to lose my customers." When Jordan appealed to Christian charity, the man replied that though he was a Baptist, "that's not the point here...I just can't lose the business." The butane gas dealer who refused to sell to the Koinonians confessed it made him feel "like [Pontius] Pilate," saying, "I just want to wash my hands and my soul."¹⁷⁹ The abandonment by former friends and neighbors was especially difficult. "I would rather face the frantic, childish mob, even with their shotguns and buggy whips," a devastated Jordan declared, "than the silent, insidious mob of good church people who give assent to boycott and subtle psychological warfare."¹⁸⁰

The boycott continued from June 1956 through the early 1960s, bringing Koinonia to the brink of financial ruin and forcing the community to depend wholly on charitable donations from sympathetic supporters through their mail-order pecan business.¹⁸¹ "You can get rid of a man just

losses from the violence destruction of their products. Estimations of losses from bombings, bullets, and arson from 1956-1957 add up to \$12, 475, a significant sum. (MS 756 4:3)

¹⁷⁹ As quoted in Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 111.

¹⁸⁰ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 143.

¹⁸¹ Koinonia Farm newsletter, 1957. The pecan business proved quite successful. With wit, the Farm sent out mailings with requests to help them "ship the nuts out of Georgia!" Donations poured in, especially as news of the Farm's persecution spread. The Koinonians detailed their situation in their monthly newsletters sent to their supporters across the country and articles appeared in national secular and religious publications such as *The Denver Post*, an ABC news report, the "Philadelphia Afro American newspaper," *Newsweek*, *Christian Century*, *The Southern Patriot*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Concerned citizens wrote the Farm of their support and outrage at the situation, many expressing that they "were sorry (but NOT surprised) to read of your community trouble," and requesting shipments of pecans. (Letter January 12, 1957. MS 756 4:1; MS 2341 5:1, MS 756 4:2; Letter from Mrs. Fountain B. Craig of New Orleans, LA, October 9, 1963, MS 2341 1:1. These letters reveal a national response to the situation in Americus. While many are from Christians, many are also from non-Christian, liberal people concerned about racism and liberty. For example, Albert Huntman, of Rockville Center, NY wrote, "Gentle People, in empathy with you and your struggle I wish I could do more to help in some way other than placing this small

as effectively by starving him as by shooting him,” Jordan mused. “Good folk who wouldn’t pull a trigger helped in the boycott,” he continued, adding, “I’d rather be shot at.”¹⁸² He soon would be.

To challenge the prevailing mores of Southern society so starkly was to invite not only intimidation, but outright violence.¹⁸³ Vandalism, stealing crops, tearing down fences, tampering with signs, destroying farm equipment and dumping trash on Koinonia’s property became regular occurrences in the late 1950s. In one particularly senseless episode, vigilantes chopped down nearly 300 peach, apple and pecan trees planted on Koinonia’s property.¹⁸⁴ Klansmen burned crosses on the lawns of Koinonia’s neighbors, in a largely successful attempt to scare people away from the Farm.¹⁸⁵ One day, a procession of seventy or eighty cars slowly drove past the Farm in a silent statement of malice.¹⁸⁶ Seeing the motorcade of cars approaching, a Koinonia woman innocently asked whose funeral it was. A Klansman chillingly responded, “it might very well be yours.”¹⁸⁷ One antagonist fired bullets from a heavy caliber pistol on the roadside stand the Koinonians operated several miles from the Farm. Another would later bomb the stand.¹⁸⁸ After several more bombings, the Koinonians abandoned the roadside stand

order with you and quoting from the Torah, ‘If not now--when?, and if not you--who?’ As a Jew I can tell you that you and yours are not alone. May peace and success in your efforts be achieved in your lifetime.” (MS 2341 1:1, MS 756 3:9, MS 756 4:1)

¹⁸² Jordan as quoted in Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 111.

¹⁸³ See: 23 July 1956 “Insurance cancellations on the 26th: “Store Dynamited Here Monday Night,” “Force and Coercion Not Condoned,” *Americus Times-Recorder* 24 July 1956. “Bi-Racial Farm Project Blasted,” *Washington Post*, 25 July 1956; “Exploding Bomb from Moving Vehicle Destroys Interracial Farm Store,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 4 August 1956; “Other Cheek is Turned in Georgia Bombing,” *Christian Century* 73:34 (August 1956), 965; “An Open Letter from Koinonia Farm,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 2 August 1956; “What is Koinonia,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 8 August 1956; “Solicitor Asks Revival of KKK at States Rights Meet Here,” *Albany Journal*, 3 August 1956.

¹⁸⁴ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 117.

¹⁸⁵ This includes Top Brown, Jordan, personal interview, 16 January, 1967, Deatrick, “Koinonia,” 60.

¹⁸⁶ K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 87.

¹⁸⁷ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 124.

¹⁸⁸ In a letter dated July 24, 1956, Con Browne writes, “Last night, as you may know by now, someone dynamited the market 4 miles from here where we sell our farm products...Clarence Jordan estimates the damage at about \$3,000.” (MS 756 3:7)

altogether, leaving its wreckage “as a monument to violence” or, as another historian phrased it, as “a mute testimony to passersby of the fruits of hate and prejudice.”¹⁸⁹ Violent attacks extended to those who aided Koinonia. In May of 1957, opponents of the Farm bombed a feed store in downtown Americus for breaking the boycott.¹⁹⁰ Even the *Americus Times-Recorder*, a newspaper that rarely commented on social matters, issued a statement condemning the recent violence and calling for its immediate cessation.¹⁹¹ “No one” the editor asserted, “could believe that such [violence] could happen in Americus, a city of peace-loving, church-going, cultured people.”¹⁹²

Perpetrators of violence soon aimed at the Farm itself where sixty men, women and children lived.¹⁹³ Attempted arson occurred frequently. Cars speeding down the rural highway in front of Koinonia regularly unleashed bullets into the community buildings as they passed by. In the last week of March 1957 alone the Farm endured three shooting incidents.¹⁹⁴ During a particularly dramatic incident, assailants fired into the bedroom of the Jordan’s eldest daughter, Eleanor, ripping through an armchair where Clarence Jordan had been sitting moments before, before finally lodging themselves in a children’s toy closet in the next room.¹⁹⁵ In another drive-by shooting, the target was the lodging of some Farm visitors, including one man from Michigan.

¹⁸⁹ Koinonia Farm Newsletter, July 26, 1956, November 23, 1956, January 18, 1957; K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South* 86; Chancey, “Restructuring Southern Society,” 47.

¹⁹⁰ “Special Report: Koinonia Updated,” *The Christian Century*, 868, AR 39.

¹⁹¹ “Local Ministers Attack Koinonia Farm Violence,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 17 Jan 1957; “State Church Council Backs Americus Group,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 2 Feb 1957, CLJ MC 2340: 31, “Churches to Back Anti-Bias Groups,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1957. “Violence Has No Place in Sumter’s Problem,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 February 1957; “Violence Must be Stopped,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 20 February 1957, Newsletter, 10 February 1957.

¹⁹² *Americus Times-Recorder*, May 1957 (Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 145-146).

¹⁹³ At this point, the fellowship included around 60 people, 45 of them white and 15 of them black. (Clarence Jordan in letter to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1957, MS 2341 5:1.). This was likely the peak of Koinonia’s population in the civil rights era, as violence limited activities, and deterred new members, particularly black ones.

¹⁹⁴ MS 756 4:4; MS 756 4:5.

¹⁹⁵ See National Southern Baptist Archives AR 39: 109, “Koinonia Farm Under Seige,” *Christian Century*, February 20, 1957, 219, Koinonia Farm Newsletter, April 24, 1957, No. 13; K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 86, Koinonia Newsletters, Koinonia Farm Archive. Upon visiting the Farm, Dorothy Day experienced the violence, as her station wagon was “peppered with bullets.” (Koinonia Archive).

The next morning, as the man left for Detroit, he asked if he should leave his hat, which now boasted a clean bullet hole, as evidence. “Take it with you,” Clarence replied, as “evidence of warm Southern hospitality.”¹⁹⁶ Later, some men opened gunfire in broad daylight while children played outdoors. “We were playing volleyball,” Clifford Angry remembered, and “when the gunfire started, we hit the ground.”¹⁹⁷ So intense and scary was the experience, that some children were sent away, including the Jordan’s oldest son, who went to live in another intentional community in South Dakota.¹⁹⁸ The Angrys, the black family living at Koinonia, were also forced to flee the violence. They moved to Hidden Springs, New Jersey to try to start another koinonia with several other families, including Harry and Allene Atkinson who had been at Koinonia since 1945.^{199,200}

Exhaustion and exasperation wore down the remaining group. In January of 1957, a desperate Clarence Jordan petitioned the President Dwight Eisenhower in a “last resort.” He wrote that Koinonia Farm was “facing annihilation unless quick, decisive action is taken by someone in authority.” Jordan described the recent violence and requested federal intervention, since America “is a land where free men have the right--and the duty--to walk erect and without fear in their pursuit of peace and happiness.”²⁰¹ The White House and Attorney General assured

¹⁹⁶ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 122.

¹⁹⁷ “A Witness to history at civil rights frontier,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 2008. Koinonia Archive.

¹⁹⁸ The Koinonians corresponded with a number of other intentional communities--a Fellowship of Intentional Communities--including Koinonia Farm, Hidden Springs Community, Kingwood Community, Tuelumne Farm, Celebrook Cooperative Community, Cele Community, Quest, Tanguy Homesteads, Macedonia Cooperative Community, Haines Turner. (MS 756 2:15). In many ways, those most affected were perhaps the children of the Koinonia who faced ridicule in school each day. For more on the Koinonia schoolchildren, see Chapter 5.

¹⁹⁹ Angry, *My Life Changing and Growing*, 13.

²⁰⁰ See: 23 July 1956 “Insurance cancellations on the 26th: “Store Dynamited Here Monday Night,” “Force and Coercion Not Condoned,” *Americus Times-Recorder* 24 July 1956. “Bi-Racial Farm Project Blasted,” *Washington Post*, 25 July 1956; “Exploding Bomb from Moving Vehicle Destroys Interracial Farm Store,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 4 August 1956; “Other Cheek is Turned in Georgia Bombing,” *Christian Century* 73:34 (August 1956), 965; “An Open Letter from Koinonia Farm,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 2 August 1956; “What is Koinonia,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 8 August 1956; “Solicitor Asks Revival of KKK at States Rights Meet Here,” *Albany Journal*, 3 August 1956.

²⁰¹ MS 2341 5:1.

the Koinonians that they would take the matter seriously, expressing a “strong aversion to acts of violence,” only to hand the matter over to the Governor of Georgia, the very same man who, months before, had angrily demanded to know who ‘this Jordan fellow was.’ Rather than offering protection against violence, Governor Griffin appointed the county’s prosecuting attorney to take steps to “get rid of this interracial cancer in the fair community of Georgia.”²⁰² The federal government offered no protection to Koinonia.²⁰³

Finally, on May 26, 1957, a delegation of prominent Americus citizens visited Koinonia and asked them to leave Sumter County.²⁰⁴ Ten well-attired men, representing the power structure of the city, took their seats in dilapidated chairs amongst the Koinonians, dressed in blue jeans and work clothes. “We have a problem which we’ve got to recognize,” began Frank Myers, representing the Chamber of Commerce. That problem, according to the group’s official spokesman Charles Crisp, was the existence of Koinonia Farm. While allowing that the Koinonians were “dedicated Christians,” Crisp alleged that the group did not “make brotherly love in the community,” which, he asserted is the “first duty of a Christian.” Koinonia, he railed, “has set brother against brother; it has created bitterness; it has created hatred; it has created every emotion that is contrary to my concept of Christianity.” The assembled men then stated that “unless this experiment is moved...somebody is going to get hurt... that is the reality of the situation.” Therefore, they stated, it would be “serving the best interests of the community and

²⁰² AR 39: 1-9, “By the Way: Report on a Siege,” Eugene J. Lipman, *The Christian Century*, February 25, 1959, 233-235”; Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 120.

²⁰³ The Koinonians also contacted the Georgia Bureau of Investigations and the Federal Bureau of Investigations after discovering that some of the bullets from attacks on the Farm were fired from a machine gun, necessarily government issue. “If United States weapons were being used against citizens in peacetime” they thought, “it was a violation of federal law and the FBI could get involved.” Turns out, there was a connection between the guns and the National Guard, something confirmed by the fact that many of the attacks occurred on Monday nights, following the weekly meetings of the local National Guard (K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South* 89).

²⁰⁴ This delegation included J.R. Blair, Frank Bowen, Tom Clark, Charles Crisp, George Mathews, Frank Myers, Jimmie Lott, J.P. Luther, J.H. Robinson representing (in no particular order) the President of the Bank of Commerce, President of the Chamber of Commerce, the leading attorneys, the mayor, the editor of the *Americus Times-Recorder*, and major businessmen.

certainly the best interests of your Lord to move and leave us in peace.”²⁰⁵ When Jordan protested that abandoning Koinonia would be spiritually detrimental, the men responded: “well, I hope that we’re big enough to be interested in your spiritual welfare, but we’re particularly, right now, interested in your physical welfare.” After this terse discussion, the delegation left. As the men got in their cars to leave the Farm, Clarence lamented that “Sumter County...could have gone down as the most glorious little county in all the world. It could have stood out as a shining light to the rest of the nation--for freedom, for truth, for justice.” Instead, it was a small Georgia city with an anxious Chamber of Commerce, so plagued by racism that it chose to expel a radical Christian group rather than honor its religious principles.²⁰⁶

The Koinonians decided to stay. As Florence Jordan recalled, “there was never any feeling that we should leave. We knew we wouldn’t be the first Christians to die, and we wouldn’t be the last.”²⁰⁷ Even in the midst of violence and persecution, specific theological beliefs sustained the community. Rather than capitulate to intimidation and fear, the Koinonians steeled their resolve by looking to the example of Christ. Like Jesus, who was misunderstood and persecuted, the Koinonians had to be willing to endure scorn and derision for their radical message. Even oppression was incarnational. Not only did the Koinonians believe that they were like Christ in his suffering, they believed that the resurrection of Christ transformed their suffering. “Jesus did not remain in the tomb,” Clarence taught, “so those who are seeking to follow His example...need not fear those who would kill the body, for they, like a mighty

²⁰⁵ This entire meeting was supposedly recorded on a cassette tape. See Faith Fuller, “Briars in the Cottonpatch”; Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 147-148.

²⁰⁶ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 153.

²⁰⁷ As Clarence remembered, “It was not a question of whether or not we were to be scared, but whether or not we would be obedient.” He continued, “We knew this flew in the face of the Southern code. We knew white men could disappear just like black men. It scared [the] hell out of us, but the alternative was to not do it and that scared us more.” (Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 115, 39)

stream, cannot be stopped by barriers erected by men.”²⁰⁸ Christians, even when they suffered would be victorious, as Christ was. As a letter sent to the Koinonians during this period declared: “What is success after all? When Jesus was nailed to the cross, who failed? We would say that his enemies failed.”²⁰⁹ In this way, the besieged Koinonia community found comfort and strength in their theology. A letter written during this period described a “real closeness” and “great joy” at Koinonia, as members shared in “glorious” times of worship together, singing “‘I Need Thee Every Hour’ and ‘Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross’ completely unannounced.”²¹⁰ The radical Christian orthodoxy of Koinonia both prompted its persecution and sustained its members in it.

Nevertheless, the late 1950s and early 1960s marked a period of decline for Koinonia Farm. The number of community residents fell to only a handful and, with the exception of the mail-order pecan business, agricultural operations collapsed. By 1958, many members had fled to safety, particularly those with children, and only 5-8 adults remained. That number fell to 4 by 1963.²¹¹ Though in one sense this was a time of suffering for the Farm, Koinonia made some extremely significant contributions during the 1960s that had a great effect on both the history of the civil rights movement and modern Christianity in America.

Koinonia as a Haven for Civil Rights Workers

In the early 1960s, “a remarkable thing happened” at Koinonia.²¹² With Americus the site of significant civil rights activity, many activists came to work in southwest Georgia. Koinonia became a haven for them, a place where they could think and rest. As any activist will attest, this

²⁰⁸ MS 756 3:6, Letter to Claud, Billie, Marion and Howard March 30, 1956.

²⁰⁹ Letter to Koinonia, November 20, 1957, MS 756 4:13.

²¹⁰ MS 756 3:6, Letter to Claud, Billie, Marion and Howard March 30, 1956.

²¹¹ Koinonia Archive, History of Koinonia Timeline.

²¹² Charles Marsh, Archives, *The Project for Lived Theology*; http://archives.livedtheology.org/nodereference/thickbox/2395/thickbox_reference_full?width=700&height=500.

is a significant contribution, and one often ignored by scholars of the civil rights movement.²¹³ Though the Farm had been weakened by violence and suffocated by the boycott, its calm fields and empty cabins offered a peaceful, quiet space where interracial groups could gather and activists could recover. As Charles Marsh put it, in the 1960s Koinonia “found itself reborn as a place of hospitality for movement activists, peacemakers and southern dissidents.”²¹⁴ The civil rights struggle, as we shall see, was somewhat beleaguered in Americus, faced with a hostile white community, constant arrests, and a cunning and intractable municipal structure. Beaten, bruised, tired and depleted, many civil rights workers found a peaceful respite under the pecan trees at Koinonia, enabling them to recuperate and continue the struggle for civil rights in Georgia and throughout the South.

The Koinonians never envisioned themselves participating in the civil rights movement, and insisted that, while they, too, hoped for racial justice to be realized in the South, their project was not a political one. In 1960, Clarence Jordan was asked if Koinonia Farm believed in racial integration. He replied: “I wouldn’t put it in those terms. Being followers of Jesus, we accept as our brother anyone who is a son of God whether he is black or white or what.” But, “we do not call that integration,” he clarified, “we simply call it a practice of our Christian beliefs.”²¹⁵ For the Koinonians, integration was just lived theology. “When we started back in 1942,” Jordan explained, “there was no integration movement, no civil rights movement, but even then it was our conviction...we didn’t want to [integrate] because it was good for business or for enlightened

²¹³ As Marsh states: “The Koinonia story has been ignored in our telling of the Civil Rights Movement because of the difficulty of appreciating the importance of contemplative and moral discipline in social protest. Koinonia makes nothing happen in terms of a familiar statistical-legal measure. Yet the movement in the South, like Bonhoeffer’s resistance movement in Germany and Gandhi’s *satyagraha* in India, depended on intentional communities dedicated to work, study and contemplation.” (Charles Marsh, *Project on Lived Theology*; http://archives.livedtheology.org/nodereference/thickbox/2395/thickbox_reference_full?width=700&height=500)

²¹⁴ Charles Marsh, Archives, *The Project for Lived Theology*; http://archives.livedtheology.org/nodereference/thickbox/2395/thickbox_reference_full?width=700&height=500.

²¹⁵ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 162.

self-interest; we wanted to do it because it was right.”²¹⁶ When the Koinonians advocated equal treatment for all regardless of race, they did so from a strictly theological basis and had little interest in involving themselves in the civil rights movement as a political and social struggle.²¹⁷ In fact, Clarence Jordan and Martin Luther King, Jr. exchanged a series of letters in which they disagreed over the tactics of the civil rights movement. King had heard of Koinonia in the late 1950s, when news of its violent persecution rippled through the South, and had written a letter of encouragement to Jordan. “You and the Koinonia community have been in my prayers continually the last several months,” King wrote in February 1957. Even in “these trying moments,” he continued, “I hope...you will gain consolation from the fact that in your struggle for freedom and a true Christian community you have cosmic companionship.”²¹⁸ King and Jordan shared a faith in God and a vision for the possibilities of integrated Christian community. They differed sharply however, both in approach and method. King, having experienced success with the bus boycott in Montgomery, began to adopt boycotts and mass demonstrations as useful tactics in the nonviolent protest movement. Jordan, on the other hand, opposed boycotting in all forms (having been the victim of such a suffocating boycott himself) and shied from direct provocation, a view which he expressed to King.²¹⁹ Though the Baptist ministers had much in common, their disagreements prevented them from forging a close bond. The Farm never associated itself directly with the civil rights movement, preferring instead to identify with, in

²¹⁶ Nicholas von Hoffman, “Clarence Jordan: A Rights Hero in Faded Blue Denim,” *Chicago Daily News*, August 7, 1965, MS 2341 3:6.

²¹⁷ Koinonia Farm newsletters, Koinonia Archives, Americus, GA.

²¹⁸ Letter from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Clarence Jordan, 8 February 1957, Koinonia Farm Archives. King wrote: “You and the Koinonia Community have been in my prayers continually for the last several months. The injustices and indignities that you are now confronting certainly leave you in trying moments. I hope, however, that you will gain consolation from the fact that in your struggle for freedom and a true Christian community you have cosmic companionship. God grant that this tragic midnight of man’s inhumanity to man will soon pass and the daybreak of freedom and brotherhood will come into being. yours very truly, Martin King.”

²¹⁹ Having experienced the effects of a boycott, Jordan was hesitant to support that action used in the name of Christ. He also often opposed the provocation used so frequently throughout the movement. Clarence Jordan Papers, King Papers; http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol4/8-Feb-1957_ToJordan.pdf.

Jordan's words, "the God Movement." Despite the Koinonians reticence to march and to boycott, however, they supported the cause and the work being done by young black and white civil rights activists.²²⁰

Thus, they welcomed scores of young people to the Farm throughout the years of the civil rights movement, offering a home cooked meal, a soft bed, a welcoming community, abundant prayers, and peace and quiet.²²¹ In 1962, Koinonia hosted a retreat for SNCC workers from nearby Albany for several days.²²² A friend of Koinonia wrote in 1963 that he was "pleased" that the Farm had chosen to "aid and abet the SNCC people."²²³ These young protestors found Koinonia, or "that Farm," as it was referred to, "like a retreat" during the years of the Movement, as the Koinonians "opened their arms" to them.²²⁴ One CORE activist, Zev Aelony, spent a prolonged season living at Koinonia. In fact, he was so attached to the place that, in a will he drafted from prison, he requested that his body be buried at the Farm.²²⁵ Aelony remarked that Clarence Jordan "knows the civil rights movement well, and helps it by keeping a kind of place of refuge on the farm for battle-fatigued workers who need to rest up and get a grip on themselves."²²⁶ Charles Sherrod echoed Aelony's words. A SNCC field secretary who labored in Southwest Georgia, Sherrod remembered, "on Sundays I used to go out there and talk to Clarence and meditate...it was nice just to be on a Farm and be quiet."²²⁷ In those silent

²²⁰ Interestingly, Charles Sherrod commented that "Much of the spade work [for SNCC's movement] has already been done by the Koinonia Farm people," whose presence "was a good start, even if it is emblazoned with bullet fringes." (Sherrod to Branton, February 8, 1963, VEP 2-19, SNCC microfilm as quoted in Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 178).

²²¹ Some estimate Koinonia hosted up to a thousand young activists a year. (Charles Marsh, *Project on Lived Theology*.)

²²² MS 756 20:4; Interview with Charles Sherrod, K'Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 152.

²²³ Letter from H.B. Munson, Rapid City, SD Dec 6, 1963; MS 2341 1:1.

²²⁴ Interview with Sammy Mahone, Atlanta, GA, January 2012.

²²⁵ Letter from Zev Aelony, MS 756 6: 8.

²²⁶ MS 756 5:7.

²²⁷ Charles Sherrod, Interview with Tracy K'Meyer, as quoted in Charles Marsh, *Project on Lived Theology*, Lived Theology Archive.

moments at Koinonia Farm, with the warm breeze rustling through the fields, activists like Pauley, Aelony, and Sherrod found the strength, peace, and nurturing they needed to continue on in the difficult struggle for civil rights. **[Image III]**

Koinonia did more than offer a respite. It also presented a vision of what these activists were striving for, of the beloved community, of the Kingdom of God. Some have suggested that it was, in fact, Koinonia Farm, that Martin Luther King had in mind when he infamously intoned, “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”²²⁸ Sitting down at the table of brotherhood happened daily at Koinonia Farm, a living picture of beloved community in the Deep South and an inspiration to the theological civil rights movement.²²⁹

To Sam Mahone, a young black growing up in Americus, Koinonia was just “a beacon of hope.”²³⁰ Indeed, Koinonia Farm’s “endurance in the face of violence and threats—especially in the middle and late fifties... put hope in the hearts of many South Georgia Negroes.”²³¹ One day during a Klan rally in Americus in 1957, a group of local blacks stood and watched, noticeably undaunted by the display of hatred. “You should know,” one onlooker explained, “Koinonia has taught us not to be afraid.”²³² Mabel Barnum, a prominent black citizen and business owner likewise added that Koinonia proved that “you don’t have to be afraid of the Klan.”²³³ These black residents in Americus saw that even in the midst of danger and persecution, there was an insistent good that refused to capitulate. Koinonia indeed refused to

²²⁸ Marsh, *The Beloved Community* 53; Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream,” March on Washington, 1963, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>.

²²⁹ Koinonia was, according to one historian, “an inspiration to blacks as much as an irritant to white supremacists.” (Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 178).

²³⁰ Interview with Sam Mahone, 2 March 2012.

²³¹ AR 39 1-4, National Southern Baptist Archive Nashville, TN

²³² Letter from Clarence Jordan to Hallock Hoffman, November 27, 1957, (MS 2340 I: 1957; K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 97).

²³³ Mabel Barnum, as quoted in Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 176.

retreat from their vision of interracial Christian community and also offered a retreat for weary activists, a significant and often overlooked aspect of the civil rights story.

Theological Re-imaginings in the *Cottonpatch*

While Koinonia Farm contributed to the civil rights movement in Americus, it also contributed to the broader theological struggle for racial equality through Clarence Jordan's *Cottonpatch* translation of the Bible. For years, Jordan had been a popular speaker at colleges, universities, seminaries, workshops, and churches, as he shared his insights from the Bible and applied them to quotidian life, including, notably, to race relations.²³⁴ Nearing the end of his life, Jordan sought to chronicle formally these ideas. Life on the Farm had quieted and Jordan began to spend more time in his little writing shack, where he penned his 1968 *Cottonpatch* Translation of the New Testament. **[Image IV]** Through his writings, and specifically the *Cottonpatch Translation*, Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farm once more challenged the relationship between Christianity and race and left a lasting legacy to Christianity in America.

Since his Seminary days in Louisville, Jordan had always possessed a deep interest in the Greek New Testament, finding power and relevancy in the original language. In his writings at Koinonia therefore, Jordan sought to apply the truths of the New Testament to life in the segregated South, “not only in his own tongue but in his own time.”²³⁵ The good news, or gospel, should not be relegated to “musty history,” Jordan believed, but should be presented as “fast-breaking news.”²³⁶ Instead of the Word becoming Flesh and dwelling among us, Jordan bitingly joked, “Too many people think that the Word became a mummy and dwelt in our archives.”²³⁷ Jordan wanted to bring that Word to life again. Taking some creative liberty, he

²³⁴ MS 756, MS 2341, throughout.

²³⁵ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 181.

²³⁶ Clarence Jordan, *Essential Writings*, 33.

²³⁷ February 1966; MS 756 7:1.

tried to “rescue the New Testament drama from the sanctuary and classroom” and place it “under God’s skies where people are toiling and crying and wondering,” creating a colloquial and often biting interpretation entitled *The Cottonpatch Translations*.²³⁸

Jordan’s version of the gospel of Luke began: “Now during the fifteenth year of Tiberius as President, while Pontius Pilate was governor of Georgia, and Herod was governor of Alabama...while Anna and Caiaphas were co-presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention, the word of God came...down on the farm.”²³⁹ The word came to John the Baptist, who, in Jordan’s rendering traded his camel hair and ascetism for “blue jeans and a leather jacket” and his locusts and honey for “cornbread and collard greens.”²⁴⁰ Jesus himself was raised in the Bethlehem equivalent of Valdosta, Georgia, baptized in the Chattahoochee River and is described as “plenty smart, and God liked him.”²⁴¹ Jordan tried to place the unfamiliar traditions and lexicon of the ancient Roman Empire in accessible language for the people he knew in Georgia, hoping then that it would pierce their hearts and change their lives.²⁴²

²³⁸ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 181; Clarence Jordan, *Cottonpatch Translations* (New York, Association Press, 1968). In an Associated Press article that appeared in the *Americus Times-Recorder*, Jordan’s translation is described as “slang,” “Peppery Dixie language,” full of “quaint idioms.” “Jordan Publishes New Bible,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, February 9, 1968, p 5, MS 2341 1:14.) Many of the epistles are published several times and in different volumes. By the time of his death in 1969, Jordan had published Cottonpatch versions of Mark and John’s Gospels and several of the Epistles of Paul.

²³⁹ Clarence Jordan, *Cottonpatch Translations*.

²⁴⁰ Jordan, “Dipped in the Chattahoochee,” *Cottonpatch Translations*, 40.

²⁴¹ Clarence Jordan, *Essential Writings*, “And Laid Him in an Apple Box,” 40.

²⁴² Not everyone appreciated the liberties Jordan took with his translation. As one Illinois reader wrote: “The author should be shot for making such a mockery of the Scriptures. If I were you I’d burn all copies--that way you might get a small idea of what it will be like in hell. For anyone who is an infidel to write such trash will end up in hell.” (Lee 184). Another review from *The Christian Beacon*’s Carl McIntire entitled “New Version Destroys Christianity,” states Jordan’s translation “literally violated” the Bible. He incensed author continues, “No longer do we translate the Bible faithfully because it is God’s Word; we translate it conveniently so that with the sanction of God in the hearts of those who read it propaganda can be promoted. This twisting and changing of the Holy Scriptures is something which God’s people must now recognize to be characteristic of the liberal, leftist movement. Thus,...the Bible means anything that the translator desires to make it mean, at least it makes it fit conveniently the particular line that he is interested in promoting in the social and political world.” (Carl McIntire, *The Christian Beacon*, March 14, 1968, MS 2341 1:13)

In this hope, Jordan not only made the characters of the Bible more similar to the people Southerners knew, but applied Jesus' teachings to the current moral issues of the day.²⁴³ In Jordan's *Cottonpatch* rendering of the story of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite became a white preacher and a gospel song leader. The Samaritan, meanwhile, was a black man who was "moved to tears" by the suffering of another and drove him to the hospital in Albany, telling the nurse on call, "you all take care of this white man I found on the highway. Here's the only two dollars I got, but you all keep account of what he owes and...I'll settle up with you when I make a pay-day." When he taught this passage in speaking engagements, Jordan would then ask his hearers, "if you had been the man held up by the gangsters, which of these three...would you consider to have been your neighbor?" When his listeners predictably said, "Why of course, the nig--I mean, well, er...the one who treated me kindly," Jordan would look them squarely in the eye and authoritatively say, "Jesus said, 'Well, then, you get going and start living like that.'"²⁴⁴ He affirmed that there was no place for racism in the community of Christ, declaring that God "has stamped his image on every race in heaven and on earth."²⁴⁵ If Southerners persisted in enacting racism, "if you segregate," Jordan harshly warned, "you commit a sin and stand convicted under the law as a violator."²⁴⁶ In his translation of the book of Ephesians, or "The Letter to the Christians in Birmingham," Jordan stated that "thoughtless white Christians" have often tried to keep blacks "outside of Christian fellowship" to deny their

²⁴³ Jordan had a vicious sense of humor at times, and that comes through in these translations. In addition to colorful phrases like "hell no" or the damned bastard" Jordan did not shy away from calling out the lame theology of his counterparts. In one section, when discussing John the Baptists harsh words for the priests, Jordan says, "This is a pretty rough way to start out...I tell you, I can't understand how John could have so much power with so little positive thinking and still be 'a Peale-ing,' a direct affront to Norman Vincent Peale's bestseller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. (*Cottonpatch Translations*, Lee, *The Cottonpatch Evidence* 184)

²⁴⁴ Jordan, *Cottonpatch Translations* 54. Before writing the *Cottonpatch Translations*, Jordan spent years considering his interpretation and using it in sermons and his numerous public speaking engagements throughout the country.

²⁴⁵ Jordan, *Cottonpatch Translations*, "One New Body," 92.

²⁴⁶ Jordan, *Cottonpatch Translations*, "Belief Backed By Deeds," 100.

“rights as fellow believers” and treated them “as though the Gospel didn’t apply.” Because of Christ, Jordan continued, “you who were once so segregated are warmly welcomed into the Christian fellowship.”²⁴⁷

These translations directly countered the prevailing racial mores, not by celebrating the promises of democracy or civil justice, or human rights, but by directly applying the Bible to Southern life. It “just burns my heart out,” Jordan claimed, that “the Supreme Court is making pagans be more Christian than the Bible is making Christians be Christians.” He continued, “I can hardly stand it sometimes when the whole integration struggle is ... about whether or not we can sit down and eat hamburgers and drink cokes together. We ought to be sitting around Jesus’ table drinking wine and eating bread together... The sit-ins never would have been necessary if Christians had been sitting down together and at Christ’s table all these many years.” Jordan believed that the true power of change was theological but that many Christians had truncated the Bible’s meaning and rendered their religion ineffectual. These “white washed Christians,” he exclaimed, “have had the Word of God locked up in their hearts and have refused to do battle with it.” Instead of hiding truths behind “artificial piety and the barriers of time and distance,” Jordan’s colloquial dialect forced the application of the Bible into daily living and into the struggle for racial equality. The demands of Jesus and the words of the Scriptures confronted people shopping on Main Street, worshipping in prominent churches, and living in shacks on the outskirts of town.²⁴⁸

One afternoon, while working in his writing shack, Clarence Jordan suffered a heart attack. Though he died that day, October 29, 1969, the spirit of Clarence Jordan and his vision

²⁴⁷ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 188.

²⁴⁸ Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 190.

for Koinonia lived on.²⁴⁹ Through the *Cottonpatch* translation, the theology of Koinonia Farm was not limited to the 440 acres in South Georgia but was made accessible to a larger audience. Excerpts appeared in many Christian journals and publications, and, with its adaption into a musical by Harry Chapin in 1981, the “Cottonpatch Gospel” was widely disseminated in song and screenplay.²⁵⁰ Indeed, Jordan’s colloquial presentation of the gospels continues to challenge social mores and apply the radical teachings of Jesus to everyday life, especially life in the South.

When Clarence Jordan and Martin England walked the scorched red earth that day in 1942, they could not have anticipated the effect of their small farm and experiment in Christian community. The lived theology of Koinonia Farm-- redemptive agriculture, Christian community, and racial reconciliation-- confronted the segregationist Christianity of Americus. By framing the issue of racial equality religiously, by providing a haven for both their black neighbors and civil rights activists, and by articulating the teachings of Jesus with relevance for race relations, Koinonia Farm defied Jim Crow with its radical Christian orthodoxy. Koinonia also comprises a major opportunity lost. Twenty years before the civil rights movement arrived in Americus, Koinonia did. In a familiar drawl, they spoke to their fellow white Baptists of love and peace, and of Christianity’s racial demands. But Americus refused to listen. Koinonia Farm was a “voice crying in the wilderness,” a prophetic John the Baptist that preceded the civil rights movement in Americus and offered a foretaste of what was to follow: a bitter theological struggle over the meanings of race and religion.

²⁴⁹ MS 2341 1:2. Jordan was buried in a simple pine coffin and buried out at Koinonia in an unmarked grave. The funeral was small, though many paid their respects to Florence and the Koinonia community through written tributes and remembrances.

²⁵⁰ Pieces from Jordan’s Translation appeared in *The Church Advocate*, *The Mennonite*, and many others. The play, performed by Tom Key, opened off-Broadway and has been performed consistently for the last 30 years. (MS 2340 3:11-16, MS2340 4:1-3, 6).

CHAPTER 2

Lee Street Theology: White Southern Protestantism in Americus, 1945-1963

“We, as Americans, have always prided ourselves that what we believe is what we do.”¹

“I would rather face the frantic, childish mob, even with their shotguns and buggy whips, than the silent, insidious mob of good church people.”²

“Maintaining segregation is a sincere Christian viewpoint arrived at after much prayerful thought and deliberation.”³

Summer Sundays were uncomfortably hot at Americus’s First Baptist. As the local families gathered on the lawns in front of the church, warm dew seeped through socks and ladies dabbed at their foreheads with handkerchiefs. The air smelled of wisteria. Rev. Harold Collins flung wide the double-doors of the sanctuary around 10 am, and the congregation poured in to the familiar pine pews. As was custom, the service opened with a few songs. Maybe that Sunday the churchgoers sang their favorite tune, Hymn #412 “Onward Christian Soldiers,” the familiar words-- “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before. /Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe; forward into battle see his banners go!” -- rising up like smoke to the rafters.⁴ It was a song their ancestors had sung since the Civil War, its context altered but meaning enduring. Surely, the congregants of Americus’s First Baptist believed, Christ would lead them against their foes still, in 1963. After the hymns, there were announcements, and after the announcements, prayer. Rev. Collins delivered a sermon, as he did every week, and the five hundred or so men, women, and children flowed out of the sanctuary

¹ Roy Parker, June 29, 2003, Interview with Sumter County Oral History Project (SCOHP), Georgia Southwestern University, Americus, GA.

² Clarence Jordan, “Briars in the Cottonpatch,” Faith Fuller, 2003.

³ Resolution, First United Methodist Church, Americus, GA.

⁴ “Onward Christian Soldiers” (1865), Sabine Baring-Gould, 1834-1924, Baptist Hymnal 1956 #412; Author’s Interview with Ben Easterlin, March 12, 2013, Atlanta, GA.

the same way they came in. A few last words and embraces on the lawn, and the citizens of Americus were off to Sunday lunch. Just another Sabbath in Americus.⁵

But on Thursday evening there was business to tend to at First Baptist. Dressed in their suits from work, hair combed and briefcases in hand, the church deacons gathered in a meeting room. The issue at hand was integration. After a brief discussion and a vote, the men approved a statement that would officially define the church's position on race. This policy, henceforth known as the "closed door" policy, declared that "any negroes who try and enter this church" should be informed that "this is not an integrated church and that they will not be admitted." The resolution continued, stating, "The ushers will refer the Negroes to a colored Baptist church of their choice and then, should they insist on entering, the ushers should use the necessary means in preventing their so doing." The "necessary means" are left intentionally vague in the motion, but the opposition to racial integration was clear. Set forth by the deacons, the motion "was immediately adopted by a majority vote."⁶ Following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954 and a growing fear that "those things" could indeed happen in Americus, the First Baptist Church made its institutional and theological position on racial integration clear.⁷ It was settled. The doors were closed.⁸

⁵ At the time, in the early 1960s, First Baptist had about 500-600 members according to one churchgoer. (Interview with Marion Hicks and Kelso Gooden, The Windsor Hotel, July 2012.)

⁶ First Baptist meeting minutes; Alan Anderson, *A Journey of Grace, A History of the First Baptist Church in Americus, GA* (Americus: First Baptist, 2006), 144.

⁷ Roy Parker Interview.

⁸ The case of First Baptist is significant since, as one religious historian commented: "The South is a Baptist empire." (T.B. Maston, *"Of One": A Study of Christian Principles and Race Relations*, Home Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, Atlanta, GA, 1946, 13) John Lee Eighmy also commented, "Churchmen and social historians who hope to understand the interrelationships of religion and culture would do well to consider Southern Baptist social thought not as a variant in Protestant behavior so much as a norm that approximates the social consciousness of most white, churchgoing Americans." (John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), xxi. However, this theological position was not reserved to Southern Baptists. The First Methodist Church likewise adopted a closed door policy. As Andrew Manis notes, "according to more recent research, the racial and civil religious views of white Southern Baptists were often shared among Southern Methodists and Presbyterians," (though these denominations certainly definitely represent different traditions and differing forms of structure and

How did the very same people who sang hymns declaring, “we are not divided, all one body we, one in hope and doctrine, one in charity” vote to keep certain neighbors out of their congregations?⁹ Why were the church doors open to some and closed to others? And what did this indicate about Southern Christianity? Did segregationist Christians subvert their genuine faith for political expediency? Or did their doctrine somehow support such decisions? Could Jesus Christ and Jim Crow coexist? And, if so, how?

By entering into Americus’s ecclesiastical, cultural, racial, and theological landscape, certain patterns of practice and belief emerge that lend insight into these confounding, complicated, consequential questions and demonstrate the ways in which racial tenets collided with religious ones. This chapter has two main aims. The first is to describe the white Protestant churches of Americus in the postwar period. The second is to discuss the broader theological principles those churches enshrined: biblical literalism and fundamentalism, congregational individualism, evangelism, and a particular Christology--especially as they pertained to race. White southern Protestants in Americus and throughout the South, it becomes clear, did not consider racial segregation incompatible with Christian belief but rather envisioned themselves and their churches as guardians of traditional orthodoxy, upholding the true tenets of Christianity in an increasingly apostate America. In considering the theological, white Southern Protestant Christianity is freed from an overly simplistic narrative of cultural captivity and understood in all its complexity, resilience, and relevance.

governance) (Andrew Manis, “‘City Mothers’: Dorothy Tilly, Georgia Methodist Women, and Black Civil Rights,” in *Race, Rights and Reaction in the American South*, edited by Glen Feldman and Kari Frederickson (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), xi; Joel L. Alvis, Jr., *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994).

⁹ This is from a later verse of the same opening hymn, “Onward Christian Soldiers.”

All Along Lee Street: Churches in Americus

Lee Street was one of the main thoroughfares in Americus, lined with trees and historic homes. Lush greenery framed wrap-around porches, sunlight dappled through delicate gingerbread detailing. Lee Street was also lined with churches. These houses of worship, while prominent, blended naturally amongst the homes and magnolias along the straight drive. Turning onto Lee Street from the center of town, The First Baptist Church of Americus sat on the right, a traditional brick building with a tall, proud steeple. Directly across the street loomed The First Methodist Church, “patterned after an Athenian Temple,” a yellow brick building with a copper dome, Corinthian columns, and intricate stained glass windows, which colored the streams of light in shades of purple, green, red and blue. One block over, The First Presbyterian Church looked on, built of white wood, small and elegant. A little farther down Lee Street was the Episcopal Church, built in 1927, which boasted a glazed brick exterior, Gothic walnut archways, and a more European style that provided “a charming contrast to some of the more ornate Victorian churches in town.”¹⁰ Still farther from downtown was the Catholic Church.¹¹ Meandering down Lee Street was a bit like meandering through church history, the different denominations, the different traditions, the different styles, now sitting all together on one avenue in a small Georgia town. The churches had been there so long, they seemed like part of the natural landscape of shadow and light, brick, green and white.

The First Baptist Church was one of the first congregations established, appearing before the town of Americus was even formally founded in 1831. Rural and remote, the church, originally called Bethel Baptist, boasted fourteen members in 1835, seventeen in 1836, and sixty-

¹⁰ William Bailey Williford, *Americus through the Years: The Story of a Georgia Town and Its People, 1832-1975* (Atlanta: Cherokee, 1975), 282.

¹¹ While the majority of people in Americus were (and are) Protestant, it is important to mention that there was a small Catholic population in Americus founded in the late 19th century.

six members in 1839.¹² With the coming of industry and small agricultural business, Americus and First Baptist both grew and by the dawning of the Civil War, the church had approximately 154 white members and ninety-nine black members.¹³ Though the black members began their own congregations after the Civil War, First Baptist continued to expand its total membership of 280, with 724 members by 1925, and in 1957, when we pick up the story in the post World War II context, 1123 members, all of them white. The First Baptist Church of Americus was a member of both the General Baptist Conference (GBC) and Southern Baptist Conference (SBC) and possessed a “conservative to moderate philosophy.” In addition to theological conservatism, the church prided itself on its evangelistic efforts, a combination of features that continued throughout the twentieth century.¹⁴

Like First Baptist, the First Methodist Church dates its beginnings to the very establishment of the settlement in Americus in 1832.¹⁵ By 1835, when the Rev. J. Edwards arrived in Americus, there were approximately 200 Methodist worshippers, meeting in “a simple wooden structure...used jointly with a small group of Baptists.”¹⁶ The church grew and by 1905,

¹² First Baptist was originally called Bethel Baptist, changing its name in 1882 to Americus Baptist, in 1897 to First Americus Baptist, and then, finally to First Baptist Church of Americus in 1898. For consistency and clarity’s sake, I will use the current name of churches. (Bethel Baptist Association records, Mercer University)

¹³ Prior to the Civil War, whites and blacks in the South often worshipped together in white churches, part of the ethos of Christianizing those in one’s care. While this may seem surprising, it reveals the constructed nature of segregation and the theology that buttressed it. What is known as the ‘black church’ developed concurrently and independently of these institutions, formally established following Emancipation. (See Chapter 3). It is worth noting also that “the presence of slaves in white congregations can easily obscure the more important fact that the churches, while respecting the Negro’s spiritual equality, helped originate the pattern of racial segregation.” (Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 26). See also Kyle Haselden, *The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective* (New York, 1964).

¹⁴ Mission efforts targeted both foreign lands and other parts of America, including efforts to minister to rural blacks in 1852 and to Choctaw Indians in 1857. (*First Baptist Records*, Lake Blackshear Library: Americus, GA, 13).

¹⁵ “A Methodist circuit rider named Dunwoody made regular stops in Americus,” teaching and encouraging the small population in private homes and a log cabin that served as communal center and courthouse (C.F. Giddings in the *Americus Times-Recorder*, 8 December 1931; Williford, *Americus Through the Years*, 34).

¹⁶ There is no enumeration of people living in Americus for eight more years, but, in 1840 “Census Taker Hugh M.D. King reported a total of 5,734,” 4,103 of whom were free white persons, 1,630 of whom were black slaves, and, fascinatingly, one of whom was a free black man. (United States, 1840: Sumter County, Ga. (Microfilm #1352, Vol. 8, Atlanta Public Library), Rev. George C. Smith, *The History of Georgia Methodism from 1786 to 1866* (Atlanta: 1913), 207; Williford *Americus Through the Years* 35, 41; “First Methodist Episcopal Church Organized

had enough people and money that its parishioners built a “beautiful new house of worship” on the corner of Lee and Church Streets.¹⁷ Many of Americus’s most prominent citizens, including mayors, city councilmen, bankers and businessmen, were members at First Methodist, making it a mainstay of Americus life and a pillar in the community throughout the twentieth century.

The First Presbyterian Church, though smaller than both the First Baptist and First Methodist Churches, also claimed a long history in Americus.¹⁸ “By 1836,” in fact, “there were enough Presbyterians for a small group of that denomination to meet regularly for divine worship.”¹⁹ In 1842, the First Presbyterian Church of Americus was formally constituted under the provision of the Flint River Presbytery.²⁰ After a fire and several temporary buildings, in 1884, the church moved to its current plot on the west side of Jackson Street, one block from Lee Street’s main stretch.²¹ There, First Presbyterian constructed a house of worship made “entirely of materials from Georgia,” with pine and walnut woodwork, a stately steeple, gingerbread

in Americus, Georgia by Circuit Rider Year 1835,” in *The First United Methodist Church Records, 1843-1976*, edited by Mazie Manson Harvey (Americus, 1976), 2.

¹⁷ C.F. Giddings in the *Americus Times-Recorder*, 8 Dec 1931; Williford, *Americus Through the Years*, 252.

¹⁸ Presbyterianism traditionally flourished more in the hamlets of New England and the Appalachian hills of the Scots-Irish, but by the twentieth century had a strong presence in the South, including in Americus. (“The Southern Presbyterians: Chapter 1: The Southern Presbyterians Before 1861,”

<http://www.pcahistory.org/ebooks/pcus/ch1.pdf>); William G. Burnett, *History of The Americus Presbyterian Church*, 1992; Mrs. Lillie N. Thurman in *History of Sumter County, Georgia* by Jack Frank Cox, 1983; “First Presbyterian Church of Americus, Georgia: Historical Summary: 1842-2008,” First Presbyterian Church Archives, Americus, GA, 2009.

¹⁹ Adiel Sherwood, *A Gazetteer of Georgia* (Atlanta: 1860), 122 ; Williford, *Americus Through the Years*, 35. It seems to have been around nine people: “Mr. George M. Dudley and his wife Caroline, H.D. McKay and his wife Catherine, Eleanor Gibson, Mary McCay, William J. Patterson, Mary Lynes, and Rebecca Daniel.” (*First Presbyterian Historical Summary*, 1).

²⁰ First Presbyterian claims to be “the first church of any denomination to be formally organized in Americus,” though it would seem the Methodist and Baptist Churches beat them to it. (Cox, *First Presbyterian Historical Summary*, 1; *Americus City Record Book*, Book 1, 358).

²¹ During this period of the church’s history, of course, the Civil War ravaged the South. The church’s collective memory includes a story from this time: “It was feared that Sherman’s troops would come through Americus. Some of the church women were concerned for the safety of the communion silver, so they took it out into the country to the home of Mrs. Patterson, and it was buried in the garden. Fortunately, the invasion of Sherman never materialized in Americus. The silver was safely recovered from its burial site.” (Cox, *First Presbyterian Historical Summary*, 2).

lattice-work, and an interior like “an old sailing vessel,” stain-glass windows aside.²² Though a small congregation, First Presbyterian housed some of Americus’ most monied citizens, including business magnate Charles Wheatley, who gave the funds for the construction of the church. While dedicated to missions and saving souls, certainly, the Presbyterian Church reflected a more studious, serious tradition than its Baptist and Methodist counterparts. It privileged doctrine and strict Scriptural exegesis. When the Presbyterian Church split during the years of the Civil War into the Northern Presbyterians and Southern Presbyterians, First Presbyterian of Americus predictably joined the Southern side. Throughout the twentieth century, the First Presbyterian Church, along with the First Baptist and First Methodist churches, contributed significantly to religious life in Americus.²³

Following World War II, these churches continued to exert extensive religious and cultural influence in Americus. News of the war’s end in 1945 prompted Georgia Governor Ellis Arnall to encourage citizens to “thank God that victory has come to our cause” while the citizens of Americus planned a joint worship service at the First United Methodist Church.²⁴ In the late 1940s and 1950s, the church as an institution took on added prominence and church attendance and financial contributions increased. Nationally, church membership skyrocketed in the 1950s,

²² This church structure, including the original bell, is the oldest extant church building in Americus. (Cox, *First Presbyterian Historical Summary*, 2).

²³ Other denominations, less common in the Black Belt of the South, slowly won adherents in Americus as new residents settled in the area. For instance, in April 13, 1853, the Right Reverend Stephen Elliot, Georgia’s first Bishop, led an official Episcopalian service and small group of Episcopalians “decided to band together and form a mission church.” The following day, eight Americus citizens formally founded St. John’s Parish at the home of Ambrose Spencer. In 1921, a First Christian Church was formally organized, though it remained small. While the majority of religious practitioners in Americus were Protestant, there were some Catholics. The Catholic Church in Americus had its beginnings in the 1880s when “a half-dozen local Roman Catholic families began holding services in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Christopher J. Sherlock.” In 1891, this small group of adherents formally organized into St. Mary’s Catholic Church, under the provision of the Savannah diocese.²³ Americus certainly contained diverse expressions of religious life, but The First Baptist, First United Methodist and First Presbyterian churches possessed the majority of members and influence. (Williford, *Americus Through the Years* 63-64, 185, 282; James B. Lawrence, *A History of Calvary Church, Americus, GA, 1858-1912* (Atlanta, 1912), 13; Henry Thompson Malone, *The Episcopal Church in Georgia 1733-1957* (Atlanta, 1960), 91; *Americus Times-Recorder*, 8 Dec 1931).

²⁴ “Arnall Urges, ‘Thank God,’” “V-J Plans for City Revealed,” “V-J Church Service Time is Explained,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 14, 1945.

with *The Yearbook of American Churches* estimating that American churches had 88,673,005 total members in 1951 and 116,109,929 in 1961, an increase of 30.94 percent in a mere decade.²⁵ Church publications would sometimes even print these details. On May 15, 1960, for instance, the bulletin for the First Baptist Church in Americus contained a box of statistics of “The Church at Study,” “The Church at Prayer,” “The Church in Training,” and “The Church in Giving,” tallying the numbers of weekly attendants and dollars received.²⁶ In 1957, the pastor of First Baptist in Americus wrote a letter to the congregation declaring his belief that the church was “in the midst of a great revival” with “indications of a real spiritual awakening among us,” challenging his congregation to break their attendance record.²⁷ Church attendance was almost mandatory in Americus, as people weekly filed into their newly renovated sanctuaries, listened to sermons like “Happy Cross Bearing Christians” and “Successful Christian Living,” and placed their checks gingerly in the tithing plate.²⁸ Ben Easterlin, a child in postwar Americus, captured Protestantism’s cultural expansiveness, remembering nostalgically: “You believed in institutions. God, country, politicians, motherhood, Chevrolet, and apple pie.”²⁹

²⁵ G.F. Ketcham and B.Y. Landis, eds., *Yearbook of American Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951-1961) in James David Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), Table 2.1, 32. See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Elaine Tyler May, “Cold War, Warm Hearth” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, edited by Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). As James Hudnut-Beumler states, “Religion in the decade of the 1950s was at the peak of its popularity, and the religious revival was celebrated far and wide for filling the houses of worship, for captivating the hearts of millions, for leading the masses back to a belief in prayer, for engaging the intellectuals and for meeting the needs of the modern world.” (Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs*, 77).

²⁶ “First Baptist Church Bulletin, May 15, 1960,” “First Baptist Church Bulletin, October 30, 1960,” First Baptist Archives, Americus, GA.

²⁷ Letter from Pastor C.L. Leopard to Friends, First Baptist Church, Americus, GA, March 19, 1957.

²⁸ *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 21, 1945. The newspaper typically ran Sunday School lessons, church announcements and sometimes even the full manuscript of sermons.

²⁹ Interview with Ben Easterlin, March 12, 2013, Atlanta, GA. As Easterlin’s comment suggests, Americanism and Christianity were often linked in postwar Protestantism. Of course, in the South racial separation was seen as part of American life. Many Southerners, then, fought integration with the same fervor that they fought overseas and prayed for deliverance from evil. It was all linked: racial separation, American citizenship, and good faith. For this reason, many scholars have seen the civil rights movement as, in Andrew Manis’s words, “as a civil religious conflict between southerners with opposing understandings of America.”²⁹ It may have been, but it was much more than

‘God the Original Segregationist’: A Theological Interpretation of Race

Behind the shimmering abundance and full church pews of Americus lingered the question of race and the long history of religiously-sanctioned inequality. As many white Protestants in Americus worshipped on Lee Street, they simultaneously sanctified segregation, believing that racial separation was God’s intended way, or at least permissible in their churches. As Dr. W.M. Caskey, a professor at Mississippi College, stated, “our Southern segregation way is the Christian way.”³⁰ The professor’s stance was not dismissible ignorance but a historically and theologically viable position shared by many. Though many ordinary white churchgoers did not reflect on the relationship between Christianity and segregation, preferring to conceive of racial segregation as natural, as “just the way things are,” many complex theological influences contributed to segregation’s sanctification.³¹

From its beginning, the Southern race question has always been a religious question. Many in the South “took their theology at least as seriously as they took inherited customs or racial mores.”³² And they took it all seriously. As Thomas Holt asserts, race cannot exist alone but, “parasitic and chameleon-like,” it attaches itself to other political and cultural phenomena—chief among them religion.³³ Therefore, it is nearly impossible to discuss race in the South without also discussing religion, in this case Protestant Christianity, and the ways that Christian theology both supported and opposed formal and informal racism. Since, as historian Joseph Crespino remarks, for many across the South, segregation was “not just a political but more

that. The civil rights movement, I argue, represented not only opposing understandings of America, but of God, the Bible, Jesus, and how Christians are to live. It was not primarily a civil religious conflict but a theological conflict.

³⁰ Caskey quoted in Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 69; See also T. Robert Ingram, “Why Integration is UnChristian,” *Citizen*, June 1962, 6-16.

³¹ Ms. Martha Wood, Interview with the Author at her home in Americus, GA, July 2012.

³² Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 277.

³³ Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 9.

important, a theological issue,” we must examine race with an eye for theology and theology with an eye for race.³⁴ By considering certain interconnected and intertwined theological tenets present in mainline Southern Protestantism--Biblical literalism and Fundamentalism, Congregational Autonomy, Evangelism, and a particular Christology--the theology of postwar segregationism is properly understood as more than sheer ignorance or hate, but as a complex, enduring theological and political position.

White Southern Protestants were not monolithic in their racial and theological beliefs. Arguments invoked by some groups, other groups opposed or at least hesitated to make. Dispensationalism, premillennialism, postmillennialism, amillennialism, pietism, Calvinism, and Arminianism all swirled through the world of Southern Protestant Christianity and all were important points of contention, revealing a staggering diversity of belief.³⁵ Additionally, class and geography divided forms of white Southern Protestantism. Christian belief in Americus, Georgia differed from belief at Emory University in Atlanta. James Hudnut-Beumler formalizes the split as one between popular religion, ecclesiastical religion and elite religion, while Paul Harvey designates a separate “ecclesiastical theology” and “folk theology.”³⁶ Whatever the terminology, it is clear that there was no one Southern theology, white theology or Protestant theology. However, that reality should not deter scholars from engaging with the various theological positions espoused, understanding that many ideas influenced the racial discourse.

³⁴ Crespino *In Search of Another Country*, 66.

³⁵ George Marsden’s book *Fundamentalism and American Culture* thoroughly and painstakingly explains these subtle theological differences in an amazing work of scholarship that manages to explain the specific doctrines and their effects on larger cultural movements. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, new edition).

³⁶ Hudnut Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs*, 79. A more detailed explanation of these distinctions will come in Chapter 6.

‘For the Bible Tells Me So’: Biblical Literalism and Fundamentalism in the South

Biblical literalism shaped the interaction of race and religion in white Southern Protestantism more than any other doctrine, undergirding other theological positions and providing conservatives with their most powerful and enduring defense. “The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man” the Methodist *Confession of Faith* states.³⁷ Likewise, official Southern Baptist doctrine declared that the Bible “is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy.”³⁸ The Bible was the basis for all Christian teaching and the rule for Christian living for most Southern Protestants, who believed it to be inerrant and sought to interpret it as literally as possible. Preachers in Americus and elsewhere in the South delivered primarily exegetical sermons, expounding on various verses and chapters from the Scriptures to teach parishioners timeless truths. Additionally, Sunday school classes conducted “pretty literal studies of the Bible.”³⁹ While Paul Harvey asserts that these Southern Protestant churches were “captive to racism and a dogmatic literalist theology,” surely some of them would have been quick to respond that the Good Book itself says one is either a “slave to sin or a slave to righteousness,” and they knew which side they wanted to be on.⁴⁰ These Christians looked to the Bible for wisdom and guidance, seeking in the ancient text not only instruction regarding morality and salvation, but also answers to the problems of modernity, race, and politics.

³⁷ The Foundational Documents of the United Methodist Church, *The Confession of Faith* (1962); *The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church, V* (1794).

³⁸ The Southern Baptist Convention, “Basic Beliefs,” <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/basicbeliefs.asp>

³⁹ Ben Easterlin, interview by author, March 12, 2013.

⁴⁰ Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 1. Colossians 3:22, Ephesians 6:5.

As far back as the Civil War, many Americans understood their racial position as a theological one centered on the Bible. For many Southerners, especially those who desired a literal interpretation, the Bible seemed to suggest that slavery was theologically sanctioned. “The power of the proslavery scriptural position,” historian Mark Noll asserts, “lay in its simplicity.”⁴¹ As one Southern woman declared, “Neither the Bible, nor the Apostles, nor Jesus Christ, ever condemned the institution of slavery as sin.”⁴² It was that simple. Passages from St. Paul’s letters were extracted to support the proslavery position as well as exegesis of the Old Testament. As Paul Harvey explains:

“These notions were not merely hypocritical cant intended to void a clear biblical message, for particular biblical passages clearly explained why spiritual equality does not (and must not) imply temporal equality. The reasoning went like this: God created the world. If inequality exists, then God must have a reason for it. Without inequality--rulers and ruled, without hewers of wood and drawers of water--there could be only anarchy...Using such logic and with plentiful references to biblical texts, antebellum white southern ministers sanctified slavery and defined southern theology.”⁴³

The debate over slavery became in essence an argument over the validity and interpretation of the Scriptures, with abolitionists on the side of the ‘spirit’ of the Word and the slavery proponents positioning themselves as guardians of the ‘letter’ of the Word. Anti-slavery seemed to possess a “devastating theological weakness” in the eyes of some, while the proslavery stance “came to look like a defense of Scripture itself.”⁴⁴ For others, pro-slavery seemed a direct contradiction to Christ’s message of freedom and love.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the question

⁴¹ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 33.

⁴² Eugene Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 76.

⁴³ Paul Harvey, “God and Jesus and Negroes and Sin and Salvation: Racism, Racial Interchange, and Interracialism,” in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, eds. Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 286.

⁴⁴ Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 45.

⁴⁵ Though not the main subject here, it is worth mentioning that there was considerable debate over the form of slavery that the Bible did/did not sanction. Was the slavery of the New Testament the same as the slavery of the American South? Protestants, Catholics, and Jewish scholars weighed in on this question, but, in the end, for many the form of slavery implied was less important than the literal word appearing in the Bible. (Noll *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 47).

of slavery and biblical interpretation went unresolved, “left to those consummate theologians, the Reverend Doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what in fact the Bible actually meant.”⁴⁶

But, of course, the question was not solved. Underneath the question of slavery was the deeper question of race, which would not disappear even in the raging fires of the Civil War. “The crisis created by inability to distinguish the Bible on race from the Bible on slavery,” Noll has written, “meant that when the Civil War was over and slavery was abolished, systemic racism continued unchecked... in a supposedly Christian America.”⁴⁷ Though slavery had been abolished, racial questions remained, becoming themselves issues of the Bible’s legitimacy and application. When Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, “the weary, black-garbed” citizens of Americus gathered the only place they knew to go to process their grief, confusion and loss. They went to the First Methodist Church to pray and weep as “muffled church bells tolled solemnly” overhead.⁴⁸ They would process defeat at church, the Bible their guide.

Through Reconstruction and into the 20th century, segregation crystallized as a Southern way of life, one that was enforced violently and defended biblically. “The ideology of racism,” one historian has argued, “required Christian underpinnings for the brutal exercise of power in an evangelically devout society.”⁴⁹ These underpinnings were often found in biblical interpretations, as many Southern Protestants saw racial separation, as they had slavery, not only as religiously permissible, but theologically mandated. “Turning to their Bibles,” and employing a literalist interpretive eye, “antiintegrationists found many narratives that supported a segregated world.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Noll *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 50. Whoever won the war, many reasoned, would have been shown God’s sovereign favor and thus, the correct theological position.

⁴⁷ Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 52.

⁴⁸ Williford, *Americus Through the Years*, 110.

⁴⁹ Harvey, “God and Jesus and Negroes and Sin and Salvation,” 286.

⁵⁰ Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred After *Brown*,” 154. For the most extreme version of this, see: Kelly J. Baker, *The Gospel According to the Klan* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press), 2011

Racial hierarchies became enshrined as unassailable dogma. “White ministers and laypeople across the South,” Jane Dailey claimed, “offered a biblically based history of the world that accounted for all the significant tragedies of human history...in terms of race relations.”⁵¹ It is important to understand these biblical arguments to have a sense of how theologically threatening integration was for many Southern Christians. By analyzing first the Hamitic hypothesis and then the idea of divinely mandated racial separateness, we can place the theological segregationism of the civil rights era in its proper historical context. The actual details of the hypothesis and its theological validity are less significant, both for the historian and even for Southerners in the civil rights era. What is significant is that the defense of segregation came to look like a defense of a conservative, orthodox interpretation of the Bible. It came to look like a defense of the Bible itself.

The Hamitic myth, also called the Hamitic hypothesis, was one theological argument for segregation that relied on a literal interpretation of the Scriptures.⁵² As the Genesis account goes, Noah “had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.”⁵³ Following the great Flood, these sons “went forth from the ark” and “from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed.”⁵⁴ But after an awkward drunken night when Ham “saw the nakedness of his father,” Noah “awoke from his wine” and, ashamed, issued a hungover curse on his son: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.” Noah continued: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem,

⁵¹ Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred After *Brown*,” 154.

⁵² See: Edith R. Sanders “The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective,” *The Journal of African History* Vol. 10, No. 4 (1969), pp. 521-532, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179896>; William M. Evans, “From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the ‘Sons of Ham,’” *American Historical Review* 85 (February 1980), 15–43; David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Also mentioned in Interview with Rev. Bill Dupree in Americus, GA, July 2012.

⁵³ Genesis 6:10.

⁵⁴ Genesis 9:18.

and let Canaan be his servant.”⁵⁵ Lest this confuse the reader as it did the author, since the name Ham is nowhere to be seen, Canaan is the son of Ham, and the curse of the son is due to the sins of the father. When Noah cursed Canaan, he cursed all of the descendants of Ham for his indiscretion that night in the tent, including the unknown people that would come from that line. The sons of Ham are “Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan,” thought by many to have been inhabitants of Africa.⁵⁶ From this biblical account then, an intricate ethnohistory/anthropology was constructed wherein some lineages of peoples emerged as particularly blessed by God while others were cursed to languish in servitude and darkness, as the result of sin and God’s righteous judgment. The myth constituted, as Elizabeth and Eugene Genovese proclaimed, “a grand religio-scientific justification for white enslavement of blacks,” and, following emancipation, their continued subordination.⁵⁷

Both as anthropological and theological theory, the Hamitic hypothesis has a long history. “In the beginning there was the Bible,” one historian remarked, but the Bible itself “makes no mention of racial differences among the ancestors of mankind.”⁵⁸ The coupling of notions of race with the sons of Noah, however, developed as racial understandings did, first appearing in early Jewish tradition. “Talmudic or Midrashic explanations of the myth of Ham were well known to Jewish writers in the middle ages,” historian Edith Sanders explained, beginning “out of a need of the Israelites to rationalize their subjugation of Canaan, a historical

⁵⁵ Genesis 9: 24-27.

⁵⁶ Genesis 10:6, 10:6-20.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholder’s Worldview*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2005, 521. In this masterful account of Southern slaveholders, Genovese considers the Hamitic hypothesis among the weaker arguments for scriptural enslavement, reliant as it is on conceptions of race. Genovese writes, “This scripturally and intellectually weakest point in the biblical defence of slavery emerged as the politically strongest. It gripped public opinion more firmly than any other. We live with the consequences of the ensuing tragedy.” (Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class*, 526).

⁵⁸ Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis,” 521.

fact validated by the myth of Noah's curse."⁵⁹ Since, as one historian has written, "ideas have a way of being accepted when they become useful as a rationalization of an economic fact of life," the Hamitic hypothesis increased in popularity, soon adopted by the Christian world as well. "That Negroes are doomed to serve men of lighter color" comprised an ideology used by Christians to explain racial difference well into the twentieth century.⁶⁰ The Hamitic hypothesis served many purposes, among them justifying slavery. The Genesis curse, some reasoned, absolved slave owners of any sin since it "clearly meant that the Negro was preordained for slavery," and "neither individual nor collective guilt was to be borne for a state of the world created by the Almighty."⁶¹ In fact, to challenge this, many came to think, would be to dismiss both sovereign God's design and the inerrancy of the Bible.⁶²

⁵⁹ Sanders "The Hamitic Hypothesis," 522. Some claim that Jewish scholars also attached moral characteristics to racial ones, writing, "Men of this race are called Negroes, their forefather Canaan commanded them to love theft and fornication, to be banded together in hatred of their masters and never to tell the truth." (R. Graves and R. Patai, *Hebrew Myths* (1964), 121.)

⁶⁰ Graves and Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, 121; Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis," 522.

⁶¹ Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis," 523. It is important to note that, though Ham was cursed and thus punished, Africans were still seen as created by God, upholding the Biblical account of one creation of man. As Sanders states, "Christian cosmology could remain at peace, because identifying the Negro as a Hamite--thus a brother- kept him in the family of man in accordance with the biblical story of the creation of mankind." Whereas many Enlightenment scholars such as Voltaire, deduced a theory of polygenism, or separate creations, that rendered "a widespread belief that the Negro was subhuman" while also "de-emphasiz[ing] his relationship with the accursed Ham," Christian clergy rejected this intervention, maintaining Negroes' full, if cursed, humanity. (Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis," 524) For example, even Carey Daniel maintains the doctrine of one creation without forsaking natural difference. He states, "The only way in which all are born equal is in the sense that we are all born with equally sinful natures which are all equally in need of being changed by Christ and the New Birth. Spiritually all are born equal; but physically, mentally, socially, racially, hereditarily, environmentally, geographically and otherwise there are many thousands of differences between us, as there should be. Many of these differences need no correction at all." (Daniel, *God the Original Segregationist* 32).

⁶² The Hamitic hypothesis was adjusted throughout the centuries to reflect modern patterns of thought, but the insistence on the validity of Noah's curse and its explanatory power for the enslavement of certain groups remained. Most notably, in what became known as the New Hamitic Hypothesis, a distinction was made between various African peoples--Egyptians, Syrians and other black Africans--and nuance added to the old theory. As travels in Africa and modern race theory discovered variance in the inhabitants of Africa, theologians remembered that only one of Ham's sons, Canaan, was cursed, not the others. Thus the Egyptians and other advanced African peoples must have descended from one of Ham's non-cursed sons. (Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis," 526-528).

If the Hamitic hypothesis had largely disappeared from mainstream pulpits and seminaries by the twentieth century, it still circulated in the South.⁶³ Even those who disagreed had to engage with the hypothesis, illustrated by Baptist minister T.B. Maston who conceded as late as 1959 that “the only reason to give any space” to its discussion “is the fact that so many people are using it today to justify the present racial pattern, just as their fathers used it to defend slavery.”⁶⁴ One person who used it was Dr. Carey Daniel, a Southern white Baptist minister and president of the White Citizens’ Church Council. In a published sermon Daniel explained that “the descendants of Shem were to become the Semitic race” while “the descendants of Ham were to become the Negro race” and “the descendants of Japheth were to become the other Gentile races.”⁶⁵ According to the Hamitic hypothesis, these races, corresponding with Noah’s sons, had been assigned their own ordained habitations in the allotment of the Earth. In both Psalm 105 and 106, Daniel pointed out, Egypt and Africa are termed “the land of Ham” while “to Japheth and his posterity were given ‘the isles of the Gentiles’ (Gen 10:5).” Daniel explained: “the world ‘isles’ here means ‘coasts’ or ‘settlements,’ and the phrase ‘the isles of the Gentiles’ is further defined in Isaiah 41:1-5 and 49:1-6 as including all territories “to the end of the earth.” In other words, Ham’s descendants could have Africa and Egypt, and Japheth’s children were to

⁶³Internationally, the Hamitic hypothesis survived the Enlightenment and the Colonial Era, but it could not survive Nazi Germany. The scientific racism enshrined in anthropology and pseudoscience for centuries was exposed in the ideology and violence of Nazism, and the Hamitic myth “lost some of its popularity.” Meanwhile, African nations were gaining independence from their colonizers at the same moment that scholars were discovering a complex African past, one that was not fixed and backward, waiting for European enslavement and improvement, but one with a long history complete with “indigenous Negro achievement.”(Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis,” 531). As Milton Mayer wrote in an article, “The Jim Crow Christ: The Failure of Church and Churchmen” in the February 1964 edition of *Negro Digest*, “You never hear any of them anymore trying to justify their crucifixion of Christ, the way they used to, especially in the South, saying that Cain’s sin was marrying a Negro woman or that the Negroes are the children of Ham, who was cursed by Noah, and condemned to father a progeny of servants. And I suppose that it’s something gained to get them to stop perverting Scripture.” (Milton Mayer, “The Jim Crow Christ: The Failure of Church and Churchmen” *Negro Digest*, Feb 1964, 31).

⁶⁴ T.B. Maston, *Segregation and Desegregation*, (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 99.

⁶⁵ Dr. Carey Daniel, *God the Original Segregationist and Seven Other Segregation Sermons*, First Baptist Church of West Dallas, 1955; http://www.buildingdemocracy.us/archive/dox/far%20right/000%20FBI-XR-A_Z/Citizens%20Council%20Movement-HQ-EBF220.pdf

have all the rest of the world, which, Daniel notes, was only fair since “they were so much more numerous.”⁶⁶ This exegesis provided proof in Daniel’s estimation that America, being one of the isles to the end of the earth, rightfully belonged to white people.⁶⁷ Many white Southern Protestants agreed, invoking the Hamitic myth loosely and when expedient. In a letter sent to First Methodist Church of Americus, a man from Tennessee reminded, “Genesis 11 tells us every one was scattered abroad. Black went to their country, white and yellow to their own lands. And so all were sent to their own countries.”⁶⁸ The Bible, he, Dr. Daniel, and others thought, clearly taught that America was reserved for white residents.

While some Southerners specifically articulated the Hamitic myth, many more adopted the general principle that God supported racial separation and segregation. Christian segregationists frequently invoked the justification that God Himself was “the Original Segregationist,” having created difference in pigmentation and geography.⁶⁹ Identifying “distinctions on earth (different languages, races, sexes),” and supposing that “these distinctions are created by God... [and] real,” many concluded that “Christians should not rebel against them.”⁷⁰ As Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett explained: “God was the original segregationist.

⁶⁶ Daniel, *God the Original Segregationist*, 9.

⁶⁷ Additionally, Daniel explains that these biblical passages “also belie the vile slander that our forefathers ‘stole’ this country from the Indians, those wandering tribes who had no organized nation, and whom our ancestors were compelled to fight in defense of their wives and children.” For Daniel and others, the adroit Hamitic myth provides not only a justification of slavery, but also of the conquest of the Americas by Europeans. (Daniel, *God the Original Segregationist*, 9)

⁶⁸ Letter from Toledo, Ohio to FUMC, August 6, 1965, BOX #2. The letter is sent from Toledo but the man claims within, “I am from Tennessee and I am white.”

⁶⁹ This phrase is constantly repeated to justify biblically sanctioned racial difference by ministers and laypeople alike; Carey Daniel has a book by this title, which serves as a good example. *God the Original Segregationist and Seven Other Segregation Sermons*, Dr. Carey Daniel, Pastor First Baptist Church of West Dallas, “A Sermon Explaining the Biblical Basis of the Doctrine of Racial Segregation Delivered in the First Baptist Church of West Dallas on Sunday Morning May 23, 1954, just after the U.S. Supreme Court’s School Desegregation Ruling.”

⁷⁰ Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred,” 152. Daniel echoes this, stating: “The only way in which all are born equal is in the sense that we are all born with equally sinful natures which are equally in need of being changed by Christ and the New Birth. Spiritually, all are born equal; but physically, mentally, socially, racially, hereditarily, environmentally, geographically, and otherwise there are many thousands of differences between us, as there should be. Many of these differences need no correction at all. With others, like the God-given color and habitation of Negroes, it is downright sinful to tamper.” (Daniel *God the Original Segregationist* 32)

He made the white man white and the black man black and he did not intend for them to mix.”⁷¹

Many agreed with Barnett’s assessment. In a sermon delivered the Sunday following the Brown decision in 1954, Rev. Carey Daniel thundered that the Creator “separated the black race from the white and lighter skinned races. He did not just put them in different parts of town...HE PUT THE BLACK RACE ON A HUGE CONTINENT TO THEMSELVES, SEGREGATED FROM THE OTHER RACES BY OCEANS OF WATER TO THE WEST, SOUTH AND EAST, AND BY THE VAST STRETCHES OF THE ALMOST IMPASSABLE SAHARA DESERT TO THE NORTH.”⁷² While Daniel was an especially impassioned articulator of theological segregation (and geography, apparently), many white Protestant Christians in the South more quietly offered their assent to God’s creative sovereignty in racial difference. Of course, in America, blacks and whites were not separated by oceans and continents, but were throughout the South living closely in small towns like Americus. While absolute separation seemed unlikely, legal segregation seemed a theologically appropriate way “for the biologically and culturally distinct races of people to coexist peacefully with one another” in a Southern context.⁷³

Much of this theological reasoning stemmed from a close reading of the Old Testament. Southerners understood Biblical passages as offering divine support for segregation, particularly in God’s instruction to His chosen people Israel not to intermarry with pagan peoples. Abraham, Moses, Nehemiah, and Habakkuk, in this reading, were transformed into prophets of segregation

⁷¹ Ross Barnett, *New York Times*, 1987; <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/07/obituaries/ross-barnett-segregationist-dies-governor-of-mississippi-in-1960-s.html>; Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 69. I am focusing on the South, but this view extended across the Mason-Dixon line. Rev. M. William Trott of Ephart, PA affirmed the segregationist stance of the South, writing, “This is God’s command—to keep the races segregated. We believe in segregation here at my church, but many churches here [in Pennsylvania] do not.” (FUMC Box, 197).

⁷² Rev. Carey Daniel, “God the Original Segregationist,” 3, <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/manu/id/2151>, capitalization his. Interestingly, this argument contains an implicit condemnation of slavery. Since races were naturally separated in different continents, colonizers never should have captured Africans and brought them to the New World to intermarry and live amongst whites there. Unsurprisingly, there is no broader discussion of European colonization, which caused all manner of racial mixing.

⁷³ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 66.

and racial purity. As G.T. Gillespie, a Mississippi minister and intellectual, explained in 1954: “from the days of Abraham, approximately two thousand years before Christ, the Hebrews, by Divine command, became a segregated people, separated by traditions, customs, religion, and strict codes of ethics, strict codes of hygiene from their neighbors.”⁷⁴ The distinctiveness of Judaism in the ancient world offered Gillespie a clear mandate for ethnic separation. LB McCord, a Presbyterian minister from Clarendon, South Carolina, similarly said in 1964 that segregation was “morally right and theologically sound,” basing his judgment on Old Testament passages in which God commanded the Israelites, to “remain holy,” or separate from other nations.⁷⁵ Old Testament commands and stories served two main purposes in segregationist theology: “to make the case for segregation as divine law, and to warn that transgression of this law would inevitably be followed by divine punishment.”⁷⁶ Those who violated God’s command for racial purity would be harshly dealt with, causing segregationist theologians to conclude that “anyone familiar with the Biblical history...can readily understand why we in the South are determined to maintain segregation.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ G.T. Gillespie, “A Christian View on Segregation.” Address given to the Synod of Mississippi of the PCUS on November 4th, 1954; reprint:

<http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/fullbrowser/collection/manu/id/1864/rv/compoundobject/cpd/1880>

⁷⁵ L.B. McCord as quoted in Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 67. This contained within it the special fear of miscegenation. Miscegenation has been widely discussed in the historical literature as the driving force behind segregation and much of the racial violence in the South. And this was not the opinion merely of the “sincere but deluded,” as Henry Louttit, an Episcopal Bishop hoped in 1955. Rather, Dailey contests, “the argument that God was against sexual integration was articulated across a broad spectrum of education and respectability, by senators and Klansmen, by housewives, sorority sisters, and Rotarians, and, not least of all, by mainstream Protestant clergymen.” (Dailey, “Sex, Segregation and the Sacred After *Brown*,” 156) For an article regarding the role of women in maintaining the values of Southern society, see Glenn Feldman, “Home and Hearth: Women, the Klan, Conservative Religion, and Traditional Family Values,” in *Politics and Religion in the White South*, Edited by Glenn Feldman (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 57-99.

⁷⁶ Dailey, “Sex, Segregation and the Sacred After *Brown*,” 156.

⁷⁷ Daniel, *God the Original Segregationist*, 6. Daniel also cites the Old Testament account of King Nimrod, whose name means “let us Rebel,” who was responsible for building the Tower of Babel and “rebelled against...God’s plan of racial segregation.” (10). Another Southern preacher, Rev. Burns stated, “spurning and rejecting the plain Truth of the Word of God had always resulted in the Judgment of God...This step of racial integration is but another stepping stone toward the gross immorality and lawlessness that will be characteristic of the last days, just preceding the Return of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Burns; Dailey, “Sex, Segregation and the Sacred After *Brown*,” 156).

These biblical arguments for segregation did not derive solely from the Old Testament. Segregationists often cited Acts 17, the Apostle Paul's speech to the Gentiles in Athens, in which he stated that God had created and ordained "bounds of habitation" for different people, finding in his words a mandate for the church.⁷⁸ Rev. G.T Gillespie wrote in his volume "A Christian View on Segregation" that "there would appear to be no reason for concluding that segregation is in conflict with the spirit and the teachings of Christ and the Apostles."⁷⁹ Based on a comprehensive reading of the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, "the burden of proof," Rev. Carey Daniel claimed, is "to prove [God] was NOT a segregationist." "The very question," he continued, "implies unbelief in the Lordship of Christ or at least a woeful ignorance of the Old Testament. Jesus was the very same identical God who spoke through the lips of Moses, Abraham, Nehemiah and Habakkuk."⁸⁰ Gillespie, too, believed that Christ's coming did not disrupt God's command for segregation. Jesus, he argued, "did not ignore or denounce racial distinctions."⁸¹ If Jesus had wanted to overturn the Old Testament law, he would have, Daniel claimed, noting instead Jesus affirmed the law when he said: 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, til Heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.'⁸² "We need not look beyond that

⁷⁸ Acts 17 is one of the most fascinating theological arguments invoked in the question segregation and race, since it is invoked on both sides. Integrationists frequently cited Paul's statement that God 'has made from one blood all the nations of the earth,' while segregationists chastised them for failing to read the second half of the verse, which reads, 'and hath given them...boundaries of their dwelling.' The full context reads: "So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being.'" (Acts 17:22-28)

⁷⁹ Gillespie, "A Christian View on Segregation," 13.

⁸⁰ Daniel *God the Original Segregationist* 9.

⁸¹ Gillespie, "A Christian View on Segregation," 11.

⁸² Matthew 5:17-18.

statement,” Daniel, Gillespie, and many other segregationist Christians maintained, “for proof that the incarnation of God in Christ did not change His views on racial segregation.”⁸³ In this way, segregationists often turned to “an argument of absence,” inferring that because the Bible, and particularly Jesus, did not condemn segregation per se, they supported it.⁸⁴

In the Old Testament, the Epistles of St. Paul, and to the words of Jesus himself, segregationist Christians in the South found biblical justifications for their racial views.⁸⁵ They truly believed that the Bible taught principles of racial separation, and thus, the courts were challenging not only their way of life, but the Holy Scriptures themselves. As Mrs. Jessie West plainly explained in 1954: “Having attended my beloved little county church from infancy, I believe I know the fundamentals of the teachings of God’s Holy Word...nowhere can I find anything to convince me that God intended us living together as one big family in schools, churches and other public places.”⁸⁶ Racial separation and segregation were biblically supported, even biblically mandated, practices; therefore, attacks on segregationism amounted, in the eyes of many, to a grave misunderstanding of the unity of the Scriptures, if not a heretical denial of God’s unchanging character and Jesus’ divinity. No less than the inerrancy of the Bible was at stake. The contestation over segregation thus amounted to a theological conflict over Christian orthodoxy.

Explicit invocations of the Hamitic myth and God’s plan for segregation waned a bit in the mid-twentieth century, but a strong Southern defense of biblical literalism did not. Even as the civil rights movement gained momentum in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Southern

⁸³ Daniel, *God the Original Segregationist*, 11.

⁸⁴ Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 108.

⁸⁵ “Since “the question of biblical provenance of their traditions and taboos was for many white southerners, a subject of great soul-searching,” David Chappell has argued, Christian segregationism cannot be dismissed as “simply propaganda.” Chappell, “Disunity and Religious Institutions in the White South,” in Clive Webb, ed, *Massive Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁸⁶ Letter from Mrs. West to Virginia Gov. Thomas Stanley, June 3, 1954, Folder 1, Box 100, General Correspondence, Stanley Executive Papers; Dailey, “Sex, Segregation and the Sacred,” 163

congregations refused to capitulate to what they saw as liberal theological incursions. As Joe Crespino has asserted:

The religious nature of the civil rights struggle forced white southerners to explain anew the relationship between their Christian faith and their segregationist practice. Some Mississippi segregationists had little difficulty believing that segregation was God's plan for creation; others seemed to struggle with that notion. By the mid 1960s, however, a significant number of white Christians in Mississippi saw the civil rights drive as the leading wedge in a much larger and broader movement rooted in a modern liberal theology that was corrupting the mission of the church and threatening practices in their communities and churches.⁸⁷

It was about race, of course, but for many, it was also about the sanctity of the Bible. The South viewed itself as the protector of the nation's and God's traditions, with a special burden to uphold the old time religion. The struggle against integration in the South, therefore, became part of a broader struggle against liberalism, communism, and heresy, a struggle over the fundamentals of Christianity and for the soul of America. As Crespino concluded: "Segregation was one issue in a broader ideological divide separating liberals and moderates from conservatives and 'fundamentalist' Christians."⁸⁸

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Fundamentalists sought to reclaim the inerrancy of the Scriptures while articulating a brand of evangelical Christianity that would become a mainstay of American and Southern religion.⁸⁹ While the term 'fundamentalist' comes with its own cache of connotations, for our purposes it indicates a belief in certain dogmas thought to be essential to Christian faith and practice. George Marsden, in his seminal 1980 work, *Fundamentalism in American Culture*, defined fundamentalism as "militant anti-modernist

⁸⁷ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* 12.

⁸⁸ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* 64.

⁸⁹ See Ballmer, Randall, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond*, 2010; William Martin, *With God on Our Side* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); George Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) George W. Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism in America* (Greenville: Bob Jones University Press, 1973); Barry Hankins, *American Evangelicals: A Contemporary History of A Mainstream Religious Movement*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); Bill J. Leonard, "A Theology for Racism: Southern Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement," *Baptist History and Heritage*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter 1999), 49.

Protestant evangelicalism."⁹⁰ More simply, fundamentalism, at its core, comprises an assertion of conservative Protestant Christianity in opposition to the supposed secularism and liberalism of modern culture. In the 1940s, especially after the formation of the National Evangelical Association in 1942, many Fundamentalists adopted the term Evangelical instead of Fundamentalist.⁹¹ Though the terms are similar, ‘evangelical’ seemed less militant and more moderate to many. In the postwar white Southern Protestant Church, both evangelical and fundamentalist indicated the same tenets: a staunch belief in the inspiration of the Bible, a defense of traditional Christian tenets including creation, miracles and the resurrection, and a distrust in national liberal ecumenicalism.⁹²

In the late nineteenth century, many American religious leaders worried that American Christianity was in decline. It was in decline morally, as its members were succumbing to alcohol, wealth, and other vices, and in decline theologically, succumbing to liberalism, German higher criticism, and evolutionism.⁹³ In response, Presbyterians at Princeton Theological Seminary, led by Charles Hodge, developed what became known as Princeton Theology, an unequivocal proclamation of biblical inerrancy. Outside of the academy, James Brookes

⁹⁰ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture*, 4.

⁹¹ Sometimes these people are also called ‘post-fundamentalists’ or ‘New Evangelicals.’ This transition is complicated and halting and conceals tensions within evangelicals and fundamentalists, conservative and moderate. Again, for a detailed interpretation, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture*.

⁹² Though not the emphasis of the movement, fundamentalism undeniably interacts with race. As Bill Leonard aptly summarized: “While fundamentalism itself is not inherently racist, the southern fundamentalists... expressed their own racist sentiments largely through the medium of their fundamentalist theology.” (Leonard, “A Theology for Racism,” 49). Fundamentalism was in many ways an innocuous carrier for more insidious racial beliefs.

⁹³ Charles Darwin published his account of biological evolution in 1848, disrupting a fundamentalist belief in a literal six-day period in which God created all living things. Around the same time, German higher criticism, also known as the Tubingen School of Theology, challenged certain biblical tenets and hermeneutics by applying Hegel’s dialectics and Enlightenment reason to the reading of the Scriptures. In particular, German higher criticism contested traditional biblical authorship. In sum, “Biblical scholarship had cast doubt on the literal accuracy of the Holy Writ by updating prophetic passages, showing multiple authorship of certain books, and explaining miracles on natural grounds. For many Protestants, such studies were undermining the foundations of their theology.” (Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 60) This was an especially heated debate amongst Presbyterians, but extended to other Protestant denominations as well. See H. Harris, *The Tübingen School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Additionally, movements for temperance were very strong during this period as well. Interestingly, the early twentieth century mirrors the postwar period in this regard. In Americus, in 1945, there was a quite heated political battle over making Americus a ‘dry’ county and forbidding alcohol. (*Americus Times-Recorder*, October 1945).

convened the Niagara Bible Conference in 1878 in which Christians gathered and learned the basic tenets of the faith. Meanwhile, reformers like Billy Sunday travelled around the nation exposing America's wayward ways and calling people back to the fundamentals of Christianity. The principles espoused by the Princeton theologians, the Niagara Conference, and traveling evangelists were soon formalized and popularized as Fundamentalism. Between 1910 and 1915, several groups combined to finance the publication of twelve volumes called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*.⁹⁴ These works, intended for those "sound in the faith," explained the basic doctrines of Protestant Christianity and established Fundamentalism as both a lasting movement and descriptor.⁹⁵ *The Fundamentals* included essays affirming the Virgin Birth, the Deity of Christ, the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the inerrancy of the Bible, and the Resurrection; in essence, a lengthy, twentieth century Apostles Creed.⁹⁶ Additionally, *The Fundamentals* contained works denouncing higher criticism, evolutionism, Mormonism, Christian Scientism, Romanism (Catholicism), and socialism.⁹⁷ The popularity of *The Fundamentals* prompted William Bell Riley to found the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA) in 1919 with a meeting that brought together six thousand faithful in Philadelphia. Feeling that the

⁹⁴ This included the Moody Bible Institute, the Los Angeles Bible Institute and some wealthy backers, such as Lyman Stewart. *The Fundamentals*, Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections, digital.

⁹⁵ R.A. Torrey, Preface to *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, (Los Angeles Bible Institute: 1917).

⁹⁶ See James Orr, "The Virgin Birth of Christ" (Vol. 1); Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Deity of Christ" (Vol. 1); G. Campbell Morgan, "The Purposes of the Incarnation" (Vol. 1), John Stock, "The God-Man" (Vol. 6); R.A. Torrey, "The Personality and Deity of the Holy Spirit (Vol. 1); A.C. Dixon, "The Scriptures" (Vol. 1), George S. Bishop, "The Testimony of the Scriptures to Themselves," (Vol. 7), Arthur T. Pierson, "Testimony of the Organic Unity of the Bible to its Inspiration" (Vol. 7); R.A. Torrey, "The Certainty and Importance of the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead" (Vol. 5).

⁹⁷ See Dyson Hague, *History of the Higher Criticism*" (Vol. 1), Franklin Johnson, *Fallacies of the Higher Criticism*" (Vol. 2), James Orr, "Holy Scripture and Modern Negations" (Vol. 9); Anonymous, "Evolutionism in the Pulpit" (Vol. 8), Henry H. Beach, "Decadence of Darwinism" (Vol. 8); Maurice E. Wilson, R. G. McNiece "Mormonism: Its Origin, Characteristics, and Doctrines" (Vol. 8); Maurice E. Wilson, "Eddyism: Commonly Called Christian Science" (Vol. 9); T. W. Medhurst "Is Romanism Christianity?" (Vol. 11), J. M. Foster "Rome, The Antagonist of the Nation" (Vol. 11); Charles R. Erdman, "The Church and Socialism" (Vol. 12).

Church had sold out to the culture and rejected the infallible Truths of God, Fundamentalists sought to recapture the essentials of Christianity and revive the American church.⁹⁸

The inerrancy of the Bible was the first and most significant aspect of Fundamentalism. The absolute Truth of the Bible, Fundamentalists asserted, was the “keystone” to Christianity, “meaning not only that the Bible is the sole and infallible rule of faith and practice, but also that it is scientifically and historically reliable.”⁹⁹ This assertion was a reaction to what became known as German higher criticism, a theological school that, in the 1920s, began to dismiss the Bible’s inerrancy and read it simply as historical text. **[Image I]** Fundamentalists despised German higher criticism and despaired of its adoption by many liberals in America. As a result they vociferously affirmed the Bible’s complete reliability, including the mysterious, miraculous aspects of the faith: creation, the virgin birth, miracles, and the resurrection of Jesus. In the South, Fundamentalists clung tenaciously to these beliefs, even in the face of derision, illustrated famously in the case of *The State of Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes*, popularly known as the Scopes Monkey Trial.¹⁰⁰

Along with German higher criticism, many fundamentalists believed that evolution was the main threat to Christian orthodoxy, among them the majority of Southern Protestants.¹⁰¹ On

⁹⁸ David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1986.) This was not only an American enterprise. The Southern defense of Scriptural literalism and biblical fundamentalism was in some respects part of a larger trend towards traditional religion worldwide. Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁹⁹ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 11.

¹⁰⁰ See Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (1998); Jeffrey P. Moran *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents* (2002); Marvin Olasky, John Perry, *Monkey Business: The True Story of the Scopes Trial* (2005). As Marsden commented, “It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of ‘The Monkey Trial’ at Dayton, Tennessee, in transforming fundamentalism.” (184).

¹⁰¹ The prevailing opinion of fundamentalists was that the teaching of Darwinism would have dire effects on the moral and religious character of America and undermine Christianity. In 1925, a Baptist committee adopted a confessional statement regarding evolution. This confession, known as *The Memphis Articles of 1925*, reaffirmed the act of creation as recorded in Genesis. Baptist President George McDaniel concluded, “This convention accepts

July 22, 1925, the day following the Scopes verdict, the *Americus Times-Recorder*, Americus' local newspaper, published an interesting editorial to this effect. A "committee" from the First Presbyterian Church in Americus had requested that the paper publish excerpts from the previous morning's sermon given by their own Rev. Richard Simpson on "the theory of evolution and the controversy raging over that question." The paper obliged. Calling the Scopes Trial a "religious controversy," Rev. Simpson explained his view to the people of Americus: "From the point of view of orthodox Christianity, what difference does it make what Darrow and the others believe so long as they do not believe in a personal God, and in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in salvation--through faith--in His shed blood?" Evolutionists were "objects of pity and not of scorn," Rev. Simpson declared, and their views were not to be heeded. The Scopes Trial provided an opportunity for the Reverend to reaffirm for himself and his readers what he considered orthodox Christian doctrine: "I believe that the world and the universe and all things in them were created by Almighty God... they are the result of His will," Simpson began, with the cadence of catechesis, adding, mostly as an aside, "I am inclined to believe that the 'days' of Genesis were days of twenty-four hours, altho [sic] I do not think the time element is vital to this belief." Simpson's statement did not stop with the doctrine of creation. He continued:

"I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. That he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. I believe that He gave His life's blood in atonement for the sins of His people, which atonement is sufficient for all mankind. I believe that He arose from the dead on the third day, that he ascended to heaven and someday will return to the earth with power and glory...I believe in the personality of the Holy Spirit. I believe in the plenary verbal inspiration of the Scripture in such a way that the Bible is God's Book and not man's. I believe the Bible...to be literally true and God's one, complete and final revelation of His will to man."¹⁰²

Genesis as teaching that man was the special creation of God, and rejects every theory, evolution or other, which teaches that man originated in, or came by way of, a lower animal ancestry." This statement was unanimously adopted as the "sentiment of the convention." (M.E. Dodd, "The Baptist Faith and Message: The Memphis Articles of 1925," "Things Which are Most Surely Believed Among Us," *Baptists and the Bible*, edited by L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1999), 351-352).

¹⁰² *Americus Times-Recorder*, "Rev. Richard Simpson, Pastor Americus Presbyterian Church, Discusses Evolution," July 22, 1925.

Rev. Simpson's statement is significant in that it not only expressed orthodoxy with a creedal spirit, but it addressed the controversy over evolution by affirming the other supernatural elements of Christianity he believed the Scopes Trial was also bringing into question. The Americus minister's declaration reflected the stance of the Christian leadership in Americus and of Fundamentalists throughout the South.¹⁰³

The Scopes Trial was an early theological contest over Fundamentalism, one especially important for the South due to the trial's location in Dayton, Tennessee. A political cartoon that ran during the trial showed the "Evolution Trial" as a huge monkey claiming, "I bet you'll miss me when I'm gone" to a stunned farmer portraying Dayton. The overall-clad farmer wondered aloud "if I'll ever be able to live this down?" as the world watched, saying flippantly, "Well, I gotta admit as a publicity stunt it's the peanuts."¹⁰⁴ **[Image II]** As part of this 'publicity stunt,' reporters and journalists from up North vilified the South, making it seem a hopelessly provincial and ignorant region, the "forlorn backwaters of the land."¹⁰⁵ For this reason, many historians have concluded that while the Fundamentalists technically won the case, they lost the larger ideological battle. As George Marsden has claimed, "In the trial by public opinion and the press, it was clear that the twentieth century, the cities, and the universities had won a resounding victory, and that the country, the South and the fundamentalists were guilty as charged."¹⁰⁶ But

¹⁰³ In addition to Simpson's editorial, *The Americus Times-Recorder* covered the Scopes Trial extensively, offering insight into how the events were interpreted in the South. From headlines proclaiming "First Shot Fired Today in Tennessee's 'Monkey War'" to "SCOPES FOUND GUILTY," people in Americus followed the case closely, as it had implications for both their region and faith.

¹⁰⁴ *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 13, 1925.

¹⁰⁵ H.L. Mencken, "Battle Now Over, Mencken Sees; Genesis Triumphant and Ready for New Jousts," *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 18, 1925. This type of rhetoric set the trial as "a clash between two worlds, the rural and the urban." As Marsden offers, "In the popular imagination, there were on the one side the small town, the backwoods, half-educated yokels, obscurantism, crackpot hawkers of religion, fundamentalism, the South, and the personification of the agrarian myth himself, William Jennings Bryan. Opposed to these were the city, the clique of New York-Chicago lawyers, intellectuals, journalists, wits, sophisticates, modernists, and the cynical-agnostic Clarence Darrow." (*Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 185). The lines were drawn in Dayton, and for the rest of the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁶ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 186.

this view diminishes the tenacity with which Fundamentalists maintained their views, even in the face of derision. Condescending reports served to further isolate the South, but they also imbued the Fundamentalist movement there with the righteous indignation of the martyred. No longer merely a narrow, conservative biblical interpretation, Fundamentalism was transformed into a broad coalition of Southern Protestants. Though Fundamentalism lost national respect, it gained members and fervor, as it came to indicate “the real hostility of rural America toward much of modern culture and intellect.”¹⁰⁷ For this reason, George Marsden remarked, “to speak of most Southern Christians as fundamentalists was to indulge in redundancy.”¹⁰⁸

Even as they were disparaged in the national press, Southern Fundamentalists came to the conclusion that it was the North that had truly lost its way by abandoning Christian principles. By the 1920s, many Southerners were convinced that North had “lost its once vital evangelical faith” due largely to “the twin misfortunes of Romanism and rationalism--Romanism coming by way of the immigrant emissaries...and rationalism developing from modern theology...traced to German scientific scholarship.”¹⁰⁹ **[Image III]**. The South, possessing in many ways an “identity by contrast,” determined not to mirror this Yankee apostasy.¹¹⁰ Southern Fundamentalists believed they had to protect the doctrines of the holy Christian religion from the corrupting influences of liberalism, of foreigners, of godless Communists, and they would do so by holding fast to the fundamentals of the faith, by resisting outside influences, and by upholding a literal interpretation of the Bible. This sentiment continued throughout the twentieth century. In 1958, for example, Southern Seminary (SBC) expelled thirteen professors from its ranks for their

¹⁰⁷ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 188.

¹⁰⁸ George Marsden in Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ Haunted South*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Erdmans, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ Eighmy 78; Victor I. Masters, *Making America Christian* (1921),148-149).

¹¹⁰ Southerners, John Eighmy writes, “regionally self conscious people. Historically and culturally, they have known who they are; they have identified themselves as members of a particular society,” a society apart. This Southern separateness not only isolated Southerners from the rest of the nation, but also imbued them with a regional righteousness. (Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 157).

theological liberalism, a decision confirmed when one of them, Old Testament scholar Ralph Elliot, suggested in his 1961 *The Message of Genesis*, a symbolic rather than literal reading of the creation account. The theological purge of Southern Seminary revealed the desire of many Southern Fundamentalists to ensure biblical orthodoxy, particularly in times of change.¹¹¹

“For the South to stand,” one religious historian noted, “its people had to be religious and its churches the purest anywhere.”¹¹²

For this reason, Southern Protestants were wary of national (and especially international) ecumenical bodies, which they associated with liberal theology and a rejection of true Christian doctrine. Throughout the twentieth century, and especially in the postwar period, Southerners “looked on national Protestant governing bodies with increasing suspicion.”¹¹³ The National Council of Churches was particularly suspect, with many Southerners, including the Southern Baptist Convention, considering it a “sham union.” They believed that the NCC was “in captivity to their most radical and liberal elements” having “rejected biblical Christianity in favor of a modern post-Christian apostasy.” The NCC and other liberal ecumenical organizations, many Southerners believed “have moved from a ‘lowest common denominator’ of theological conviction to the outright repudiation of the Gospel itself.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2012, 34-35.

¹¹² Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 202.

¹¹³ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 64.

¹¹⁴ *Baptist Faith and Message* [1963]. See *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1963* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1963), p. 269-81; Albert Mohler, “The Southern Baptist Convention and the Issue of Interdenominational Relationships,” A Memorandum Prepared for the Great Commission Council of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2009. The National Council of Churches came out of the Federal Council of Churches, was established in 1950, and included thirty three Protestant and Orthodox denominations. Even the Methodist Bishops acknowledged the “unfriendly” campaign against the NCC waged by some religious groups. The South Georgia Conference denounced these allegations leveled against the NCC, assuring Georgia Methodists that the organization was neither unchristian nor communist and remarking “The organization and Personnel of the National Council of Churches passed under the close scrutiny of the Council of Bishops...it was recommended as worthy of support” by both lay and clergy members. (The Methodist Church Journal 1964, 99th Session South Georgia Annual Conference, “National Council of Churches,” 151-154). Another opposition to the National Council of Churches must be mentioned briefly. Many fundamentalists in this period were premillennial dispensationalists, meaning that they

Not only had the NCC repudiated the true Gospel, it had replaced it with the teachings of Karl Marx.¹¹⁵ In 1966, a small volume circulated amongst many Christians entitled “How Red is the National Council of Churches?” The answer? Very Red. According to co-author J.B. Matthews, the “at least seven thousand Protestant clergymen” of the NCC comprised “the largest single group supporting the communist apparatus in the United States.”¹¹⁶ Mr. E.E. Bell Smith Towson of Dahlonga, Georgia also expressed outrage and disbelief over the “Communist monstrosity known as the National Council of Churches,” which he claimed in a letter to the Methodist Bishop, was neither American nor Christian.¹¹⁷ In addition to assuming national bodies were communist fronts, many Southerners believed that liberal ministers “knew their politics, but they did not know their Bibles,” that they were “more likely to be conversant in Myrdal and Marx than Matthew and Mark.”¹¹⁸ The National Council of Churches and its adherents, according to many Southern Protestant conservatives were Communists, not Christians.

‘The Big Surprise’: Congregational Autonomy

The anger directed at the National Council of Churches reveals a deep mistrust of central organization. With fear of Communism high, Southerners privileged the autonomy of individual

believed that the second coming of Christ would occur before the millennium and usher in the final tribulation. This eschatological view is foundational for many fundamentalists and significant in that it means that human history will follow certain patterns based on a literal interpretation of the book of Revelation. For example, it is believed that the Church and Israel play significant roles, as does the AntiChrist and the false church. The National Council of Churches, many thought, was a harbinger of the end times, “the one-world church identified in the Book of Revelation as the Whore of Babylon and the tool of the AntiChrist.” So, their strong opposition of the NCC made theological sense.

¹¹⁵ Many Southerners maintained that Communism was inherently godless and decidedly unchristian. See Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The World of Joe McCarthy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Stanley I. Kutler, *The American Inquisition: Justice and Injustice in the Cold War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982); Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s Press, 1994); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1991).

¹¹⁶ *How Red is the National Council of Churches?* (American Council of Christian Churches, Laymen’s Commission), 1966.

¹¹⁷ Letter from Mr. W.E. Bell Smith Towson to Bishop John O Smith, (John O. Smith Papers, Emory University), MSS 242 Box 7 Folder.

¹¹⁸ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* 157, 156.

congregations, a position not only political, but in keeping with their theological views. In what he dubs “the big surprise” of segregationism, David Chappell has argued that “the most prominent and vigorously asserted religious theme in the white supremacist propaganda of the 1950s and early 1960s is not Noah’s curse on Ham or the statements in Acts 17 about God’s ordaining the ‘bounds of habitation’ of the separate nations or even traditional American Protestant opposition to social preaching.” “It is, rather,” he asserted, “anticlericalism.”¹¹⁹ The anticlericalism Chappell pinpointed targeted Roman Catholics, to be sure, but also Protestant ruling organizations. Individual Southern evangelical congregations consistently asserted their independence from denominational jurisdiction, particularly concerning race. Thus, racial segregation was transformed into a theological issue regarding the integrity of local religious bodies.

Baptists especially had long held this individualistic view of church governance.¹²⁰ Even Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. acknowledged this. The Southern Baptist Convention, he mused, “is a denomination which has said over and over again that segregation is sinful,” yet most of its churches “still practice it.”¹²¹ Overarching pronouncements from national denominational mouthpieces had very little to do with what Baptist churches actually did. Methodists had a slightly “more centralized structure” and a governing body that convened at a General

¹¹⁹ Chappell, “Disunity,” 141.

¹²⁰ As church historian John Eighmy writes, “In Baptist polity the ultimate authority resides in individual, autonomous congregations, whose support of denominational programs is voluntary. Congregations elect their own pastors and large assemblies, the membership of which is also chosen by the churches.” (Eighmy xix.) In this way, Baptists and Methodists generally dictate the culture of the congregation apart from ecclesiastical authority such that “local sentiment greatly influences the expression of social opinion.” (Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, xx). Congregational individualism is significant for understanding ecclesiastical arrangements in the South. As Paul Harvey attests, Southerners “found in both their white and black Baptist churches a powerful theological and ecclesiastical tradition--congregational independence--that taught that God had sanctioned local men and women to run their own spiritual affairs and implied that they were meant to control their own destinies.” (Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 4).

¹²¹ “MLK Question Response on Ministry and Segregation,” The King Center Digital Archive, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/mlk-question-response-ministry-and-segregation>.

Conference.¹²² Even so, individual congregations often rejected the decisions of the Methodist General Conference, especially regarding segregation in the South. In 1956, for instance, the General Conference of the Methodist Church officially published a resolution that declared the immorality of racial segregation. But like the Baptists, official proclamations had little effect on individual Methodist congregations throughout the South that continued to assert segregation's biblical foundation.¹²³ In Americus, the First Methodist Church openly flaunted the 1956 national decision, passing its own resolution that "emphatically oppos[ed] the action of the General Conference of the Methodist Church in approving permissible integration on a voluntary basis."¹²⁴ Instead, as the chapter's opening narrative revealed, the church adopted a closed door policy, wherein black visitors were expressly not welcomed. In 1957, Americus's Lee Street Methodist similarly flouted the national denomination. Issuing a "special resolution," the church warned that if the denominational "bombardment" promoting integration did not cease, "a tragic disaffection will ensue, seriously, if not irreparably imperiling the spiritual future and financial program of the Methodist Church."¹²⁵ For these Americus Methodists, it was their church, in their town, and it was their decision. The Presbyterian Church in Americus never adopted an official closed door policy, but with its inclusion into the Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS)

¹²² Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* 60.

¹²³ In Mississippi, Methodists, "concerned...with what they saw as liberal, integrationist sentiment in the national Methodist Church," met to form a counter organization. Founded in 1955 with the gathering of two hundred Methodists, the Mississippi Association of Methodist Ministers and Laymen (MAMML) "became, in effect, the 'Citizens' Council of the Methodist Church.'" One of MAMML's goals was to draft a bill that "attempted to strip governing religious bodies of their jurisdiction over local church properties." While the bill was pretty vague, it was a thinly veiled ploy to "aid local Methodist Churches upset with the national church's racial policy." While the Methodist Church retained a sense of national governance, the example of MAMML and the Mississippi Methodists provides an understanding of the individualism possible even within Methodism. (Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* 60-61)

¹²⁴ *Americus Times-Recorder*, June 6, 1956; Williford, *Americus Through the Years*, 333. This tension is the subject of Chapter 6.

¹²⁵ "Lee St. Methodist Warns Against Mass Withdrawals In Church's New Policies," *Americus Times-Recorder*, February 23, 1957, MS 756.

maintained a segregationist stance.¹²⁶ Governed by the ruling elders, the presbytery, and by the Presbyterian Synod, the Presbyterian church was not as independent as their Baptist and Methodist brethren, but could, through movements and gatherings, assert their autonomy.

The division between national denominations and individual congregations was made possible both by the governing structure of Protestant churches and their doctrine of the priesthood of believers, that is, that congregants could discern God's will and determine congregational policy autonomously.¹²⁷ In this way, appeals to the sanctity of the local church represented not simply an attempt by Southerners to maintain their way of life in the face of national changes. These appeals also drew upon a theological tradition dating back to the Reformation that granted the local faithful the power to determine God's will for themselves and their churches. And, for many white Southern Protestants, God's will for their churches was to preserve the fundamentals of old time religion, including the literal interpretation of the Bible and the racial hierarchy. The rest of the world could capitulate to Communism, liberalism, and integrationism, but Southern churches would stand firm, even if they were alone. These autonomous churches would continue to do what they had always done.

¹²⁶ The Southern Presbyterians split with their Northern brethren in 1861 over slavery and secession, their different views on race and the role of the church and the nation carrying on well into the twentieth century. In time, the Southern Presbyterians (PCUS) who remained separate from the National Presbyterian Church faced controversy within their own body. In 1954, the General Assembly, the official governing board of Southern Presbyterian Church, stated that there should be no racial division within the church. This led, predictably, to controversy within the PCUS. ((Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Southern White Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement," *Phylon* (1960-), Vol. 40, No. 4 (4th Qtr., 1979), pp. 334-341; <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/stable/274530>) Three factions emerged: a liberal faction that advocated adoption of civil rights initiatives, moderates that wished to see agreement and consensus, and conservatives who strongly opposed any civil rights stance by the church, thus maintaining the segregated status quo. Eventually, the groups split, with the liberal joining the Northern Presbyterians in 1983 and the conservatives forming a new Presbyterian denomination in 1973, committed to doctrinal orthodoxy as articulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Calvinism.

¹²⁷ Congregational independence certainly echoes earlier and later calls for states' rights. It's hard to know exactly how these concepts interacted, but likely Southerners' learned something about states' rights from their congregational structure and then asserted their divine right to independence with the same fervor that they opposed federal intervention in the state of Georgia.

“Come on Down!”: Evangelism and the Southern Tradition

What they had always done was preach the gospel. The job of the church, many white Southern Protestants believed, was not to pontificate on world issues or involve itself in global affairs, it was to save souls, pure and simple. In their eyes, northern liberal churches, had, as Joe Crespino puts it, “strayed from their calling--if they ever experienced a true call-- to win souls for Christ.”¹²⁸ Not only had Northern Protestants and national ecumenical bodies “corrupted the pure and simple Gospel of salvation by forsaking strict biblical interpretation,” they had also, many Southern Christians railed, lost “their zeal to save lost souls” in their foolish endeavor “to improve conditions in the present world.”¹²⁹ Many Southern white Protestants were deeply resentful of this liberal Christianity, which “threatened to tear Christian churches apart over social and political issues” and “overemphasized social regeneration.”¹³⁰ The Social Gospel, or any similar emphasis on earthly reform, was seen by many throughout the South as a distraction from the true mission of the church: to usher in eternal salvation.¹³¹ As one American native recalled, the churches in town contained “no aspect geared toward changing attitudes as opposed to classic Christian principles.”¹³²

¹²⁸ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* 157.

¹²⁹ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 41. National organizations largely dismissed these Southern conservatives as backwards and inconsequential to their real work. This would prove to be a great tactical error and underestimation of the popularity and passion of Southern fundamentalists. As Joe Crespino writes, “The feeling of alienation, of being misunderstood by liberal national church councils--the feeling that the churches had abandoned bedrock practices of faith and social practice--was part of the broader reaction that led some southern ministers to join reactionary organizations such as the citizens councils.” (Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 64)

¹³⁰ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 13.

¹³¹ The Social Gospel was viewed as a distinct aberration from Christian orthodoxy and subject to much derision as a product of European liberalism. As one commentator wrote, “A full decade before the turn of the century, the seeds of the Marxist “social gospel” were already being planted within our major seminaries and divinity schools by returning American theologians who had studied in England and Germany. There they had become infected with the virus of a Conspiracy which had already changed much of the spiritual and moral structure of Europe. After awhile, of course, America produced her own clerical conspirators. One of these was a man named Walter Rauschenbusch.” (David Emerson Gumaer “Apostasy: The National Council of Churches,” <http://www.reformed-theology.org/html/issue07/apostasy.htm>). Claiming that Walter Rauschenbusch was a disciple of Karl Marx not Jesus Christ, many Southern white Protestants rejected any notion of the social gospel, preferring that ‘old time religion’ that prioritized eternal salvation and one’s personal relationship with Christ.

¹³² Ben Easterlin Interview.

Classic Christian principles meant focusing on a theology centered upon individual salvation, on “winning souls for Christ.”¹³³ Not only was personal salvation of more importance than social reformation, but many also believed that only changed hearts would lead to a changed world. “The Baptist attitude towards all social reform work and service,” one historian noted, “is that the unadulterated gospel preached and accepted solves all social problems, rightly adjusts all industrial inequalities, removes domestic frictions, adjourns divorce courts and supplies adequate protection and uplift to the weaker parts of humanity.”¹³⁴ There was no need for social programs or worldly change. The spiritual change offered by conversion would trigger the necessary uplift of society and the desired peace. Not that that was the reason to evangelize, however. So privileged was the theological emphasis on spiritual salvation that to shy away from evangelism amounted to a denial of Christian orthodoxy. Refusal to preach a message of hellfire and brimstone, the eternal stakes of belief in Christ, signaled for many Southerners liberalism’s capitulation to the world and weak faith. Sweating, red-faced evangelism was real, it was strong, and it was the Southern way.¹³⁵ As one minister bellowed from his pulpit in Alabama: “I am a KKK and proud of it and... if some of these fat, greasy, panty-waist preachers would get intestinal fortitude enough to preach the Gospel and keep their mouths out of things they know absolutely nothing about...the churches would have more people in them.”¹³⁶ Certainly most Southern preachers lacked the ‘intestinal fortitude’ of this man, but many of them offered a

¹³³ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 13.

¹³⁴ Eighmy *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 110, *Minutes of Virginia*, 1920, 98. Though not the focus here, foreign missions is the one place where Baptists and other conservative denominations sometimes blur that boundary, though the emphasis is still on evangelism.

¹³⁵ Even in Presbyterian churches, less prone to emotional pleas and impassioned altar calls, emphasized the eternal stakes of preaching through technical explanations of the need for justification in Christ and the wrath awaiting the unredeemed.

¹³⁶ Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 312-313, 318, 319.

message of evangelism that dismissed the soft worldliness of less stout churches, overlooked social concerns, and allowed racism to be submerged under the importance of spiritual salvation.

Evangelism was the heart of the Southern Christianity, and always had been. From the days of George Whitefield preaching outdoors to the masses on the coast, to traveling itinerates crossing the state in the nineteenth century, to the programs of the established churches of the twentieth, evangelism was a key feature of Protestantism in Georgia, one that continued in the postwar period.¹³⁷ Evangelistic revival was a central and anticipated part of Southern Protestant church life. Americus hosted annual revivals, popular among youth and adults alike. Ben Easterlin remembered these frequent revivals, “tent-revivals almost,” though, he noted, most people in Americus “didn’t stand or raise their hands or anything.”¹³⁸ One advertisement for a revival in Americus proclaimed: “Revival Time is Near!: To prepare for Revival/ To glorify my God/ To serve my Day and Generation/ To Strengthen my Home Front/ To justify God’s Abundant Blessings to me.” Not only was revival necessary for the soul, but for society, for the “home front,” in order to “justify” and, one might guess, earn “God’s abundant blessings.”¹³⁹ In addition to annual revivals, weekly church bulletins often included prayers for general revival and increased evangelical zeal. One from First Baptist Church in Americus in 1962 read, “Lord, send us out, with heart aflame, To win men’s souls for Thee...Send us out! With heart aflame;

¹³⁷ Notably, George Whitefield preached the gospel to slaves in the rice plantations of Georgia, contributing to the overwhelming conversion of African Americans to Protestant Christianity. In a fascinating continuation of Whitefield’s legacy, white evangelists continued to preach to blacks well into the twentieth century. Even Rev. Carey Daniel, the segregationist preacher previously discussed, believed the gospel should be presented without regard to race. He claimed: “God knows my heart and he knows that I am anything but a ‘nigger hater.’ I have repeatedly proven my love for my colored brethren by helping them many, many times in church work. I have preached for the scores of times...the most successful revival I have ever conducted was a tent meeting for the colored folks...we had fifty-five professions of faith.” Though his statement leaves much to be desired in ‘proving his love,’ Daniel’s assertion does highlight the incredible legacy of integrated evangelistic revival in the Deep South. (Daniel, *God the Original Segregationist*, 8-9).

¹³⁸ Ben Easterlin Interview.

¹³⁹ First Baptist Church Americus, GA, February 25, 1962.

Send us out with power to win the lost; Lord, send us out in Thy name.”¹⁴⁰ Evangelists W.H. Rittenhouse, Frank Boggs, Jimmy O’Quinn and Bishop Arthur Moore frequently visited Americus, bringing with them a certain brand of evangelical fervor and otherworldly excitement.¹⁴¹ **[Image VI]**. Bishop Moore especially was “highly inspirational,” a “forceful, charismatic preacher,” who always stressed personal faith in Christ, and “coming down front” to confess Christ and recite the sinner’s prayer.¹⁴² At revivals such as Bishop Moore’s, people were frequently “born again,” a designation that would gain currency in the next twenty years, especially with the election of Jimmy Carter, who, in all likelihood, heard Moore preach as a boy in Sumter County.

The term “born again,” had its roots primarily in the Gospel of John and Jesus’s statement, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit,” Jesus explained, “he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it

¹⁴⁰ First Baptist Church Americus, GA, February 25, 1962.

¹⁴¹ Bill Rittenhouse, a native Georgian, World War II Air Corps bomber pilot, and former POW was one of Americus’ favorite preacher-evangelists. While in a prison camp, “he answered the call to preach the Christian Gospel,” going to UNC and Duke Divinity School upon his release. A Southern Baptist, Rittenhouse travelled throughout the state as a full-time evangelist. Frank Boggs, a musician from Texas, often traveled with these evangelists as a full time “personal singer.” (From the First Baptist Church of Americus Church Bulletin, May 9, 1965.) Born in 1888, Arthur Moore is one of the most prominent religious figures in Georgia in the twentieth century. In addition to his work pastoring in the Methodist Church nationwide, Moore was a highly sought after traveling evangelist. He wrote eight books, served on the Board of many ministries, began Epworth By the Sea, a Methodist retreat, and founded a devotional series, *The Upper Room*, that continues to provide devotional literature to Christians of many denominations. Following his death in 1974, Moore’s portrait was hung in the Georgia State Capitol. For more, see: Roger M. Gramling, *A Ministry of Hope: Portrait of Arthur J. Moore* (Nashville, Tenn.: Upper Room, 1979); Arthur J. Moore, *Bishop to All Peoples* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1973).

¹⁴² Ben Easterlin Interview. “The Sinner’s Prayer” is a short prayer, prevalent in evangelical Protestantism that signals conversion to Christianity. Though there are variations, The Sinner’s Prayer usually has certain characteristics. It emphasizes penitence and repentance (being sorry for and turning from one’s sins), request for forgiveness and the Holy Spirit (asking for God to come into one’s heart) and regeneration (the desire to behave as a follower of Christ). Billy’ Graham’s example goes something like, “*Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe you dies for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior. In Your Name, Amen.*” This is a simple prayer that combines the fundamental tenets of Christianity as a statement of conversion and change.

wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”¹⁴³ Jesus, many evangelicals inferred, offered inward spiritual change, a new heart and a new spirit. The primacy placed on evangelicalism and being born again in white Southern Protestantism reveals a preference for the unseen over the seen, the spiritual over the physical, and the divine over the human.

‘Fairest Lord Jesus’: Sanctified Racial Identities

The emphasis on evangelism derived from a certain vision of Christ. Jesus’s presence in one’s life caused an inward shift and bestowed a changed heart; it was primarily a spiritual transformation. In this view, Jesus was an ethereal Being who made one put away the former things--alcohol, gambling, quarreling, womanizing--in order to live righteously for God. Many Christians, like those Americus residents who went to Bishop Moore’s revivals, considered themselves “born again” after coming to terms with the Divine Jesus, envisioning themselves like the Apostle Paul on the Road to Damascus, to emerge better than they were before. The change this Jesus offered was spiritual and then behavioral, a view stemming from a particular Christology, a particular theological understanding of Jesus.

While views of, interactions with, and ideas about Jesus varied from church to church and even from person to person, white Southern Protestants tended to emphasize Jesus’s divinity. Often described as “radiant,” “fair,” “holy” and “pure,” Jesus was imagined in his glorified form, the second person of the Trinity and worthy of praise. He was also usually depicted as white. Christ’s deity, of course, was an orthodox Christian view, but, when spiritual holiness was conflated with racial purity, it became a socially powerful and pernicious one.¹⁴⁴ From the early

¹⁴³ John 3:3, 5-8.

¹⁴⁴ See 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); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Richard Wrightman Fox, *Jesus in America:*

Puritans who hesitated to depict Christ physically to the explosion of mass marketing images of Christ in the twentieth century, America's portrayal of and connection with Jesus has varied widely. Stoic to compassionate, brawny to effeminate, rugged to corporate, portrayals of Jesus reflected prevailing trends in American life.¹⁴⁵ But they accomplished something else as well. Depictions of Jesus revealed much about power in America, particularly racial power. Jesus' whiteness was used to convey righteousness, and his righteousness to convey whiteness. There exists a theological as well as sociopolitical connection between Christ's whiteness, His deity, and His salvific role. In the person and notion of Jesus, race and religion come together in especially potent and bewitching ways. It was in fact, according to theologian J. Kameron Carter, the Christology of white Southern Protestantism that allowed for racism in Christianity.

In his work *Race: A Theological Account*, Carter offered a theological answer to the question of how racism came to infiltrate Christianity by analyzing how views of Jesus have influenced the development of race. In doing so, Carter constructed "a rationale for approaching the problem of race" that has "theology at the center."¹⁴⁶ Tracing the concept of race from its emergence in modernity, Carter identified not only race's political and philosophical origins, but

Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004); Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to the Passion of the Christ* (Westmont, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2008). While these works are far-reaching and descriptive, analyzing a wide array of Christological representation for different eras and groups, they tend to neglect theology, which leaves the reader still wondering *how* all of these well-described meanings of Jesus came to be. See also Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "Review: The Color of Christ," *Journal of Southern Religion* 14 (2012): <http://jsr.fsu.edu/issues/vol14/maffly-kipp.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Blum and Harvey, among others, have pointed out that Jesus' whiteness corresponds closely with the American nation-building project. As definitions of whiteness became narrower in the face of Reconstruction, the arrival of immigrants, conflicts with Native Americans in the West, and imperialism abroad, Jesus' whiteness became more pronounced. Christ became a national icon to represent ideal Americanism, which was white. For secondary literature on whiteness studies, see: Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of A Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

¹⁴⁶ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2008, 42.

its pseudotheological ones.¹⁴⁷ In the Enlightenment, and even earlier, in the Anti-Semitism present in the early church, Carter has discovered theological foundations for racial anthropology. The theological act of supersessionism--divorcing Jesus from his Jewishness, Carter argued, was the direct precursor to the privileging of whiteness in Christian tradition. Robbing Jesus of his identity as the Jewish Messiah of the line of David, as the fulfillment of God's covenant with His people Israel, was also, according to Carter, to rob him of his physicality, his body. Jesus the Christ is reinterpreted in a specific, neo-Gnostic reading of the Scriptures as spiritual and not physical, as rational and not sensual, and, most significantly for Carter, as a white figure of Greek wisdom not an Oriental figure of Jewish tradition and lineage.¹⁴⁸ This heresy privileging of Jesus's divinity over his humanity, Carter argued, allowed for the beginning of racism. When Christ's humanity re-entered the Christological conversation, it had been profoundly changed by His time in the ethereal wilderness. Jesus was reimagined in his human body as white.

European philosophers and Southern parishioners alike often constructed an image of Jesus as perfect, white, divine, spiritual, one to whom they aspired and from whom they drew strength. The poor, beaten, mocked, radical, Jewish Jesus faded in the light of the glowing Christ with golden locks and blue eyes.¹⁴⁹ **[Image V]** This Christology suited the American context well, as representations of Christ as both heavenly and Caucasian proliferated. The most prevalent artistic rendering of Christ in the postwar period was Warner Sallman's 1941 work *Head of Christ*. This portrait of Jesus adorned the walls of Sunday School classes, sat on

¹⁴⁷ Carter, *Race*, 39.

¹⁴⁸ An ancient Christian heresy, Gnosticism eschewed all physical matter as evil, and considered the physical body a degradation and a prison. Because of this, Gnostics balked at the idea of the divine taking on human form and rejected the orthodox view of Jesus as fully man and fully Divine as purported in The Nicene Creed of 325. The schism of Christ from his Jewish body thus allowed for a 'scientific,' essentialist racial binary between Gentile and Jew, and thus white and black—a theologically conceived, politically viable racism.

¹⁴⁹ Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 12.

bedroom nightstands, and even came in a wallet size so Jesus could actually be physically with you “to the end of the age.” By 1944, just three years after its creation, 14 million prints of *Head of Christ* had been distributed in the United States. So ubiquitous was Sallman’s Jesus that it was “the literal face of Jesus to many.” That face was white.¹⁵⁰

Predictably, white Southerners latched onto this image with fervor, using Christ’s “holy whiteness to sanctify racial hierarchies.”¹⁵¹ “Christ looked like a white guy,” an Americus man stated, “you didn’t think of him as Middle Eastern [or] a Jew.” Put simply, “he wasn’t considered a man of color.”¹⁵² From their earliest Sunday School lessons at First Baptist, First Methodist, and First Presbyterian in Americus, children learned about their Savior and became familiar with this depiction of Jesus. Sallman’s white, ethereal Christ was everywhere.¹⁵³ A program from the First Baptist Church in Americus commemorating their new building campaign, for instance, had Sallman’s Christ on the cover. **[Image VI]** While “the goal of these pictures was to teach Christianity,” they had another “unintended consequence,” which was “to create an often unspoken belief that Jesus was white.” Because these lessons were inculcated at such a young age, for many Southerners growing up in the Protestant Church, Jesus’s whiteness became a “psychological certainty.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ By the 1990s, Sallman’s portrait of Christ had been printed more than 500 million times and “had achieved global iconic status.” This popularity “showed that everyday Christians, not just church leaders or theologians, were the prime mover’s of faith’s material culture.” (Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 211)

¹⁵¹ Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 8. It was not just Southerners who did this. As racial boundaries coalesced and definitions of whiteness became more exclusionary, Jesus’ image transformed to meet the rigid standards imposed for United States citizenship and political participation. “White Americans,” Blum and Harvey write, “sanctified their disdain for Jewish and Catholic immigrants by crafting and globally distributing a blond-haired, blue-eyed, non-Semitic Jesus. Faith in and depictions of this new ‘Nordic’ Christ symbolized white Americans’ righteousness--and self-righteousness--as they took control of foreign peoples, lynched black men, and barred or discriminated against immigrants...[White supremacists] presented their racial ideology as sacred, and therefore as above human creation and beyond human control.” (Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 10-11).

¹⁵² Kellete Heys, interview with author, July 27, 2012, Americus, GA.

¹⁵³ This included in the Northern United States. Caucasian depictions of Jesus flourished widely outside of the South. However, only in the South was Christology part of a larger segregationist theology.

¹⁵⁴ Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 15.

While this may seem like a simple instance of people imagining their God in their own image, it had grave theological ramifications, as Carter has demonstrated.¹⁵⁵ Adopting a view that emphasized Christ's divinity and ignored His Jewishness transformed Jesus into a white moral exemplar and allowed for a racial hierarchy that was socially and theologically acceptable. Jesus was at the top of the hierarchy, the whitest of the white (he *was* God, after all), followed by white Americans, with Southerners imagining themselves at the peak, since they were the ones preserving America's racial stock and the fundamentals of Christianity. Much of this corresponds with the language of purity. Jesus was God, perfectly pure, and so should white Americans intend to be. This was their sacred responsibility, both socially and theologically. As Sam Bowers of the Mississippi Ku Klux Klan stated, Jesus had called him "to the priestly task of preserving the purity of his blood and soil."¹⁵⁶ Racial separation was a theological as well as a cultural imperative.

By privileging the spiritual over the physical, representing Jesus as phenotypically Caucasian, and associating Jesus's racial purity with Southerners' racial purity, Southern Christology buttressed racism rather than subverted it. The white Jesus of the white Southern Protestant imagination sanctified racism and also offered eternal salvation. That Jesus was worthy of adoration, a spiritual help and power, but had little to do with the inequalities of life except to save people from them. In their adherence to biblical literalism and the fundamentals of the faith, their insistence on congregational autonomy, and their emphasis on evangelism

¹⁵⁵ The idea of people imagining Christ in their own image, first put forth in Buechner and Bolton's 1974 work, *The Faces of Jesus*, is now somewhat disputed. As Blum and Harvey contend, "This myth renders material, social, and cultural power meaningless; it transforms the resourcefulness of everyday people into little more than ethnic chauvinism; and it fails to take particulars of faith and society into account." It also "pretends that American history can be told from unique, segregated racial perspectives and that each group has its own relationship with Jesus" rather than understanding that race and religion in America are "defined by continuous interracial contact and conflict." (Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 19)

¹⁵⁶ Sam Bowers, as quoted in Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 55-90; Randy J. Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 228-231.

deriving from a particular Christology, white Southern Protestants maintained a comprehensive theology of Christian segregation.

Lived Theology on Lee Street

This theology was lived out on Lee Street in Americus. First Baptist, First Methodist and First Presbyterian were all segregated congregations that perceived themselves as protectors of traditional orthodoxy. Religious devotion included racial separation, even into the 1960s. When the men of First Baptist gathered that Thursday in 1963 to keep their church segregated, they believed they were living their theology. So did the the First Methodist Church in Americus when it declared that the “desire for maintaining segregation is a sincere Christian viewpoint arrived at after much prayerful thought and deliberation.”¹⁵⁷ Another Americus congregation also proclaimed, “there is nothing ‘unchristian in the segregation of the races in the church,” going so far as to accuse integrationists of “straying from... devoted service to Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁸

These white Southern Protestants felt they were acting out of the same impulses that they were when they were singing hymns, entreating the Almighty, and worshipping four days prior. They were upholding the sanctity of the Bible and the fundamentals of Christianity against northern liberals. They were promoting the salvation of sinners. They were, above all, maintaining the purity of their Bible, their churches, their Christ, and their race from the corrupting influences of the world. When all of these aspects are taken together, a complex political position emerges with its roots in theology. White Southern Christians cannot be so easily dismissed as “stupid, vulgar and one-dimensional.” Rather, they emerge as people seeking to preserve their faith and their way of life from the outside incursions of Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, the National Council of Churches, the federal government, and the coming civil rights

¹⁵⁷ “Local Church Hits Efforts Opposing Segregation Plan,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, Koinonia Archive.

¹⁵⁸ “Lee St. Methodist Warns Against Mass Withdrawals In Church’s New Policies,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, February 23, 1957, MS 756.

movement. Biblical literalism and Fundamentalism, congregational individualism, and evangelicalism were the bedrocks of Southern white Protestantism in the postwar era.

While the view of the First Baptist, First Methodist and First Presbyterian Churches was the pervasive one in the white community and “very, very, very few people felt differently,” there existed an alternate view in the South and in Americus.¹⁵⁹ As the white Protestants worshipped on Lee Street, the black community in Americus gathered in its own churches on the other side of town, with its own traditions, and its own theology.

¹⁵⁹ Ben Easterlin interview.

CHAPTER 3

“Jesus, He’s my Brother”: The Black Church, Black Theology and the Civil Rights Movement in Americus

“The basis for good [race] relations is found in the Christian religion, in the proper understanding of the Christian doctrines of man, Christ, and God, and in the application of Christian insights and convictions in everyday living.”¹

“Blacks do not ask whether Jesus is one with the Father or divine and human, though the orthodox formulations are implied in their language. They ask whether Jesus is walking with them, whether they can call him up on the “telephone of prayer” and tell him all about their troubles... “If [Martin Luther] had been born a black slave, his first question would not have been whether Jesus was at the Lord’s Table but whether he was really present at the slave’s cabin, whether slaves could expect Jesus to be with them as they tried to survive the cotton field, the whip, and the pistol.”²

*“Unwanted by your kind who let you in,
Contained, alone, you find your grudging spare place,
And turn your thoughts maybe on God’s skin,
Hoping that He like you has a black face.”³*

Robertiena Freeman grew up in church. “I mean every time that church door opened-- even if no one else was there,” she remembered, “we were there.” Robertiena’s father, the Rev. R.L. Freeman was the pastor of Bethesda Baptist Church in Americus, Georgia and he made sure his family was in attendance to learn the Bible, hear the gospel preached, participate in community, pray for and serve others. But in the early 1960s, Robertiena went to church not only on Sunday mornings but also on balmy summer nights for the mass meetings of Americus’ nascent civil rights struggle. “We’d meet in the churches,” Robertiena recalled, “they were packed...[but] weren’t airconditioned...we were sitting all in the windowsills.” At these mass meetings, heavy with heat and hope, people gathered together, listened to speakers, asked God

¹ Benjamin E. Mays, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations*, 1946.

² James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 13-14.

³ Alex R. Schmidt, “Episode: Street Car” *Phylon* 9 (1948): 247 as quoted in Steven G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 24.

for help, and sang songs of both protest and of praise. “We’d be singing,” she mused, smiling, “yeah, they could hear us clear all the way to Albany we were singing so loud.”⁴

The church, as W.E.B. Du Bois put it, was the “centre,” of life for blacks in the South.⁵ Though its significance and role have been debated extensively, it is difficult to deny the primacy of the black church in the lived experiences of many African Americans, including those in Americus.⁶ “In the South, at least,” W.E. B. Du Bois commented, “practically every American Negro is a church member.”⁷ Born and raised in Americus, Eddie Rhea Walker recalled, “my mother took me, every Sunday, every night...church was very much a part of growing up, it was as much a part of life as school.”⁸ Juanita Freeman echoed this, reporting she was at church, on time, “every Sunday.”⁹ While young children dressed in finery often went to church begrudgingly, resenting the stockings and Scripture, ties and theology, they inherited much in these morning meetings. And many came to value the church deeply, as it offered a coherent (if not always satisfactory) context in which to process their life circumstances and a loving community. The church provided a place where black people could come together, affirm their personhood, remember the gospel and worship God, as well as socialize, eat, sing, dance, and

⁴ Robertiena Freeman Fletcher, March 6, 2004, Sumter County Oral History Project, Warner Robins, GA, Georgia Southwestern University, Americus, GA. Albany is a city about 40 miles from Americus.

⁵ W.E.B Du Bois, “Of the Faith of the Fathers” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, (133-145), 136. Martin Delaney voiced this even more strongly in 1849 when he wrote, “Among our people generally the church is the Alpha and Omega of all things.” (Martin Delaney, quoted in Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night*, The African American History Series (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 1.

⁶ Much of the debate revolves around what Fredrick Harris has called the opiate theory and the inspiration theory. While some maintain that Christianity placated the masses, functioning as an “opiate of the people,” other recognized the subversive possibilities Christianity offered blacks, inspiring resistance and freedom movements. (Harris, *Something Within*, 4-5). See also Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, particularly Chapter 4, “The Creation and the Burden of the Negro Church.”

⁷ Du Bois, “Of Faith,” 137. Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson provided statistical evidence for Du Bois’ claim in their 1933 work *The Negro’s Church*, p 209-213.

⁸ Eddie Rhea Walker, interview by author, July 2011, Americus, GA.

⁹ Juanita Freeman Fletcher, 2003, Sumter County Oral History Project, GA Southwestern, Americus, GA.

rejoice-- a place of moral and theological instruction as well as “amusement and relaxation.”¹⁰

Remembering a childhood spent at Campbell Chapel AME, Americus resident Karl Wilson rhapsodized that “it was like heaven,” especially in the hell of the Jim Crow South.¹¹

In addition to comfort and community, the black church protected the autonomy of both the black religious experience and of black protest.¹² For years the primary space for planning, cohesion and community in black life, the church naturally became the organizational base for much civil rights activity.¹³ The church, an “indigenous institution owned and controlled by blacks,” according to historian Aldon Morris, gave the civil rights movement “an organized mass base,” a generation of clergymen who were “economically independent...and skilled in the art of managing people and resources,” a financial well upon which to draw, and actual “meeting

¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Problem of Amusement,” (1897; reprint, *W.E.B. Du Bois: On Sociology and the Black Community*, eds. Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 228, as quoted in Evans 152. In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois also discusses this dual function of the black church, saying, it is “the central club house of a community” and also “a religious centre of great power.” He continues, “Depravity, Sin, Redemption, Heaven, Hell, and Damnation are preached twice a Sunday after the crops are laid by.” (“Of the Faith of the Fathers” *The Souls of Black Folk*, 136.) It’s worth noting that Du Bois thought that the “semi-religious” activity was harmful to the church, a claim that Curtis Evans analyzes and disputes.

¹¹ Author’s Interview with Karl Wilson, Georgia Southwestern University, January 2012, Americus, GA.

¹² There is no one ‘black church’ any more than there is any one ‘black experience,’ of course. As Curtis Evans states, “The construction of the Negro Church (and its now common appellation, the black Church) has obscured the very real differences among African Americans that Du Bois himself detected and it has rendered invisible or regressive those black religious groups and practices that do not fit into such categories as progressive or prophetic.” (Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 165.) Rather the black church, as an institution, provided a capacious enough and autonomous enough space for the diversity of belief and practice within the black church to flourish. As Paul Harvey notes, “black religious institutions have contained within them the tensions and complexities of African American communal life.” (Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 3). For a more complete historiography of the black church see: Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro Church* (Atlanta 1903); Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington 1921), Benjamin Mays, *The Negro’s God, as Reflected in His Literature* (New York, 1938); Melville Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston 1941) E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, 1964); Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY, 1983); Sylvia R. Frey, “The Visible Church: Historiography of African American Religion since Raboteau, *Slavery and Abolition*,” Vol. 29, No. 1, March 2008, 83-110; C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

¹³ See: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899); Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro Church* (New York: Arno Press, New York Times, 1933); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963); *The Black Church in America*, eds. Nelsen, Yockley, Nelsen (New York: Basic Books, 1971); Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

spaces where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves.”¹⁴ Historiographically, this is usually attributed to issues of sovereignty and privacy, since the church was one of the few places black Americans, living under the constant scrutiny of Jim Crow, could be, in a sense, free.

But the black church offered the civil rights movement much more than buildings and resources. It offered an intellectual and spiritual alternative to racism and segregation, a profound and powerful black theology.¹⁵ “The black church,” one historian has argued, “supplied the civil rights movement with a collective enthusiasm...the songs, testimonies, oratory, and prayers” and preached a message that “oppression is sinful” and God was on the side of freedom.¹⁶ By analyzing the history of the black church in America and the broader history of black theology, it is evident that African Americans developed a powerful countertheology that undergirded the freedom struggle of the 1960s. The tenets of black theology--God’s creative authority and goodness, segregation as sin, God as the Deliverer, and Jesus as one who suffered--culminated in a vision for love’s redemptive possibilities in the American South. Telling the story of the black church and black theology, the civil rights movement is placed in its historical, intellectual, and spiritual genealogy.

The Black Church in America

Prior to the Civil War and Emancipation, blacks and whites typically worshipped together in America, though sometimes African American communities would gather for separate worship amongst themselves.¹⁷ Records for the First Baptist Church of America, for

¹⁴ Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 4.

¹⁵ See Fredrick Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African American Religious Activism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Chappell, David L., *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 4.

¹⁷ The black church did not begin in the South with post Civil War establishments of formal churches but has existed since the earliest days of enslavement and arrival in the Americas. See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The*

example, show that on the cusp of the Civil War, in 1858, the church boasted 154 white members and ninety black members.¹⁸ But at the war's end, freed blacks sought ecclesiastical autonomy and on December 10, 1865 petitioned First Baptist to grant them "use of the church house until they could establish a separate house of worship."¹⁹ Their petition was granted and in February of 1866, First Baptist "approved the move of the colored membership to erect a house of worship" and committed to "render them what aid they need and we are able to give." Black Baptists in Americus acquired a plot of land "on the south fringe" of the white First Baptist Church and formally constituted their own church, Bethesda Baptist.²⁰ While the white First Baptist Church remembered this event as one of "granting," "approving" and helping their less fortunate black brothers and sisters, the congregation of Bethesda Baptist told a different story. Their history stated that "the colored membership increased so rapidly that a separation was necessary."²¹ In fact, the records for First Baptist indicate that at the time of constitution, blacks did outnumber whites in church membership, with 130 white members and 150 black members.²² Whether out of a sense of altruism or intimidation, in 1866, Bethesda Baptist was established, "the first Negro Baptist Church in Americus."²³

In addition to Bethesda, Americus soon saw the establishment of an African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). This small congregation of twenty-five began to meet in 1869, "at

"Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2004; Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books), 1976; Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941).

¹⁸ First Baptist Church Americus, Georgia, 1831-1996, Charles G. Henderson, Church Historian, First Baptist Church Library Americus, GA, 1996, 6.

¹⁹ First Baptist 9. Records for this time show the black membership to be around 94 individuals.

²⁰ Ibid. Another source states that the formal constitution was a couple years later, in 1868 ("Sumter County Church Chronology," Compiled by Alan Anderson, Sumter County History.)

²¹ *Bethesda Baptist History*, Lake Blackshear Library, Americus, GA, 9.

²² *First Baptist*, 9; First Baptist Americus Archive.

²³ *Bethesda Baptist History*.

Hampton and Anshron Streets, under the supervision of the white Methodist church.”²⁴ The church was dedicated in 1877 under Bishop Campbell, for whom it was named.²⁵ In the ensuing decades, Campbell Chapel increased in membership, participated in the A.M.E. general conferences, called deacons and elders, and served the local community in Americus.²⁶ In 1922, the church moved to its current location next to the “Negro Hospital and the black high school.” This new building, “a towering cathedral unmatched in its eloquence and beauty by any other African American structure in southwest Georgia,” became a landmark in Americus and source of pride for the congregation.²⁷ In the same year, Americus hosted the annual meeting of the A.M.E. Conference, with 190 black pastors and leaders coming to see the new church.²⁸ Throughout the twentieth century, Campbell Chapel continued to be a meeting place for A.M.E. representatives throughout the South, hosting conferences, revivals, guest lectures, and even dramatic and musical presentations, and contributing significantly to life in Americus.²⁹

Bethesda Baptist and Campbell Chapel, being the oldest black churches of their denominations in the area, typically attracted those in Americus with a certain amount of money or social respectability. Many black residents in Americus found themselves in an economic and

²⁴ “History of Campbell Chapel A.M.E. Church, 1869-1969,” Karl Wilson personal collection.

²⁵ Sumter County Church Chronology, Compiled by Alan Anderson, Sumter County History. See also handwritten Deed, Georgia, Sumter County, Feb 26, 1877, Deed Book, 549, Georgia, Sumter County, SC-VF 975.8913, 342-344.

²⁶ Sumter Republican January 30, 1880, SC-VF 975, 8913.

²⁷ “Campbell Chapel AME,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, no date, from Karl Wilson’s personal collection.

²⁸ “Annual Meeting of A.M.E. Group: Colored Ministers Attend Americus Conference in Large Numbers,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, October 13, 1922.

²⁹ “500 Negro Workers to Attend Meeting: State Sunday School and League Convention to Meet at Campbell Chapel Wednesday,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, May 16, 1924; “Prominent Negroes Attend Conference: Many Delegates Here to Participate in Annual Allen Christian Endeavor Meet”; March 26. 1926 “African Bishop Will Speak Here: White People are Invited and Urged to hear Negro Bishop Monday Night”; *Americus Times-Recorder*, February 2, 1929 “Revival Series at Campbell Chapel”; *Americus Times-Recorder*, Feb 24, 1931 “Negro Drama Staged Here Moves Audience: Movement Started to Have ‘Heaven Bound’ Repeated Here at an Early Date”; *Americus Times-Recorder*, March 28, 1933 “Play at A.M.E. Church Friday”; *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 10, 1940 “Baby Clinic and Religious Forum at A.M.E. Church; “Negroes Form Public Forum in Americus,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec 14, 1940; *Americus Times-Recorder*, April 8, 1950: “Rev. Wright at Campbell A.M.E. Church on Sunday.” (Karl Wilson personal collection).

social situation that required that their Sunday mornings to be spent cooking and preparing the Sunday dinner in the homes of the wealthy white families of Americus. Unable to attend Sunday services in the more prominent black churches, these black Christians founded their own congregations and gathered together after the work was done, in the evening, for refreshment, worship, and rest.³⁰ These less prestigious congregations emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ministering not only to those in the city of Americus but also to those living in the surrounding rural areas. In time, other churches were established, most of them also Baptist or A.M.E. For example, from Bethesda Baptist came Shady Grove Baptist in 1868, Mt. Olive Grove in 1881, Bethel Baptist in 1885, Friendship Baptist in 1895 and Peace (later Union Tabernacle) in 1907. From Campbell Chapel came Allen Chapel AME, St. Paul AME in 1890, Mt. Creek AME in 1893, and Mt. Carmel AME in 1896.³¹ Whether the venerable middle-class sanctuaries downtown or the smaller pine churches way out in Sumter County, the church was a seminal part of black life in Americus.³²

In Americus and across the South, black congregations proliferated in the years after Reconstruction. Even through the “nadir of race relations” in the South, these congregations created a strong, separate black church that developed independently of its nearby white counterpart.³³ As Howard Thurman put it: “the Negro Church was the one place in the life of the people which was comparatively free from interference from the white community.” For one

³⁰ Eloise Paschal, interview by author, August 1, 2012, Americus, GA.

³¹ Some of these dates are an approximation since, in many cases, congregations were meeting before they appear in official records by purchasing land or calling a minister. This is not an exhaustive list of every church in Americus and the surrounding areas, but simply some of the most prominent Baptist and AME congregations. There is also at least one Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) church in Americus and in 1946, a black Catholic Church, St. Jerome's, of the Diocese of Savannah.

³² While some historians have contended that the role of the church diminished following the Second World War, that certainly was not the case in Americus, Georgia and many similar towns throughout the South.

³³ Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901*, 1954. Black Baptist and Methodist churches (A.M.E., C.M.E.) dominated religious life in the South, while blacks in the North attended not only Baptist and Methodist churches, but other denominations as well. Additionally, in the twentieth century, black Christians became increasingly involved with Pentecostal, Holiness and sanctified movements in America.

“terribly fulfilling moment,” Thurman explained, those living under oppression remembered that they “[were] somebody.”³⁴ The black church offered not just spatial and social separateness, but theological distinctiveness. This “black religious tradition,” historian Paul Harvey has argued, “provided theological, institutional and personal strategies for cultural survival during bondage and the era of Jim Crow.”³⁵ Throughout these years, the church offered a haven from racial oppression and a powerful counter-narrative to white supremacy.³⁶

The Theology of the Black Church

While the black church served a pragmatic purpose in organizing the community and providing a social respite from Jim Crow, it also transmitted a particular theology that offered many a spiritual alternative reality to oppression and racism. From their earliest moments of conversion, black Christians who adopted the theological tenets of Christianity reconfigured them into a worldview that confronted racial stratification. Immediately, African Americans in the United States understood the leveling aspects of Christianity. It was a “fundamental paradox”: though white Christians preached “not only to evangelize people of color but to make them more content in their enslavement,” their efforts actually accomplished the reverse--

³⁴ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

³⁵ Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night*, 3.

³⁶ For the most part, this was framed in strictly spiritual terms. For example, in 1922, Charles Stewart told the audience at Campbell Chapel that “The proper application of the Golden Rule, and the religion of Jesus Christ in the hearts of all men will solve all human problems on earth.” Of course, for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, religious figures in the South were forced to couch their statements in the vocabulary of the power structure. For example, in 1976, N. Bascom Sterrett, a presiding elder in the A.M.E. church, issued the statement that: “Having been informed that I have been represented as preaching political Sermons in my pulpit, I adopt this method of denying the assertion. and would further state that I am not here for the purpose of meddling with politics. I am a minister of the Gospel, and as such am diametrically opposed to pleading religion and politics together under any circumstances.” (“A Card,” *Americus*, Ga. June 12, 1876, Karl Wilson’s personal collection.) But with the establishment of the *Americus* Negro Business and Civic League in 1933, the black A.S. Staley High School in 1936, and the *Americus* Chapter of the NAACP in 1945, it became apparent that the black community of *Americus* was seeking to address and confront certain inequalities in southern life. The church also began to unite its religious precepts with the secular demands of its parishioners. In 1940, the black community held a public forum at Campbell Chapel A.M.E. to discuss the racial situation, revealing that the black church was increasingly willing to take on a political as well as religious role. (“Helpful Talks to *Americus* Negroes,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, Karl Wilson’s personal collection; “Negroes Form Public Forum in *Americus*,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec 14, 1940.)

Christianity “provided the language and the spirit” to subvert not only enslavement but racial inequality.³⁷ African American Christians found in their faith stunning theological power. This theology was distilled from centuries of faithful Christians, from the prayers of forgotten grandmothers and the admonitions of Bible-toting uncles. In the twentieth century, these principles nurtured by the black church influenced the academic discourse over race, as a group of black religious intellectuals transformed certain tenets of Christian belief into a powerful argument against racism in America: that they were created by God, that segregation was sin, that God would deliver them, and that Jesus was with them. The theological ideas that strengthened many African American Christians across the generations of slavery and Jim Crow and that informed black religious intellectuals, also inspired the great freedom struggle of the civil rights movement.

African slaves encountered Christianity upon arriving in the New World. Baptism, catechesis, and ritual instruction of slaves occurred with regularity throughout the colonial era, though the depth and sincerity of Christian conversion is debatable. However, during the Great Awakenings, particularly the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century, conversions increased, as itinerant white Baptist and Methodist preachers and evangelists began to proselytize large swaths of people in the South.³⁸ The famous Methodist orator George

³⁷ Harvey, *Through the Storm*, 6. The language of the Bible became the language of resistance. “From their straitened vantage,” one religious scholar noted, African Americans “came to see in the holy Scriptures that God grants victory to the unlikeliest people—people like themselves... The Bible privileges those without privilege and honors those without honor. (Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), xiii). Not only did this manifest theologially, but politically, as in the Stono Rebellion in 1739 and the “Great Negro Slave Plot” in 1741, which both used Christianity to establish revolts.

³⁸ Raboteau remarks that the Great Awakenings “represented ‘the dawning of a new day’ in the history of the conversion of slaves to Christianity.” Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 128, 96-150. For more on the Second Great Awakening, see: Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (1957); Bruce Dickson Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800–1845*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974); Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishers, 1991); Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University

Whitefield, for instance, used to regularly address tens of thousands of listeners, both black and white. At one revival, Whitefield boasted that “nearly fifty Negroes came to give me thanks for what God had done to their souls” while in Savannah, Georgia in 1812 an estimated 1500 “among the colored population” were converted and “received by baptism.”³⁹

Soon after conversion, African slaves in the New World experienced and expressed Christianity in different ways than did their masters, merging their own traditions with the gospel of Christ. Unlicensed black lay preachers, such as Harry Hosier, Joseph Willis, John Chavis, and Henry Evans, began exhorting their fellow men and women, acting “as crucial mediators between Christian belief and the experiential world of the slaves.”⁴⁰ A distinctly African American Christianity was developing, and, with it, a particular theological understanding derived from the experience of oppression. Enslaved blacks were decidedly not “ignorant theologically;” “on the contrary,” historian Dwight Hopkins asserted, “their structural religious world-view of God, Jesus, and human action,” their systematic theology, “sustained them against the racist assaults” of American slavery.⁴¹

Spirituals offer insight into this African American theology.⁴² The spirituals were, in the words of Benjamin Mays, the “soul-life of the people;” they were “songs of the soil and songs of

Press, 2004); Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010).

³⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 128, 132; David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America* (New York: 1848), 739.

⁴⁰ Raboteau *Slave Religion*, 136-137. See also: Charles Colcock Jones, *Religious Instruction of the Negro* (Savannah, GA: Thomas Purse), 1842); Carter Godwin Woodson, *History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1921); Walter H. Brooks, “The Evolution of the Negro Baptist Church,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 7, No. 1. (January 1922).

⁴¹ Dwight N. Hopkins, “Slave Theology in the ‘Invisible Institution,’” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornel West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 792.

⁴² See Miles Mark, *Negro Songs in the United States*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press for The American Historical Association, 1953); Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925); Howard Thurman, “The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death,” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornel West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 29-49; Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Friends United Press, 1975)

the soul.”⁴³ Despite the plethora of studies on spirituals, little has been written concerning their theological aspects. “Apparently,” Jim Cone remarked, “most scholars assume that the value of the black spiritual lies in its artistic expression and not its theological content, which could be taken to mean that blacks can ‘sing and dance good’ but cannot think.” “What about the black person as a philosopher and theologian?” he continued, “is it not possible that the thought of the spiritual is as profound as the music is creative?”⁴⁴ Cone is correct; in the language of the spirituals, there existed a deeply theological engagement that applied the tenets of Christianity to lived experience of black people.

Consider this spiritual, recalled by Anderson Edwards: “My knee bones am aching,/ My body’s rackin’ with pain,/ I ‘lieve I’m a chile of God,/ And this a’int my home,/ ‘Cause Heaven’s my aim.”⁴⁵ In these simple phrases, oppressed blacks remembered that they were created by God, that they were his children, and that their true citizenship was not of this world but in heaven. When blacks sang “My Lord delivered Daniel/Why can’t He deliver me?” they declared that the God of the Bible, of Exodus and the Lion’s Den, was a God of deliverance from bondage and death.⁴⁶ Another song claimed: “He have been wid us, Jesus,/ He still wid us, Jesus,/He will be wid us, Jesus/ Be wid us to the end,” affirming Jesus’s unwavering presence and identification with the his people.⁴⁷ Amidst suffering, the spirituals declared a counter-theology to the racist Christianity of Southern slaveholders. This occurred throughout the South, including in Americus. Reverend Pearlie Brown recalled that his grandmother, sold in slavery from Virginia

⁴³ Mays and Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933) 2. See: James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (Binghamton, NY: The Vail-Bollan Press, 1925); John W. Work, *Folk Songs of the American Negro* (Nashville: Press of Fisk University, 1915).

⁴⁴ James H. Cone, “Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation,” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornel West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 775.

⁴⁵ Anderson Edwards, as quoted in Rawick, eds., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. 5, *Texas Narratives*, pt. 2, 6-7 in Raboteau 218.

⁴⁶ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, (The Seabury Press, 1972).

⁴⁷ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Negro Spirituals,” *The Atlantic*, June 1867; <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/1867jun/spirit.htm>.

to Americus, spoke of songs that called on her to “pray hard” in this life and look to the day of meeting “on that other shore” where there was “no more auction block.”⁴⁸ “The basic idea of the spirituals,” one black theologian averred, “is that slavery contradicts God; it is a denial of His will.”⁴⁹ To sing them was to protest evil and to profess a theology of hope, allowing African American Christians to sing, even in enslavement, “Glory, Hallelujah!”⁵⁰

The theology espoused by spirituals continued to be incubated by the black church after Emancipation. Black clergy, parishioners, and intellectuals persisted in advocating a counter theology to that of Christian white supremacy. Figures such as Nannie Burroughs, Virginia Broughton, and Ida B. Wells, Henry McNeal Turner, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Daniel Alexander Payne, spoke out against racial oppression with theological moral imperatives.⁵¹ “We are not an accursed people. . . we are creatures of God’s most perfect handiwork” one Rev. Moton declared, while Rev. Kelly Miller added that, “the Negro must believe that He is the Son of God.”⁵² African American churches and denominations, like Bethesda Baptist and Campbell Chapel A.M.E. in Americus, nurtured and protected the black theology of resistant orthodoxy.⁵³

⁴⁸ Reverend Pearl Brown, African American spiritual, “Resurrection Remix,” *The African American Lectionary* (American Baptist College: Nashville, 2008).

⁴⁹ James H. Cone, “Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation,” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornel West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 779.

⁵⁰ “The ‘Glory, Hallelujah!’ is not a denial of trouble; it is an affirmation of faith. It says that despite the pain of being alone in an unfriendly world the black slave is confident that God has not really left him, and *trouble* is not the last word of human existence.” (James H. Cone, “Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation,” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornel West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 785, emphasis his).

⁵¹ See: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement of the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells Barnett & American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Stephen Ward Angell, *Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1992); Josephus R. Coan, *Daniel Alexander Payne: Christian Educator* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1935); Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (New York: Arno Press, 1968); David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1994); David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000).

⁵² Robert Russa Moton and Kelly Miller in Mays and Nicholson, *The Negro’s God*, 168, 187.

⁵³ James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; Howard D. Gregg, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: (The Black Church in Action)*, (AMEC, 1980); James H. Cone, “God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer,

While throughout the nineteenth century, black theology remained mostly ensconced within the black church, in the opening decades of the twentieth century, there emerged a new “cadre of black religious thinkers.”⁵⁴ These men: Mordecai Johnson, George Kelsey, Benjamin Mays, William Stuart Nelson, and Howard Thurman, “came of age” in the 1930s and 1940s as they “attained important academic positions” in historically black institutions, “undertook serious scholarly studies about the black church and black religion,” and, years before the modern civil rights movement, “theologized ... direct action techniques.”⁵⁵ This generation of black intellectuals took the theology and the institutional power of the black church and began to consider how to advance a theological movement for racial change. Though located primarily in academic institutions, these individuals demonstrated great influence as they “preached regularly in black churches in the North and South,” organized conferences, and published collaborative works.⁵⁶

One such conference, “Whither the Negro Church?” occurred at Yale University in 1931. Organized by the Upsilon Theta Chi society (composed of seven black Yale Divinity students,) this conference considered the role of the black church to “uplift the Negro race” and create “a new social order based on the principles of Jesus.”⁵⁷ Speakers included A. Philip Randolph and

Man Our Brother: A Theological Interpretation of the AME Church," *AME Church Review*, vol. 106, no. 341 (1991); Julius H. Bailey, *Race Patriotism Protest and Print Culture in the AME Church*. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2012).

⁵⁴ Dennis C. Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55,” *Church History* 74:2 (June 2005). The role of black religious intellectuals has largely been ignored in the historiography of the civil rights movement, though their role is beginning to be reconsidered. See: Clarence Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Older works include: Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders since 1940* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1979); Randall Burkett and Richard Newman, *Black Apostles: Afro-American Clergy Confront the Twentieth Century*, (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978).

⁵⁵ Dickerson “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 219.

⁵⁶ Dickerson notes that “their sermons stressed the same themes that they conveyed in their campus chapels and classrooms.” (“African American Religious Intellectuals,” 220.)

⁵⁷ “Whither the Negro Church?” (Seminar at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn., April 13-15, 1931), 3, 5, 42, 48, as quoted in Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 220. At the end of the Conference the group affirmed its goals and further proclaimed that the “task of the Negro Church” was to develop “a more

Benjamin Mays. At one point, Jerome Davis, a white Yale professor, suggested the group consider Gandhi and his nonviolence approach to civil disobedience.⁵⁸ If blacks in America would use “soul force” in the manner of Gandhi, if they would “refuse the way of violence...willing to die for justice,” they might not only overthrow segregation but redeem “not only his own race but...the white man as well.”⁵⁹ The group heeded Davis’s advice. Following the 1931 convening, black religious intellectuals embarked on pilgrimages to India to meet with Gandhi and learn about possibilities for a practical application for their theological convictions.⁶⁰ Indeed, they found in Gandhian nonviolence what one historian has dubbed “the praxis of nonviolence.”⁶¹ Black religious intellectuals had long preached prophetic Christianity; Gandhi showed them how to practice it. But the praxis of nonviolence was never disengaged from the theology of the black church; indeed, “theology and tactics” were “bound together...in ways that made each intrinsic to the other.”⁶²

This theology and these tactics were applied to the specificities of the black church. Thus, in his 1938 work *The Negro’s Church*, Benjamin Mays expressed his hope that “the Negro Church has the potentialities to become possibly the greatest spiritual force in the United

prophetic and fearless technique in making applicable the implications of the religion of Jesus in relation to our social order” and “develop a type of leadership that would do for America and the Negro race...what Jesus has done for the world.” (Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 221).

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that Davis was not the first to recommend looking to the Indian leader for tactics in the freedom struggle. As early as 1921, W.E.B. Du Bois recognized the importance of Gandhi, writing about the ‘Indian saint’ in *Crisis*. That same year, the A.M.E. Church Review ran a piece highlighting Gandhi as well. (Dickerson 221; Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up A Prophet: The African American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

⁵⁹ As quoted in Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 221.

⁶⁰ From 1935-1937, six black religious intellectuals went to India, including Mordecai Johnson, Howard Thurman, and Benjamin Mays. (Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 222). See also: Dennis C. Dickerson, “William Stuart Nelson: The Interfaith Origins of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism*, eds. R. Drew Smith, William Ackah, Anthony G. Reddie (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.57-72.

⁶¹ Dennis C. Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55,” *Church History* 74:2 (June 2005); Dennis Dickerson, Lecture, Vanderbilt University, Spring 2010.

⁶² Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 225.

States.”⁶³ If black ministers were “prepared theologically” to lead, if they “would envisage God as one who required them to battle Jim Crow with a moral methodology consistent with justice and love,” they could lead the black faithful in achieving racial parity in America.⁶⁴ Mays’ words were prescient. Future leaders of the civil rights movement were sitting in his classroom.⁶⁵

In the meantime, black religious intellectuals continued to develop their understanding of how Christian theology and nonviolence could be applied to race relations in the United States. In 1948, Mays and other black thinkers and theologians compiled a work entitled *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, edited by William Stuart Nelson and sponsored by the School of Religion at Howard University. The volume described major issues in American race relations and asserted “the central role... the Christian way of life should play in the solution of these problems.”⁶⁶ For instance, William Stuart Nelson, in his essay, “Crucial Issues in America’s Race Relations Today,” claimed “the gravest loss from which the nation suffers as a result of the unsolved racial problem is spiritual.”⁶⁷ Demanding a confrontation between America’s claim to Christian democracy and the reality of racial inequality, was, in Nelson’s view, a call for

⁶³ Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Institute for Social and Religious Research, 1933), 291-292. This sociological work involved surveying 749 black churches, both rural and urban.

⁶⁴ Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 225, Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Institute for Social and Religious Research, 1933).

⁶⁵ Mays was the dean of Howard Divinity School and president of Morehouse College. (Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971); Randal Maurice Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays: Schoolmaster of the Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) Martin Luther King, James Farmer, and other civil rights leaders studied under the black religious intellectuals at Morehouse, Howard, and elsewhere.

⁶⁶ *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, edited by William Stuart Nelson, (New York: Harper&Brothers Publishers, 1948), vii. Essays bear titles such as: ‘Economic Forces and the Christian Way,’ ‘Political Forces and the Christian Way,’ and ‘Social Practices and the Christian Way,’ ‘What can the Church Do?,’ ‘The Role of the Christian College’ and ‘The Obligations of the Individual Christian’ from black religious intellectuals like William Stuart Nelson, George Kelsey, Howard Thurman, Richard McKinney, and Benjamin Mays.

⁶⁷ Nelson, “Crucial Issues in America’s Race Relations Today,” *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 15. Nelson, born in Kentucky in 1895, was educated at Howard University and later Yale University, becoming a professor and later dean at his alma mater, Howard University.

“redemption.”⁶⁸ Like Nelson, George Kelsey too, wrote of the centrality of Christianity in addressing race relations, claiming “the soul that is united with God” would necessarily be compelled to “realize the love of God toward all peoples.”⁶⁹ James Robinson perhaps put it the most succinctly. He added: “the God of the Christian way desires and seeks to eliminate any social condition which prevents or impedes [abundant life.]”⁷⁰ Eradicating oppression was, for Robinson, no less than the command of Jesus. Like *The Negro’s Church, The Christian Way in Race Relations* concluded with a call for prophetic leadership. And though George Kelsey cautioned that, “Jerusalem always stones her prophets,” his friend Howard Thurman insisted that leaders who “approach his fellow as a brother” could “depend on the God of life to sustain him even in his moment of greatest despair and frustration.”⁷¹

Just as black religious intellectuals called for prophetic black leadership, they also confronted segregationist Christianity as theologically heretical. Benjamin Mays thundered that segregated churches “could hardly be called ‘Christian,’” since they denied their basic function as an embodiment of the body of Christ. In fact, he stated, they were decidedly “unchristian.”⁷² If “man’s relationship to God is automatically one of kinship,” Howard Thurman reasoned, to deny a fellow man equality based on race was sinful, “unrighteous,” “a repudiation of the ethical meaning of life.”⁷³ And there would be consequences. Richard McKinney concluded the work with a sobering warning to segregationists: “to live as though we are not our brother’s keeper or

⁶⁸ Nelson, “Crucial Issues in America’s Race Relations Today,” 25. This redemption would extend to economic inequalities inherent in capitalism, political barriers, and social hatreds between races and would be carried out by the churches, Christian colleges, the YMCA, YWCA Social and Civil Organizations and Agencies, and of course, individual Christians.

⁶⁹ Kelsey, “The Christian Way in Race Relations,” in *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 38.

⁷⁰ Robinson, “Social Practices and the Christian Way,” *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 97. The notion of abundant life, no doubt taken from the gospel of John (“I have come that you might live and have it in abundance.” John 10:10), would have certainly included a life possessing basic civil rights.

⁷¹ Howard Thurman, *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 235.

⁷² Benjamin Mays, *The Christian Way in Race Relations*.

⁷³ Howard Thurman, “Judgment and Hope in the Christian Message,” *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 233.

to disregard the law of human brotherhood...is to bring down the judgment of the eternal God.” Racial hatred was an affront to God and His ways. It would result, McKinney argued, in “misery and suffering...the expression of the judgment of God in history.” That much was clear from the Bible. Even the Hebrew prophets of old “recognized the law of brotherhood, and always pointed out...that the judgment of God would most surely be brought down upon them if they failed to rectify their ways.”⁷⁴

While *The Negro's God or The Christian Way in Race Relations* may not have been read thoroughly by every rural pastor in the South, the ideas espoused certainly became part of the national conversation about Christianity and race. As these religious intellectuals led workshops, taught seminary classes, and trained a new generation that would put these ideas into practice in the civil rights movement, they put centuries of theologizing into the language of religious protest. They also established the important connection between black clergymen and social change in America. By “apply[ing] the Christian ethic of love and brotherhood to social situations,” these religious intellectuals fostered a dialogue regarding Christianity’s role in social change and equipped the coming generations of black leaders with the theological and linguistic tools to contest America’s racial inequality. From the 1931 Yale Conference to *The Christian Way in Race Relations* to voyages to India, the black religious intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s articulated a sustainable theology of racial resistance and also discovered a practical application for that theology in nonviolence. In doing so, they “laid theological foundations for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Richard I. McKinney “Judgment and Hope in the Nature of Man and Society, *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 244-245.

⁷⁵ Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 233. Dickerson claims further: “King’s themes, terminology, and tactics echoed what a previous generation of black religious intellectuals articulated two decades before the civil rights movement.” The old theological principles of the black church and black religious intellectuals “informed King’s rhetoric” and provided the philosophical grounding of the protest movement. (“African American Religious Intellectuals,” 218).

Four major theological principles bequeathed the civil rights movement a deep religious power and offered an antidote to the racist assumptions white Christians promulgated in the South: God's creative authority, segregation as sinful, God as deliverer of his people, a Christology of Jesus as identifying with the oppressed. These principles, asserted by the black church and black religious intellectuals, and adopted by civil rights leaders, culminated in the notion that Christian love, displayed nonviolently, was redemptive and could transform American race relations.

The Creative Authority and Goodness of God

"In the beginning," the Bible opens, "God created." This simple statement was the beginning of a theological objection to racism held by generations of Christians, formulated by black religious intellectuals, and inherited by the civil rights movement. Harkening back to a pseudoscientific racism long accepted as biology, the idea that blacks were inherently inferior constituted a common justification for oppression of black Americans based on their skin color. "Oh, we never believed that," Americus resident Karl Wilson stated, with profundity and a hint of mischievousness, "we knew we were created in God's image, we were his children."⁷⁶ This core theological assertion that Wilson articulated offered blacks a foundational knowledge of their dignity and worth as sons and daughters of the Creator and bearers of the image of God, and also provided a distinctly theological critique of racism. In a lecture in 1964, Dr. King proclaimed that "the conviction that we are made in the image of God" was "deeply etched in the fiber of our religious tradition." This belief, for King, meant that every person, regardless of skin color, was "of infinite metaphysical value, the heirs of a legacy of dignity and worth."⁷⁷ When King spoke these words, he was invoking the views of generations of black Christians as well as

⁷⁶ Karl Wilson, interview by author, January 19, 2012, Americus, GA.

⁷⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Lecture at the University of Oslo" (1964).

his former teachers, George D. Kelsey, Richard I. McKinney, Howard Thurman, and Benjamin Mays among them.

“Fundamental to the Christian doctrine of man,” black intellectual Richard I. McKinney stated, “is that man is made in the image of God.”⁷⁸ To simply exist as a human being meant that one was created, and was thus bestowed divine dignity as a possessor of the image of God. In his work *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, George D. Kelsey developed this theological argument against racial discrimination.⁷⁹ The argument unfolded thusly: According to the biblical account, God created the heavens and the earth. He proclaimed them good. He then “created man in his own image” and proclaimed this “very good.”⁸⁰ All humans, therefore, were created in the image of God, bore his imprint, and were very good. While this idea may seem rather basic, it provided a powerful theological foundation for racial equality. The notion of God as Creator, as a Creator with both authority and goodness, meant that to disparage black people was either to deny God’s authority as Creator of all things, or to deny his goodness, implying that he made a mistake in Creation. If God, in his infinite goodness created man in his own image, then to disparage a man would be to deny that image and to dispute the singular fact of God’s creative act. As Kelsey explained: “God has created all men in His own image... The decision as to whether or not men are equal cannot be made my looking at men; he who would

⁷⁸ Richard I McKinney, *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 239.

⁷⁹ George D. Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1965), 25. While this particular volume is published rather late, in 1965, Kelsey had been teaching these ideas for many decades prior. In 1948, for instance, he wrote: “The concept of the image of God has significant implications for race relations.” (George Kelsey, “The Christian Way in Race Relations,” in *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, edited by William Stuart Nelson, 1948, 30-31). This concept of the image of God “does not mean that men are created out of a divine substance” according to Kelsey; they are created from the dust. “It is not a reference to the fineness or coarseness of the material out of which our bodies and minds are made. The concept does not refer to substantial nature. It means essentially relation to God. To partake of the divine image is to trust and obey God.” (Kelsey, “The Christian Way in Race Relations,” 31)

⁸⁰ See Genesis 1.

decide must look at God.”⁸¹ “God alone is the source of human dignity,” Kelsey emphasized, continuing, “God has bestowed upon all the very same dignity. He has created them all in His own image and herein lays their dignity.” Therefore he concluded, “human dignity is not an achievement nor is it intrinsic quality...it is a gift, a bestowal.” The gift of dignity could not be taken away without denying the Giver.⁸²

The theology of ‘the image of God,’ or *imago deo*, contained not only the belief that all people were created by God, but that all were also children of God. “Men are equal because God has created them in his own image and called them to sonship,” Kelsey explained.⁸³ In the act of creation, God and man forged a familial bond. As Howard Thurman wrote, because of the Fatherhood of God, “man’s relationship to God is automatically one of kinship through origin.”⁸⁴ Human beings were not only made in the image of God and therefore given dignity, but, human beings were also loved by God, as sons are loved by a Father.⁸⁵ In this way, black theologians insisted that people must treat each other with the same sort of love that God gave to them, ever bearing in mind, as George Kelsey reminded, that “equality is an imperative of love.”⁸⁶ Thus, “every act of justice and every assessment of human rights becomes an expression of love,” derived from the familial love of God.⁸⁷

In a 1961 speech at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, King applied the notion of *imago deo* specifically to race relations. He declared that in recent years, “the Negro came to

⁸¹ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 87.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 86. The concept of sonship may sound odd or even archaic, but most simply indicates a familial bond between Creator and creation.

⁸⁴ Thurman, as quoted in Dickerson, “Black Religious Intellectuals.”

⁸⁵ The gendered aspects of this doctrine are fascinating, complex and well-debated in scholarship. For the purposes of this chapter, however, the only aspect of sonship that relates to gender is the implication that sons, in ancient cultures, would inherit the father’s estate. Therefore, to speak of Christians as sons is not so much to emphasize gender, but to emphasize their prized place in the family, as inheritors with Christ. See Romans 8: 16-17: “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

⁸⁶ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 91.

⁸⁷ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 93.

feel he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children and that all men are made in his image, and that the basic thing about a man is not his specificity but his fundamentum, not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin but his eternal significance and his worth to God.”⁸⁸ Throughout his ministry and mission, King would reiterate this theological point. “Every man is somebody because he is a child of God,” King thundered in a sermon in 1967, “Every person has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator.”⁸⁹ Many other ministers similarly reminded people of this foundational identity as “even those [churches] who remained quiet on civil rights--preached a gospel that embraced the longings and desires of a disenfranchised people.”⁹⁰ This was true of Americus’s own African Methodist Episcopal Social Creed, which proclaimed in 1952 a belief in “the dignity of man and in the sacredness of human personality.”⁹¹ Howard Thurman captured the resilience of this belief. “Once when I was very young,” he recalled, “my grandmother, sensing the meaning of the constant threat under which I was living, told me about the message of one of the slave ministers on her plantation...the climactic moment came in these exhilarating words: ‘You are not slaves; you are not niggers condemned forever to do your master’s will--you are God’s children.’”⁹²

For Kelsey and other black religious intellectuals, and for many in the civil rights movement, the theology of God’s creative goodness and authority had profound practical

⁸⁸Martin Luther King, Jr. “Chapel address: the church on the frontier of racial tension,” April 19, 1961, Southern Theological Seminary, The Boyce Digital Archive, <http://digital.library.sbts.edu/handle/10392/49>. King repeated these words in similar forms throughout his public career and they appear in part in many speeches and manuscripts. See also, for example, “Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony,” Address Delivered at the American Baptist Assembly and American Home Mission Agencies Conference, 23 July 1956, Green Lake, Wisc. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, Stanford University.

⁸⁹ King, Christmas sermon, 1967 in *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 255.

⁹⁰ Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 13. Marsh continued, “After enduring the indignities of demeaning jobs and discriminatory practices six days a week, “black people could experience on Sunday mornings a rare though passionate affirmation of their humanity.”

⁹¹ “Americus, GA Conference, 6th Episcopal District, Friday May, 9, 1952” in Official Minutes of the Thirty-Fourth Session of the General Conference of AME Church in Chicago, Illinois, May 1952.

⁹² Howard Thurman, “From The Luminous Darkness,” *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornel West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 687.

consequences. If all people were equally human, equally created, equally given dignity by their Creator, moreover, equally sons of the Father, they were to approach one another out of this essential likeness and equality. The command to justice and love was built upon the authority of God's creative action and His goodness. And, it followed, any inequality existed in denial of these divine attributes. Kelsey called it idolatry.

Racism as Idolatry, Segregation as Sin

The doctrine of *imago deo* and sonship, once embraced, endowed acts of racism with theological significance. "Since racism assumes some segments of humanity to be defective in essential being," Kelsey argued, "and since for Christians all being is from the hand of God, racism alone among the idolatries calls into question the divine creative action."⁹³ Racism was an affront to man, certainly, but moreover, an affront to God. The presupposition was that God must have erred in creating some races. Dr. Benjamin Mays stated that racial discrimination was "tantamount to saying to God, 'You made a mistake, God, when you didn't make all races white.'"⁹⁴ In this doctrinal view, racism was not simply an attack upon the creatures but an assault upon the Creator. Therefore, when white Christians engaged in racial discrimination, they denied God's identity as the good, authoritative creator of humanity and elevated themselves as the rulers and interpreters of the created order.

In forming a hierarchy based upon pigmentation, racism privileged the creation over the Creator, succumbing, in the theologians' estimation, to the worst sort of idolatry. Racism essentially repeated the initial sin of man: wanting to be his own God. It was "complete self-deification."⁹⁵ Racial discrimination displaced the creative act of God bestowing upon all men

⁹³ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 25.

⁹⁴ Benjamin Mays, in Freddie Colson, *Dr. Benjamin E. Mays Speaks* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 61.

⁹⁵ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 72.

His image by re-creating man within a racial hierarchy of his own making. In other words, as Kelsey wrote, “the true identity of man is the worship and adoration of God. But man, the master, seeks to displace God and to glorify himself.”⁹⁶ This self-worship was then, “utter blasphemy,” for the sin was rooted in the very fallen nature of man.⁹⁷ Likewise, Benjamin Mays, years before King, stated his belief that “no group is good enough, wise enough, to restrict the mind, circumscribe the soul, and to limit the physical movement of another group. To do this is blasphemy. It is a usurpation of the role of God.”⁹⁸ Racism and segregation, to these black religious intellectuals, constituted “the final expression of fallen man’s confidence that he is by himself and for himself.”⁹⁹ Thus, they held, it was “the ultimate sin, for the ultimate sin is the rejection of life as the gift of the Creator, based on the false assumption that life is self-procured.”¹⁰⁰ Black religious intellectuals concluded that racism represented, “a form of idolatry... an abortive search for meaning.”¹⁰¹ It was theologically wrong. Therefore, segregation was sinful.

King adopted this belief, alluding frequently to segregation as sin.¹⁰² In “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” King, like his teachers before him, declared notions of God-sanctioned racial difference no less than “blasphemy.”¹⁰³ “Segregation is wrong,” he stated, “because it substitutes an I-It relationship for the I-Thou relationship. Segregation is wrong because it

⁹⁶ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 56-57.

⁹⁷ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 158.

⁹⁸ Benjamin Mays quoted in Colson, *Dr. Benjamin E. Mays Speaks*, 61.

⁹⁹ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 176.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, 9.

¹⁰² See: Martin Luther King, Jr. “Segregation is Wrong” Greensboro, North Carolina July 11, 1963, The King Center Digital Archive. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/statement-mlk-segregation>)

¹⁰³ Martin L. King, Jr. “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” November 4, 1956, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL. As George Kelsey himself later reflected on King’s life and legacy, he asserted that his former student understood “that racism is an idolatrous contradiction of Christian faith,” a truth King most certainly learned from the church men and women who taught him. (George D. Kelsey, “Dr. King and the Civil Rights Struggle in Perspective,” 28-30, Kelsey Papers, box 3, (notes undated), 2; Dickerson, *Church History*).

relegates persons to the status of things.”¹⁰⁴ More than a principle put forth in the *Dred Scott* decision, the notion of persons as things was a theological inversion that heretically vaulted white men to the status of God. Perhaps Eddie Rhea Walker of Americus put it best. Though whites “felt God had given them the right to [discriminate and oppress],” she said, “we knew better.”¹⁰⁵

The God who Delivers his People

While practitioners of black religion may have known they were created in God’s image and that segregation was sinful, they still had to deal with the reality of their oppression. From the days of enslavement to the era of Jim Crow, the story of Exodus and God’s deliverance of his people from bondage served as a powerful motif in the black church and in black theology, providing meaning and hope.¹⁰⁶ As one slave recounted, “de preachers would exhort us dat us was de chillen o’ Israel in de wilderness and de Lord done sent us to take dis land o’ milk and honey.”¹⁰⁷ Spirituals like ‘Go Down, Moses,’ ‘Didn’t Ol’ Pharaoh Get Lost?,’ ‘Walk Together Children,’ and ‘God call Moses!’ had long been part of the black theological canon.¹⁰⁸ Albert Raboteau has cited one such spiritual: “*God did say to Moses one day/ Say, Moses, go to Egypt*

¹⁰⁴ *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Vol. VI.: Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948-March 1963, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). In addition to black religious intellectuals, this passage also invokes theologian Martin Buber. Segregation is was sinful not only following the doctrine of creation, but also in the doctrine of sin. King and other black religious intellectuals adopted the position of Paul Tillich that sin was separation (from God, from one another, from self). If sin was separation, and segregation was separation, then, it followed, segregation was sin. See “Martin Luther King and the Meanings of Freedom,” in Richard King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 104.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Eddie Rhea Walker, July 2012, Americus, GA.

¹⁰⁶ The appropriation of the Exodus account is not unique to African American Christians, of course. Michael Walzer goes so far as to claim that “wherever people know the Bible, and experience oppression, the Exodus has sustained their spirits and (sometimes) inspired their resistance.” He mentions Savonarola, the Maccabean Revolts, Jean Calvin, John Knox, the Huguenots, Scottish Presbyterians, English Puritans, socialists Moses Hess and Karl Marx, Zionists movement, and the struggle in Boer South Africa. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 4, 5-6.

¹⁰⁷ Charles Davenport, as quoted in Norman R. Yetman, *Life Under the ‘Peculiar Institution’: Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 75.

¹⁰⁸ See Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 142 and Callahan 83-137.

land/ And tell him to let my people go./ Canaan land is the land for me,/ And let God's saints come in.”¹⁰⁹ For blacks in the American South, the liberation of the Exodus was also theirs, it was for all of “God’s saints.” In essence, “the slaves became the people of Israel.”¹¹⁰ “When I heard of his delivering people from bondage,” Polly, a slave woman recounted, “I know it means poor Africans.”¹¹¹ The exodus narrative endured through Emancipation and animated the civil rights struggle. As King remarked in a sermon at Dexter Avenue on Exodus, “men cannot be satisfied with Egypt...and eventually they will rise up and begin crying out for Canaan’s land.”¹¹²

“Through the analogical reading of the Exodus story,” historian Eddie Glaude has written, “blacks not only constituted themselves as a nation but also created an interpretative framework in which hope could be sustained... the God active in history who delivered Israel would surely deliver the oppressed in the United States.”¹¹³ Within the Exodus trope, African American Christians discovered a story that assigned meaning to their oppression, gave a language to their nationhood, and offered a linear, progressive hope for liberation out of the wilderness into the Promised Land. They discovered a God who cared for the oppressed and worked on their behalf to deliver them, a God who punished the wicked and brought a people

¹⁰⁹ Slave spiritual, as quoted in Raboteau, *Fire in the Bones*, 17.

¹¹⁰ Raboteau, *Fire* 33-34. In some rare cases, blacks in America took their identification more literally, such as William S. Crowdy and the Church of God and saints of Christ in Lawrence, Kansas who believed that African Americans were descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel or Wentworth Matthews Commandment Keeper’s Congregation of the Living God in Harlem, a collection of ‘Ethiopian Hebrews.’ (Raboteau 108-109).

¹¹¹ Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, diary entry of 12 December 1857, in *An American Diary, 1857-1858*, ed. Joseph W. Reed, Jr. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, 65, as quoted in Raboteau¹² and Callahan 83.

¹¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Birth of a New Nation,” sermon preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 7 April 1957; http://mlkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/the_birth_of_a_new_nation_sermon_delivered_at_dexter_avenue_baptist_church/.

¹¹³ Glaude’s argument is that the Exodus story, while embedded in religious life and in the biblical realm, had important “secular,” or political, ramifications. It provided not only a language of nation but also a conception of nation “that begins with the common social heritage of slavery and the insult of discrimination” and in turn offers hope for liberation, in heaven, yes, but also on earth, with “a people acting for themselves to alleviate their condition.” Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus!: Religion, Race and Nation in Nineteenth-Century Black America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 81.

unto Himself. Exodus provided a “public vocabulary” deeply entrenched in Christian theology that reminded people, even those laboring under oppression, that there was a “transcendent God active in history” and that he acted on behalf of His people. Not that people were without their part to play. Indeed, King claimed in 1957, “whenever you break out of Egypt, you better get ready for stiff backs. You better get ready for some homes to be bombed. You better get ready for some churches to be bombed. You better get ready for a lot of nasty things to be said about you, because you're getting out of Egypt, and, whenever you break aloose from Egypt, the initial response of the Egyptian is bitterness.”¹¹⁴ Blacks in America would have to cross the Red Sea, they would have to march through the wilderness, but God, the Deliverer, would go with them.

Not only would blacks be freed, but their oppressors would be punished. As Jim Cone has written: “‘And if ‘de God dat lived in Moses’ time is jus de same today,’ then that God will vindicate the suffering of the righteous black and punish the unrighteous whites for their wrongdoing.”¹¹⁵ This belief endured beyond Emancipation, as exodus theology offered biblical grounding for jeremiads against Jim Crow as well.¹¹⁶ God would punish white America just as He had brought plagues upon Egypt. “I can hear God speaking,” King said, in his exposition of Exodus, “I can hear him speaking throughout the universe, saying, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ And if you don’t stop, if you don’t straighten up, if you don’t stop exploiting people, I’m going to rise up and break the backbone of your power. And your power will be no more!”¹¹⁷

The God of Exodus was a God who delivered and who punished. Thus, “the appropriation of the

¹¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr, “The Birth of a New Nation,” sermon preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 7 April 1957; http://mlkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/the_birth_of_a_new_nation_sermon_delivered_at_dexter_avenue_baptist_church/.

¹¹⁵ James H. Cone, “Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation,” in *African American Religious Thought*, eds. West and Glaude.

¹¹⁶ David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005. These black jeremiads, present from Frederick Douglas to Martin L. King, Jr. amounted to “warning issued by blacks to whites, concerning the judgment that was to come from the sin of slavery.”(Wilson Moses).

¹¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr, “The Birth of a New Nation.”

Exodus story,” Eddie Glaude stated, “not only gave an account for the circumstances of black lives...it ensured retribution for the continued suffering of God’s people.”¹¹⁸

The narrative of the children of Israel being led out of slavery in the Old Testament offered hope of freedom for oppressed blacks in the South. It also caused them to envision themselves as a unique people. As Albert Raboteau put it: “by appropriating the story of Exodus as their story, black Christians articulated their own sense of peoplehood.”¹¹⁹ In the Exodus account, following their deliverance, the people of Israel were given the law in a covenant with God and constituted as his people. The notion of deliverance and covenant has often been historically constitutive for groups. For example, the American colonists took on the motif of exodus when establishing their new government, immortalized by John Winthrop’s “A Modell of Christian Charity.”¹²⁰ To the Puritan colonists, England constituted Pharaoh’s oppressive Egypt, the code of conduct Winthrop and others established before God and each other their new covenant, and America the Promised Land.¹²¹ Of course, blacks in America saw things differently. For them, America was not the Promised Land but Egypt herself, the land of their oppression and exploitation. But they too, like the Puritans of old, found a collective identification in the delivered Israelite people. This peoplehood, was grounded not in ethnicity,

¹¹⁸ Glaude *Exodus!* 10.

¹¹⁹ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 33.

¹²⁰ Winthrop wrote: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. ...And to shut this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. “Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil,” in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.” (“A Model of Christian Charity” (1630); <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>).

¹²¹ Often, this people adopts the mantle of chosenness as well. It was in fact, “the ideology of chosenness “ which “provided the religious base for America’s political ideology and its national identity.” (Glaude 78). See also James H. Moorhead, “The American Israel: Protestant Tribalism and Universal Mission” in *Many are Chosen: Divine Election & Western Nationalism* ed. by William R Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann, Harvard Theological Studies (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

but in the experience of freedom, contract with each other, and trust in God.¹²² It was a spiritual peoplehood, born of oppression and born into hope.

The covenanted people of Israel sought a new place; blacks in America, for the most part, did not.¹²³ The Promised Land for them was not another land, but the one they inhabited, restored and redeemed and fulfilling its promise. As Allen Callahan said: “the Promised Land is not a home. It is a hope.”¹²⁴ The hope was that America would keep its part of the covenant and offer equality for all. This was the request of the civil rights movement--a political request but also a deeply theological demand for the covenantal promise to be fulfilled.¹²⁵ As Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel noted, “it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.” Practitioners of African American religion in the United States would continue the struggle out of bondage that the ancient Israelites began.¹²⁶ They would live the theology they espoused.

The persistent belief that God would deliver them and punish their oppressors animated African American religion, and provided a language of peoplehood and assurance of victory in the civil rights movement. The story of the Exodus applied to the freedom struggle, Gary Selby argued, “provided an overarching narrative structure, rooted in African Americans’ religious

¹²² Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 112.

¹²³ Some did advocate returning to Africa or establishing new homes at various moments and in various movements. See Kenneth C. Barnes, *Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); James Campbell, *Middle Passage: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Claude A. Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David Jenkins, *Black Zion: The Return of Afro-Americans and West Indians to Africa* (London: Wildwood House, 1975).

¹²⁴ Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 118.

¹²⁵ Walzer notes that politicizing the Exodus account is decidedly not a “violation” and not “invention, or mere invention,” rather, he states, “the text is plausibly understood in political terms, as a liberation and a revolution,-- even though it is also, in the text, an act of God.” He furthermore asserts: “The Exodus is an account of deliverance or liberation expressed in religious terms, but it is also a secular, that is, a this-worldly and historical account...it is a realistic account, in which miracles play a part but which is not itself miraculous.”(Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 7,9).

¹²⁶ Interestingly, in this way, Exodus politics offered hope not just for blacks but for America itself—“that the true test of American democracy rested with the nation’s darker sons and daughters.” (Glaude, *Exodus!* 111).

heritage, from which members of the movement could view themselves and their crusade.”¹²⁷ “The Exodus paradigm,” Selby continued, “connected their cultural tradition, their religious understandings, and their quest for a better life together within a single, coherent, compelling world view.”¹²⁸ Martin Luther King became the Moses of the Movement, while Southern segregationists were cast as “pharaohs” keeping blacks in “the Egypt of segregation” rather than freeing them to go to the “Promised Land” of equality.¹²⁹ King and other leaders of the civil rights movement drew upon “the most salient story in the African American cultural tradition, the story of the Exodus,” in order to mobilize African American Christians. “What had happened four thousand years earlier when God brought the nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land of Canaan,” these leaders argued, “was happening in their own day once again.”¹³⁰ As King stated in 1961: “we’ve broken loose from the Egypt of slavery and we’ve moved through the wilderness of segregation, and now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration.”¹³¹ The Exodus story was the narrative and theological framework, inherited from the black church, that undergirded the civil rights movement.

The Black Christ: Son of Man, Son of God

St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians declares that in Jesus Christ “all things hold together.”¹³² The same might be said of the theology of the black church. The fourth theological notion that animated the civil rights movement was a profound, practical Christology that freed

¹²⁷ Gary S. Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom: The Exodus Narrative in America’s Struggle for Civil Rights* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 168.

¹²⁸ Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*, 171.

¹²⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where do we go from Here?: Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), King, “Out of the Long Night of Segregation,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, February 10, 1958, 6.

¹³⁰ Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*, 2.

¹³¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Address by MLK at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,” April 19, 1961 (The King Center Digital Archives, 2) <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/address-mlk-southern-baptist-theological-seminary>.

¹³² Colossians 1:17.

Jesus from the whiteness of the American imagination and remembered him as both the Jewish Messiah and the Incarnate God-man, the suffering servant ever present with those who suffer.¹³³ Far from the esoteric murmurings of academic hermeneutics, this theology was intensely practical. “If our existence were not at stake,” Jim Cone explained, “then the Christological question would be no more than an intellectual exercise for professional theologians.” “But,” he continued, for black Christians, “for Christians who have experienced the extreme absurdities of life,” the “Christological question is not primarily theoretical but practical. It arises from the encounter of Christ in the struggle of freedom.”¹³⁴ Christ’s presence in the freedom struggle was a central doctrine of black theology and one of the most assertive. “Christianity begins and ends with the man Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection,” black theologian Jim Cone unequivocally stated, “He is the Revelation, the special disclosure of God to man, revealing who God is and what his purpose for man is. In short, Christ is the essence of Christianity.”¹³⁵

African American Christians had possessed this view long before Cone expressed it in the 1960s as a major tenet of black theology, however. From stories of slaves searching for letters of Jesus’s name in the Bible to calling out for him in the shadows, the Jesus Christ they knew was never far off in the heavenlies, but one who was intimately acquainted with them and their plight; indeed, one who shared it.¹³⁶ When in the black church and later in mass meetings,

¹³³ See Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God became a National Icon*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003).

¹³⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 99-100.

¹³⁵ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969), 34. He later says more succinctly “What is the essence of Christianity? Two words: Jesus Christ.” (111). J. Kameron Carter echoes this, claiming, “Christology is the sum and substance, the alpha and omega, the proton and eschaton, the capstone of Christian thought. It is that which keeps Christian thought from veering into the abstraction of natural theologies.” (Carter, *Race*, 162).

¹³⁶ See: David McRae, *The Americans at Home: Pen and Ink Sketches of American Men, Manners, and Morals*, 2 vols, (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas: 1870),2:112-113; Raboteau, *Slave Religion* 242; Callahan 186-187. Even Du Bois wrote: “Jesus Christ was a laborer and black men are laborers; He was poor and we are poor; He was despised of His fellow men and we are despised; He was persecuted and crucified and we are mobbed and lynched. If Jesus Christ came to America He would associate with Negroes and Italians and working people...” (W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Church and the Negro,” *Crisis*, No. 6 (October 1913), 290.

throng of African Americans sang “*Give me Jesus, Give me Jesus, You may have the world, but Give me Jesus,*” they were not, as is so often asserted, selling out to the otherworldly, but were recognizing the supremacy of understanding and identifying with Jesus Christ in the practice of Christianity. Christology had special relevance for black Christians. Cone claimed that Jesus Christ “is the content of the hopes and dreams of black people.”¹³⁷ Jesus did not merely point to the source of hopes and dreams, he was himself the content of them.¹³⁸

In the twentieth century, mainline Protestant theologians both in Europe and America increasingly envisioned Jesus as an abstract Being with little to do with life on earth. But most black Christians never adopted this position, and maintained a close relationship with the God who became man and entered history. King himself, as a graduate student and young theologian criticized white Protestants for, in Charles Marsh’s phrase, their “thin Christology.” “Niebuhr’s Jesus,” for example, according to King, was “pure abstraction...[not] the Jesus of history who walked in Jerusalem.”¹³⁹ King therefore repudiated the Christological liberalism of Crozer and instead looked to theologians like Howard Thurman and back to the tradition of the black church for a savior real enough to meet the harsh reality of American racism. While many white evangelicals, too, dismissed theological liberalism and treasured Jesus’s immanence, there were differences. Black theology viewed Jesus as not only incarnately real, but as one who, in his

¹³⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* 30.

¹³⁸ White evangelicals also privileged Jesus’s immanence and esteemed having a personal relationship with him. But Christ’s immanence had special significance for black Christians deriving from a shared experience of suffering. Jesus did not simply come into their hearts and offer salvation, he also dwelt among them and aided them in their pain and their struggle for freedom. As James Cone says, “the story of [Jesus’s] life and death is the answer to the human story of oppression and suffering.” (Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 99).

¹³⁹ The conversations King had in seminary about the philosophy of Christ were “ultimately unhelpful to the black Baptist preacher struggling to take the Bible seriously on the streets of ordinary southern towns.” The Jesus of liberal Protestantism was weak and inconsequential in dealing with the concrete problems of this life, namely segregation and sin. King therefore rejected the liberalism of Crozer and adopted a position of “theological realism” (as did Niebuhr, eventually) that was capacious enough to meet the travails of the twentieth century. His position brought him back to the Christology of the black church: the actual life, death and resurrection of the God-man, Jesus Christ. Only that could meet American racism. As Marsh put it: “Abstractions cannot empower acts of compassion and self sacrifice or sustain the practice of nonviolence,” only a belief in Jesus, King found, could. (Charles Marsh, “Review of *A Stone of Hope*”).

earthly form looked like them, who suffered for and with his people. Refusing to allow weak white Protestantism to co-opt their savior, practitioners of African American Christianity and their benefactors in the civil rights movement, reclaimed Jesus in all of his concreteness.

First, Jesus was Jewish. Howard Thurman, a theologian and King's professor at Boston University, therefore began his seminal 1949 work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "with the simple historical fact" that "Jesus was a Jew."¹⁴⁰ The fact of Jesus's Jewishness meant that he existed as a man, and a racialized one at that, with real flesh, which was most likely brown.¹⁴¹ Jesus's Jewishness also meant that he was born into a minority ethnic group, an exiled one no less.¹⁴² He was poor.¹⁴³ Jesus's ethnic marginalization and economic deprivation linked him, according to Thurman, with "the masses of men on the earth," the "masses of men [who] live with their backs constantly against the wall...the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed," including, certainly, many black Christians in the American South.¹⁴⁴ When God chose to come to earth, he chose to come like them—racialized, ostracized, and poor.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1949, 15. This marks a core tenet of black theology as well, as Jim Cone emphatically exclaims: "Jesus was a Jew!" (Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 109)

¹⁴¹ The fact of Jesus's Jewishness provides a rebuttal to the scurrilous racism often created within Christianity. As theologian J. Kameron Carter argues, racism entered Christendom through a vicious anti-Semitism that removed Jesus from his Jewishness and eventually his human concreteness and transformed him into a white ethereal being. This theological move allowed racism to exist, imagining that God were white, as was the Christ, with humans falling hierarchically beneath, with white Europeans being closest to the Divine and people of color furthest away. Recapturing Jesus as Jewish means that He had "racialized flesh," undoing this heretical white supercessionism. See: J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴² In addition to being Jewish, Jesus was also a Palestinian, "a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominant and controlling group," the Romans. (Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 18). As black theologian Albert Cleage puts it, the truth is "that Jesus was the non-white leader of a non-white people struggling for liberation against a non-white people, Rome." (Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 3).

¹⁴³ By comparing the account of Jesus's dedication at the temple in Luke and the Hebraic regulation laid out in Leviticus, Thurman deduces that "the mother of Jesus was one whose means were insufficient for a lamb, and who was compelled, therefore, to use doves or young pigeons." His family had so little that they could not afford even the recommended offering at the temple. (Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 16-17).

¹⁴⁴ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 13.

¹⁴⁵ From this thinking stems the influential school Jim Cone heralded as 'black theology.' In his groundbreaking 1969 treatise, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone states, "In a society that defines blackness as evil and whiteness as good," he begins, "the theological significance of Jesus is found in the human liberation through blackness. Jesus is the black Christ!" (James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969; *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970;)). What does this blackness

Emphasizing Jesus's Jewishness not only recaptured him as concretely, pigmentedly human, but also revealed Him as a member of God's chosen people.¹⁴⁶ As Thurman explained: "it is impossible for Jesus to be understood outside the sense of community which Israel held with God."¹⁴⁷ The God who sent Jesus Christ, African American Christians held, was same God who covenanted with Israel. Jesus was understood to be the Messianic fulfillment of God's covenant, evidence that God keeps His promises and will, in fact, save His people.¹⁴⁸ As Jim Cone has argued: "The particularity of Jesus's person as disclosed in his Jewishness is indispensable for Christological analysis. On the one hand, Jesus's Jewishness pinpoints the importance of his humanity for faith, and on the other, it connects God's salvation drama in Jesus with the Exodus- Sinai event."¹⁴⁹ Just as the black church tenaciously clung to the Exodus story, Jesus's incarnation as the Jewish Messiah was yet another confirmation of both God's covenantal love and the liberation from bondage for God's people.¹⁵⁰

signify? As Cone states, "the 'blackness of Christ' therefore, is not simply a statement about skin color, but rather a transcendent affirmation that God has not ever, no not ever, left the oppressed alone in the struggle." (Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 126.) Much deeper and more "radical" than pigmentation, Jesus's blackness is a statement of his identification with the creature man. (Carter 192). Blackness comes to mean creatureliness, vulnerable humanity, acceptance of the frailty of life, and acknowledgement of human weakness. Jesus himself, as man, experiences blackness in taking on human flesh. It bears mentioning that the notion of Jesus as Black did not originate with Jim Cone or the Black Power Movement. Indeed, over fifty years earlier Henry McNeal Turner had proclaimed, "God is a Negro." (Henry McNeal Turner, "God is a Negro" (1868)). Nevertheless, Cone is often referred to as the father of black theology and is its principal articulator. In late 1960s and 1970s, the notion of Jesus as Black gained traction as a more separatist theology and racial movement. (See: Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968); Peniel E. Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁴⁶ As J. Kameron Carter writes, this notion provides an "understanding of Christian existence as grounded in the Jewish, nonracial flesh of Jesus and thus as an articulation of the covenantal life of Israel." (Carter 92).

¹⁴⁷ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 16.

¹⁴⁸ The Jewish Jesus, "as the one whose life is a life of fidelity to Israel's covenant with YHWH," confirms that "YHWH is on both the Creator and creaturely sides of the covenant, holding it." (Carter, *Race*, 378, 192.)

¹⁴⁹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 109.

¹⁵⁰ For the adherents of black theology, God's chosen people, after the time of Christ, became the oppressed, wherever they are to be found. As Thurman writes: "The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique for survival for the oppressed... wherever his spirit appears the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy and hatred... need have no dominion over them." (Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 29).

But how would this liberation come? Looking to Jesus, many African American religious leaders and civil rights activists concluded it would be through redemptive suffering. In order to redeem the world, Jesus had been persecuted and killed. He not only knew the disgrace of marginalization and understood the degradation of poverty, he had felt the sting of the lash, had tasted the bitter cup of God's wrath. Jesus died an ignominious death, like so many blacks in the South had, which was why they could, in the very same breath, speak of "the cross and the lynching tree."¹⁵¹ They were not alone in suffering, or even in death; Jesus understood it, he knew, like them, what was meant when it was written "cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."¹⁵² The significance in black theology of Jesus's immanence was his suffering, and not simply that he suffered *for* Christians but that he suffered *with* them. "During my childhood," James Cone remembered, "I heard a lot about the cross at Macedonia A.M.E. Church... The spirituals, gospel songs, and hymns focused on how Jesus achieved salvation for the least through his solidarity with them even unto death. There were more songs, sermons, prayers and testimonials about the cross than any other theme." Jesus's crucifixion on the cross, he concluded, comprised "the foundation" of black Christianity.¹⁵³

The crucifixion itself, though, could not bring hope, cosmic companionship notwithstanding. But, according to orthodox Christianity, he rose from the dead. The resurrected Jesus emerged as not only a fellow sufferer but as the One who brought liberation, even from death. Though crucified as a poor Jew, "he was resurrected as Lord," Cone remarked, "thereby

¹⁵¹ See: Countee Cullen, *The Black Christ and Other Poems*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929); James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

¹⁵² Galatians 3:13; Deuteronomy 21: 23. As Jim Cone states: "the death of the man on the tree has radical implications for those who are enslaved, lynched and ghettoized in the name of God and country." (Cone 9.)

¹⁵³ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 21.

making good God's promise to bring freedom to all who are weak and helpless."¹⁵⁴ For many black Christians, the resurrection of Jesus was the ultimate symbol of hope, a guarantee that their struggles would end in victory and in liberation. The resurrection meant freedom from death, sin, and oppression. It meant that Jim Crow would be defeated. It also meant that suffering could be redemptive. If Jesus's terrible suffering and death were part of God's redemptive plan, it was possible, many black Christians believed, that their the plight could be as well.¹⁵⁵ Their Christology, their theological belief in the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus, led many African American Christians to claim the power of redemptive suffering, knowing that resurrection would follow death.

Living Black Theology: Redemption and The Love Ethic

These theological principles, long proclaimed by generations of black Christians, culminated in the twentieth century notion of the transformative love ethic, practiced in Christian nonviolence. Christian nonviolence, that "praxis" developed by black religious intellectuals, gave the civil rights movement its concrete expression. Men like Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Lawson, both ministers nurtured in the black church, fused their theological training with the ideas of Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, and Gandhi to create a protest movement designed for black Christians in the South.¹⁵⁶ The way to live theology, they declared, was to

¹⁵⁴ "Faith in the resurrection," Cone continues, "means that the historical Jesus...was God's way of breaking into human history, redeeming humanity from injustice and violence and bestowing power upon little ones in their struggle for freedom." (Cone, *God of the Oppressed* 97, 110).

¹⁵⁵ "While King never thought he had achieved the messianic standard of love found in Jesus's cross, he did believe that his suffering and that of African Americans and their supporters would in some mysterious way redeem America from the sin of white supremacy, and thereby make this nation a just place for all." (Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 89).

¹⁵⁶ King was born in Atlanta, reared in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where his father, Martin King, Sr. was pastor. He attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, then went on to Crozer Seminary and Boston University where he earned a Ph.D. in theology. King then heard the call to the ministry and took a position in Montgomery, Alabama. He continued to serve as minister as his activism in the civil rights movement increased in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After leading the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), King and some other ministers soon founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) which would become a leading force in the movement for civil rights. (There are many good biographies and portraits of King. See: Taylor Branch,

demonstrate it in love and nonviolence, as Christ himself did.¹⁵⁷

“Love,” King unequivocally proclaimed, “is the key to the solution of the problems of our world.”¹⁵⁸ This love would be expressed in nonviolent direct action protest in order to “oppose the unjust system and at the same time love the perpetrators of the system.”¹⁵⁹ For King and his fellows in the civil rights movement, neither retaliation nor violence offered any real power to change the racial status quo, but love did. The love that they referred to, though, was “not to be confused with some sentimental outpouring.” No, King clarified, “love is something much deeper than emotional bosh.”¹⁶⁰ Indeed, weepy emotionalism was no match for police dogs, billy clubs, and mocking mobs. Not merely feeling or sentimentalism, love constituted the conscious decision of religious conviction. As Charles Marsh has asserted, “King’s concept of love was certainly not the platitudinous ‘all you need is love;’” rather, he continues, it was “the passion to make human life and social existence a parable of God’s love for the world.”¹⁶¹

Love meant consistently deciding to put off bitterness and hatred, exemplified by Jesus, who instructed his followers to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”¹⁶²

Parting the Waters (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* edited by Clayborne Carson (New York: Warner Books, 1998); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1986). Born in 1928, Jim Lawson was raised in Ohio in a Methodist home. He graduated from Baldwin Wallace College and soon got involved with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), developing a strong belief in pacifism, nonviolence and racial parity. After serving time for being a conscientious objector in the Korean War, Lawson travelled to Nagpur, India as a Methodist missionary. Upon return in 1955, Lawson enrolled in graduate school at Oberlin College, where one of his professors introduced him to Martin Luther King, Jr. The two men and ministers then developed a deep friendship and began to work together on implementing the Christian faith they shared into an applicable protest movement. Lawson enrolled at Vanderbilt University’s Divinity School and began conducting workshops in Christian nonviolence in Nashville in the early 1960s, where he came into contact with a young generation of students, like John Lewis, ready to sacrifice their bodies for the cause of freedom.

¹⁵⁷ See Howard Thurman, “Love,” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornel West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 49-61.

¹⁵⁸ Martin Luther King, “Loving your Enemies,” *Strength to Love*, (1963), 48.

¹⁵⁹ King, “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” *Strength to Love*, 19.

¹⁶⁰ King, “Loving your Enemies” in *Strength to Love*, 52.

¹⁶¹ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice*, 2.

¹⁶² Matthew 5:44

This would require, in Howard Thurman's words, "painstaking discipline."¹⁶³ For blacks in the civil rights movement, the love ethic required the discipline of forgiveness, since, in America, to love one's white neighbor meant necessarily to love one's antagonist. Here again, it was the example and message of Christ that offered the theological motivation for nonviolence and reconciliation. "Jesus' insistence that we should forgive seventy times seven," Thurman claimed, reveals "the assumption that forgiveness is mandatory," even for the oppressed. Not only did Jesus's teachings promote this costly forgiveness and love, but so did his life.¹⁶⁴ "Although crucified by hate," King taught, Jesus "responded with aggressive love."¹⁶⁵ Civil rights activists would practice the same aggressive love of Jesus, in the form of active nonviolent resistance.

Transformed by the love of Christ, many believed they could likewise transform their oppressors. In a famous explanation, King thundered:

To our most bitter opponents we say: 'we shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you... Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.'¹⁶⁶

In nonviolence, in redemptive suffering merged with the love ethic, civil rights activists believed they could not only bring down segregation and Jim Crow but convert America to brotherhood and goodwill. In Christ's redemptive suffering, in his love ethic and forgiveness, in the notion of crucifixion and resurrection, many civil rights activists found proof that love was more powerful

¹⁶³ Howard Thurman, "Love," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* eds. Cornel West and Eddie J. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 60. "Merely preaching love of one's enemies...however high and holy," Thurman wrote, could not "in the final analysis, accomplish" transformation.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ King, "Love in Action" April 1960, The Martin Luther King Papers Project; <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol6/July1962-March1963DraftofChapterIV,LoveinAction.pdf>

¹⁶⁶ King, "Loving your Enemies," Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, November 17, 1957; http://mlkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_loving_your_enemies/

than hate, that life would conquer death. For King and many other inheritors of black theology, nonviolent resistance was the flesh and blood embodiment of their religious heritage.

The God who created them, who delivered them out of bondage in Egypt, who in Christ was like them and with them, was present, African American Christians felt, in their struggle in the twentieth century South against the sin of segregation. These theological principles were the ideological pillars of the black church, providing a strong theological foundation that undergirded the civil rights movement. They made the civil rights movement “*move*.”¹⁶⁷ As Americus minister J. R. Campbell put it, “the same God that was with us before was with us [now], ‘cause he had to be with us,” so “[we] woke up and found out [we] could be defiant, could assert [our] rights.”¹⁶⁸

Lived Theology Takes to the Street

Campbell’s comments reveal that theology mattered not just to trained intellectuals but to less educated, rural populations of black churchgoers. To borrow a phrase from Jonathan Walton, these forgotten faithful were “theologically trained within seminaries of suffering.”¹⁶⁹ The same doctrinal principles espoused from the lectern and pulpit possessed resonance in ordinary life, in bedtime prayers and sweaty sermons in plain pine churches. “Christ’s meaning is not only expressed in formal church doctrine,” black theologian Jim Cone explained, “but also in the rhythm, the beat, and the swing of life.”¹⁷⁰ The theology of the black church not only pervaded everyday life but also encountered the realities of everyday living. As Benjamin Mays stated, blacks were “not interested in any fine theological or philosophical discussions about God,” not

¹⁶⁷ David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 3, emphasis his.

¹⁶⁸ J.R. Campbell, Interview by SCOHP, July 21, 2003, Georgia Southwestern University, Americus, GA.

¹⁶⁹ Jonathan L. Walton, “The Black Church Ain’t Dead! (But Maybe it Should Be?),” in response to Eddie Glaude, “The Black Church is Dead.”

¹⁷⁰ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, “Who is Jesus Christ for us Today?,” 115.

interested in abstract argumentation, choosing to emphasize *lived* theology, the God “who is able to help him bridge the chasm that exists between the actual and the ideal.”¹⁷¹

In the civil rights movement, the theology of the black church found real, lived expression. For example, John Lewis, an activist who worked in Americus, recalled a story of a minister picketing at the county courthouse. When a white observer remarked, “‘You shouldn’t be doing that, you should be preaching the gospel!’ a SNCC worker marching with the minister replied, ‘He is preaching the gospel!’”¹⁷² “What is remarkable about the civil rights movement,” David Chappell claims, “and what makes it like one of the great historical [religious] revivals is that the enthusiasm moved out of the church and into the streets.”¹⁷³ It even moved into the rural streets of towns like Americus.

In Americus, the theological civil rights movement was led primarily by two ministers: Rev. J.R. Campbell and Rev. R.L. Freeman. Since the church played such a pivotal role in black life, ministers were often regarded as leaders in the community, as they offered religious instruction and served as pillars of education and respectability.¹⁷⁴ The same was true in Americus as Campbell and Freeman used their positions as ministers of the gospel to provide the

¹⁷¹ Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church*, (New York: Institute for Social and Religious Research, 1933), as quoted in Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals,” 225.

¹⁷² John Lewis Correspondence, March 1964, SNCC papers as quoted in Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 3.

¹⁷³ Chappell, *Stone of Hope*, 97. Certainly not every activist considered their activity as theological demonstration. Many conceived of their efforts as being a political duty, a moral duty, an American one, totally separate from religion. This more secular interpretation of civil rights movement has received much attention in the historiography and is the normative perspective, seeing theology as unknowable and bound up with the irrelevant history of the black church while the emphasis is on human rights and social struggle. While that is true for some of the movement, the theological undergirding, I would argue is always there, providing the invisible, intellectual power behind the movement. Of the civil rights workers laboring in the South, Albert Cleage states, “Most of them do not realize that what they are doing is religious.” But, of course, he implies, it is, despite their ignorance or denial of that fact. (Cleage, *The Black Messiah*, 36).

¹⁷⁴ Male ministers, of course, were not the only active participants in the black church or in the civil rights movement. For a rich, fuller history of the roles both men and women religious played in black life, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1965*, edited by Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement*, edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001.)

movement with resources and to apply the doctrines of Christianity to the nascent civil rights struggle. The lives and work of these two men offer meaningful insight into black theology and how it was indeed lived in the civil rights movement in Americus.

Born in 1925 in Newport News, Virginia and reared in South Carolina, J.R. Campbell was deeply familiar with the rhythms and strictures of the Deep South. Abandoned as an infant, J.R. lived with four different families before settling with the Campbells, whose surname he adopted. His surrogate father then died when J.R. was twelve, leaving him largely on his own, as he worked in the Carolina lowcountry “pulling turnips, picking peas, cleaning fish, catching crabs.” Even in these difficult circumstances, Campbell claimed he was “an ordinary black boy in the slum part of town” who, of course, “grew up going to church.”¹⁷⁵ After enlisting in the Army and serving in World War II, J.R. Campbell returned to South Carolina. He initially worked in a restaurant, as “the best cook in the state of South Carolina,” but soon felt a pull into Christian ministry. “I was called to preach,” he stated, “I ran as long as I could but the Lord pushed me forth to preach, I couldn’t run no further.” So Campbell began to preach within the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) church, pastoring several congregations in Georgia.¹⁷⁶ One of those congregations was Allen Chapel A.M.E in Americus.

When J.R. and his new bride, Mamie, of Savannah, arrived in Americus in 1963, they encountered a place where blacks faced severe racial discrimination. Only seventy-nine African Americans were registered to vote. But underneath the oppression, a nascent civil rights movement stirred. And though Campbell set out solely to preach God’s Word and minister to his flock, he soon found himself swept up in the spiritual struggle of the movement. “When I came to Allen Chapel,” J.R. remembered, “the Sumter County Movement, the [local civil rights]

¹⁷⁵ J.R. and Mamie Campbell interview.

¹⁷⁶ Within the Georgia Conference of the AME Church, Campbell served in many places including Atlanta, Lyons, Vidalia, Americus, Dublin, Sylvester, Easton, Macon, and others.

movement was getting people registered to vote. The boys [Don Harris, Ralph Allen, John Perdew and Bobby Mathas of SNCC] came before I got here and told me all the preachers was in the movement. I said, ‘Oh, that’s marvelous. That’s wonderful. If all the preachers in it, sure I’ll join.’ I joined.” But when Campbell arrived at the small mass meeting out at “a little community church ...there weren’t no preachers.” Many preachers avoided involvement, fearful of repercussions from the white community and desirous of maintaining their own personal status in the community. Reverends in Americus “didn’t want to lose fifteen minutes of air time for ‘rescue hour’ on Sundays.”¹⁷⁷ Despite this slight deception and the lack of ministerial presence, Campbell was taken with the students’ enthusiasm and committed himself to the local civil rights movement, eventually becoming its leader and hosting mass meetings at Allen Chapel.¹⁷⁸

Buttressed both by his newcomer status and his theological convictions, Campbell was able to eschew the trappings of worldly prominence and lead a movement of passionate young people. Initially, the local movement lacked organization, but with outside support from the NAACP, SNCC and other groups, it began to gain momentum with mass meetings, marches, voter registration drives, pickets, and boycotts. Most of the meetings occurred in the black churches around town, with black ministers providing a theological foundation and strong leadership for the young students who made up the majority of the movement. As Campbell himself put it, “the pastors opened the door for the children to meet.” Many Americus residents did not appreciate the fervor and courage of the young minister. “White people told me they was going to kill me,” he reported, “my phone rang off the hook...just rang, rang, rang night and

¹⁷⁷ This refers to the evangelical radio programs and indicates that certain ministers wanted to protect even a small amount of respectability in the mainstream white culture and preserve their status more than serve the practical needs of the community. On another note, radio broadcast has always been significant in the black community and continues to have an influence today. See Barbara Diane Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1999.

¹⁷⁸ When asked about leadership within the Sumter County Movement, Campbell joked that though some people imagined a leaderless organization, he did not, quipping, “I believe in leadership because I belong in the Methodist Church.” J.R. and Mamie Campbell interview.

day.” Even so, Campbell “didn’t fear nothing,” gaining strength and courage from his Christian theology. “I knew there was a God upstairs,” he smiles, “and I was doing the right thing. I know God had no respect for persons.” Campbell brought his fearless dependence on God to the mass meetings, saying, “We just got to pray every meeting.”

J.R. Campbell was eventually joined by another black preacher, R.L. Freeman. Freeman was born and raised in Atlanta, one of nine boys in a prominent Atlanta family. He was well-connected within the black community of Atlanta, educated at Morehouse College, and mentored by ‘Daddy’ King himself.¹⁷⁹ After college, Freeman heard the call to the ministry and became a Baptist preacher, serving parishes in Toccoa, GA and South Carolina before arriving in Americus. In September 1946, Rev. Freeman visited Bethesda Baptist, which at the time was looking for a pastor, to preach as a guest minister. He preached “a gospel sermon with so much power that it was deeply felt by all present,” and the church asked him to come and accept the position of pastor “before leaving that day.” Rev. Freeman agreed and began his tenure in October 1946. Almost immediately, he began a series of improvements at the church, including the renovating the church building and parsonage. He also began reinvigorating the youth programs and focusing more church efforts on young people in other ways as well. Following his arrival, Bethesda Baptist prayed over Rev. Freeman that “God would bless his life and [that he] would live long to render loving-hearted service for the Master.”¹⁸⁰ Not only did Freeman render service to God, but to the civil rights movement.

Despite an initial reticence, possibly owing to his position as the Assistant principal at the black Staley High School, Freeman was drawn into the civil rights struggle, principally by his

¹⁷⁹ At one point, R.L. had to drop out of Morehouse for lack of funding. One day, as he was walking down the streets of South Atlanta, Daddy King stopped him and asked why he wasn’t in school. When he replied that he didn’t have the money, “Daddy King went to Morehouse, used his influence, and got him back in school. That family meant a lot to him.” Robertiena Freeman Fletcher Interview.

¹⁸⁰ *Bethesda History* 17-18.

daughter Juanita. A high school student during the early 1960s, Juanita had been “long vigorous and conspicuous” in the Sumter County civil rights movement.¹⁸¹ As an active participant in the civil rights movement and one of the first black students to integrate Americus High School, white authorities in Americus targeted Juanita. They arrested her and, though the charges were soon dropped and Juanita released, the Americus authorities had unwittingly awoken a sleeping giant in Rev. Freeman. At the moment of his daughter’s arrest, Freeman’s hesitations evaporated in hot anger and he devoted himself to the civil rights struggle in Americus. He registered his parishioners to vote, talked about the movement in midnight living room conversations, took all the black newspapers he could that reported on civil rights happenings, and constantly bailed young people out of jail. “Whenever something would happen in town,” one Americus resident remembered, “everyone would always come talk to Rev. Freeman.”¹⁸²

Both Campbell and Freeman found themselves in positions of influence in Americus. As Martin King, Sr. described: “In the act of faith, every minister became an advocate for justice. In the South, this meant an active involvement in changing the social order all around us.”¹⁸³ Given the organizational and institutional tools afforded by the black church, Rev. Freeman and Rev. Campbell were uniquely equipped to be leaders in the community. The power of their status as ministers also allowed them to engage the struggle for civil rights morally, motivated by compassion for their parishioners as well as a sense of righteousness and forgiveness. Robertiena Freeman recalled that her father, “taught us to look at the world and see it as it is, but not to see race, not to see color...to be forgiving. God gave us His son, Jesus, He forgave us from our sins. We are forgiven, when we accept Christ, you know, we are forgiven, then we should also show

¹⁸¹ Marshall Frady, *Southerners*, “What Happened That Summer to Warren Fortson,” 233.

¹⁸² Robertiena Freeman Fletcher Interview.

¹⁸³ Martin Luther King, Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 82.

compassion for other people and situations.”¹⁸⁴ In the civil rights movement, as it was manifested in Southern towns like Americus, the power was both institutional, bequeathed by the rich tradition of the black church, but more significantly, the power was theological, sparked and sustained by deep religious convictions.

Arguably, the power of the civil rights movement *had* to be theological. As historian David Chappell has written: “The most successful struggle against oppression in modern America--the civil rights movement--defies sustained comparison with at nonreligious movement. It is hard to imagine masses of people lining up for years of excruciating risk against southern sheriffs, fire hoses, and attack dogs without some transcendent or millennial faith to sustain them.”¹⁸⁵ Or, as Jim Cone put it: “How can black people account for the power and courage to struggle against...the Ku Klux Klan and police? What keeps the community together when there are so many scares and hurts? What gives them the will and courage to struggle in hope?...I think the only ‘reasonable’ and ‘objective’ explanation is to say that the people are right when they proclaim the presence of divine power, wholly different from themselves.”¹⁸⁶

From Howard Divinity School to Friendship Baptist, Morehouse College to the streets of Americus, certain theological principles allowed practitioners of African American Christianity the strength and power to stave off racism’s mendacity and affirm both their temporal and eternal dignity, notions which would manifest powerfully in the civil rights movement.¹⁸⁷ Beliefs developed in oppression and incubated in the black church offered African Americans a

¹⁸⁴ Robertiena Freeman Fletcher Interview.

¹⁸⁵ Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 102.

¹⁸⁶ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 108-137.

¹⁸⁷ I should here note that not every parishioner of African American religion participated in each of these strategies and beliefs. Even those that did did so unevenly, sometimes unconsciously as well as consciously. Undoubtedly there is great diversity of thought and practice in African American life, with some claiming Christianity and others embracing other religious traditions, and great divergence even with black Christianity. This list, rather than serve as an unconditional and all-encompassing litany of African American strategies, should rather serve as an offering of emancipatory possibilities that some blacks participated in in various moments.

powerful counter-theology from white American Protestantism. In investigating the theology espoused by black clergy and theologians, the actions and words of the footsoldiers of the civil rights movement are properly understood within their black theological heritage and imbued with compelling theological power.

Dressed in printed sundresses and bright flats, hair nicely done despite the heat, Robertiena Freeman and her friends sat close together in the smooth wooden pews. Like they had so many days in their lives, the girls clapped and sang in the church, fanning themselves occasionally and exchanging excited glances. But this was not a regular Sunday night worship service; it was a mass meeting. And on this hot July night, after the meeting ended, Robertiena and the others in the packed church did not go home to supper. Instead, enlivened by the hymns, the sermon, and by each other, they marched two by two out of the church and onto the dark, unpaved road leading to the Sumter County courthouse.¹⁸⁸ The time had come in America, the time had come in Americus: the black church and black theology were taking to the streets.

¹⁸⁸ Descriptions come from scenes captured in the WSB Film Clips, University of Georgia Hargrett Library and Special Collections, Athens, GA.

CHAPTER 4

Marching to Eternity: Theology Takes to the Streets of Americus

“Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soul-saving music of eternity?”¹

“What were these new ideas? That all men and women were created equal. That there is a place in the Sun for us all. Where did these ideas come from? From God of course. So they were not new ideas, nor were they old, they were eternal, and folks were coming upon them and incorporating them in consciousness and living them.”²

Willie Bolden had been in Americus all summer. And all summer, he had been waiting for this moment. All of the organizing, the leaflets, all of the threats of violence, the mass meetings, they had all led him to this. “People may say we are agitators,” he shouted to the swaying crowd around him. “They may say we are extremists. But let me ask you something,” he intoned, with the cadence of a preacher. “Okay, alright, yeah man,” the crowd murmured in anticipation as Bolden dramatically paused. “Was Jesus Christ an extremist when he died for you and me?”³

On the sweltering July night that Bolden delivered these words, protestors in Americus were marching to the courthouse to protest the unjust imprisonment of four local women. But,

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr, “Transformed Nonconformist,” *Strength to Love* (Cleveland, OH: William Collins+World Publishing Co., 1963), 25.

² Peter deLissovoy, *The Great Pool Jump & Other Stories from the Civil Rights Movement in Southwest Georgia* (2010), 40.

³ WSB Film Clips; Richard Russell Collection, University of Georgia (Athens, GA), henceforth called WSB Film Clips. The clip identifies the man speaking as Willie Bolden, but it looks to me like it could also be Benjamin van Clarke. Both men volunteered in South Georgia and led protest marches. The words spoken are reminiscent of King: “But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.’...So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists. (Martin L. King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 1963).

Bolden's speech reveals, the women's release was not their only goal. They were also, in their nonviolent protest and "extremism," seeking to embody Jesus Christ. This part of the story of civil rights in Americus is about spiritual inspiration and religious dissent. In marching down the streets of Americus, protestors claimed they were children of God, not the slurs they had been called. In waiting in voting registration lines, they fashioned themselves as the children of Israel wandering in the desert before entering the Promised Land. In enduring beatings and humiliations, they took on the mantle of Christ at Golgotha. In languishing in fetid jail cells, they imagined the sufferings of Paul and Silas in a Roman prison centuries earlier. The civil rights movement in Americus was certainly a social and political movement, but it was also a theological one. The same is true for the broader story of civil rights throughout the South. This chapter first explores the general theological origins of the civil rights movement and then traces the movement through SNCC, into Albany, and finally to Americus, where it was manifested in the lives of local men and women.

For decades, African-Americans in the South had been organizing and agitating for the rights owed them by the United States Constitution and confirmed by Abraham Lincoln. The NAACP, founded in 1909, worked for "equality before the law and fair play" long before the 1960s.⁴ But as the civil rights movement unfolded, local leaders, student volunteers, and national activists throughout the South asserted their demands in an unprecedented way to bring down Jim Crow. This story is well-documented, well-known, and extremely important. Yet, as these events occurred, another, quieter phenomenon was taking place. This was a spiritual revolution, in which many people asserted the primacy of their religious beliefs over and against the

⁴ Wilson Jefferson, February 15, 1917, Augusta, Georgia; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press), 2009. Some blacks in the South, disenchanted with a defunct patriotic promise, found comfort in leftist ideology. Most, however found more hope in God than Karl Marx. (Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

confines of a racist culture. While many historians are quick to dismiss hope in God as otherworldly and irrelevant, the theology of the black church was intensely practical.⁵ As Chapter 2 demonstrated, engagement with Christian theology and dedication to the black church was a main source of community and power for African Americans in the South. It should come as no surprise, then, that as the civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1950s and 1960s, it combined the political hopes of a people with the power and comfort found in Christian theology.

The civil rights movement had lofty goals. It sought to “redeem the soul of the nation” by bringing the Christian principles of nonviolence and redemptive love into the public fight for civil rights.⁶ The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), for instance, in the words of its founders, assembled “because we have no moral choice, before God, but to delve deeper into the struggle--and to do so with greater reliance on non-violence and with greater unity, coordination, sharing and Christian understanding.”⁷ These ministers brought Christian theology into direct conflict with segregation in the South, involving local communities and tapping into the wellspring of religious power within the black church. With the *Brown* decision in 1954, the effectiveness of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and the backing of a major national organization in the SCLC in 1957, black Americans felt that change was coming and students especially began to organize in grassroots movements.⁸

⁵ While certainly containing the notion of heavenly relief, it also put forth the idea of earthly liberation and even earthly jubilee.

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. as quoted in Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); See also Kim A. Lawton, “Before he was a Leader, King was a Pastor,” *The Seattle Times*, January 14, 2006; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

⁷ King, *Papers* 4:95. The founders of SCLC include: Rev. Martin L. King, Jr., Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and Rev. C.K. Steele.

⁸ As mentioned in the Introduction, scholars have begun to trace earlier beginnings of the civil rights movement, challenging the traditional 1954-1968 timeline, and recasting their studies as part of “the long civil rights

A Theology for Radicals: SNCC

By the 1960s, an “electrifying movement of Negro students” lit up the South and demanded racial change.⁹ This grassroots stirring, “initiated, fed and sustained by students,” needed to be trained in the practical strategies of direct action and taught the philosophy of redemptive nonviolence.¹⁰ An ideological foundation was crucial to the success of the movement, especially in its effort to appeal to the national conscience. “The key significance of the student movement,” Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, “lies in the fact that from its inception, everywhere, it has combined direct action with non-violence. This quality has given it the extraordinary power and discipline which every thinking person observes.”¹¹ Many of the training sessions, lectures, and workshops were directed by Rev. James Lawson, sometimes referred to as the “teacher of the movement.”¹² “Teaching nonviolence in the ‘50s was a major

movement.” These interventions are quite helpful in considering how change came to the South and across the nation, and how also how it did not. For more on *Brown*, see Michael Klarman, *Brown vs. Board of Education and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Numan V. Bartley, *Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1969); *Massive Resistance*. ed. Clive Webb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); For more on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, see: *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, edited by Stewart Burns (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women who Started It*, ed. David Garrow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Jake Miller, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott: Integrating Public Buses* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2004); Donnie Williams, *The Thunder of Angels: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People who Broke the Back of Jim Crow* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2006). For more on the SCLC, see: Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); *The SCLC Story in Words and Pictures* ed. L.D. Reddick (The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1964); For more on the beginnings of the student movement, see: William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1991.⁹ *Papers* 5: 368; See Lerone Bennett Jr., “SNCC: Rebels with a Cause” *Ebony*, July 1965, 146-153.

¹⁰ *Papers* 5: 368.

¹¹ King, “The Burning Truth in the South,” (1960); *Papers* 5:450.

¹² Born and raised in the Midwest, Lawson was the son and grandson of Methodist ministers, highly educated, devout, and committed to nonviolence. As a freshman at Baldwin Wallace College in Ohio, Lawson joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an organization dedicated to pacifism and peaceful change. (Founded in 1915 in Europe during World War I, the group eventually came to the United States, where it boasted members such as Bayard Rustin, Glenn Smiley, and Martin England, co-founder of Koinonia Farm.) In 1951 Lawson declared himself a conscientious objector to the Korean War and was subsequently jailed for over a year. Upon his release, Lawson travelled as a Methodist missionary to Nagpur, India. There, he learned techniques in satyagraha from Mohandas Gandhi and his struggle against the British imperialists, which Lawson fused with his Christian faith. It is interesting to note that while Lawson and other leading black intellectuals such as Howard Thurman, William Stuart Nelson,

challenge because it was like teaching in a foreign language,” Lawson recalled, “though it was a language deeply rooted in the spirituality of Jesus, deeply rooted in the spirituality of many of the prophetic stories of the Hebrew Bible.” Lawson’s task then, was to familiarize the students with their Christian heritage and expose them to the power contained therein. It was a “magnificent story,” a glorious “secret,” Lawson asserted, that “nonviolence was rooted in their own history and religion.” Martin Luther King, he told them, “was not a man from Mars, but a man out of the black church and out of the black Scriptures.”¹³ His power was their power. The fusion of black Christianity with Gandhian nonviolent resistance, Lawson asserted, could sustain a movement for revolutionary change in the South. It was “God’s promise,” he declared, “that if radically Christian methods are adopted the rate of change can be vastly increased.”¹⁴

In this spirit of God’s promise, Lawson, Ella Baker, Charles Sherrod and other activists founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, in April of 1960. In the conference in Raleigh that established SNCC as an independent group, 120 young men and

and Benjamin Mays, gained practical insight into direct action through their travels in India and meetings with Gandhi, these interactions did not alter their core theological foundations. In a 1964 interview with Robert Penn Warren, Lawson reported that Hinduism “has had very little influence” on the movement, continuing to say that even satyagraha “has come through the eyes of people like E. Stanley Jones, the Methodist missionary, who lived for many years in India and was an intimate friend of Gandhi.” (“Who Speaks for the Negro?” Robert Penn Warren Center, Vanderbilt University, 15). When he returned to the United States in 1955, he enrolled in the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin College, where one of his professors, Rev. A.J. Muste, introduced him to another young activist preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr. Lawson was impressed by King’s ability to mobilize the masses in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and King was taken with Lawson’s philosophical and theological depth. As the story goes, King told Lawson, “Come now. Come immediately. We don’t have anyone with your background in the South.” (Letter from Jim Lawson to Martin King, Jr, November 3, 1958, THLSr. MLW-MBU: Box 25; (Lawson, Interview by King Papers Project, 23 November 1998.) So Lawson transferred from Oberlin to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, where he worked as a field secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and began conducting workshops in Christian nonviolent action.

¹³ James Lawson, *This Far by Faith*, edited by Juan Williams, (New York: Harper Collins), 2003, 226.

¹⁴ James M. Lawson, Jr., “From a Lunch Counter Stool,” *Motive*, February 1966. Lawson said this in reference to the nascent sit-in movement, which he believed symbolized a spirit of “judgment and promise.” Beginning in February of 1960 with students from Greensboro, then students in Durham and Nashville, the student sit-in movement became one of the most effective nonviolent strategies for change and perhaps the most enduring image of the movement. Students would calmly and peacefully enter an establishment, take a seat, and endure the stares, humiliation and threats with silent dignity. The sit-ins in the 1960s, while the standard beginning of the civil rights struggle, were not actually the first direct-action protests of their kind. CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, had actually conducted sit-ins in the 1940s. However, the sit-ins of college students in the 1960s had a much larger impact on the movement and in the public.

women determined to bring change in the South by direct nonviolent action. Their Statement of Purpose, drafted by Lawson, declared: “We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the pre-supposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from a Judaic-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love.”¹⁵ This nonviolence was possible, even in a violent society, because of the hope of redemption and transformation. The Statement continued,

“Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance displaces prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality...by appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.”¹⁶

From its inception, SNCC harnessed a religious power to foster racial change, applying Christian theology to the struggle for civil rights.¹⁷ It was theology made practical; it was theology lived. Not all of its members were religious, of course, nor was theological adherence a requirement for participation; nevertheless, theological principles gave SNCC its identity. Believers and nonbelievers alike recognized the functional, confrontational power of Christian theology as well as the discipline and cohesion it offered the movement. As Charles Marsh has noted, “no doubt, there were many SNCC activists whose moral energies were driven by secular ideals, as there were those who considered the faith of black people altogether quaint. Nevertheless,” he continued, “student-based organizations like SNCC...as well as the larger movement itself, were initially anchored in the language, imagery, and energies of the church, in

¹⁵ *The Student Voice* Vol. 1 No. 1, June 1960, SNCC Papers, digital.

¹⁶ SNCC *Statement of Purpose* (April 17, 1960), SNCC Papers.

¹⁷ As C.T. Vivian describes, “The Movement sprang from Christian morality, and its strategy and tactics evolved from that morality...the tactics could be explained in terms of Christian witness, Christian witness moved out of the pews and the pulpits and into the streets. That was how nonviolent action began.” (C.T. Vivian, *Black Power and the American Myth*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 55.

search of a ‘circle of trust, a band of sisters and brothers gathered around the possibilities of agapeic, the beloved community.’¹⁸

This concept of the beloved community motivated the movement. From the first direct action in Montgomery, King reminded people that the boycott and even integration were not the main aims. Rather, he stated, “The end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community.”¹⁹ SNCC, too, described its “ultimate” goal not as political or economic power, nor even democracy, but as the “creation of the beloved community.”²⁰ The beloved community signified, to borrow from Charles Marsh, “the realization of divine love in lived social relation.” It was not “the platitudinous ‘all you need is love;’” nor, as some scholars have dismissed it, a pie-in-the-sky, heavenly vision for someday. The beloved community was rather “the passion to make human life and social existence a parable of God’s love for the world,” an attempt to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth.²¹ The beloved community was not merely a vision of legal rights and political access, though it certainly included that. It was a vision of a redeemed America, an America that resembled the Kingdom of God. As Jim Lawson asserted, “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. The kingdom of God, as in heaven so on earth, is the distant goal of the Christian. The kingdom is far more than the immediate need for integration.”²²

¹⁸ Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 3; See also: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (as revised in conference, April 29, 1962) Charles Sherrrod Papers, file 24, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Vol. 3 ed. Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Peter Holloran, and Dana L.H. Powell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 136.

²⁰ King *Papers* 5:427.

²¹ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York, Basic Books, 2005), 2.

²² James Lawson, “From a Lunch Counter Stool,” *Motive*, February 1966.

The “essential message” of the movement, as Lawson put it, was “theologically specific.”²³ Segregation was sin. It corrupted creation, dehumanized God’s children, and violated his divine authority. Integration, then, was more (but not less) than asserting political personhood. Integration meant participating in the restoration of godly human relationships, worshipping God through honoring one another, and building the beloved community.²⁴ It was through this theological lens that Lawson described the message of the student sit-in movement. “We who are related to the movement,” he wrote in a 1966 article, “are trying to raise the ‘moral issue’” by “pointing to the viciousness of racial segregation and prejudice and calling it evil or sin.” In framing segregation as sin, “the matter,” became, in Lawson’s words, “not legal, sociological, or racial; it is moral and spiritual.”²⁵ In sum, as Charles Marsh has contended, “the theological language could not have been more unapologetic in its specificity and scope, or more subversive of the racial status quo.”²⁶

This ideology was not rigid, but flexible and adaptable to quite different circumstances.²⁷ While SNCC taught its volunteers religious tenets and rooted its activism in Christianity, its theology also allowed for a certain degree of ecumenicalism. A nonbeliever could embody Christ, if he or she chose to act like him.²⁸ SNCC’s sturdy and capacious theological foundation drew in the energies of young volunteers both secular and devout and made them participants in

²³ Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 2.

²⁴ As Marsh unapologetically states, “King’s vision of beloved community was grounded in a specific theological tradition, and no amount of postmodern complexity can remove that intention and claim.” Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 6.

²⁵ James Lawson, “From a Lunch Counter Stool,” *Motive*, February 1966.

²⁶ Marsh *The Beloved Community* 3.

²⁷ From Greensboro, North Carolina to Nashville, Tennessee to Americus, Georgia, SNCC’s “theology for radicals,” as Charles Marsh described, “allowed itself to be stretched by the uncertainties and energies of lived experience; to be invigorated with the rough-hewn wisdom and unguarded testimonials of the untrained.” (Marsh *The Beloved Community* 3).

²⁸ While many students participated in the movement as an expression of their theology, some participated in the movement and thus expressed a collective theological view that they may or may not have possessed individually.

SNCC's efforts toward the beloved community.²⁹ As Albany Freedom Rider and SNCC activist Casey Hayden remarked, nothing mattered "except the willingness to act out your beliefs."³⁰ The beliefs were in place and young people throughout the nation were ready to act.³¹

Charles Sherrod and the Movement Next Door

Almost immediately, SNCC, along with other civil rights organizations, set its sights on Southwest Georgia and the city of Albany, launching the Southwest Georgia Freedom Project.³² Deep in the black belt of the South, Albany was, in SNCC's imagination, part of the "typically 'rural south,'" as it "sits (or sleeps) amidst the largest pecan and peanut growing area in the U.S."³³ A "backwater" city of about 60,000 inhabitants, Albany possessed a history of mostly calm, if deeply unequal, race relations.³⁴ But in the early 1960s, galvanized by national and state

²⁹ While the firm theological foundation was always present, it was explicitly invoked in much of the early movement. As SNCC's efforts spread, as more and more young people came into the movement from around the country, and as impatience for change mounted, much of the original theology was overlooked. This frustrated Lawson and others who believed that an understanding of agapeic love was the source of power for nonviolence, and, without the theological framework, the movement could quickly descend into violence. As Kelly Miller Smith, a minister from Nashville involved in early student action there, put it in 1964, he feared the theology of nonviolence had become just a "tactic," a "technique." Miller Smith continued, saying, "I feel personal guilt for this, in this community because I don't think we did the wisest thing in our movement here. In our workshops, we should have included a little more of the theological basis for our methods and goals...we should have kept the things that were happening within some kind of a theological frame of reference." "Some of the things that we did outside of the church," he assessed, "we should have done from within the church" so that we could "see...the struggle itself from a theological vantage point." (Kelly Miller Smith, "Who Speaks for the Negro?," Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, Vanderbilt University, Tape 2, 30-31,

[http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/sites/default/files/RPW_reel_3.Kelly%20Smith.tape2 .pdf](http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/sites/default/files/RPW_reel_3.Kelly%20Smith.tape2.pdf).

³⁰ Casey Hayden in Constance Curry, et al., *Deep in our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 342.

³¹ The combination of belief and action was indeed powerful. As Marsh says, "the men and women encountered in the story of the beloved community provide such compelling demonstration of the mercy and kindness of God as to offer, perhaps unwittingly, an apologetic of their peculiar theological claims." (Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, 6).

³² Perhaps the best known is the Mississippi Freedom Project, marked by the violence and courage of Mississippi Freedom Summer. But the Mississippi Freedom Project had an earlier, less-known counterpart, the Southwest Georgia Freedom Project, which targeted Albany, Americus and the surrounding rural areas. This effort, often overlooked in the grand narratives of the movement, revealed the misfires early in the civil rights movement and previewed the enduring nature of racial struggle even with legal gains.

³³ SNCC report, SNCC Papers. Marshall Frady describes Albany as "a drab little city in the state's southwest sunstruck flatlands of cotton and peanut fields." Marshall Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), 87.

³⁴ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1981, 57. Blacks represented about 40 percent of the population in Albany.

movements, people in Albany began to agitate for change.³⁵ The Albany Movement, “organized primarily through the urging and pressure of SNCC,” sought massive and comprehensive desegregation, the likes of which had not yet been attempted in the South.³⁶ The story of the Albany Movement is well-known: the courage and freedom songs of the activists, the cunning obduracy of Mayor Asa Kelley and Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, and, not least, the failure of Martin Luther King Jr. to secure lasting change in the city.³⁷ But its theological elements are less acknowledged. Under the leadership of Charles Sherrod and in conjunction with local clergy, the Albany Movement possessed a deep theological power, one that would influence the civil rights movement in the surrounding rural areas of Georgia, including Americus.

The story of the theological civil rights movement in Albany begins with Charles Sherrod.³⁸ Sherrod was born in 1937 in Surry County and raised nearby in Petersburg, Virginia.³⁹ His mother was fourteen at the time of his birth, so Sherrod and his seven younger siblings were

³⁵ Interestingly, rather than choosing one area to protest—the buses, the lunch counters, the train station—Albany, as Wyatt T. Walker put it, “synthesized a variety of nonviolent protest techniques in a broad assault on segregation.” (Rev. Wyatt T. Walker, “The American Dilemma in Miniature: Albany, Georgia,” an address delivered at a Conference on Civil Disobedience and the American Police Executive, March 26, 1963, Fifth Avenue Hotel, New York, New York).

³⁶ SNCC papers (1962), Veterans fo the Civil Rights Movement; http://www.crmvet.org/lets/62_sncc_albany.pdf, 1

³⁷ In the early 1960s, the Albany Movement emerged as a touchstone for the larger civil rights struggle, providing a lesson in the intractability of southern racism and revealing the limits the movement might face in the struggle for equality. SNCC’s leader in the Albany Movement, Charles Sherrod, contests the traditional interpretation of the Albany Movement, which often highlights the difficulties faced. He claimed, “they don't talk about the unity we had. About the strength we had, for the first time. They talk about failure. Where's the failure? Are we not integrated in every facet? Did we stop at any time? What stopped us? Did any injunction stop us? Did any white man stop us? Did any black man stop us? Nothing stopped us in Albany, Georgia. We showed the world.” Sherrod also disputes the widely circulated notion that the Albany power structure blocked nonviolent civil rights action by being nonviolent themselves and refusing to participate in the spectacle of southern violence for the national media. “One of the most disturbing things to me,” Sherrod stated, in a candid moment, “is how the people who've been writing about the movement, during the sixties, could come up with a nonviolent police chief in Albany, Georgia, when, in fact, he was the most violent and conniving...” (Interview with Charles Sherrod, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on December 20, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.)

³⁸ Unfortunately, there is no definitive biography on Sherrod. His name appears occasionally in accounts of the civil rights movement and especially of Albany, but the length and breadth pf his ministry and activism has been underresearched. More often, people recognize his wife, Shirley Sherrod, who served in the Obama Administration.

³⁹ Wyatt T. Walker, SCLC’s Executive Director and one of Martin L. King’s closest advisors was also from Petersburg.

raised by his grandmother.⁴⁰ The family was close, though poor. In fact, Sherrod recalled “carrying junk and shining shoes” as a child to bring in money for his family.⁴¹ Growing up in Virginia, Sherrod was exposed to the reality of Southern racism from a young age. As he remembers, when he was two years old, he boarded a bus, and his mother yanked him from a front seat in the white section to the very back. The incident emblazoned on a young Sherrod the inequality of racial space in the South, though it did not keep him from wanting to challenge those mores.⁴² Much of Sherrod’s resistance to racism came from the Christian faith he learned from his grandmother, a devout Baptist. As he recalled, she taught him “that as a Christian, if he acted humbly and in step with the teachings of Jesus, he need not fear any man.”⁴³ With her encouragement and instruction, Sherrod developed a deep spiritual devotion, which he clung to during an otherwise tumultuous and deprived childhood. He attended Mt. Olive Baptist Church, where he sang in the choir and participated in church social activities. It was even rumored that, as a young child, Sherrod used to practice preaching to the other kids. Unsurprisingly, when Sherrod enrolled at Virginia Union University in Richmond, he elected to study religion.⁴⁴

Intelligent and diligent, Sherrod threw himself into his studies, working “as hard as two men to get through school.”⁴⁵ During his time in college, Sherrod’s theological beliefs led him to seek possibilities for the practical application of the gospel, which, in turn, led him to participate in civil rights demonstrations.⁴⁶ Sherrod merged his deep Christian faith with his activist

⁴⁰ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle*, 57. Some accounts say five siblings.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² At one point, for example, a teenage Sherrod announced to his family that he intended to find and meet his white relatives living around Petersburg. Aghast at this presumption, the family “throttled this violation of taboo.” (Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 525.)

⁴³ Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Vision for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 109.

⁴⁴ Some accounts suggest Sherrod earned a degree in sociology as well.

⁴⁵ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 161.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

yearnings, “attracted, like John Lewis and many others, to the radical implications of Christianity” for American society.⁴⁷

In 1961, after graduating from Virginia Union and earning a Bachelor’s of Theology Degree at the Seminary there, Sherrod turned down a teaching position and instead devoted himself to the civil rights movement full-time. He headed to Shaw University in Raleigh where, as previously mentioned, he, Jim Lawson, Ella Baker, and others formed what would become SNCC and dedicated themselves to providing leadership and organization to the student movements emerging across the South. Sherrod, Diane Nash, Charles Jones and Ruby Smith, traveled to Rock Hill, South Carolina, where they were jailed almost immediately. Sherrod and Jones worked on the chain gang while “armed guards with shotguns on horseback surrounded them,” reporting that they could be “whipped or even shot for looking these deputies in the eye.” But, rather than stunting the movement, the imprisonment, hard work, and constant threat of violence nurtured it. Diane Nash recalled reading the Acts of the Apostles during her time in jail, discovering, “a surprising spiritual side to her time there.”⁴⁸ “You learn the truth in prison,” Sherrod asserted, “You learn wholeness. You find out the difference between being dead and alive.”⁴⁹ Having looked straight into the “ever present threat of death,” Sherrod claimed his time in Rock Hill “transformed” him. “If I accept death,” he realized, “then there’s nothing that anybody can do to me.”⁵⁰ The time in jail not only allowed Movement leaders opportunities for introspection, but also allowed them to refine their tactics. They decided to serve jail sentences rather than post bond immediately; staying in jail, they believed, would highlight injustice, allow

⁴⁷ Carson, *In Struggle*, 57. As one white civil rights activist, Peter DeLissovoy noted, “It’s no accident that the early leaders like Martin Luther King and Charles Sherrod and Reverend Samuel B. Wells and others were Christian preachers,” explaining, “it took a particular wholeness of spirit, vision, and strength beyond personal resources to start up something like the Movement in the American Deep South.” (DeLissovoy, *The Great Pool Jump*, 37).

⁴⁸ David Halberstam, *The Children*, 267-268.

⁴⁹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 32-33.

⁵⁰ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 52.

them to remain nonviolent, and put pressure on the criminal justice systems if small towns.

Sherrod also believed that imprisonment would bond the students to one another and refine the spiritual nature of their struggle, as he himself had experienced. “Our best selling point,” Sherrod explained, “is that we are students with nothing but our bodies and our minds...yet we stand with Love.”⁵¹

Following the Rock Hill incident and a short stint in McComb, Mississippi, SNCC appointed Sherrod as a Field Secretary to the Deep South and made him Director of their new Southwest Georgia Freedom Project. He set out for Albany in October 1961, taking his theological activism to the most recalcitrant of regions. Along with Cordell Reagon, Sherrod began to do very much the same thing that Jim Lawson had done in Nashville, organizing people and teaching workshops on Christian nonviolence.⁵² He was twenty-two years old. Reagon, at eighteen, was even younger than Sherrod.⁵³ The two men arrived in Southwest Georgia “full of zeal and empty of almost everything else.”⁵⁴

To make connections, Sherrod introduced himself to pastors of local churches, identifying himself as a fellow minister of the gospel. There was some initial hesitation on the part of Albany’s religious institutions to be associated with SNCC. These black ministers had to be “fearless,” one movement activist recalled, since if “they opened the doors of their churches

⁵¹ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 52.

⁵² Cordell Reagon worked with Charles Sherrod and other activists in Albany to conduct workshops and organize for many years. He was also arrested over 30 times. Reagon also had a wonderful singing voice and would often lead the young students in singing, to strengthen their spirits and draw upon the church roots many of them possessed. In 1962, at the behest of Pete Seeger, Reagon, along with first wife Bernice Johnson Reagon, established the Freedom Singers. The Albany Freedom Singers encouraged activists throughout the nation with their rich lyrics and deep gospel sound and continue to be a national cultural treasure. Reagon continued his activism throughout his life, protesting the Vietnam War and labor issues, eventually moving to Berkeley, CA. His life was tragically cut short, however, when he was the victim of an unsolved homicide in 1996 and died at the age of 53. (“Cordell Hull Reagon, Civil Rights Singer, Dies at 53,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 1996.)

⁵³ James Forman called Reagon ‘the baby of the movement.’ Originally from Nashville, Reagon had snuck into Lawson’s workshops as a sixteen-year old and participated in the first Freedom Rides. Despite his youth, Reagon was a powerful figure. “Nonviolence,” Reagon explained to the students, “is love. Love for your fellow man.” *Voices of Freedom* edited by Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 99.

⁵⁴ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 524.

for mass meetings” they were “defying authority, risking the loss of church mortgages, the loss of members and, for some, the loss of jobs.”⁵⁵ In time, though, Sherrod and Reagon “were given their support” and “many churches opened their doors.”⁵⁶ A 1962 SNCC report stated: “The ministers are a great help. Their churches are the meeting halls.”⁵⁷ For instance, the pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, Rev. H.C. Boyd, allowed Sherrod to use his church facilities for meetings with the high schoolers in the earliest days of the Movement.⁵⁸ As in Americus, the black church in Albany served as an organizational space and provided grounding. With the support of the religious community in hand, SNCC, the Baptist Ministerial Alliance, and the Interdenominational Alliance united under the expansive moniker The Albany Movement.⁵⁹

A 1961 handbill from The Albany Movement captured the intellectual and theological engagement that accompanied their action. “Those who love the Lord and Freedom,” were invited to a mass meeting at Macedonia Baptist Church, to “Come; Listen; Learn; Love!” The Albany Movement asserted, “We believe in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of

⁵⁵ William G. Anderson, “Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement,” *The Journal of Southwest Georgia History*, Vol. 9, Fall 1994, 1-14, 8.

⁵⁶ Charles Sherrod, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Memorandum (1961); http://wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/173/177665/28_nonvi.HTM. The openness of traditional religious leaders was critical for the success of the movement since the black clergy held “a unique and responsible position in the negro community,” and were “looked up to and held in the highest esteem by their adult flock.” Sherrod noted that though the black church sometimes displayed “hypocrisy” in wanting to preserve their own power and respectability, it also contained the “seeds of the ultimate victory of Truth.” (Sherrod in Carson, *In Struggle*, 58). Sherrod and Reagon also faced opposition from other members of the community, including Tom Chatman, a powerful citizen and leader of the NAACP’s Youth Council, who was envious of SNCC’s growing influence. Chatman sought to persuade black Albany that Sherrod and Reagon were Communists and, as C.B. King so delicately informed Sherrod that “the community might be well advised to divest itself of [their] presence.” (Branch *Parting the Waters*, 526).

⁵⁷ SNCC papers (1962); Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement; http://www.crmvet.org/lets/62_sncc_albany.pdf.2.

⁵⁸ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 526. Though not without his doubts, Boyd realized that “Sherrod was accomplishing what no Albany pastor, including himself, could do—he was attracting a growing number of teenagers into church, two, three, four times a week.”

⁵⁹ Americus native William G. Anderson was elected the president of the Albany Movement and Slater King the vice president. It also bears mentioning that though Reagon and Sherrod were committed to the principles of Christian nonviolence and sought to convey those principles to the participants of the Albany Movement, there were, even from the beginning of the Albany struggle, traces of a more violent reaction to segregation. Howard Zinn tells a story about this. He writes, “On the first day that Dr. King led his hymn-singing marchers toward City Hall, two well-established Negro gangs lined the streets with concealed knives and other weapons, ready to move on if the nonviolent Negroes were attacked.” (Howard Zinn, *New Republic*, 20 July 1963, 16; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*).

man...we believe that God made of one blood all nations for to dwell on all the face of the earth,” before making its critical declaration: “Our beliefs have consequences.” The Albany Movement proclaimed, “if there is the seed of God in every man, then every man has, by reason of that fact alone, worth and dignity,” concluding, “it follows that no man may, with impunity, discriminate against or exploit another.”⁶⁰ Theological beliefs animated their struggle for freedom. With a faith at once “incurably optimistic and unyieldingly realistic,” the students and clergy of the Albany Movement clung to “the power of Love and Nonviolence” which “is creative and redeems.” Creative redemption grounded in orthodox Christian theology was the intellectual foundation and practical power of the civil rights movement, both in Albany and elsewhere.⁶¹

Mass meetings like the one advertised in the handbill occurred in churches throughout Albany as the movement began to spread. As Charles Sherrod remembered, “The night of the first Mass Meeting came! The church was packed before eight o'clock. People were everywhere, in the aisles, sitting and standing in the choir stands, hanging over the railing of the balcony upstairs, sitting in trees outside near windows.” The meeting began, Sherrod recalled, with freedom songs and then “petitions were laid before Almighty God by one of the ministers.”⁶² Singing together with determination and hope, the people intoned “...the Lord will see us

⁶⁰ The handbill continued, “If we are of one blood, children of one common Father, brothers in the household of God, then we must be of equal worth in His family, entitled to equal opportunity in the society of men.”

⁶¹ “The Albany Nonviolent Movement,” November 9, 1961; The National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, *The Making of African American Identity*; Vol. III, 1917-1968,

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text2/albanymovement.pdf>; *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History*, ed., Staughton Lynd (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966), pp. 442-443. As Peter deLissovoy, a white volunteer in Albany, stated: “the Movement above all was an inner experience, an expression of the soul... the SNCC kids and Movement people in Albany, GA, had a peculiar wholeness and depth of spirit already intact, otherwise they would not have had the courage and joy to persevere.”(DeLissovoy, *The Great Pool Jump*, 37.)

⁶² Charles Sherrod, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Memorandum (1961). Albany Movement President and Americus native William G. Anderson echoed Sherrod’s memories of singing and preaching about freedom, claiming, “There was never a gathering of the movement in which...expressions of faith and aspiration could not be heard and felt and believed.”(Anderson, “Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement,” 2).

through...we are not afraid...we shall live in peace...God is on our side.”⁶³ By the end of that first meeting, Sherrod reported, “tears filled the eyes of hard, grown men who had known personally and seen with their own eyes merciless atrocities.” Those present not only wept over oppression but looked ahead to the hope of victory. “When I momentarily opened my eyes,” Sherrod recalled, “something good happened to me. I saw standing beside a dentist of the city, a man of the streets singing and smiling with joyful tears in his eyes and beside him a mailman with whom I had become acquainted along with people from all walks of life. It was then that I felt deep down within where it really counts, a warm feeling and all I could do was laugh out loud in the swelling of the singing.” He continued, “when we rose to sing ‘We Shall Overcome,’ nobody could imagine what kept the top of the church on four corners. It was as if everyone had been lifted up on high and had been granted voices to sing with the celestial chorus in another time and in another place.” Sherrod himself was deeply affected. “I threw my head back and closed my eyes as I sang with my whole body,” he remembered. SNCC volunteer Prathia Hall recounted that “the mass meeting itself was just pure power...you could hear the rhythm of the feet, and the clapping of the hands from the old prayer meeting tradition...people singing the old prayer songs.” “There was something about hearing those songs, and hearing that singing in Albany in the midst of a struggle for life against death,” she remembered, “that was just the most

⁶³ SNCC “Song sheet,” Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement; http://www.crmvet.org/docs/song_sheet.pdf. A SNCC song sheet shows many of the anthems sung, including well known tunes ‘Aint Gonna Let Nobody Turn me Round,’ “I Woke up this Morning with my Mind on Freedom,” and “We Shall Overcome,” as well as less known ones like “Mommie, why was the Darkie Born?,” “I Love Everybody” and “Paul and Silas.” These civil rights songs evidence a longing for freedom above all else and a willingness to stand up to oppression, buttressed by the courage offered one another in community. They also reveal an interesting theological message. Singing “This Little Light of Mine I’m going to let it shine, all over Alabama...all over Governor Wallace...all over Barbour County” communicates an insistence on redeeming unjust people and systems with light. The same message appears in “Way Over Yonder,” in which people mused, “I wonder can you hear freedom bells tolling...I wonder if you’ll pray, pray for George Wallace way over there in Montgomery.” Civil rights activists definitely “wanted freedom now,” as they repeatedly intoned, but they also believed that the way to get it and preserve themselves in the process was through goodness, nonviolence, and love, through praying for those who persecuted them.

powerful thing I'd ever experienced."⁶⁴ The power of the community singing and praying together “amazed” even SNCC workers like Sherrod and Reagon, who were stunned to see “people who had inched tentatively into the church take up the verse in full voice.” Mass meetings displayed both the courage of ordinary black Southerners and the deep theological power they harnessed in their struggle for equality and freedom.⁶⁵

Soon after the first mass meeting, The Albany Movement conducted a direct action protest at a Trailways bus station on November 22, 1961.⁶⁶ As Sherrod recalled, perhaps with the romanticism of hindsight, “The idea had been delivered. In the hearts of the young and of the old, from that moment on, Segregation was dead--the funeral was to come later.”⁶⁷ It was not quite as simple as that, though. As the Albany community mobilized, they faced staunch

⁶⁴ Rev. Prathia Hall, in Juan Williams, *This Far By Faith: Stories from the African American Religious Experience* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003). A Philadelphia native and daughter of a Baptist minister the mass meeting was Hall’s “first experience of the Deep South,” one she found very emotionally and spiritually moving.

⁶⁵ Charles Sherrod, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Memorandum (1961); http://wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/173/177665/28_nonvi.HTM. Music played pivotal role in the mass meetings, and soon became a particular hallmark of the Albany Movement. With Cordell Reagon possessing a rich tenor and Rutha Harris and Bernice Johnson contributing stirring harmonies, this trio led the songs of the movement, calling themselves the Albany Freedom Singers.

⁶⁶ Earlier that month, the Interstate Commerce Commission’s ban on racial discrimination in interstate bus terminals took effect, providing an opportunity for the new Albany Movement to test the segregated structure. “We had been walking them dusty roads,” Sherrod remembered, “and talking to the young people, and the old people...and out of nothing came this ruling, and I said to myself, you know, wow, you know, this is it. Here we go. Um, I had anticipated moving into sit-ins or something else, you know, later on. But when this ruling came through, we were ready.” (*Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, edited by Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, (Bantam Books, 1990). Three high school students--Julian Carswell, Eddie Wilson, and Evelyn Toney-- prepared to be arrested, beaten, or worse, armed only with their belief in nonviolent love. The bus station was full of men in blue,” Sherrod described, “but up through the mass of people past the men with guns and billies ready, into the terminal, they marched, quiet and quite clean.” “They each understood that we would be nonviolent,” Sherrod explained, “we’d been slapped around and kicked around and pushed around, so they — they were accustomed to what possibly might happen. And so they went in.” The student protestors were arrested by Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, and taken to jail. Though quickly bailed out, their small action of nonviolent resistance emboldened the black community in Albany and throughout Southwest Georgia. Two other students from Albany State, Blanton Hall and Bertha Gober, came to the station later that day and were also arrested. Hall and Gober actually served time, spending their Thanksgiving break from school in jail, and winning the sympathies of local black Albany residents, some of whom “took plates of turkey down to the jail.” (Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 531). (Charles Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc., December 20, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection; Mary Royal Jenkins, *Open Dem Cells: A Pictorial History of the Albany Movement* (Columbus, GA: Brentwood Academic Press, 2000), 21.)

⁶⁷ Charles Sherrod, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Memorandum (1961); http://wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/173/177665/28_nonvi.HTM.

opposition from municipal leaders. Though activists sang songs like “A’int Gonna Let Chief Pritchett Turn me Round,” they often faced arrest.⁶⁸ In all, in the late fall of 1961, somewhere between 500 and 700 black citizens and SNCC workers were arrested for their protests, including Sherrod and Reagon.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, in the face of opposition, the civil rights movement turned to its greatest collective strength: Christian faith.

“Our ability to suffer,” Sherrod unflinchingly declared, is “somehow going to overcome their ability to hurt us.”⁷⁰ The Albany Movement continued to do what it had done from the beginning: they prayed and asked God for help, conducting prayer meetings frequently on the steps of the Albany courthouse and in local churches. As one Albany man intoned, “We pray, oh Lord, that oppression will end, that domination will end, that prejudice will cease. Thou, who overruled the Pharaohs, overruled the Babylonians, overruled the Greeks and Romans, You alone is God, always have been God...may our suffering help us. For the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”⁷¹ At that point in the prayer, those assembled joined in, repeating the words of

⁶⁸ With his name often included in the words of this freedom song, Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett has become one of the most well-known, yet also vexing, figures of opposition to the movement. Unlike his Alabama and Mississippi counterparts, Pritchett refused to capitulate to the desire for a media spectacle, but quietly obfuscated the movement at every turn. Laurie Pritchett, “with his heavy bulk and cigar always stuffed in his mouth,” may have seemed “the consummate caricature of a white Southern lawman.” But, underneath his Albany drawl was an “amiable, possumlike wiliness, in which he had determined to answer the demonstrations by ‘killin’ ‘em with kindness”” as another Albany official recalled. (Frady, *King*, 87-88). On December 12, for instance, almost four hundred people marched from Shiloh Baptist to City Hall where they were met by local police. Over two hundred and sixty five people were arrested, having to wait hours in the rain for their names to be recorded. (“Albany, Ga. Jails 267 Negro Youths,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1961; Branch *Parting the Waters*, 536.)

⁶⁹ This was, of course, a tactic of the movement, though some thought it was not necessarily a good one. “Albany was a success, “ the NAACP’s Ruby Hurley joked, “only if the goal was to go to jail.” (quoted in Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 150). Nevertheless, the Movement thought that unrelenting pressure and the imprisonment of innocent people would force the City of Albany to consider their demands in a biracial committee. Staying in jail was relatively “easy,” and put tremendous pressure on city officials and unifying locals. As Sherrod put it: “My uncle always told me that enough pressure can make a monkey eat a pepper.”(as quoted in Branch *Parting the Waters*, 536.)

⁷⁰ Charles Sherrod Interview.

⁷¹ Branch *Parting the Waters*, 542. See Chapter 2.

the twenty-third psalm. The beleaguered movement looked again to God, and then to each other, sustaining its activism with biblical logic.⁷² But it still needed help.

With much of the leadership in jail and the community wearying under the weeks of protests, Albany Movement President William G. Anderson called on an old friend from his days in Atlanta: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.⁷³ On December 15, 1961, King arrived in Albany, bringing his message of nonviolent action and his religious fervor to South Georgia. Walking from porch to porch and pool hall to pool hall encouraging the tired citizens of Albany, King had an electrifying effect on the city. One night, he addressed the movement at a mass meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church. As Albany Movement president William Anderson remembered, the church “was filled to the rafters. People were sitting in the aisles. They were hanging out of the

⁷² This was not only the purview of elderly laymen, but movement leaders. When rebuffed by Albany Mayor Asa Kelley, Movement President William Anderson’s response was, “We will kneel and pray until God comes and helps to show us and the world the way to take a step toward freedom.” It was God who was leading the Movement, according to its very President. (Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 547).

⁷³ Anderson, “Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement,” 9. Despite the men’s personal friendship, King was resistant to the idea of coming to Albany in 1961. As Wyatt T. Walker summed, King “felt he was between a rock and a hard place.” Following the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, King had yet to wage another successful nonviolent campaign, though his prominence had grown considerably. He felt torn and a bit lost, hunted by J. Edgar Hoover and facing IRS issues in Alabama, King struggled with a deep sense of discouragement coupled with a moral hope in the possibilities of the movement. There was also tension between King’s SCLC and SNCC. As Wyatt T. Walker recalled, SNCC “wanted to international and national attention that Martin Luther King’s presence would generate, but they did not want input from his organizations, nor his strategy, which considerable different from...SNCC.” Walker continued, King “could not say at Dr. Anderson’s invitation that it won’t work into my schedule or I can’t come, because nonviolent struggle is what Dr. King is about...so it was a natural place for him to be. But without having organizational input and control it was a very difficult campaign for him.” (Wyatt Tee Walker, *Voices*). Anderson recalled being on the telephone with King, trying to convince him to come down. King was discussing his hesitations--a full schedule of national events and an unfamiliarity with the particulars of the Albany situation--when Anderson interrupted. “Just a minute, Martin,” he remembered saying, “I want you to hear these children singing.” And, as Anderson recounted, “I hung the phone out the window so he could hear them singing as they filled up Shiloh Baptist Church...I said, ‘You hear that Martin?’” to which he simply responded, “Let me hear it some more.” As the voices of the children of Albany singing “Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom” traveled across the lines of copper to Atlanta, King changed his mind. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he replied, and hung up the line. (Anderson, “Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement,” 10). Other accounts attribute King’s coming to the reports and request of Bernard Lee. (Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 538). The Albany Movement debated over this decision. They struggled to determine whether or not the presence of King would cripple their local movement and also considered the consequences of relinquishing leadership to the SCLC. In the end, though, “a motion to appeal for King’s help by telegram passed overwhelmingly.” (Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 541).

windows. The choir stands were filled.”⁷⁴ People “had come from hundreds of miles around [South Georgia] because they had heard that King was coming.”⁷⁵ When he walked up to the pulpit that night, King’s steps were accompanied by “roaring cheers, clapping, a booming of the movement chorus.”⁷⁶ The handkerchiefs waving aloft from the pews “made the church look like a cotton field in cross cutting breezes.”⁷⁷ And though he began with an erudite message, it was indeed the theology of the cotton field that King channeled that night. “You are saying you don’t like segregation,” he thundered, “You are saying...that you are willing to struggle, to suffer, to sacrifice, and even to die if necessary in order to be free in this day and in this age.”⁷⁸ “It may look dark now, maybe we don’t know what tomorrow and the next day will bring,” King opined,

⁷⁴ Anderson, “Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement,” 10-11.

⁷⁵ Ibid. Charles Sherrod too remarked about the help of having Dr. King, even as there was reported tension between the tactics and leadership of the SCLC and SNCC. He said, “When we got out of jail, it was easy for us to call a mass meeting. Boom. Dr. King is here. Two thousand folk, hanging out of windows, hanging out of trees, you know. Kids from everywhere, coming from other counties, money coming in from other counties, you know.” (Interview with Charles Sherrod). People commented later that they were so moved by King’s presence as to have had a profound religious experience. Even outsiders, such as Pat Watters, a reporter for the Atlanta paper, were moved. (Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 545).

⁷⁶ William Anderson tells an anecdote about this event. He claims that King delivered a powerful sermon in the church, but before he could take his seat, Anderson whispered something to him. “‘Martin, you’ve got to go across the street to Mt. Zion,’ he said. But ‘I’ve already spoken, Andy,’ King reportedly replied. But Anderson insisted, saying. “‘I know that, Martin, but these people have not heard you. They couldn’t get into Shiloh. Shiloh is too small. These people have come from hundreds of miles around and they want to hear it from the King.’” As the story goes, King then went across the street and spoke again, delivering an even more impassioned message. But as he was moving to finally rest, Anderson whispered in his ear that he needed to go back across the street to Shiloh. Though King protested that he had just spoken there, Anderson claimed, “I know that, but all those people have gone home and these are new people. These are people who couldn’t get into Shiloh, couldn’t get into Mt. Zion.” Graciously, King replied, “well, all right, Andy, I’ll try it one more time.” And again, he delivered a powerful address. Predictably, however, Anderson again whispered, “Martin, guess what?” “Don’t tell me, Andy,” and exhausted King exhaled, gathering himself to go back across to Mt. Zion. Back and forth he went, Anderson recalled, and “every time he spoke, with every sentence that he uttered, with every word that he preached that night, he got stronger and stronger.” Interestingly, the account of simultaneous mass meetings appears elsewhere. Marshall Frady, in his biography of King, describes, “dual mass meetings” in Albany that took place at the same time in churches “facing each other across an avenue.” As Frady writes, the two congregations would sing the “same freedom hymn back and forth to each other, until it seemed both churches were lifted like arks from all the daily oppressive gravities of the earth and on up into the quiet evening sky into eternity with Abraham and Moses and the prophets and Jesus himself...” (Frady, *King*, 89).

⁷⁷ Branch *Parting the Waters*, 546.

⁷⁸ “Series of WSB-TV news film clips of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking at a mass meeting as well as a civil rights march and the arrest of marchers in Albany, Georgia, 1961 December,” The Civil Rights Digital Library, (Athens, GA): Digital Library of Georgia and Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection, University of Georgia Libraries, 2007. The University of Georgia’s Walter J. Brown Media Archives, amazingly, has video footage of this event. See http://crdl.usg.edu/cgi/crdl?format= video;query=id:ugabma_wsbm_44758.

“But if you will move on out of the taxi lane of your own despair, move out of the taxi lane of your worries and fears, and get out in the take off lane and move out on the wings of faith, we will be able to move up through the clouds of disappointment.”⁷⁹ The suffering was sure, but, with faith in God, so was the victory.

The next day, the Movement marched again, ready to embody the notions of redemptive suffering King that had preached. Holding hands and clutching Bibles, over two hundred and fifty people filed out of church into the cold December light to go “pray at the City Hall.”⁸⁰ They were quickly arrested, but over the panic and din, the voice of one marcher could be heard. “The blessed Son of God was born about this time of the year two thousand years ago to bring peace to the world,” he yelled out, “and here we stand two thousand years later.”⁸¹ Connecting the suffering in Albany directly to the suffering of Jesus, the Albany Movement found a deep theological power not only to endure, but to hope for peace. Still, King was jailed. And with the Albany jails filled to capacity, he was taken to a small town called Americus.⁸²

Marching in Americus

When Martin Luther King, Jr. arrived in Americus, Sherriff Fred Chappell was waiting for him. Chappell, a “surly fellow with a splenetically bulb-eyed face,” possessed decidedly less tact than his Albany counterpart Laurie Pritchett. Chappell was “like a bulldog” one civil rights activist remembered, “red in the face, already...even when he wasn’t mad he was always red in

⁷⁹ Martin Luther King, (1961) “The Albany Movement,” Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle; http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_albany_movement/.

⁸⁰ King, as quoted in Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 548.

⁸¹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 549.

⁸² “I had sat down and looked at a map and went fifteen miles,” Pritchett explained, “How many jails was in a fifteen mile radius...I contacted those authorities and they assured us that we could use their facilities.”(Laurie Pritchett in *Voices of Freedom*, Chapter 6.)

the face...red in the face, and white hair, and big, heavy jowls...thick as an oak tree.”⁸³ In addition to his imposing physical presence, Chappell prided himself on being a “tough,” “independent” man who “said ‘nigger’ to and about any person of color...with a half smile of defiant assurance, as though to emphasize his absolute disregard for polite convention.”⁸⁴ As King himself famously concluded, Fred Chappell was ‘the meanest man on earth.’ Chappell swiftly threw King and those with him, Ralph Abernathy and William Anderson, in the small cells of the Americus jail.

Anderson and King were released on bail the following day and spoke to those gathered in Americus’ downtown square, encouraging his hearers to protest nonviolently and join the struggle for freedom throughout the South. Teresa Mansfield, then thirteen years old, remembers King’s arrest and speech as the catalyst for her desire to see racial change. “We got tired,” she said, of the black community in Americus, “we got fed up.” Mansfield and others started chanting, as they had heard in Albany, “Ain’t going to let Fred Chappell turn us round.” King soon left Americus, to go on to Birmingham and Atlanta and to Memphis. But his short visit to Americus served to ignite the civil rights movement in this corner of Southwest Georgia, to

⁸³ John Perdeu and Randy Battle, “A Kitchen Table Conversation, Americus, Georgia: Sheriff Fred Chappell and ‘Slappy’ John Perdeu and Randy Battle,” Interview, Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, October 2005. <http://crmvet.org/nars/perdeu2.htm>.

⁸⁴ Branch 550. Fred Chappell has become an icon of the racist Southern sheriff--the cigar-smoking, politeness be damned, profanity spewing institution present in so many southern towns. Chappell feared no retribution for many reasons, one of which was that members of his family held governmental positions in Americus, including: “home demonstration agent, sheriff, county court clerk, (handles voter applications), public service commissioner, postmaster, county commissioners, and state highway patrolmen (three brothers in law.)” They also own “several thousand acres” of farmland, employing a number of blacks as sharecroppers. These individuals readily admit that they cannot register to vote since “the sheriff would, of course, find out, and they would lose their place in the county’s economy.” The Chappell family thus has a “near-monopoly” of local power. (SNCC Research, John Perdeu). Sammie Mahone confirmed this saying, “Several members of Chappell’s family occupied local offices. Frank Chappell was postmaster, Rufus Chappell was a county commissioner, Carl Chappell was a state patrolman, Elizabeth Chappell was the court clerk in charge of voter registration, her husband was a local state patrolman, Allen Chappell was a state public service commissioner, and Boots Chappell was the county home demonstration agent.” (*Roots in the Cottonpatch*, edited by Kirk and Cori Lyman-Barner, Sam Mahone, “Reflections on the Americus Movement,” Eugene, OR (?), 2013, 166.

inspire a generation of young people and students as well as encourage the ministers and adults who would lead them.⁸⁵

Sherriff's Pritchett's decision to regionalize the Albany struggle propelled SNCC to do the same and they began the Southwest Georgia Freedom Project. In April of 1962, at their third general conference, SNCC staff elected to expand their activities into the "hard-core," deeply racist, and, as one worker described, "very, very hostile" areas of Southwest Georgia.⁸⁶ Given nicknames by activists to match their reputations, these rural counties--"Terrible" Terrell, "Bad" Baker--were strongholds of Southern segregationism. One SNCC research report on Americus and Baker County dubbed the region a "tragic area, the stepchild of the New South."⁸⁷ It was here that civil rights activists, like Clarence Jordan twenty years before them, decided to root their project in justice.

Charles Sherrod assigned several field workers--Bob Mants, Ralph Allen, John Perdew and Don Harris--to Southwest Georgia and to Americus. Bob Mants was an Atlanta native, who got interested in SNCC while a student at Morehouse College. Though he would later go on to activities in Lowndes County Alabama, Mants got his start in Southwest Georgia. "The one thing I remember most," Mants recalled, "was a conversation with [Charles] Sherrod nagging me to

⁸⁵ Teresa Mansfield, interview by author, July 27, 2011, Americus, GA.

⁸⁶ Don Harris, Interview by Emily Stoper, "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," Harvard University dissertation, 1968, Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, <http://crmvet.org/nars/harrisd.htm>. One SNCC field worker, Charles Black, even claimed at the project's beginning that "Southwest Georgia was far worse than Mississippi." (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 8, 1962). These initiatives marked the first time a major civil rights organization elected to "take the movement into hitherto untouched areas of the rural Deep South." The Southwest Georgia Project has attracted much less attention in the national press and the large civil rights narratives than its counterpart, the Mississippi Freedom Project (and Mississippi Freedom Summer). (See Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007); John Dittmer, *Local People* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994)) There are several reasons for this. As Stephen Tuck explains in his work *Beyond Atlanta*, the first reason was that Charles Sherrod, while a talented leader and an especially saintly man, lacked the "charisma" of Bob Moses in Mississippi. Secondly, the Georgia Project became increasingly alienated from the SNCC headquarters, a strange fact considering its proximity to Atlanta. Finally, and most significantly, the Southwest Georgia Freedom Project never attracted the number of student volunteers as did the Mississippi Project, particularly Freedom Summer when over 600 students came South to help register voters. (Tuck *Beyond Atlanta* 160-161).

⁸⁷ John Perdew, "SNCC Report on Americus and Baker County," 1965.

come to Southwest Georgia.” No one from Atlanta went down there in those days. Mants explained: “Here I was, a young student, first generation to be college educated...[and] here’s ol’ Sherrod talking to me about coming to Southwest Georgia, dropping out of school.” He did. John Perdew also dropped out of school to get involved in the movement, leaving Harvard in his junior year. The son of a Harvard professor, the white 23-year old recalled volunteering to come to South Georgia because “he wanted to do something adventurous and different.” Perdew could not have imagined what he was in for, a white man in the Deep South living with blacks. He recalled that he “had no idea at all of [the] kind of violence and daily oppression” blacks endured, laughing, “but then I got my ass kicked.”⁸⁸ Another white college student who joined the Movement in Americus was Ralph Allen.⁸⁹ Allen, a Massachusetts native, was enrolled at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, when he headed to Georgia to participate in the civil rights movement. Classmates described the New Englander as having “everything that [college] could give; he was in a fraternity, he was popular, he had good marks, and he seemed destined to become a typical turtleneck sweater Big Man on Campus.”⁹⁰ But Allen left his collegial pedigree behind to serve as a SNCC field secretary. Don Harris was another field worker tapped for Americus. He was a “charismatic,” black, twenty-two year old student at Rutgers University when he decided to head to Georgia.⁹¹ Harris had already been involved in local civil rights efforts up North and made a conscious decision to participate with SNCC. He was “unusually

⁸⁸ Following his first arrest in South Georgia, Perdew elected to forgo Harvard and stay on SNCC’s staff. John Perdew actually never left South Georgia. He married a young black volunteer, Amanda Perdew, and the couple still lives in the area. Interview with Perdew by Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 163.

⁸⁹ Howard Zinn remembered first meeting Allen “neat and Ivy League-ish,” at Sarah Lawrence College at a civil rights conference. The next time he saw him, Allen was “dirty and unshaven, just out of Terrell County.” Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.)

⁹⁰ Bruce W. Frier, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Trinity Tripod*, Vol. LXII, No. 9, October 15, 1963, Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut; <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1618&context=tripod>

⁹¹ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 162; “Evaluation of Sumter County Project,” David E. Bell and Robert Manis, 24 September 1963, 3, Americus File, Mants Papers, MLK.

gifted” at community organizing and “developed a tremendous fellowship” within SNCC, with one fellow worker calling him “a quasi-saint.”⁹²

Perdew, Mants, Allen and Harris comprised an intentionally integrated group. They were joined by Joan Browning, a young white Methodist woman who grew up on a farm in South Georgia and worked in the region with SNCC from 1961 to 1965. Noting her “deeply religious perspective,” Browning believed that “the courage and moral clarity to be part of SNCC” came from her “religious convictions.” Moreover, for Browning, participating in the civil rights movement was tantamount to “practicing [her] religion.”⁹³ Penny Patch was another white woman who worked with SNCC in Southwest Georgia. In a letter written to a friend in Atlanta in December 1962, Patch recounted that she and a group of other SNCC volunteers had recently moved into southwest Georgia “as an integrated group,” though she said, they were not fully aware of “the magnitude of this move or its full implications.” “The significance [of SNCC’s interracialism],” she continued, “creeps up on me more and more every day,” as “Southerners are able to see Negroes and whites working side by side as equals and friends.” “Rather than talking about black and white together,” Patch boldly asserted, “we are showing here and now...that a dream can be a reality...there are few things that are designated as totally, absolutely, and completely right. Integration is one of those things.” She concluded: “this is why the integrated group is an essential part of our entire philosophy.”⁹⁴

Unlike projects in Mississippi and elsewhere that hesitated to fully include whites, Sherrod, like Penny Patch, considered an integrated SNCC essential, especially in seeking to

⁹² Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 179.

⁹³ Browning was a young Methodist woman who was involved with the freedom rides and also served with SNCC in Southwest Georgia from 1961-1965. Joan Browning, “Religion and Joining SNCC,” *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*, 2004.

⁹⁴ “Letter from Penelope Patch to Wiley Branton, Director of Voter Education,” December 8, 1962, SNCC Papers.

incarnate the beloved community.⁹⁵ Sherrod explained that racial change would come only “if [the South] see[s] white and black working together, side by side, the white man no more and no less than his black brother, but human beings together.”⁹⁶ Of course, this was a radical idea in the 1960s Deep South. As Anne Braden, a white civil rights activist who worked with Sherrod, wrote in 1962, “Anyone who would go into an area like this [South Georgia] with interracial teams of registration workers has to be a little bit wacky; either that, or he has to be gripped by a vision of a whole new world.”⁹⁷ Sherrod may have been a little wacky, but he certainly had a vision for a new world--the beloved community--in which blacks and whites took on a common identity as children of God and a common purpose for justice and equality.

This vision was reminiscent of that of Koinonia Farm. Not only did Charles Sherrod and Clarence Jordan share the goal of creating the beloved community, but Koinonia supported SNCC in important ways. Jordan allowed Sherrod to conduct SNCC training and orientation at the Koinonia in June 1963, welcoming twenty young people to the Farm.⁹⁸ Frequently, volunteers and leaders would come out to Koinonia for an afternoon simply to rest in the pecan grove. Some estimate that in the early 1960s up to a thousand people visited the farm in search of respite and community.⁹⁹ They would pray with Clarence Jordan, play with the Farm kids, and get a break from the stress of canvassing. As Frances Pauley, a young white activist recalled,

⁹⁵ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart* 151. As Emily Stoper commented, “Southwest Georgia was where those committed to non-violence and white participation tended to cluster.” (Stoper, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 28). Despite defeats, Sherrod never lost his initial idealism and continued, throughout all of SNCC’s changes, to cling to both Lawson’s Christian nonviolence and an integrated staff.

⁹⁶ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 72.

⁹⁷ Ann Braden, “Images are Broken”; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 72.

⁹⁸ “Koinonia: 20 summer workers orientation, June 11-15, 1963,” SNCC papers, AU; Tuck 178.

⁹⁹ Charles Marsh, Archives at the Project for Lived Theology (Charlottesville, VA), http://archives.livedtheology.org/nodereference/thickbox/2395/thickbox_reference_full?width=700&height=500.

“Koinonia was my haven...And I would always leave there like I could keep on, always.”¹⁰⁰

Though hurt by persecution, Koinonia did much to further the movement in South Georgia.

“Much of the spade work [for civil rights]” Sherrod noted, has “been done by the Koinonia Farm people...this is a good start even if it is emblazoned with bullet fringes.”¹⁰¹ In its spiritual defiance of racism, Koinonia Farm presented an example of the beloved community and provided a necessary retreat for the SNCC activists. It was a stream in the desert.¹⁰²

SNCC’s stated goal in the area was organization and voter registration, but first the activists had to acquaint themselves with the local people. In the beginning, they simply spent their days “in the fields, talking to people.”¹⁰³ As had been done in Albany, they also immediately approached the ministers in town. Rev. J.R. Campbell remembered that soon after he and his family arrived in Americus in 1963, he received a visit from Don Harris, Ralph Allen, John Perdew and Bob Mants, who “informed me that they wanted me to join the Movement.” Though Rev. Campbell was initially hesitant, being in his words, “thirty-eight, a family man,” he eventually agreed and became the Americus movement’s leader.¹⁰⁴ The activists also sought out the minister of Bethesda Baptist Church, Rev. R.L. Freeman. He, too, lent his support.¹⁰⁵ While some ministers required prodding, SNCC had no trouble recruiting students. Since King’s imprisonment the previous December, young people especially were anxious to join the struggle for civil rights. Students, some as young as ten, began to get involved. As James Brown, the youth secretary for the NAACP in Georgia, noted, the students “could not see the struggle for

¹⁰⁰ Frances Pauley Interview No. 2 by Cliff Kuhn, May 3, 1988, Georgia Government Documentation Project, Georgia State University Special Collections, Atlanta, GA; *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 151.

¹⁰¹ Charles Sherrod to Branton, February 8, 1963, VEP 2-19, SNCC microfilm; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 178).

¹⁰² For more on Koinonia and its interaction with the civil rights movement, see Chapter 1.

¹⁰³ SNCC Report, digital.

¹⁰⁴ Campbell also reorganized the Americus chapter of the NAACP, which had existed since 1945. Interview with J. R. Campbell.

¹⁰⁵ In addition to Campbell and Freeman, Rev. Daniel of Friendship Baptist as well as others gave their support. (Interview with Jewel Wise Alaman).

freedom without participating themselves.”¹⁰⁶ Sandra Mansfield was just eleven years old in 1962, when she was drawn into civil rights activism, despite warnings from her parents. She attended “regular mass meetings” at Allen Chapel and other churches and was even arrested the following year.¹⁰⁷ “I remember we started planning, going to mass meetings every day, picketing” Carolyn Melinda Mary recalled, “it was exciting for me because I was young.”¹⁰⁸

The mass meetings described by Mansfield and Mary were held mainly outside of town and out of the reach of the Americus authorities.¹⁰⁹ [See Image I] Twenty-three brave citizens ventured out to the small, country Pleasant Grove Baptist for the first gathering, led by the “instructing and exhorting” Charles Sherrod.¹¹⁰ These Americus mass meetings combined the new excitement over civil rights change with the familiar, ancient tenets of Christianity. In July of 1962, the Americus Movement conducted a mass meeting at Mount Olive Baptist Church in rural Terrell County. On this particular night, Charles Sherrod had invited reporters Claude Sitton of the *New York Times* and Bill Shipp of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Sitton and Shipp joined people from all over Southwest Georgia who had gathered in the small pine church “with Jesus and the American presidents on the walls.” Local leader Lucius Holloway began the meeting with a summary of the preceding week’s events. Then it was Sherrod’s turn to speak. He issued a spiritual admonishment to his listeners, one rooted in the deep theological tradition of the black church.¹¹¹ “Do you believe in God?” Sherrod began, to murmurs of affirmation. “If you believe in God,” he continued, “do you also believe that God said ‘Thou shalt have no other God before me?’ Are you not making the white man a god, if you afraid of this white man?” By establishing

¹⁰⁶ *Sewanee Herald Tribune*, 13 October 1960; 110.

¹⁰⁷ Sandra Mansfield, “A City Without Pity.”

¹⁰⁸ Carolyn Melinda Mary, “A City Without Pity.”

¹⁰⁹ Meetings were “designed to galvanize people for voter registration” as well as foster courage in the community (Interview with Sammie Mahone)

¹¹⁰ Letter from Faith Holsaert, November 18, 1962; Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement http://www.crmvet.org/lets/6211_albany_faith_let.pdf

¹¹¹ See Chapter 3, “Jesus, He’s My Brother.”

the relationship between man and God, Sherrod was able to challenge, theologically, unequal human relationships. Sherrod insisted that for black Christians, God's existence and holiness meant that both racial discrimination and capitulation to it were sinful--an affront against God and a transgression against the first commandment. But, employing the same Christian theology, he offered a way out of this fearful bondage--faith. "What do you believe?" Sherrod thundered, his voice filling the small pine church. "Do you really believe you are going to heaven? Do you really believe that nothing can separate you from the love of God?" Even death was less powerful than God's love for them, Sherrod explained, concluding with the words of Saint Paul to the Romans, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"¹¹²

By this point, the local sheriff, Z.T. Matthews had had enough of Sherrod's preaching. He stormed in the meeting, shouting that he was "fed up." The presence of the white reporters alarmed him. "Hey there, boy," he reared around, directing his words at Claude Sitton, "put that pencil and paper away. Who you anyway?" "I'm Claude Sitton from the *New York Times*," he replied, adding, "and I'm a native Georgian, just like yourself." Two weeks later, Mount Olive Baptist Church was burned to the ground. Another civil rights worker in Georgia reported receiving threatening phone calls within hours of the first mass meeting held in Sumter County. "The night following the meeting," Faith Holsaert recorded, "we received two phone calls" threatening to "blow the sons of bitches integrationists up."¹¹³ As the ashes of Mount Olive attest, these were more than empty threats. Many white Southerners would stop at little to

¹¹² Romans 8:31. Much of Sherrod's comments in this meeting are based on Romans 8. When he asks "do you really believe that nothing can separate you from the love of God," it is a reference to Paul's words, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39). (Allen quoted in Greenburg, *Circle of Trust*, 58; Sherrod in "Freedom Faith," Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 74).

¹¹³ Letter from Faith Holsaert, Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement.

prevent the social, political, and theological revolution that was occurring throughout Southwest Georgia. They were willing to use intimidation, violence, and apparently arson.

Most of the civil rights volunteers in Americus, black and white, lived in the SNCC house, “an old three room house” at 406 Jefferson Street, which sometimes saw visits from the local Klan and others who wanted to scare off the activists.¹¹⁴ Don Harris recalled that the house was “shot into a number of times” and that, predictably, “there was no protection at all offered by any officials.” “As a matter of fact,” Harris noted, “officials were the ones carrying out most of the intimidation.”¹¹⁵ Willie Turner also described intimidation from local law enforcement, saying that at one point the “police stopped us and said if they saw us in a car with the white girls [SNCC activists] they would kill us.” One night after a mass meeting, Turner remembered, some of the SNCC students “decided after to go down to the Dairy Queen to get some ice cream. And we rode in the same car.” “Little did we know,” he continued, “the police was watching the car that we was in. So we guys who was black had to get down in the seat and hide underneath the seat...that was one of the most frightening experiences that I’ve ever had in my life.”¹¹⁶ The specter of violence was omnipresent. Ralph Allen, for example, sustained serious injuries when he was beaten up attempting to register an elderly black woman to vote.¹¹⁷ Despite the threats and instances of violence, SNCC’s teams of integrated civil rights workers persisted in their

¹¹⁴ Sammie Mahone, Interview by author, August 9, 2012, Atlanta, GA.

¹¹⁵ Don Harris, interview by Emily Stoper. “We were so hot in Americus,” John Perdew remembered, “that the cops would follow us around all the time, so we made a game of it. We knew the cops would arrest us if we did any slight thing wrong.” Though the threats were real, the activists also managed to make a game out of the police scrutiny. “We drove around a ten miles an hour at most,” Perdew laughed, “so we would have a slow, slow caravan through the projects and North Lee Street in Americus. And finally they would get tired of it. They would get tired of it before I would.” (John Perdew and Randy Battle, “A Kitchen Table Conversation,” Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement).

¹¹⁶ Willie Turner, “A City Without Pity.”

¹¹⁷ This occurred in April 1963; Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered; www.americusmovement.org/the-movement.html.

activism, emboldened by the courage of the local people and their own theological mission for the beloved community.

Much of this emboldening came through prayer. [See Image II] The only way to combat the obstacles facing them in South Georgia was to call on the power of the Almighty for help. SNCC activists in Americus did this daily. “Anyone who went down there and worked with Sherrod in Southwest Georgia remembers the Prayer Breakfast,” Bob Mants recalled, “every morning, over a glass of orange juice and a cinnamon roll...we would sing and pray.” SNCC recruit John O’Neal remembered that the first time he rode with Sherrod, “he pulled the car off the highway...and said, ‘let’s pray.’” Sherrod proceeded to bow his head and pray for “what seemed like three hours. And then after a while he took his handkerchief and wiped the tears from his eyes and said, ‘Amen.’” When O’Neal inquired about this, Sherrod responded that, “he always prayed before he got on the highway because he didn’t know [whether] he was going to get where he was going.” Sherrod and others found that the only way to live and work in Southwest Georgia was to seek God’s divine guidance and protection in prayer.¹¹⁸ As Rev. Campbell echoed, “we just got to pray.”¹¹⁹ Prayer was a major part of every movement meeting. These were “very meaningful experience[s],” Bob Mants remarked, they provided “a sense of reverence for what we were all about, a sense of commitment to what we were about.”¹²⁰ Prayer also comprised a component of protest.¹²¹ As King demonstrated in Albany, praying in public created a striking image of segregation’s moral dilemma, one that Americus activists used to great effect. In this way, both believers and nonbelievers contributed to the power of lived

¹¹⁸ Sherrod Interview, O’Neal interview in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*.

¹¹⁹ J.R. Campbell Interview.

¹²⁰ Interview with Bob Mants, “Don’t Stick your Nose in Other Folks’ Business: Remembrance of Southwest Georgia and Lowndes County Alabama,” Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, 1988.

<http://crmvet.org/nars/mants1.htm>

¹²¹ See Chapter 6 on the kneel-in movement.

theology. Many of those involved in the Americus Movement believed in the invisible efficacy of prayer, that God heard them, cared for them, and acted on their behalf; yet, even those who did not believe still participated in the outward action of prayer. Though certainly not the same-- the believer was an individual embodiment and the unbeliever a collective participant -- both were examples of the lived theology. Prayer was “vital” to the theological civil rights movement in Americus.¹²²

But the Americus Movement did “more than just pray.”¹²³ From meetings in small churches on the outskirts of town, long conversations in pecan fields, and mounting excitement in Sumter County’s young students, the movement was drawing momentum, culminating in the formal establishment of the Americus and Sumter County Movement in January of 1963. Prominent citizens, such as Lonnie Evans, Leland Cooper, and Hope Merritt, Sr. offered their support as did scores of students, many of whom came against the wishes of their fearful parents. Deacon Evans was named president of the movement and John Barnum, whose family provided all the bail money, was named treasurer.¹²⁴ After the establishment of the Americus and Sumter County Movement, SNCC activists, students and others continued to meet throughout the winter and spring of 1963. Then, on the night of July 17, 1963, after leaving a 350 person mass meeting at Peace Baptist Church, some inspired students decided to engage in the city’s first direct action protest.¹²⁵

¹²² Jewel Wise Alaman, Interview by author, August 2, 2012, Americus, GA.

¹²³ Mabel Barnum, as quoted in J.R. Campbell Interview.

¹²⁴ Interestingly, Evans was not named President until July 17, 1963, and J.R. Campbell soon replaced him. The Barnum family, anchored by John and Mabel Barnum, was a leader in the black community and the richest black family in town. They operated the successful Barnum Funeral Home and were an example of the small black middle class in Americus. Despite their status, the family supported the local Movement, hosting civil rights workers and protesting themselves as well.

¹²⁵ *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 12, 1963. Other accounts claim this action began at Friendship Baptist Church.

Direct Action, the Leesburg Stockade and the Americus Four: 1963-1964

Eleven young blacks sought to buy tickets at the “white” entrance of the Martin Theater on Forsyth Street in downtown Americus.¹²⁶ “The Martin Theater was segregated,” Sammie Mahone recounted, “and blacks had to go around the corner down a dark alley, up the stairs, to watch the film.” On this night, though, the group of students “decided...to stand in line at the front entrance” instead. They were arrested and formally charged with “disorderly conduct” and “blocking the sidewalk.”¹²⁷ “I remember the Martin Theater,” Bob Mants mused, that was “before the Civil Rights Act was passed.”¹²⁸ C.B. King of Albany defended the students and they were released on probated sentences.

Three days later, eighteen blacks, “eleven juveniles and seven adults,” were arrested again at the Martin Theater.¹²⁹ The following week, on July 24, the Americus Movement conducted a nighttime demonstration to protest the closing of the Martin Theater’s “colored balcony,” which resulted in another wave of arrests.¹³⁰ Students Sammie Mahone, Lena Turner, Lorene Sanders and Bobby Lee Jones received a sentence of sixty days in the Americus City Prison, unable to post bail since they were “under a probated sentence” from their arrests the previous week. The jailers ordered the students to work, but they refused, “going limp.” Incensed, city authorities assigned Jones and Mahone to an isolation cell, a four by six foot concrete box dubbed “the Hole.” The young men responded with a hunger strike. Four days later, the young men “passed out” and were taken to the hospital. Following this episode, the Americus authorities removed Jones and Mahone from “the Hole” and put them on prison work detail.

¹²⁶ These students included: Graham and Theresa Wiggins, Lorene Sanders, Lena Turner, Bobby Lee Jones, Sammie Mahone, William Bowen, Phil Gooper, and Barbara Jean Daniels, as well as two others. (Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered; <http://www.americusmovement.org/the-movement.html>).

¹²⁷ Sammie Mahone Interview

¹²⁸ Bob Mants Interview.

¹²⁹ *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 15, 1963.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

They had to “get up at six o’clock in the morning, get on these trucks, and go out and cut grass on the side of the road, pick up garbage on the weekends.” “The most horrendous job they gave us to do” Mahone recalled, “was to clean up the city sewage.” Upon release, Mahone determined to become a SNCC staff member, his resolve having been strengthened by his time in jail.¹³¹

Mahone’s experience was not uncommon. Many civil rights activists found prison to be a fortifying experience, just as Charles Sherrod and Ella Baker had years earlier. Jake Dowdell, a student, recalled, “we would demonstrate all night at the jailhouse and we would sing our songs... ‘Fred Chappell, you know you can’t turn us around.’”¹³² Exasperated authorities ordered “no singing and praying” in jail, claiming, “when you come here you lose all your rights.” Charles Sherrod and others responded defiantly: “We may be in jail, but we’re still human beings and still Christians.”¹³³ Christian theology changed the experience of imprisonment. Activists frequently invoked the biblical story of Paul and Silas, imagining that they too, with God’s help, might be freed or convert their jailers.¹³⁴ By singing and praying, many found deep comfort and power in their beliefs. JoAnne Christian exemplified this spiritual succor. A fourteen-year old girl from Albany, Christian was placed in a “pitch black” jail cell in Terrell County, Georgia. When her attorney, Dennis Roberts, went to visit her and asked about the lack of light, Christian

¹³¹ Interview with Sammie Mahone. Mahone stayed in Americus, his hometown, until 1966, when he went to Mississippi to attend Tougaloo College and work for civil rights in the Mississippi Delta. From Mississippi, Mahone went to Lowndes County, Alabama with friends and fellow Americus volunteer Bob Mants. Then, in January 1969, Mahone was drafted. “The army came after me” he remembered, after he had registered as a conscientious objector, with the FBI tracking him down in Atlanta. “They told me,” he remembered, “that I could either go in the military or go to prison.” He was then sent to Fort Benning, GA for basic training, where he remained with a “hold-over company” doing manual labor. From Fort Benning, Mahone was sent to Germany but, because he couldn’t get a security clearance due to his arrest record, he was put in an empty office with nothing to do. From Germany, though, Mahone got a camera and a car, leaving whenever he could to Paris to take pictures, and beginning a career as an artist and photographer. In 1972, when Mahone returned to the United States, he got a job in Atlanta with the Georgia Department Archives of history, learning paper restoration; Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered Timeline, “The Movement,” <http://www.americusmovement.org/the-movement.html>

¹³² Jake Dowdell, “A City Without Pity.”

¹³³ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart* 75.

¹³⁴ “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened.” (Acts 16:25-26)

told him that the Sherriff had taken out the light bulb from her cell as punishment for leading the other prisoners in freedom songs. “But,” she quickly noted, “I don’t need a light, ‘cause Jesus is my light.”¹³⁵ Jesus’s presence brought light; it consoled her and empowered her. For Jo Ann Christian and many civil rights activists, Christian theology brought comfort in imprisonment and transformed it into a liberating experience.

Nevertheless, imprisonment in Americus could be a harrowing experience, a reality illustrated by an episode that became known as the Leesburg Stockade. In July of 1963, the Americus and Sumter County Movement organized another demonstration. “The plan,” James A. Westbrooks, a 19-year-old student and SNCC field secretary, recalled, “was for half of the demonstrators to head to the segregated Martin Theater, while the rest were to veer right toward the White waiting room of the Trailways bus station.”¹³⁶ The group gathered at a church on Cotton Avenue. Dressed in starched short sleeve shirts and sundresses, they began to walk towards downtown Americus singing, “*before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord to be free.*”¹³⁷ As they approached the downtown square, the demonstrators saw “a large white mob” waiting for them, including “law-enforcement officers, known Ku Klux Klan members and self-deputized citizens who had apparently heard about the protests.” Seeing the assemblage of the police dogs, electric cattle prods, fire hoses and billy clubs, the protestors exchanged looks as if to fortify each other in their “oath of nonviolence.”¹³⁸ When Sherriff Fred Chappell yelled for them to disperse, the marchers “dropped to their knees and began to pray.”

¹³⁵ Dennis Roberts, “Visiting JoAnne Christian in Jail, Dawson, GA, 1963,” in DeLissovoy, *The Great Pool Jump*, 113.

¹³⁶ “Stolen Girls,” *Essence Magazine* (December 16, 2009).

¹³⁷ LuLu Westbrooks-Griffin, *Freedom is not Free: 45 Days in the Leesburg Stockade* (Rochester, NY: George Eastman House, 1998), 16.

¹³⁸ The oath, according to one activist, included, “no hitting or cursing, not speaking or laughing, never blocking entrances to stores and aisles, and being courteous at all times.” (“Stolen Girls”) Another, LuLu Westbrooks, added to this list “Remember love and nonviolence” and repeating internally “May God bless each of you.” (LuLu Westbrooks-Griffin, *Freedom is not Free*, 14).

The infuriated white mob descended upon the kneeling men, women, and children. Chaos ensued. Thirteen year old LuLu Westbrooks was hit with water from a fire hose which “felt scalding” and the force of which “blew off [her] shoes.”¹³⁹ At that moment, two policemen, “one 6’4,” the other 6’5,”” slammed Lulu in the head with clubs. Her brother James remembered seeing blood “pouring” down the face of his little sister.¹⁴⁰ In the din, the Americus authorities began arresting the demonstrators, including around thirty girls.¹⁴¹ “We were in the paddy wagon,” one of the girls remembered, “we had no idea where we were going.”¹⁴² At first neither did their imprisoners. But eventually, after being transferred to a couple different facilities, the girls were placed in the Lee County Public Works Facility, twenty-six miles south of Americus on the Leslie Highway, where they remained for forty-five days. The facility was almost completely isolated and had not been used since the Civil War. Sandra Mansfield described the terror the girls, some as young as ten, felt, away from their parents who had no knowledge of their location. “We were hoping to go home,” she said, “but we were told we were going to be taken out one by one and killed. So everyday we lived in fear.”¹⁴³

The girls were kept in a large concrete cell, approximately twenty feet by twenty feet. They slept on the floor, until they were given three old mattresses, “dirty and full of cigarette

¹³⁹ Westbrooks-Griffin, *Freedom is not Free* 15.

¹⁴⁰ LuLu Westbrooks-Griffin, James Westbrooks, *Freedom is not Free*, 16. Their crime, according to Americus Police Chief Ross Chambliss, was “disorderly conduct.” *The Student Voice*, October 1, 1963.

¹⁴¹ The most complete listing of the girls kept at the Leesburg Stockade includes: Carol Barrier, Lorena Barnum, Pearl Brown, Bobble Jean Butts, Agnes Carter, Pattie Jean Collier, Mattie Crittenden, Barbara Jean Daniels, Gloria Dean, Carolyn DeLoatch, Diane Dorsey, Juanita Freeman, Robertiena Freeman, Henrietta Fuller, Shirley Ann Green, Verna Hollis, Evette Hose, Mary Frances Jackson, Vyrtil Jackson, Dorothy Jones, Emma Jean Jones, Emmarene Kaigler, BarbaraAnn Peterson, Annie Lue Ragans, Judith Reid, Laura Ruff, Sandra Russell, Willie Mae Smith, Billie Jo Thornton, Gloria Breedlove Westbrooks, LuLu Westbrook, Ozellar Whitehead, Carrie Mae Williams (Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, “Leesburg Stockade”)

¹⁴² Westbrooks-Griffin, *Freedom is not Free* 16.

¹⁴³ Sandra Mansfield, “Special Report: Stolen Girls Remember 1963 in Leesburg,” WALB News 10, July 24, 2006; <http://www.walb.com/story/5190050/stolen-girls-remember-1963-in-leesburg>; *The Student Voice*, “Americus, GA: Police Smash Demonstrators,” October 1963.

burns.”¹⁴⁴ “Because the toilets were stopped up to the top,” remembered Robertiena Freeman, “we used the mattresses” instead. The cramped cell was so putrid that one girl declared she would “never forget the stench.” On top of this, the summer heat was unrelenting, as were the mosquitoes that came in through the cell’s barred, screenless window. For sustenance, the girls were given four, reportedly raw, hamburgers, though many said they were too repulsed to eat them. Their only water came from a broken, dripping shower. “Sleeping on the floor, with no mattresses, no blankets, no sheets, no nothing,” the girls nevertheless kept on “singing and praying.”¹⁴⁵

The guards often taunted and played cruel tricks on the girls. “They called us pickanninies and stupid niggers,” one girl recounted, noting that there was no escape from their mocking. When Dr. King was arrested that summer, the guards told the girls, jeering, “Who’s going to be your Savior now?” The girls knew King was not their Savior. They kept singing and praying, and refused to allow the guard’s words to penetrate their souls. LuLu Westbrooks thought about the hymns her mother used to sing, especially the lyrics, “*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds/ In a believer’s ear!/ It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds/ and drives away his fear.*” Singing hymns like that one and praying with the other girls, Westbrooks claimed, “strengthen[ed] my faith and sustain[ed] me...during the stockade ordeal.”¹⁴⁶ The girls’ defiant spiritual expressions further antagonized their oppressors. At one point, a guard even put a rattlesnake in their cell. “This is to teach you a lesson,” he said, as he tossed in the snake, “and to stop you singing and praying.” As Annie Lester remembered, “the door was opened, cracked, and they put that snake in there.”¹⁴⁷ The snake remained in the cell the entire night --“we could

¹⁴⁴ Westbrooks-Griffin, *Freedom is not Free*, 18.

¹⁴⁵ Robertiena Freeman, *Christian Century*, “Americus Rejects Americanism,” October 16, 1963, Vol. 80.

¹⁴⁶ Westbrooks-Griffin, *Freedom is not Free* 35.

¹⁴⁷ Annie Lester in “A City Without Pity”; Robertiena Freeman Fletcher Interview

hear his rattle,” one girl explained-- until finally a guard removed it as his compatriots laughed.¹⁴⁸

The conditions and cruelty at the Leesburg Stockade would most likely have been unknown if not for the efforts of Danny Lyon. Lyon, the first SNCC field photographer, had been born in Brooklyn, New York and was enrolled at the University of Chicago when he hitchhiked down to South Georgia in the summer of 1962.¹⁴⁹ One day in September, the girls in the Leesburg Stockade, heard a whisper through the barred window. It was Danny Lyon. “Shhh, be quiet,” he said, “Some of you girls go distract the guard. I’m taking pictures and hopefully they’ll get you released.”¹⁵⁰ His hands trembled as the shutter clicked. Some of the photos, slightly blurry, reveal this fear. **[See Image III]**. Danny Lyon knew that to many in Georgia, the life of a Jewish, Yankee activist was worth no more than these brutalized black children.¹⁵¹ But he also knew that he had to expose the injustices occurring in the forgotten reaches of the South. Lyon sent his photos to the SNCC headquarters in Atlanta, which promptly sent them to a number of national figures. Senator Harrison Williams was so appalled that he spoke on the floor of the “disgraceful” conditions of the Leesburg Stockade. “Mr. President,” the Senator Williams thundered, “I wish the RECORD could show the jail facilities in use in Americus. But I have with me some pictures that were secretly taken and smuggled out. They really make you wonder whether they could have been taken in the United States of America at this point in the 20th Century. I invite any Senators who may be interested to examine them.”¹⁵² Lyon’s photos

¹⁴⁸ Sandra Mansfield in “City Without Pity.”

¹⁴⁹ Randy Kennedy, “Stubbornly Practicing His Principles of Photography,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2009.

¹⁵⁰ Danny Lyon, as quoted in Westbrook-Griffin, *Freedom is not Free*, 20.

¹⁵¹ Lyon was right to be afraid. Less than a year later, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, both Jews from New York, would be brutally murdered in Mississippi, along with James Chaney, a black man. See: Seth Kagan and Philip Dray, *We are not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Nation Books, 2006); William Bradford Huie, *Three Lives for Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

¹⁵² *Congressional Record*, 109, S18040-18041 (daily ed. September 25, 1963).

eventually found their way to Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, who, furious and disgusted, sent them to his brother Jack. President Kennedy sent the National Guard to Georgia on September 6, 1963 to release the girls from the Leesburg Stockade.¹⁵³ Blacks in Americus who had been hesitant to join the movement now felt they simply had to. Demonstrations continued, drawing the attention of the national press.

A month before the Leesburg girls' release, Don Harris, Ralph Allen, and John Perdew led a nighttime march from Friendship Baptist to downtown Americus. That July night, a confrontation erupted between the demonstrators and the Americus authorities, who used electric cattle prods and other violent means to disperse the crowd. When they refused the police's orders to send everyone home, Harris, Allen, Perdew, were arrested and charged with inciting a riot, resisting arrest, assault and battery, and, most importantly, insurrection. In the state of Georgia, insurrection was a capital offense. Dating back to 1871, Georgia's Anti-Treason Act, also known as the Sedition Act of 1871, stipulated that anyone arrested for attempting to incite rebellion against the state could be put to death.¹⁵⁴ A week later, at a prayer demonstration at the police

¹⁵³ The girls, who were arrested on July 19, spent these weeks in prison while the Judge went on vacation; their trial was not even scheduled until September 3, when he would return for the fall session. (Sumter County Courthouse records).

¹⁵⁴ The law was originally written in 1868, but amended to include attempt to incite insurrection in 1871. The law stipulates that Insurrection "shall consist in any combined resistance to the lawful authority of the State" or "Any attempt, by persuasion, or otherwise, to induce others to join in any combined resistance to lawful authority of the State." Insurrection or attempts at insurrection "shall be punished with death; or, if the jury recommend to mercy, confinement in the penitentiary." (4315, 4317) It was under this provision that the Americus Four were held. *The Code of the State of Georgia*, prepared by R.H. Clark, T.R.R.R. Cobb and D. Irwin, Second Edition, Fourth Edition (Atlanta, GA: Jas. P. Harrison & Co., Printers and Publishers, 1882), King & Spalding Library, Atlanta, GA. "Americus Ga., Stifles Negro Drive," *The New York Times*, September 29, 1963. This account claims, "At a hearing before Justice of the Peace M. Cooper Bradley, officials testified that Harris had laid down in the street," continuing that, "Sheriff Chappell, in his testimony, said that he had jabbed Mr. Harris with an electric cattle prod in an attempt to make him get up." When asked how Harris reacted to that, the Sheriff responded, "he didn't move any more than he was moving before."

station, a fourth protestor, Zev Aelony, was arrested on the same charge.¹⁵⁵ They became known as the Americus Four.

After about a month in the Sumter County jail, Ralph Allen smuggled out a letter containing a jarring description of the circumstances surrounding his arrest. A city marshal “charged me from across the street and hit me...hit me twice on the head with a billy club,” Allen recalled, “then, he said, ‘When I say run, you’d better run, you nigger-lovin’ son-of-a-bitch.’”¹⁵⁶ This encounter brought the charge of insurrection. Zev Aelony also smuggled out a letter, written on brown wrapping paper. Tellingly, it was his last will and testament, addressed to Koinonia Farm. Though Aelony thought he might die, he reiterated that he would not “hit back under any circumstance,” continuing, “I want so badly to live and get out of here, but if I am killed, perhaps I can still dry some tears and bring some joy.” Aelony then requested that if he were to die that

¹⁵⁵ Zev Aelony is a fascinating figure in the Americus story. Born February 21, 1938 in Palo Alto, California, Aelony’s parents emigrated from the Ukraine. His father was an organic chemist and the family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota where Zev grew up. After graduating from University High School in 1956, Zev enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he studied for two years before going to Israel where he lived at the Kibbutz Shoval for one year. (A kibbutz is a communal farming community in Israel, often organized around both Zionist and socialist ideas). It was during his time at the Kibbutz Shoval that Aelony read about a similar experiment in communal agriculture in the United States--Koinonia Farm. He returned to the United States in 1959, and spent that summer at Koinonia before returning to school, this time at the University of Minnesota. Influenced by his experiences in Georgia, Aelony organized a campus organization, Students for Integration (SFI), which sought racial justice. In 1961, Aelony participated in a Freedom Ride bound for New Orleans. But he never made it. Aelony was arrested in Jackson, Mississippi, and taken to the Jackson City prison. From Jackson, he was transferred to the Hines County prison and then to Mississippi’s Parchman Farm where he was placed in solitary confinement for scribbling ‘you’ll reap what you sow’ into a wall of the prison. In 1962, Aelony joined the Soul Force branch of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) where he worked on various projects in the Midwest. By the spring of that year, Aelony had embarked on the “Journey of Reconciliation.” The Journey of Reconciliation began in response to the murder of William Moore, a white man who was married to a black woman and sought to walk from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi in order to deliver a request to Mississippi governor Ross Barnett for integration. Moore’s wife asked that his journey be continued following his death, a call Zev Aelony was ready to answer. Along with nine others, he set off through the Deep South, but got no further than Alabama where he was arrested and taken to a county jail and then transferred to Kilby State Prison. After being tried, convicted, and let go on bail, Aelony was sent to Americus, Georgia. It was during this stint in Americus with CORE that Aelony was arrested with Harris, Allen and Perdew under the Treason and Sedition charge. Beyond simply having a remarkable story of travel and activism, Aelony is important in understanding the Americus Movement in that he offers a connection between the Christian interracialism of Koinonia with the presence of white civil rights activists in the 1960s. Though Aelony himself was not Christian, he was motivated by religious principles in his pursuit of peace and equality. (Zev Aelony Interview, Freedom Riders 40th Anniversary Oral History Project, Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, http://pegasus.lib.olemiss.edu/visual/freedomridersreunion_aelony.mov).

¹⁵⁶ Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1964, 183.

he be buried at Koinonia, saying “just please plant a tree, a plum or fig or peach or a pecan, something that bears sweet fruit and has a long life, so that it may use what remains of my body to make pleasures for children of my brothers in Sumter County.”¹⁵⁷

The intensification of repression did not deter the Americus Movement. Protestors gathered “to pray and protest the arrests and brutal beatings of [Harris, Perdew, and Allen] last night,” Movement Treasurer John Barnum stated. “They left the church,” according to Claude Sitton’s report, “and walked four blocks in orderly columns,” to the courthouse. Armed troopers and deputized citizens, led by the city marshal and Police Chief Ross Chambliss, attacked protestors with billy clubs, cattle prods and baseball bats; some present insisted shots were fired.¹⁵⁸ Many were injured and arrested.¹⁵⁹ Violence and intimidation did not just descend on people engaged in protests. James Williams, a young man active in the Americus Movement described in a sworn statement that the night of August 9, while he was walking along the street near a demonstration, troopers and policemen had halted him. One officer “clubbed” him while another “jumped on his leg and had broken it.” A state trooper then burned him with an electric cattle prod, “a hot shot,” as Williams called it. Americus whites maintained that Williams’ leg broke when “he fell in a ditch.”¹⁶⁰ In another incident a couple weeks later, James Brown, a black Korean War veteran, was allegedly shot in the back and killed by an Americus police

¹⁵⁷ Letter from Zev Aelony, MS 756 Box 6, Folder 8; *These Few Also Paid a Price: Southern Whites who Fought for Civil Rights* edited by G. Mcleod Bryan (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 53-54.

¹⁵⁸ *The Student Voice*, “In Americus, Ga: Police Smash Demonstrators; Four Face the Death Penalty,” Vol. 4, No. 3, October 1963, 2.

¹⁵⁹ The Student Voice said that “Milton Wilkerson, 19 required twenty stitched to close the wounds on his head, Emanuel McClendon, 67, required three stiches on his head. Thomas Douglas, 16, needed six stiches on his head. He also had scars on his back and arms from cattle prod burns. Collin McGee bled profusely from the nose and face after being beaten with clubs. Another 16 year old youngster, Johnny Boynton, had four stitched to close head wounds.” *The Student Voice*, Oct. 1963, 2.

¹⁶⁰ *New York Times*, Claude Sitton, Special Report, September 29, 1963. In September, the *New York Times*’ Claude Sitton wrote a Special Report on the Americus Four and the general situation in South Georgia, one of the only accounts of what was happening in Americus. Claiming that the movement had been “all but crushed by the use of the law,” Sitton described endemic police intimidation and harsh sentences conferred on those who dared challenge the “Black Belt community’s racial customs.”

officer following a protest.¹⁶¹ After this event, the Americus and Sumter County Movement filed a petition to the Justice Department to investigate police brutality in the small Southern town. Nine days later, on August 31, Attorney General Robert Kennedy told the national press that the Justice Department and the FBI found no evidence of police brutality in Americus. When the federal government would offer no protection, the Americus Movement clung to the hope that God would.

While the violence against protestors in Americus went largely unacknowledged, the fate of the Americus Four eventually garnered national attention, due both to the severity of the charges and the backgrounds of the victims.¹⁶² Don Harris' hometown of Riverdale, New Jersey, erupted with protests in early October after the Riverdale press ran the headline "Death Sentence Hangs Over Youth's Head."¹⁶³ Prompted by Harris' enrollment at Rutgers, New Jersey Senator Harrison A. Williams took an interest in the Georgia case and brought it to the attention of his Senate colleagues.¹⁶⁴ In September, Williams gave a speech protesting the charges leveled at the Americus Four. He stated that Harris's arrest "passes all understanding," and declared that the boy's only "crime" was "making the mistake of believing that people have a right to vote in

¹⁶¹ Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered Timeline.

¹⁶² In many ways, the treatment of the girls in the Leesburg Stockade was significantly worse than the Americus Four (though, admittedly, the girls were not jailed under the threat of the death penalty). But in the same way that white college students brought national sympathy to the Freedom Rides and Mississippi Project, the imprisonment and possible death of educated adults (one even being white) brought on an increased level of concern. See also: Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf Press), 2006.

¹⁶³ "Riverdale Aiding Resident Jailed in Civil Rights Battle in Georgia," Farnsworth Fowle, October 3, 1963. Harris' friends established "the Americus, Ga. Legal Defense Fund," which, in its first week raised over \$1,200. Additionally, Harris' fellow students at Rutgers University raised \$1000 on his behalf.

¹⁶⁴ At Williams' request, the Senate constitutional rights subcommittee started an investigation and asked Attorney General Kennedy and Georgia Attorney General Eugene Cook for reports. ("Free 4 in Americus, Solon Asks FRK," Margaret Shannon, *Atlanta Journal*, October 19, 1963. Williams was joined in his request by two representatives from Colorado, John Perdue's home state.

Americus.”¹⁶⁵ The Senator highlighted “what seems to be a growing trend in the South”:
“leveling [severe] charges...as a way of cutting the heart out of the civil rights movement.” While most revere America as the land of the free and home of the brave, Senator Williams continued, “there are some areas and towns in the United States where this is not so... one of them, I am sorry to say is a small town of Americus, Georgia. For in Americus, most of those who are brave are not free.” By focusing national attention on the case of the Americus Four, Senator Williams hoped to help the men receive a fair trial, noting that he would have more peace of mind if “the eyes of the world were focused on Americus.”¹⁶⁶

Several weeks earlier at the March on Washington, a young John Lewis also had Americus on his mind. After asserting that the Kennedy Administration's civil rights bill was “too little and too late,” the original transcript of Lewis’ speech demanded to know, “What about the three young men in Americus, Georgia, who face the death penalty for engaging in peaceful protest?” The young men he referred to, of course, were his three SNCC fellows --Don Harris, Ralph Allen and John Perdew.¹⁶⁷

National attention continued to mount during the fall of 1963. The *Harvard Crimson* took an interest in the case because former Harvard student John Perdew was one of the Americus Four.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, lawmakers from Connecticut organized in support of Trinity College student Ralph Allen. The *Hartford Times* reported on October 11 that over three hundred and fifty individuals, including Senators Thomas J. Dodd and Abraham A. Ribicoff, gathered at the Connecticut State Capitol to protest Allen’s imprisonment. The Trinity College President

¹⁶⁵ “New Jersey Senator Assails Rights Jailing at Americus,” *Atlanta Journal*, Margaret Shannon, Washington Correspondent, September 26, 1963; Press Release 63/234, as quoted in Anthony Manganaro “HARRISON A. WILLIAMS, JR: A Biographical Sketch of his Senate Career,” (Rutgers University, 2007).

¹⁶⁶ “New Jersey Senator Assails Rights Jailing at Americus,” *Atlanta Journal*, Margaret Shannon, Washington Correspondent, September 26, 1963, Koinonia Archive.

¹⁶⁷ Original Draft of SNCC Chairman John Lewis' Speech to the March on Washington; John L. Lewis and Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

¹⁶⁸ “Lawyers Petition Court to Release Six Students,” Steven V. Roberts, *The Harvard Crimson*, October 10, 1963.

spoke, declaring that he was “proud of Ralph,” as did Senator Dodd who called the arrest of the Americus Four a “glaring” example of “the way the law has been manipulated by local authorities to halt the drive for equal rights.” Senator Dodd also claimed he had confronted President Kennedy with these issues, asking that “all the influence and power within the purview of the federal government be brought to bear” in releasing the students and overruling Georgia’s outdated statute.¹⁶⁹

Many white Georgians disagreed with Senator Dodd. They thought that racial matters were under the jurisdiction of the states and abhorred the idea that President Kennedy or any federal body would meddle with Georgia’s affairs. Americus Solicitor General Stephen Pace boasted that the insurrection charge was “the most serious charge” ever meted out in the entire nation.¹⁷⁰ According to SNCC, Pace consistently evidenced a “remarkable disregard for legal ethics, justice, and good public relations.” The organization decried Pace’s decision “to use the insurrection charge by claiming that the Four were responsible for all the racial tension in the city.” Pace’s only reason for choosing the capital charge, SNCC asserted, was to jail the protestors “indefinitely.”¹⁷¹ While the civil rights movement condemned it, many Americus citizens were pleased with the harsh sentencing. One man asserted his hope that the authorities “get any outsider for anything they can get them for until they find out they are not wanted here.”¹⁷² Harsh sentencing became part of what *New York Times* journalist Claude Sitton referred to as “legal terror.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ “350 Hear of Effort to Free Jailed Youth,” *Hartford Times*, October 11, 1963, Koinonia Archive. Lawmakers from John Perdew’s home state of Colorado did the same. Two Republican and one Democratic lawmaker contacted the Justice Department calling for an investigation into the Americus situation. “Ask Probe of ‘Insurrection’ Charge in GA.” *United Press International*, 1963, Koinonia Archive.

¹⁷⁰ Stephen Pace, as quoted in “Race ‘Rioting and Threat of Death Penalty: 4 in Dixie Jail Charged with Insurrection Attempt,” Raymond Coffey, Koinonia Archive.

¹⁷¹ SNCC Research, John Perdew, “Americus and Baker County,” August 1, 1965.

¹⁷² *New York Times*, September 29, 1963.

¹⁷³ “Legal Terror in Americus,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1963, Koinonia Archive.

Finally, on October 31, 1963 the case went to trial.¹⁷⁴ Attorneys D.L. Hollowell of Atlanta and C.B. King of Albany represented Harris, Allen, and Perdew, while Aelony had different counsel provided by CORE.¹⁷⁵ On November 1, 1963, the federal court ruled 2-1 that the Georgia state law was unconstitutional and the men were released.¹⁷⁶ [See Image IV] According to the *New York Times*, the federal intervention in the proceedings “marked the first time that the federal judiciary had halted a state court proceeding in a civil rights case.”¹⁷⁷ With the verdict, it seemed as though a major victory had been won for the cause of civil rights in Americus and through the South. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that the ruling “may

¹⁷⁴ See WSB-TV newsfilm clip of lawyers for civil rights workers charged with the capital offense of insurrection, police, and trial bystanders in Americus, Georgia, 1963 October 31, WSB-TV newsfilm collection, reel 1102, 49:34/53:02, Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection, The University of Georgia Libraries, Athens, GA, as presented in the Digital Library of Georgia.

http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/crdl/id:ugabma_wsb_n_45411

¹⁷⁵ C.B. King was a legendary black attorney involved in the Movement, whose service is frequently noted. Personal accounts of his legal strategies, however, reveal a light-hearted, humorous man who often mocked the racism evident in Southern courtrooms. Dennis Roberts remembered that King used to “make a point by attributing it to some real or mythical confederate hero.” References to “the Honorable Beauregard B. [for Bubba] Smith” or “Beauregard Bucknellington Wellington III, a famous Confederate General who liberated the City of Dogpatch, Georgia” would “put white folks in a quandary because they took these things absolutely seriously and couldn’t imagine you were joking about it.” (Dennis Roberts, “Remembering Attorney C.B. King,” in *The Great Pool Jump*, edited by Peter deLissovoy (Lancaster, NH: YouarePerfect Press, 2010), 119.

¹⁷⁶ The three judge panel included: Frank Tuttle, Lewis Morgan and Robert Elliot. Following this federal intervention loomed a near endless line of appeals and re-trials. Ralph Allen was held under new charges. A few weeks later, on November 26, 1963 Allen was indicted under the felony charge of “Assault with Intent to Murder a Police Officer.” He pleaded not guilty. The case encountered many delays, brought both by the defense and by the court, postponing a definitive ruling for months. On December 2, 1963, for example, C.B. King argued that the felony indictment was “violative of the Fourteenth Amendment,” “vague, ambiguous, uncertain,” and did not “provide a sufficiently ascertainable standard of guilt.”¹⁷⁶ (*The State of Georgia vs. Ralph Allen*, Case #1050, General Demurrer to Indictment, 2 December 1963.) The very same day the motion was “denied and overruled.”¹⁷⁶ (*The State of Georgia vs. Ralph Allen*, No. 1051, 2 December 1963.) The case went to court and a jury found Allen guilty on December 5, but that too was soon appealed. (*State of Georgia vs. Ralph Allen*, No. 1051 in Sumter Superior Court, Charge of Assault with Intent to Murder, “Charge of the Court,” December 5, 1963). The defense then filed a motion for a new trial, initially scheduled for February 14, 1964.¹⁷⁶ Another March 30, 1964 plea for a new trial was overruled. On May 23, 1964, legal proceedings were still underway. By the end, both the plaintiff and defendant were “in error” and the trail had become so languorous and confusing that a 455 page review of events had to be filed to ensure that both the state and the defense remembered all of the proceedings. (“Certificate,” Ely Clarke, “Case of Ralph W. Allen, defendant in error vs. State of Georgia, Defendant in error.”)

¹⁷⁷ *New York Times*, Nov 2, 1963. An outcry immediately erupted in Americus. A “Special Presentment” to the Jury called the action “totalitarian,” commenting that it was “a new power grab hardly even envisioned before this time.” The federal court in Americus had “discarded tradition,” detractors bellowed, as it “bulldoze[d] a state law out of the way,” “[ran] over a state court proceeding,” and “repressed...cherished judicial rights.” What happened in Americus amounted to an “ominous threat” against the autonomy of state legal proceedings, leaving the states “at the mercy of power-hungry federal officials.” (“Special Presentment,” Sumter County Courthouse Records).

become a far-reaching precedent in the civil rights field,” claiming it could allow “civil rights demonstrators to go directly to federal court with complaints of excessive bond, or other violations of constitutional rights.”¹⁷⁸ In the short term, however, the verdict offered the beleaguered SNCC workers of Americus too little too late.

The harsh indictment succeeded in impeding the movement by taking away its leaders and instilling fear. In September 1963, SNCC fieldworkers conceded that, “the many big and little pieces of the movement drifted apart and a lot was lost in the immediate effect of the August demonstrations and in the long-range strength of the movement in Americus.”¹⁷⁹ Sheriff Chappell and other law enforcement officials, emboldened by being cleared of the charges of police brutality, continued their work of intimidating and harassing those who defied their wishes. In November of 1964, one year after his release from prison, Don Harris was again arrested by the Americus police and charged with “assault with intent to murder” a police officer. The falsified charge was eventually dropped, but the specter of arrest continued to haunt Harris and others working for civil rights in South Georgia. Not only did ‘legal terror’ plague the Americus Movement, so did actual acts of terror. From 1961-1963, eight black churches were either bombed or set on fire. Deacon Trim Porter, an ally of the Movement, was targeted; his home burned to the ground.

Despite the violence, over the next year the Americus and Sumter County Movement re-organized and rebuilt their local movement under the leadership of president J.R. Campbell.

Black students created their own newspaper, *The Voice of Americus*, and continued to

¹⁷⁸ “Rights Movement to Benefit from Americus Case Ruling,” Jim Clotfelter, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 1963; Koinonia Archive. Interestingly, that did not happen, and the case was largely overlooked in the national conversation over legal rights. In many ways, the case of the Americus Four represents a huge missed opportunity for the movement in Southwest Georgia in affecting the national conversation over constitutionality and legal justice.

¹⁷⁹ SNCC Field Report, David Bell and Robert Mants, 24 September 1963, 3, Americus File, Mants Papers, MLK, digital.

demonstrate throughout the warmer months of 1964, albeit on a smaller scale than the summer before.¹⁸⁰ For example, activists in Americus set out to test the Civil Rights Act three days after its passage. In the summer of 1964, students sought to integrate a local restaurant, the Hasty House, an action for which they were beaten.¹⁸¹

In addition to the federal legislation of 1964, the state of Georgia also began to address the race issue. Georgia Governor Carl E. Sanders, elected in 1962, was a self-proclaimed “progressive,” who boasted that he was “Georgia’s first modern Governor.”¹⁸² Sanders sought to avoid any situation where federal authorities might intervene.¹⁸³ This meant obeying national laws and promoting “law and order” throughout the state. It also meant following the federal mandate to integrate public schools. Much to the chagrin of Americus’ white residents, in August of 1964, four black students integrated Americus High School.¹⁸⁴ Despite these changes, the late months of 1964 were relatively calm. By the summer of 1965, though, Americus exploded again.

¹⁸⁰ It could also be that the summer of 1964 was quieter in South Georgia, due to the resources and volunteers flooding Mississippi for Freedom Summer there.

¹⁸¹ John Perdew, Bob Mants, Graham Wiggins, Willie Ricks and Sammie Mahone were involved in this action, occurring on July 5, 1964; Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered.

¹⁸² Interview with Carl E. Sanders, Troutman Sanders LLP, October 9, 2013. Sanders himself, though by no means a promoter of civil rights initiatives, worked to keep Georgia from becoming a racial spectacle in the way of George Wallace’s Alabama and Ross Barnett’s Mississippi. In the 1962 gubernatorial race, Georgians elected the moderate Sanders over the segregationist candidate and former Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin. Griffin, who had served the state from 1955-1959, was a staunch segregationist, illustrated by his comment following the Brown decision that Georgia schools would never integrate, “come hell or high water.” (Time Magazine, July 12, 1954. For more on Griffin, see Scott E. Buchanan, *Some of the People who Ate my Barbeque Didn’t Vote For Me*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011. Griffin, in fact, began to moderate his views during his time in office, not using state power to object to the integration of the University of Georgia). But, by 1962, the tide had turned in Georgia. The defeat of Griffin and Carl Sanders’ election marked the first time since the 1920s that a governor had been elected from an urban part of the state, due in large part to a change in voting procedures to the county-unit system in Georgia. (See Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta* for a larger discussion of the county unit system and its effects on Georgia racial politics).

¹⁸³ This was not unprecedented for Georgia’s governors. Sander’s predecessor, Ernest Vandiver had adopted a similar position. Vandiver, who early in his term declared that “never, not one” black student would integrate Georgia’s institutions, chose not to protest the admission to Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter to the University of Georgia. Though he himself was a segregationist, it was more important to Vandiver and to his successor Sanders to preserve Georgia’s reputation as a cultural and economic power. Preserving segregation was not worth risking federal intervention and negative national attention.

¹⁸⁴ See Chapter 5 for a full discussion of school desegregation and its consequences in Americus.

The Hot Summer of 1965

In June of 1965 the Americus and Sumter County Movement enacted a boycott of three local grocery stores to push for integration in hiring.¹⁸⁵ Protestors also picketed in front of the stores. The Piggly Wiggly, Kwik-Chek and Colonial supermarkets were transformed from spaces of domestic provision to daily reminders of the changes coming to small towns like Americus. **[See Image V]** The city was extremely tense. Integrated groups of demonstrators were mocked, spit on, beaten, and arrested. One Atlanta journalist, Walter Lundy, recalled one day when, “all of a sudden” a pickup truck screeched up in front of one of the grocery stores, jumping “up on the sidewalk.” A white man got out of the truck and “without any warning, turn[ed] and shove[d] [a white demonstrator] as hard as he [could], in sort of an upward direction.” The man went “flying at an angle in the air and dropp[ed] into the street...land[ed] in a crash, his glasses [went] flying.” Journalists and FBI agents looked on, but “no one did anything.” The episode, though relatively inconsequential in the larger scope of the civil rights movement in Americus, was, for the young reporter, “symbolic of the whole fight.” “At the ripe old age of 22, it was the vilest thing I’d ever seen,” Lundy recalled, “it was [so] shocking to me [that] almost 50 years later, I can describe it.”¹⁸⁶

Journalists like Walter Lundy were not the only newcomers gracing the sidewalks of Americus in the summer of 1965. In late June, SCLC sent twenty additional workers to the Southwest Georgia town as part of its Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project, meant to register blacks in six southern states to vote.¹⁸⁷ SCOPE Director Hosea

¹⁸⁵ “From now on,” SCLC field worker Willie Bolden proclaimed, “we’re going to live black, sleep black, buy black, walk black, and wear black.” Willie Bolden, as quoted in the *Americus Times-Recorder*, 1965.

¹⁸⁶ Walter Lundy, Interview by author, September 27, 2013, by phone.

¹⁸⁷ “Results of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Hosea L. Williams, Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement Documents; www.crmvet.org/scope65.pdf. The SCOPE results from Sumter County are as follows: 3,500 voters registered to vote out of 5,800 attempted. 15,200 people involved in political education, 16,400 involved in

Williams, Ben Clarke, Julian Bond and Willie Bolden were among the new arrivals. In a town as small as Americus, the presence of non-locals was easily discerned and usually not appreciated. A few days after the new volunteers arrived, white night riders “welcomed” them by driving through the city tossing homemade explosives and firing guns. The threat of violence was ever-present. Nevertheless, organizational meetings and demonstrations continued through June and July and the civil rights protestors continued to march regularly. It was “the Ku Klux Klan on one side, and [us] on the other,” Rev. J.R. Campbell stated, as tensions in the city climbed with the summer’s heat.

Then, on July 20, 1965, the city erupted. Four women, Mary Kate Fishe Bell, Lena Turner, Mamie Campbell, and Gloria Wise, were arrested for attempting to vote in a local election. Strangely enough, Bell was actually one of the candidates, running against an “avowed racist,” J.W. Southwell, a former Georgia Bureau of Investigations officer. Mamie Campbell described the events leading up to her arrest: She was at home, “getting ready for a meeting at the church,” when she heard a knock at the parsonage door. It was Lena Turner, asking after her husband, Rev. Campbell. When Mamie informed her that the Reverend was not home, Ms. Turner said she was going down to vote and asked Mamie to come along too. “Come on with us” she said, “you’ll be home before [Rev. Campbell] even get here.” Impulsively, Mamie agreed, without even “thinking to weigh it...I just jumped in with some of the girls.” She would not be back by the time her husband got home; in fact, she would not return home for over a week. When the women arrived at the courthouse, there were three voting lines: “white men, white women, and colored.”¹⁸⁸ They got in the line for white women. While debate swirled over

community organizations and 180 arrested. Interestingly, the summer of 1965, out of 251 total arrests in the state, 180 were from Sumter County. (Important to note that these numbers are cumulative; meaning, if someone attended three community meetings they were counted three times. Thus, the inflated numbers compared to the population.)

¹⁸⁸ J.R. and Mamie Campbell Interview.

whether some of the women were intentionally testing the civil rights act by standing in the white line, Mamie Campbell, for her part, maintained that she was an accidental activist. “I walked straight,” she recalled, “I just got in the line and it was a long line.” When the women waiting their turn approached the courthouse door, Sheriff Chappell greeted them. “You’re standing in the women’s line,” he informed them, to which Campbell bluntly replied, “I don’t know what you call me, I have five children.” “I guess that was too smart for him,” she laughed. The women were arrested and taken across the street to jail.¹⁸⁹

Rev. J.R. Campbell, the president of the Americus and Sumter County Movement, remembered hearing the news that his wife Mamie had been arrested. “Lo and behold,” he recalled, “one of the young men came to me where we used to have our hair cut then and told me, ‘Rev. Campbell, you in here watching the TV and Mrs. Campbell, and Lena, and Miss Fishe and Gloria Wise have gone to jail!’” The Reverend responded: “Don’t tease me like that,” thinking the young man was joking. But the man “prevailed ” upon Rev. Campbell and he eventually decided to go downtown and see what was going on. Sure enough, when he got to the courthouse, a crowd had gathered, upset over the arrests of the women, one of whom was indeed his wife. Campbell went back to the parsonage and promptly “called Martin Luther King’s office in Atlanta.”¹⁹⁰

Six days later, on July 26, Hosea Williams, an SCLC volunteer who had been in Americus that summer, SNCC’s John Lewis, and Rev. Campbell held a press conference in Atlanta to discuss the situation in Americus. “Ladies and Gentlemen of the press,” Williams read from a scripted statement, “the Negroes of Sumter County Georgia, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, [and] the Southern Christian Leadership Committee have united their

¹⁸⁹ Mamie Campbell, Interview by author, July 26, 2012, Americus, GA. The women were arrested for ‘blocking the entrance’ of a polling place.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Rev. J.R. and Mamie Campbell, Sumter County Oral History Project, July 21, 2003.

forces.” They had come together to “do whatever it takes to bring justice here and now, even in the deepest Black Belt of Georgia.” Williams declared that there would be a “massive, united invasion on segregation in Georgia” taking the form of “massive nonviolent street protests, demonstrations.” The current “mild” marches and protests would be “stepped up to our maximum potential,” Williams warned, “unless there can be an immediate meeting of the minds and an acceptable settlement of Sumter County’s racial problems.” Elucidating what was indicated by an acceptable settlement, SCLC, SNCC and the Americus and Sumter County Movement provided a list of demands: a recall of the Justice of the Peace election, the immediate release of the four women with all charges dropped, police protection for blacks in Americus, open and fair voter registration, the appointment of one black registrar, and finally, the formation of a fourteen person biracial committee to discuss race relations in Sumter County. If these demands were met, Williams stated, “demonstrations would be halted for a time,” but if they were not, marches would continue and even be escalated.¹⁹¹ John Lewis described it as “an all-out effort” to demand justice.¹⁹²

As soon as the women were arrested, “all the churches got opened” for mass meetings in order to organize people and coordinate activities. More activists from Atlanta descended on Americus to help demonstrate, march, and hold rallies until the women were released. Inspired and bound together “like cement,” hundreds of people marched daily from Allen Chapel to the county courthouse and back again, “a good little jump.”¹⁹³ [See Image VI] “We could see the

¹⁹¹ WSB Film Clips, Press Conference with Rev. Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Reverend J. R. Campbell of the Sumter County Movement speaking about civil rights demonstrations in Americus, Georgia, 1965 July 26,” The Civil Rights Digital Library; http://crdl.usg.edu/export/html/ugabma/wsbn/crdl_ugabma_wsbn_48397.html. Williams claimed the Movement was not only calling for increased demonstrations but also registering people to vote and seeking to “mobilize the forces of goodwill in Georgia.”

¹⁹² “Americus Target for Mass Invasion,” July 27, 1965, *Americus Times-Recorder*. Comedian Dick Gregory also famously came to the city at this time.

¹⁹³ J.R. and Mamie Campbell interview; (http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/crdl/id:ugabma_wsbn_42982)

people [marching] outside from in the jail” Mamie Campbell remembered, to which Rev. Campbell added, “We marched until you got out.” The Campbell children even marched, yelling, “Fred Chappell, I want my mama out of jail and I want her out now!”

The constant marching and demonstrations terrified and incensed much of the white community. They simply never imagined this day would come. For Mark Pace, who was a child that summer, the marches made an indelible impression. “I can remember standing on the streets,” he recalled, “watching the blacks march down.”¹⁹⁴ Disbelieving that “their Negroes” could possibly be so riotous, many Americus whites blamed the racial situation on the presence of nonlocals. Americus Mayor T. Griffith Walker claimed, “If [outside groups] were not here, the situation would not be what it is today.”¹⁹⁵ At the same time though, segregationists hosted some guests of their own. Over the past decade, many white citizens in Americus had joined conservative organizations, such as the Citizen’s Council and John Birch Society, occasionally welcoming speakers. In May of 1964, for instance, Alabama Governor George Wallace came to Americus to pay a visit to the local chapter of the John Birch Society. At a standing room only affair held at the Americus Country Club, just down Lee Street from the First Methodist and First Baptist churches, Governor Wallace gave a “race-baiting” speech and applauded the community for their opposition to civil rights.¹⁹⁶ During the summer of 1965, the frequency and intensity of these meetings increased. On July 26, in the midst of the marches for the four women, the Americus Country Club welcomed Lester Maddox, a rabid Georgia segregationist, a man once characterized as “a cracker Don Quixote,” and the future governor of the state. Maddox had been passing through South Georgia en route from Valdosta when he decided to

¹⁹⁴ Mark Pace was the son of Stephen Pace. Mark Pace, interview by Sumter County Oral History Project, June 4, 2003, Georgia Southern University, Americus, GA.

¹⁹⁵ T. Griffith Walker, July 31, 1965. WSB film Clip, Civil Rights Digital Archive, Clip 48504. See also Chapter 5.

¹⁹⁶ Alan Anderson, *Remembering Americus: Essays on Southern Life* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2006), 30.

accept an invitation to speak in Americus. He laughed at the media's suggestion that they had "imported Lester Maddox to Americus," joking, "no one imported me! I belong here in Georgia!" Declaring that he was in town on a "mission of peace," Maddox, in his "high tinny hectic" voice, addressed the eager crowd packing the room, commending his listeners on "what you've done this far" in resisting integration. "We're going to restore states rights," he shouted, "we are going to get them like George Wallace in the state capitol...in the White House, and save this great land." Remarking that he was "proud to be called a segregationist," Maddox concluded his speech with the assertion that integration was "against the constitution" as well as "ungodly," "sinful," and "unchristian." The proclaimed Christianity of the civil rights movement did not go unchallenged by the opposition, who possessed their own claims to theological and racial orthodoxy. Maddox's address was met with enthusiastic applause and heartened cheers.¹⁹⁷

A few weeks later, Maddox led a march of 600 Ku Klux Klan members and sympathizers through downtown Americus.¹⁹⁸ A week after their march the Klan held a rallies at the Sumter County Fairground and in front of the Americus courthouse, the same spot where civil rights demonstrators had been gathering in previous weeks. Led by Imperial Wizard Robert Shelton of Tuscaloosa, these rallies also boasted the support of Atlanta Grand Wizard Calvin Craig, and the conservative organization "Americans for States Rights."¹⁹⁹ At one event, Lester Maddox gave the evening's keynote address to hundreds of angry citizens. Some claimed that, despite his

¹⁹⁷ Marshall Frady, "My Dream Came True. I was Mr. Maddox," *New York Review of Books* (April 6, 1972); Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 183. Some reports indicate that Mr. Maddox spoke at a recreational facility.

http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/crdl/id:ugabma_wsbn_48501; http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/crdl/id:ugabma_wsbn_41882

¹⁹⁸ Some accounts mark this as July 26, 1965 and others July 29, 1965. "WSB-TV Newsfilm Clip of Lester Maddox promoting states' rights and segregation as he speaks to a white audience in Americus, Georgia, 1965 July 29." Civil Rights Digital Library, Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens, GA (2007); <http://crdl.usg.edu/cgi/crdl?action=retrieve;rset=001;recno=1;format=video>. Lester Maddox is a fascinating figure in Georgia history and politics. Elected to Governor after Carl E. Sanders, Maddox was a staunch segregationist whose campaign claim to fame was that he supposedly chased blacks away from his Pickwick restaurant with an axe handle. He used to sell and autograph these axe handles as a political symbol of his racial views.

¹⁹⁹ "March on Mayor's Home Threatened in Americus," *Atlanta Journal*, August 7, 1965.

public admonitions, Mayor Walker was actually in attendance. When Tom Brokaw later asked Walker about the it, he replied that he “would welcome any patriotic group,” noting that it was “a fine meeting,” with “the gist” to “abide by the law.”²⁰⁰

With activists both for and against civil rights pouring into Americus, pressure continued to mount. Rev. Campbell remembered, “We had our rallies and they had theirs. We had our march and they had theirs.”²⁰¹ Frank Myers, a young man who would go on to be mayor of Americus, recalled those tumultuous weeks. He reported being amazed by the courage of Americus’ black citizens, commenting that their marches were his “real conversion.”²⁰² At the same time, Myers understood the determination of whites to preserve the social structure. “I saw the KKK march in downtown Americus,” he mused, “I saw that.”²⁰³

The civil rights movement clung to its theological foundations. Those in Americus Movement relied on their faith in God to remind that they “had a right just like white people.” “I didn’t fear nothing,” Rev. Campbell insisted, “I knew there was a God upstairs, and I was doing the right thing. I knew God had no respect for persons.” Since God did not privilege some people over others, Campbell believed, those in the civil rights movement were justified in agitating for their rights. And with God on their side, they could endure even the worst violence. “Those people,” Campbell told his listeners at a mass meeting, referring to white segregationists in town, “said there was going to be red blood running down Lee Street if we come out one more day.” The minister continued, “All y’all who want to march, to go to your bloody grave, stand up.”

²⁰⁰ Interview with Russell Thomas, August 3, 2012, Americus, GA; (WSB Film Clip, University of Georgia Digital Archive, http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/crdl/id:ugabma_wsbn_42203)

²⁰¹ J.R. Campbell Interview.

²⁰² Frank Myers, Interview by Sumter County Oral History Project, June 4, 2003, Georgia Southwestern University, Americus, GA.

²⁰³ Ibid.

“Everyone stood up,” he remembered.²⁰⁴ [See Image VII] That night almost two hundred black citizens marched, singing and praying as they went.²⁰⁵ These marches were an exercise in community cohesion and organized discontent, but they were also, as Campbell’s words suggested, an expression of theological principles. God would help them, God would strengthen them, God would protect them, and ultimately, as he had the Israelites of old, God would deliver them out of bondage and into freedom.

A few days later, Judge Frank Hooper released the four imprisoned women, officials promised a biracial committee and desegregated elections, and the city agreed to appoint two black registrars.²⁰⁶ Marches abated, national civil rights leaders and the media went on to other destinations, and students returned to school. It seemed as though, despite the harassment and threats, despite Sherriff Chappell the Leesburg Stockade, despite the insurrection law and the Klan rallies, the civil rights movement had been victorious in Americus in the early 1960s. And not simply in the legal concessions eked out, for surely they lost as much as they won. But in the conflict in the streets of Americus, it appeared the appeal to freedom, to human dignity, and to God-given rights had prevailed.

From SNCC’s founding, to Charles Sherrod’s vision for Southwest Georgia, to Reverend Campbell’s religious leadership in Americus, Christian theology was central to the civil rights movement. Nonviolent workshops taught students to take on the mantle of Christ. Freedom songs, hymns, and spirituals channeled the tradition of the black church, as prayers called upon the divine power of the Holy Spirit. The community of activists mirrored the early church. Those

²⁰⁴ J.R. Campbell Interview; “Negroes Continue Marches in Protest of Jailings, *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 27, 1965.

²⁰⁵ “Negroes Renew Marches Today After Moratorium End; Sanders Watches,” *The Americus Times-Recorder*, July 30, 1965.

²⁰⁶ “Mayor Issues Statement; Press Headquarters Set Up, *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 30, 1965; “Mayor Again Pleads Negroes End Marches, *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 31, 1965.

imprisoned reflected the joy of the Apostle Paul and Silas. It was performed belief; it was practiced faith; it was lived theology. Though certainly helped by exposure from the national media and a zeitgeist of change, the civil rights movement possessed a theological power that provided strength and endurance to its proponents while exposing the immorality of its opponents. Though everything was against them, the theology in the streets won in Americus. As Americus resident Karl Wilson remembered, “We didn’t have anything--no money, no decent places to live, no schools...but when you’ve got God, you overcome. We just believed in the higher power.”²⁰⁷ Teresa Mansfield agreed. She believed that there was an “Almighty Being looking out for us,” so even the dictates of Jim Crow could not triumph over God’s purposes for justice and freedom.²⁰⁸ Theology was the very core of the civil rights movement. In the words of Wilson, “It was a spiritual movement. And that’s why it was victorious--it was the will of God, not our will.”²⁰⁹

But the civil rights movement was not without opposition, an opposition that also claimed it stood for the will of God. The theological conflict over civil rights was not over.

²⁰⁷ Karl Wilson interview.

²⁰⁸ Teresa Mansfield interview.

²⁰⁹ Karl Wilson interview.

CHAPTER 5

“The Devil won, Hands Down:” Opposition to Civil Rights in Americus

“Well, the Devil has just made Jesus look bad in Americus...The Devil won hands down.”¹

“We weren’t so upset about integration...it was the government running schools and having no prayer.”²

On the night of July 28, 1965, peaceful demonstrators were camped out in front of the Sumter County courthouse. Led by the clergy and some SNCC and SCLC volunteers, the group had conducted a mass meeting at Allen Chapel, marched to the courthouse, sang, prayed, and planned to spend the night on the lawn in protest. Around midnight, it began to rain. Then, cutting through the chorus of cicadas and drizzle, a shot rang out in the dark. “Between twelve and one in the morning,” Rev. J.R. Campbell recounted, “the news media came to me and said, ‘Rev. Campbell, I don’t want to get you all upset, but we got trouble. I said, ‘what trouble?’” When the informants told Campbell the news, he replied, “oh my, it gonna be the Devil. Oh my God.”³

About two blocks from the courthouse, there had been a murder. On his way home from work at the local drive-in movie theater, a twenty-one year old man, Andrew Whatley, had been gunned down at the corner gas station, by two black males driving by, Charlie Lee Hopkins and Willie Lamar. Most believed that Whatley, shot in the head by a .38 caliber pistol, had been mistaken for some ‘white youths’ who had been throwing rocks and bottles at passing cars, and that his death was incidental.⁴ Andrew Whatley, or Andy, an “energetic, quiet, friendly youth,”

¹ Quoted in Ralph McGill, “The Devil Outscores Jesus,” *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, September 25, 1965.

² Mr. and Mrs. Harry Entrekin, interview by author, August 6, 2012, Americus, GA.

³ “Americus Negroes Begin Vigil at Court House,” *UPI*, July 29, 1965; Interview with Rev. J.R. Campbell, SCOHP. The students requested a police escort and spent the rest of the night at the Friendship Baptist Church. (“Murder Charges Filed Against Negroes in Death of Youth, 21,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 29, 1965.

⁴ “Murder Charges Filed Against Negroes in Death of Youth, 21,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 29, 1965.

was from a working class family. He had attended school in Americus, was a member of the First Baptist Church, and worked two jobs, one at the Manhattan Shirt Factory and one at the Sunset Movie Theater.⁵ The industrious Whatley had also recently enlisted as a Marine. Some suspected he suffered from developmental disorders of some kind, making his work ethic all the more remarkable.⁶ In an interview with Tom Brokaw, then a young TV correspondent already in Americus to cover the protests, Mrs. Whatley meekly answered questions about her son's murder from her front porch.⁷ By all accounts, Andy Whatley was a good kid who worked hard and mostly kept to himself. And, he was white.

Though neither Whatley nor his murderers were directly associated with the civil rights movement, his tragic death became a turning point for race relations and the development of civil rights activity in Americus. The tensions that had increased throughout the summer exploded with that .38 caliber weapon. A random, tragic act of violence, the murder of Andy Whatley nevertheless gave opponents of the civil rights movement an opening they had not had. Having been silenced and even paralyzed by the moral demands and peaceful action of the movement, the opposition now found its footing, invoking arguments that would become the hallmark of

⁵ "Nightriders Gun Down Georgia Youth," *The Delta Democrat-Times* (Greenville, MS), July 29, 1965.

⁶ His mother, Mrs. Lyda Whatley, commented that her son had suffered from "slight retardation" from an young age, but had worked hard to overcome his deficiencies, having recently passed the entrance exams for the Marine Corps. "Whatley Had Just Joined Marine Corps," *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 29, 1965.

⁷ WSB Film; http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/crdl/id:ugabma_wsb_n_38840. Tom Brokaw moved to Atlanta in 1964 to work for WSB-TV, home of the Huntley-Brinkley Report, a program that focused on civil rights issues throughout the South. In this role, Brokaw was a news anchor on the eleven o'clock news with opportunity to cover civil rights issues for both WSB and occasionally NBC. The move to Atlanta exposed Brokaw to the subtle and resilient presence of race in the South. He recalled "seeing through our Midwestern eyes the depth and complexity of the place of race in the South." Brokaw remembered the events of that summer: "In Americus, Georgia, an ugly confrontation between blacks and whites reached critical mass when a young white man was killed in a drive-by shooting. All hell broke loose inspired in part by a Klan rally and the racial rants of Lester Maddox. NBC News in New York dispatched me to Americus to cover events there until one of its regular correspondents could arrive...I decided to see what the mother of the white victim had to say. Not quite knowing what to expect, I approached her house in a working class neighborhood. A small quiet woman in a plain, faded frock--what we used to call a housedress--opened the screen door just a crack and agreed to be interviewed. I asked her what she thought of all the trouble that had blown up in town, with threats of lynchings and shootings for any black who marched in protest. In soft tones she said it made no sense. It wouldn't bring back her son. She hoped it would end soon. I found her statement, in its simplicity, tremendously powerful, and an antidote to all the hate-filled rhetoric of the Klan." (Tom Brokaw, *Boom!: Voices of the Sixties* (New York: Random House), 2007, 15-16, 46.)

conservative racial politics for years to come. By subverting the moral legitimacy of the civil rights movement, ostracizing dissenters, forming Christian private schools, and redoubling their theological position, the white opposition to civil rights in the South and in Americus, Georgia, not only weakened the civil rights movement's power but created a powerful political and theological movement of its own.

'It's Gonna be the Devil': The Murder of Andy Whatley and the Menace of 'Outsiders'

The death of a white citizen petrified and enraged the white community. Mothers forbade their children from going downtown, while fathers readied their weapons. As one newspaper headline from that week declared, "Americus is Armed."⁸ Whatley's funeral was held at the First Baptist Church, where the altar was adorned with flowers, some sent by Lester Maddox himself. The self-proclaimed "proud" segregationist and later Governor of Georgia recognized the political opportunity presented by a young innocent victim, making several trips to Americus in the weeks following Whatley's death to hold rallies where he condemned the civil rights movement as "unchristian" and "ungodly."⁹ Even the minister at First Baptist, Harold Collins, felt compelled to speak out about the incident, remarking that Whatley's death was "the sheer product of hate, indifference and pressures on mind and heart—such as distrust and greed."¹⁰ Though Rev. Collins did not specify the individuals or groups to which he was referring, he clearly implied that the murder had resulted from the mass civil rights protests, and specifically, from black leaders and their demands for freedom.

⁸ *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 1965.

⁹ *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 2, 1965. WSB Film Clips. Maddox, only days earlier, had addressed a large group of white citizens, boasting that he was "proud to be called a segregationist," and claiming integration was "against the constitution" as well as "ungodly," "sinful," and "unchristian." No doubt the shrewd segregationist and later Governor was somewhat thrilled by the violent developments in Americus, as he returned to Americus multiple times in the following weeks to lead Klan marches and hold additional rallies.

¹⁰ "Negroes Beaten in Americus, GA," *New York Times*, August 1, 1965; Isabelle Collins, interview by author, March 8, 2014, Americus, GA.

Civil rights activists remained undeterred. Benjamin Clarke of the SCLC stated in a press conference, “we regret very seriously the death of Mr. Andy Whatley,” but also announced that marches would continue following a twenty-four hour moratorium.¹¹ Other demonstrators in Americus proclaimed that respect for one deceased could not be traded for respect for thousands of the living. The following day, 150 black citizens marched again, singing and praying.¹² But the tides had turned. Marches were now viewed as disrespectful and dangerous.

In the days following Whatley’s murder, leaders in Americus began to speak out more forcefully against the civil rights movement. Americus Mayor T. Griffin Walker placed the responsibility squarely on the civil rights movement. Calling upon the black leadership to cease demonstrations, he remarked, “one death is enough.”¹³ For his part, Governor Carl Sanders blamed the tragedy on individuals seeking justice in the streets and not through the legal system of Georgia. “The proper way to implement the law,” Sanders claimed, “is through the courts and not through a brawl in the streets.”¹⁴ Though Sanders commended the civil rights movement’s moratorium on marches in the wake of the murder, he nevertheless remarked that the action was “a little late.”¹⁵ At the Americus municipal office’s request, Governor Sanders ordered over 100 state troopers down to Sumter County.¹⁶ These state troopers stood in front of the courthouse, policed the streets and, as J.R. Campbell remembered, “[rode] through town to keep the peace.”¹⁷ Their presence intimidated marchers and stifled the spirit of nonviolent protest.

In a statement regarding the “present racial situation,” Americus Mayor T. Griffin Walker

¹¹ Benjamin Clark of SCLC, WSB Film Clips.

¹² “Negroes Renew Marches Today After Moratorium End; Sanders Watches,” *The Americus-Times Recorder*, July 30, 1965.

¹³ “Mayor Issues Statement; Press Headquarters Set Up,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 30, 1965.

¹⁴ “Sanders Says Killing of Local Youth Tragic Result,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 29, 1965.

¹⁵ “Sanders Says Killing of Local Youth Tragic Result,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 29, 1965.

¹⁶ “100 Additional Troopers Being Sent to Americus,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 29, 1965. Most of these troopers were from Southwest Georgia

¹⁷ J.R. Campbell Interview.

called continued protests “completely unwarranted and irresponsible.” “For two weeks now” he stated, “this community has been subjected to uncalled for actions that would have tried the patience of a Job.”¹⁸ Not only did the Mayor dismiss the moral demands of the civil rights movement, he characterized the white citizens of Americus as victims, equating them with the afflicted, innocent biblical character of Job. The moral tide had shifted. According to much of the white community, the movement was disrespectful and fearsome. The nonviolent movement had been subverted. Mayor Walker especially criticized the grocery store pickets, saying, “It is sad that in Americus, Ga., today...peace-loving citizens may be kept from performing such routine chores as shopping because of a feeling of fear.”¹⁹

It did not matter that Andy Whatley’s murderers were not even tangentially involved in the civil rights movement; it did not matter that they were not outsiders, but local Americus residents. Moreover, it did not matter that the event was as surprising and frightening to the black community in Americus as to the white. Though the murder had nothing to do with the movement, it had everything to do with it. The *Americus Times-Recorder* gave it such “great and extensive coverage” that it became “inseparably related” to the Americus and Sumter County Movement.²⁰ A murder was something the opposition could work with. They could accuse the activists of being out of control, paint black people as threatening to whites, and, most significantly, they could assert that the civil rights movement was not really nonviolent nor was it moral.

By 1965, the civil rights movement itself was fragmented between those who upheld the transformative moral power of nonviolence and those who asserted that nonviolence meant a

¹⁸ “Mayor Issues Statement On Situation Here,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 3, 1965.

¹⁹ “Mayor Issues Statement On Situation Here,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 3, 1965.

²⁰ *State of Georgia vs. Charlie Hopkins*, “Motion for Change of Venue,” Sumter County Superior Court, March 1, 1966.

bloodbath for blacks in the South. The latter voices had always existed within the conversation over rights and revolution, but they spoke louder in 1965 than before. Stokely Carmichael, wearied by SNCC's nonviolence, integrationism, and notions of the beloved community, was organizing a new black political movement, Black Power, in Lowndes County, Alabama.²¹ The rise of Black Power and its declaration that it would fight whites with arms if necessary, renewed fear amongst whites. The great violent uprising of America's black citizens that many had long feared seemed imminent. Perceptions of black violence and criminality especially took hold of the American imagination as the freedom struggle became distanced from its theological roots. "The leaders of civil rights are always crying out against prejudice and hate," one prominent evangelical declared, "They are always talking about love," but, he continued, "I am fearful that all of the rioting and demonstrating has produced a great amount of hate as evidenced through recent murders and other forms of violence."²² A week or so after Whatley's murder, the Watts Riots broke out in Los Angeles.²³

The fear produced by displays of violence not only allowed white citizens to frame the movement as dangerous, chaotic and immoral but also justified a new fervor over the establishment of 'law and order.' In Americus, the mayor, governor, and police chief constantly invoked this phrase as police presence dramatically increased. Americus Police Chief Ross Chambliss, for instance, assured citizens that "law and order [would] be maintained in the city

²¹ See: Hasan Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Peniel E. Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting Til the Midnight Hour*, (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2006); William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Robert Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (1962).

²² Jerry Falwell, "Ministers and Marches" (1965) in Matthew Avery Sutton, ed. *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012.

²³ Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia), 1995; Robert Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1968).

under all circumstances.”²⁴ Arrests, even in nonviolent demonstrations, continued, with punitive sentences. Andy Whatley’s alleged killers, for instance, were quickly found, arrested, and charged.²⁵ And with the Los Angeles flames still burning in the minds of the public, it was unlikely, their attorney C.B. King argued, that the proceedings would be objective. “In the minds of the public,” King stated, there existed “a merger of identity of the defendant with the Movement...[which] inflamed the prejudices and passions of the white community of Sumter County to the extent that the defendant is virtually foreclosed from the possibility of receiving a fair and impartial trial.”²⁶

Charlie Lee Hopkins and Willie Lamar were both black men in their early twenties with criminal records. Though there exists some debate, evidence suggests that Hopkins and Lamar were, in fact, responsible for Whatley’s death. Though they likely did not intend to kill anyone, and certainly not Whatley, they fired fatal shots that ended an innocent man’s life. Hopkins, the shooter, appeared before a special grand jury comprised of 23 Sumter County residents and chaired by none other than W.D. White, an avowed racist.²⁷ Hopkins pled not guilty to the charge of murder “with malice aforethought.”²⁸ On March 3, 1966, however, a jury of 12 pronounced Hopkins guilty, though they requested that the court “have mercy.”²⁹ In December

²⁴ “Law and Order will be Kept, Chambliss Says,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 4, 1965.

²⁵ The men were formally accused of killing and murdering Andy Whatley “with malice aforethought...by shooting him in the head with a pistol.” (*State of Georgia vs. Charlie Lee Hopkins and Willie James Lamar* (Alias Willie Lamar Thomas), Case No. 1228, Sumter County Superior Court February Term 1966).

²⁶ *State of Georgia vs. Charlie Hopkins*, “Motion for Change of Venue,” Sumter County Superior Court, March 1, 1966.

²⁷ *State of Georgia vs. Charlie Lee Hopkins*, Case No. 1228, Sumter County Superior Court February Term 1966. *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 2, 1965. Stories of W.D. White are infamous in the county, as he was a man who remained an outspoken racist and advocate of white supremacy into the 1970s (Interview with Rev. Bill Dupree).

²⁸ *State of Georgia vs. Charlie Lee Hopkins*, Case No. 1228, Sumter County Superior Court February Term 1966.

²⁹ There is a legal difference between a guilty verdict with a request for mercy and one without. The request for mercy officially indicates a recommendation for life in prison as opposed to the death penalty. K.L. Carpenter, Foreman, March 3, 1966, Clerk Superior Court Records.

of 1966, he was sentenced to be “confined at labor” for “the rest of his natural life.”³⁰ Lamar, already out on bond for possession and manufacturing of illegal whiskey, plead guilty to voluntary manslaughter and was sentenced to five years in prison.³¹

Defense attorneys did challenge the sentences, though most of their case centered around the impossibility of receiving a fair trial in Sumter County, not around proving innocence. Attorneys filed a “motion to quash the indictment” on that grounds that the Sumter County Grand Jury was not representative. Attorney C.B. King noted that “the defendant herein is a member of the Negro race” while “all of [the Grand Jury’s] 22 members were of the white or Caucasian race, except one.” Furthermore, King protested, “the jury commissioners of Sumter County are now, and in the past, have always been members of the Caucasian race” and “select a disproportionately small number of Negroes...to comprise the jury list from which grand jurors are selected.” Black residents “have been and are now,” King complained, “deliberately, systematically, arbitrarily and expressly discriminated against...their selection for traverse jury duty is denied solely on account of their race.”³² Such discrimination violated of the Fourteenth Amendment and thus, the defense argued, nullified the ruling. The defense also requested a “change of venue,” claiming that Hopkins and Lamar could not “obtain a fair and impartial trial in this county because of the prejudice against Negroes.” Attorney King noted “that Sumter County has been the site of demonstration by the Ku Klux Klan, following the alleged murder,” appealing that “the Ku Klux Klan is an organization of considerable influence in said County.”³³ Hopkins especially could not receive a fair trial “in the County aforesaid” since “the act for

³⁰ Felony Sentence, *State of Georgia vs. Charlie Lee Hopkins*, Case No. 1228 (1966), December 1965, Sumter County Court Records. Hopkins was paroled on March 19, 1976, and his civil and political rights were commuted on July 10, 1980.

³¹ *The State vs. Willie James Lamar*, Case No. 1228 (1966), Sumter County Court Record.

³² *State of Georgia vs. Willie Lamar*, “Motion to Quash the Indictment and Challenge to the Array of Traverse Jurors,” February 28, 1966, Sumter County Superior Court. Interestingly, King complains not only of blacks being excluded, but women as well, who he imagined would be more sympathetic to his clients.

³³ *State of Georgia vs. Charlie Hopkins*, “Motion for Change of Venue,” Sumter County Superior Court.

which he was indicted involves the alleged death of a white person at the hands of a non-white person; a crime for which white jurors...have historically permitted emotion to interfere.” In Sumter County, a black person accused of killing a white person simply would not receive a fair trial. Despite the defense’s protestations, both men were convicted and imprisoned. Indeed, beginning in the 1960s, the constant invocation of law and order and draconian punishments meted out disproportionately to black Americans, contributed to a new system of legal oppression.³⁴ As the South slowly shed its system of legal segregation, another system began to take its place, one made possible by the perceived violence and imposed criminality of black Americans.

As they invoked law and order to suppress protest, Americus officials and white citizens also began to speak out harshly against the presence of outsiders. Americus Mayor T. Griffin Walker cited the “irresponsible statements” and “vulgar language” of “outside agitators” in explaining the racial tensions in town. Their words, Mayor Walker claimed, “are calculated for one purpose...the creating of ill will and violence in this good city.”³⁵ For his part, Georgia Governor Carl Sanders estimated that seventy-five percent of civil rights demonstrators did not live in Americus, expressing his belief that these outsiders sought to “stir up emotions and perhaps cause more violence.”³⁶ Sanders implied that the movement was hypocritical, claiming Christian morality while it spread hatred. As he put it, “An invitation for continued violence is being sponsored by so-called apostles of goodwill.”³⁷ “It would be a tragedy if there is a further loss of life because of outsiders coming to our state,” the Governor intoned. “I would like so see

³⁴ This continued throughout the twentieth century, even as the civil rights movement and Black Power movement receded. Historian Michelle Alexander, in her exploration of mass black incarceration beginning in the 1980s, even labeled the phenomenon the “new Jim Crow.” Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press), 2010.

³⁵ “Mayor Hits Agitators, Urges Calm by Citizens,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 4, 1965.

³⁶ Carl Sanders, *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 3, 1965.

³⁷ “Keep Outsiders out of Americus, Sanders Urges,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 2, 1965.

those outsiders leave” he continued, so that “our differences can be resolved by responsible Georgians and not by outsiders.”³⁸

This notion that unrest and violence had been incited by outsiders allowed white officials in Americus to tell themselves that the local black residents were content in the unequal system of Jim Crow. A few days after Whatley’s murder, a series of curious and revealing editorials to that effect appeared in the local newspaper, the *Americus Times-Recorder*.³⁹

On August 2, the newspaper printed a rather unusual piece attributed simply and obliquely to “A Negro Citizen.” Calling it “an unsolicited letter received by *The Times-Recorder*,” the newspaper noted that although it “ordinarily requires that names be listed with letters printed from the public, it is not doing so in this instance because of the writer’s fears.” “His identity is known to the newspaper, however,” the editor assured readers. The author of the column insisted that he was an Americus native who had lived there “for many years in peace and harmony with my own race and the white people.” He claimed, “our town has been a good town,” one that had “always treated negroes fairly.” Americus, the man wrote, had “abided by the laws of the United States and has let those of us who wanted to enter public eating places, picture shows, and schools and to vote.” While affirming the freedoms allowed blacks in town, the author also made an argument for continued segregation. “Most of us do not want to mix with the white people,” he stated, explaining, “we are proud of our color and of our race. We feel that God made us black and the white man white and He made the segregation [sic]. ... We do not want to go with our white friends, to their churches and schools, we have our own, we are

³⁸ “Keep Outsiders out of Americus, Sanders Urges,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 2, 1965.

³⁹ Fascinatingly, the paper itself was mentioned in the Whatley murder proceedings. Defense attorney C.B. King petitioned to have the trial moved partly due to the fact that the Times-Recorder, the only local newspaper in town, “gave great and extensive coverage” to the murder. The Times-Recorder, he alleged, “has pursued a publication and editorial policy antagonistic and hostile against the Sumter County Movement.” (*State of Georgia vs. Charlie Hopkins*, “Motion for Change of Venue,” Sumter County Superior Court, March 1, 1966).

happier with our own race as God intended us to be.” Of course, since God had sanctioned racial difference, the civil rights movement was characterized by the editorialist as “a force of evil.” Blaming the movement on “white people who we never saw before,” this citizen complained that agitators “come into our streets begging us to march and always we find letters begging us to march and not to buy anything from the white people.” This was not good for black citizens of Americus, the author averred, noting, “we colored people have had less freedom the past two weeks in Americus than we ever has [sic] in our lives. We do not know why these outside white people and negroes come into our town to cause us trouble. We do not like it. We feel like it is an outside force, maybe this Communism we hear about. Whatever it is, it is not good and the average Americus negro does not want it.” Not only did local blacks not benefit from the movement, they suffered for it. As the author put it, “we are scared to go on the streets of a town where we have been happy, we are scared for our wives and children.” He concluded the letter with a plea for help from the white community, saying, “I have been thinking and I would like to know if the good white people could back us the good negroes and all stick together to fight the devil that is among’st us. Maybe together we could stop all this.” Though the author admitted he was “not smart enough to know why” these events were occurring, he nevertheless called for an end to civil rights activities and a return to the halcyon days of segregation, concluding, “I hope the *Times-Recorder* will print this. I am afraid to sign my name. Our town is filled with fear.”⁴⁰

While this “negro citizen” may have existed, it seems more plausible that he existed only in the imaginations and yearnings of the white community of Americus. The arguments invoked suggest the projected hopes of white southerners, while the condescending, occasional grammatical errors (appearing disproportionately toward the end of the letter) and final plea that

⁴⁰ Letter from “A Negro Citizen,” “Voice of the People,” *The Americus Times-Recorder*, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box 25.

“we are having to put up with something none of us want and I am not smart enough to know why” look more like calculated counterfeit than earnest ignorance. For this reason, it is fair to presume that this letter was written by whites. As such, its text can be mined for the insight it provides into the intellectual, moral and theological chasm separating white Southerners’ perception of their black neighbors and the reality of black Americans’ feelings and beliefs.

The notion that “Americus has always treated negroes fairly” seems less a reflection of actual labor conditions and social arrangements than the segregationist defense that Jim Crow was a system built on fairness and dignity. Certainly the argument that Americus had been always integrated is false; so too, is the claim the strides toward integration of public facilities resulted from the benevolence of the general population. It seems highly unlikely that blacks would characterize the civil rights movement as “ a force of evil” in which black citizens were harassed on their porches and “begged to march” by a troublesome, “outside” force. It is even more unlikely that they would characterize civil rights protestors as “the devil amongst us.” The assertion that “we do not want to go with our white friends, to their churches and schools, we have our own, we are happier with our own race as God intended us to be,” sounds more like the formulation of segregationists than of African Americans. Civil rights proponents rarely spoke of joining white institutions for the sake of joining them and much more spoke of integration as ending the evil of segregation and providing equal access to American life. The editorial’s theological arguments are particularly interesting, as they reveal a hidden theology of segregation, imagined as universal orthodoxy. The statements that “God made us black and the white man white and He made the segregation,” and that separate races were the way “God intended us to be,” may have been unassailable dogma in the white community, but it had no purchase among blacks.

Two days later, a response to the column appeared in the *Americus Times-Recorder*, this one proudly authored by a prominent white citizen, Wm. Harry Moore. Writing “TO THE FRIGHTENED COLORED PEOPLE OF AMERICUS, GEORGIA,” Moore assured his “friends” that they were “not alone in these troublesome days,” but were joined by “a vast host of white persons who are interested in your welfare, safety and security.” Moore agreed with the “Negro citizen” that much trouble was being caused by outsiders, reiterating, “these outsiders who have invaded our City are not your friends, they have only one interest and that is the furthering of their selfish ambitions and the money that they can collect. These people are paid so much a day to come in and cause trouble.” “When all of this is over,” Moore claimed, “they will be hundreds of thousands of dollars the richer,” but “guilty of taking little children and marching them through the streets for their own selfish ambitions.” He continued, “if these outsiders threaten you in any way do not hesitate to call the Police Department and they will see that you have every protection.” Moore entreated the black community of Americus to trust the city authorities and not these outside influences. “I know the Mayor and the Members of the City Council and the other elected officials of Sumter County,” he claimed, “they want to be your friends,” and have at their heart “the welfare of all the City of Americus.” In addition to political leaders, Moore also wrote that the businesspeople of Americus supported peaceful black citizens: “they appreciate your patronage... You are welcome in their stores and on the streets and in any of the public places of this city.” Moore assured his readers that “Americus is made up of people of good will,” remarking that “if this had not been so, there would have been violence.” “We have all tried to keep cool, calm, and level headed in these days,” he recognized. This restraint would pay off, Moore insisted. He pledged, “when the outsiders, the renegades, and the paid tools of violence and ill will have gone home, you may rest assured that the white people of

goodwill will sit down with responsible people of your race and find a solution for any problems that may exist,” noting however, that “no right thinking person... can sit down and council together as long as there is a gun leveled at [their] heads.” But, with God’s help and provision, Moore declared that there was hope for a peaceful future for Americus. “Like the Hebrew children of old,” he wrote, “Americus is walking through the fiery furnace, but by the Grace of God, we shall come out safely on the other side.” Signing his name, “Yours in Christ,” Moore concluded his editorial with a benediction: “May our Heavenly Father protect you, comfort your hearts and drive fear from your lives.”⁴¹

Like its predecessor, this editorial reveals much about the thoughts and feelings of the white community of Americus. They believed that the “vast host” of white people were basically good, and that civil rights activists were bad. Americus, they thought, would return to its normal equanimity as soon as the outside agitators left, since the native black community was content and race relations mostly peaceful.

Moore’s editorial not only captures the white community’s perceptions of outsiders and hope for resolution, it also reveals a significant theological reconstitution. Moore recast the whites of Americus rather than the blacks as Israelites fleeing enslavement in Egypt and yearning for freedom. The good people in Americus were being persecuted by Pharaoh’s minions-- opportunist agitators. His concluding benediction, “May our Heavenly Father protect you, comfort your hearts and drive fear from your lives,” positioned him and those he represented as considerate, benevolent protectors of the black community, those on their same side, and also those who were “yours, in Christ.” Thus, the opposition to the civil rights movement not only insisted on law and order but sought to undercut the theological claims of the black community, particularly the civil rights movement’s monopoly on identification with the persecuted children

⁴¹ Letter from Wm. Harry Moore, *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 4, 1965, FUMC Box.

of Israel. With the murder of Andy Whatley, the white opposition to civil rights in Americus began to regain its footing, and soon the theological high ground. Anyone who hesitated in this assessment or expressed contrary viewpoints was quickly hushed and ostracized.

Warren Fortson: A Southern Heretic

Warren Fortson took one last look at his beautiful new home on Taylor Street before pulling out of the driveway. Earlier in the day, he had wandered through the nineteen rooms of his turn of the century home, sadly imagining the life that could have—should have—been. This was where he was going to raise his family, where he was going to build his law practice, where he was going to live his days in peace. At this house, in this town. Those dreams now seemed forever lost, lost somewhere between justice and the law, between doing the right thing and saying all the wrong ones. How had he got here? Fortson didn't even know. All he knew was that he had to leave Americus. In addition to subverting the moral position of the movement, opponents of civil rights also maintained power and influence by ostracizing dissenters and alienating those who possessed different views. As in issues of religion, issues of race became dogmatic and those who held heretical notions were ousted from the fellowship of believers.

Fortson was a Georgian. Born in 1928 in Washington, GA, he was the youngest of eight children.⁴² After attending Oxford College of Emory University and two stints in the Marine Corps, Warren Fortson read the law and began to set up a practice in Georgia, first in Hawkinsville but then in Americus, where he moved with his wife and young family. They arrived in Americus in 1958. At first, everything was wonderful for the Fortsons. The family thrived, with Betty happily occupied at the Americus Country Club, the Junior League, the Americus Garden Club, and many other social activities. Warren's law practice prospered and he

⁴² His eldest brother, Ben, served as Georgia's Secretary of State for 33 years and had an illustrious political career. See: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/government-politics/ben-fortson-1904-1979>.

was soon named the Sumter County Attorney. Additionally, he served on the school board, taught Sunday school at First United Methodist, and held numerous other leadership positions in the community, including being the President of the Rotary Club. Humbly, Fortson insisted his community involvement was “what all young lawyers do.”⁴³ He was indeed a young lawyer, and a family man, happy to be in a town where he had both influence and friends.

But in 1963, the peaceful life the Fortsons had built in Americus came under fire. The students who had fought for the integration of the Martin Theater had been arrested and placed in an abandoned building in downtown Americus, near Fortson’s law office. “I came to work, saw all those children, Fortson recalled, and “I made it my point to get to know those kids who were down there.” Most of the students were released on bond and given probationary status. Vulnerable under the law, they were “snatched up for anything.” Fortson took on their cases, working closely with Albany attorney C.B. King. Fortson’s legal work soon brought him into conflict with the white power structure. In 1964, for example, a young civil rights activist named Robertiena Freeman was arrested under charges of “fornication.” Freeman, “a straight A student,” had recently integrated Americus High School and some in Americus wanted her gone. When Fortson heard the news of her arrest, he “knew damn well that the next morning her father was going to be in my office for me to represent them,” which, he added, “I did.” Fortson negotiated a deal in which Freeman avoided jail time and instead went to California for a while.⁴⁴ A few years earlier, Fortson had also offered legal counsel to Clarence Jordan and the Koinonia children when they were banned from attending Americus High, successfully

⁴³ Warren Fortson, Interview by author, January 20, 2012, Atlanta, GA.

⁴⁴ Warren Fortson Interview. Actually, It was Clarence Jordan who arranged for Robertiena to go to California. As her father, Rev. R.L. Freeman recalled, “While all of this was going on Dr. Clarence Jordan, in a prayerful manner, succeeded in getting the judge of court to turn my daughter over to him, and let him enroll her in a camp of their approval to spend the summer. This camp which he sent her to was very helpful and enjoyable to her. The prayers of Dr. Jordan and the people at the Koinonia Farm, my family and myself, and our many friends and her many friends and school mates --we believe God answered them all.” (R.L. Freeman, Koinonia Archive)

petitioning for their admission to the school. This action had already made him “a trifle gamy” to his white neighbors, and his involvement with the Freeman case solidified his suspect status. . Fortson insisted that his primary allegiance as an attorney was to uphold the law; his defense of the students stemmed not from activism or radicalism, but devotion to the American legal system. But in addition to a lawyer’s mind, Fortson had something of an activist’s heart. Around this same time, Fortson began to “work behind the scenes” on racial issues, urging the schools to integrate voluntarily, “quietly integrating the library,” and building business relationships in the black community. Then, in the contentious summer of 1965, Fortson unknowingly committed his “final heresy.”⁴⁵ At the request of civil rights activists, Fortson advocated the organization of a biracial committee to discuss the racial situation in Americus. Though the committee never came to fruition, Fortson had taken a step too far, unquestionably emerging as a civil rights sympathizer, a southern heretic, and a target for the segregationist orthodox.⁴⁶

For his part, Fortson insisted that he simply sought equitable, legal solutions to Americus’s

⁴⁵ “Americus the Beautiful,” *Newsweek*, September 1965, p 30.

⁴⁶ The story of the “hopeless” Americus biracial committee is a saga unto itself. (Marshall Frady, “What Happened that Summer to Warren Fortson, *Southerners*). “At the appropriate time,” Mayor Walker stated on July 31, 1965, “but certainly not now, meeting of a biracial committee can and will be recommended by myself and the Council.” But, he continued, “I feel that it would be ineffective now because of the feeling generated in the hearts and minds of citizens of both races in the city of Americus.” In the wake of tension and violence, the committee was postponed and deferred several times and many in Americus were completely opposed to the formation of a political entity comprised of black and white citizens. Eventually, a group of 8 white and 8 black citizens were arranged and met to discuss racial issues in Americus and come up with equitable solutions. Selection of the Committee members was decided by the Mayor, City Council, and Board of Sumter County Commissioners and included white representatives: Warren Fortson, Mrs. Audrey Bass, Ms. R.D. McNeill Sr., Lang Sheffield, Harold A. Collins, John Pope, Spencer Pryor, W.E. Smith. (“Community Relations Committee Named Here,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 26, 1965.) However, the committee never really came to fruition, as it was stymied by an issue at once completely superficial and yet deeply significant in the South. One of the women of the biracial committee was Mabel Barnum, a prominent black citizen and member of Americus’ small black middle class. She asked to be called Mrs. Barnum at the meetings and that caused quite a stir. Fortson recalled a discussion amongst the whites. “They want to be called Mr. and Mrs.,” he stated, continuing, “What we gonna call Mabel? I don’t mind calling her Ms. Barnum. Hell, I’ll call her that.” But not everyone was willing to both meet with blacks in Americus and also afford them equal status, even in a matter as small as prefixes. “The whole damn thing broke up because they couldn’t agree on what to call a woman they had known all their lives,” Fortson chided sadly. (Warren Fortson Interview). See also WSB Film Clip: http://crdl.usg.edu/cgi/crdl?query=id%3Augabma_wsbn_48455&_cc=1&Welcome.

racial disputes, hoping that fair agreements would “quiet all this down.”⁴⁷ Of the South’s struggle to accept racial equality, he mused, “it was like watching a child trying to master a puzzle. And you get frustrated and you want to say ‘Just pick it up and put it over here!’”⁴⁸ In Fortson’s estimation, change was undeniably coming to the South and pragmatic Southerners would work to ensure that that change came about peacefully and justly. That was a strategy that had been successful in Atlanta and in other places. Fortson, like the boycotters themselves, assumed that people would ultimately act in accordance with their economic interests. Not in Americus.⁴⁹ Whereas business leaders in most Georgia cities sought to mollify protestors at the very least, the 1963 president of Americus’ Chamber of Commerce rebuffed such measures, like the calls for a biracial committee, with a bemused “what the hell for?”⁵⁰ As Francis Pauley, the Director of the Georgia Council on Human Relations, concluded, in Americus, “they would rather have had their banks and businesses fail than to desegregate their town.”⁵¹ Or, in Fortson’s own words: “the voice of reason is very weak in our community.”⁵² Pauley and Fortson’s comments reveal how deeply segregation was woven into the fabric of white society, so much so that maintaining it was worth sacrificing economic solvency. At one summer dinner party, a local business leader

⁴⁷ Warren Fortson interview.

⁴⁸ Warren Fortson interview.

⁴⁹ There were exceptions. For example, “the most prominent” businessman in town, Charles Wheatley, once vociferously defended segregation, but he bent when his assets were threatened. A man whose “views [were] rarely disregarded,” Wheatley controlled the hospital, bus station, four of the five grocery stores in town, the Manhattan Shirt Factory, a construction company, and served influentially with a local bank, with the First Presbyterian Church of Americus, and as City Engineer. But Wheatley’s racial views “served to protect his economic and social capital at all costs.” John Perdew recalled that in 1963, a group of black citizens sought an audience with the Mayor, T. Griffin Walker. Wheatley “reportedly motioned aside the Mayor” and ensured that the city “refused adamantly to yield any concessions.” Yet, the following year, fearing national retribution from organized labor, Wheatley quietly integrated the previously all-white labor force at his Manhattan Shirt Factory. (John Perdew, SNCC report, “Americus and Baker County, August 1, 1965, Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement.)

⁵⁰ “Four Pickets Jailed in Georgia Under Law with Penalty of Death, *Nashua Telegraph*, Nashua, N.H. October 31, 1963.

⁵¹ “The Civil Rights Act: Compliance as Reported to the Georgia Council on Human Relations” (July 15, 20, 1964), Frances Pauley Papers; *New York Times* July 9, 1964; Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 41; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 158, 176. For more on Pauley, a remarkable woman and friend of Warren Fortson, see: Kathryn L. Nasstrom, *Everybody’s Grandmother and Nobody’s Fool: Frances Freeborn Pauley and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁵² “Americus Whites Ask Peace Talks,” Gene Roberts for the *New York Times*, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

approached Fortson, informing him, likely in slurry speech, “What’s wrong with you, Warren, is that you’re trying to be the conscience of this town.” Tired, Fortson replied that no, in fact, “what’s wrong with me is I just want this town to find its conscience.”⁵³

Fortson’s activities and opinions earned him the ire of much of the white community--his friends, neighbors and even fellow church members. To them, his racial pragmatism amounted to a “heretical streak.”⁵⁴ There were “threatening phone calls and charges of Communism.”⁵⁵ According to then Secretary of State Jimmy Carter, Fortson became the “victim of a whisper campaign in which he has been accused of being a member of the Communist Party and a supporter of the NAACP.”⁵⁶ The campaign against Fortson culminated in a petition demanding he be ousted as the County Attorney. The petition garnered over 2,000 signatures and he was soon removed from his position.⁵⁷ “By this time,” Fortson remembered, “I had publicly become the centerpiece of it all, and there was a growing antagonism toward me... they pretty much turned against us.” He and his family soon found themselves cast out socially and even in physical danger. Warren’s wife Betty, upon arriving at her regular Junior League meeting, discovered that she was “invisible.” His law practice shriveled. The family received harassing phone calls and threats around the clock. Their son was even almost shot and killed by a playmate who called him a nigger lover.” Thankfully, someone walked by and took the rifle out of the youngster’s hands.⁵⁸

⁵³ ““Americus the Beautiful,” *Newsweek*, September 1965, 30.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Americus Whites Ask Peace Talks,” Gene Roberts for the *New York Times*, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ For his part, Fortson claimed to be “less interested in defending his job than in seeing Americus recognize its racial difficulty as a ‘human problem.’” (“Americus Whites Ask Peace Talks,” Gene Roberts for the *New York Times*, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

⁵⁸ Interview with Warren Fortson.

The antagonism extended even into the fellowship of the church, which exerted a “discreet hand in the ostracism of Fortson.”⁵⁹ In the South, racial inclusion could easily lead to religious exclusion.⁶⁰ Even those who stood within the community of the church could be ousted for refusal to comply with theologically reinforced segregationism. Fortson and his family had to stop attending First United Methodist because of the mounting hostility directed at them. Though he had been the superintendent of Sunday School for years, Warren was relieved of his Sunday School responsibilities. The church’s pastor, Vernard Robertson, “declined comment.”⁶¹

One man from Athens, GA, when he learned of Fortson’s dismissal, blasted the church, saying he was “sickened” by their actions. “When I read of the failure of your church to renew [Fortson’s] capacity as a Sunday School teacher,” the Athens man wrote, “I could easily have thrown up.” “You are a pitiful spectacle before decent mankind,” he declared, “you and your church, along with your sick community...will hardly see the incompatibility of your professed belief in Christ, history’s chief rabble rouse and agitator, and your nauseating silence when one of the few Christians in Americus takes a stand on the side of Christianity. How will you face your congregation? As if nothing has happened?” The man concluded by condemning the church and Vernard Robertson: “You are merely another manifestation of the failure of modern Christianity to serve its founder who according to my memory and recollection of the Scriptures never avoided an issue because of its being unpopular in the community.” Ralph McGill, a Georgia journalist, also expressed his contempt over Fortson’s removal at First Methodist. “The firing of a Sunday School teacher for practicing Christianity,” McGill exclaimed, “is so grotesque and preposterous a thing that one can only break into a loud, mocking laughter.” He

⁵⁹ Marshall Frady, “God and Man in the South,” *The Atlantic*, 1966.

⁶⁰ For example, Clarence Jordan and the Koinonians has been removed from the fellowship of Rehoboth Baptist Church in 1950, just as Warren Forston and his family were pushed out of First United Methodist Americus. (See Chapter 1).

⁶¹ “Racial Attorney Leaves Americus,” *Ellensburg Daily Record*, September 16, 1965 (AP Press).

concluded that if the church represented Christianity in the South “perhaps it is just as well that there is in this country a recession in religion.”⁶² The outrage over the church’s action toward Warren Fortson, at least for some, stemmed from a distaste for those who “preach the gospel or profess the church in hypocritical fashion.”⁶³ Fortson could defensibly be kicked out of the Rotary Club for his racial politics, but not the church. The shunning of racial dissenters was certainly political and social, but as so many things caught in the nexus of race and religion in the South, it also contained a theological component.

After weeks of terror and loneliness, Warren Fortson decided that it was time to leave Americus behind. He had already sent his wife and children out of town and the house was quiet. Fortson sat in his beautiful living room on Taylor Street which had once housed dinner parties and children playing, and where he now sat alone “with [his] rifle across [his] lap.” Right then, he recalled, “I realized it was over in Americus.” He soon left for Atlanta.⁶⁴ The experience scarred the young attorney. As he put it: “to have your people turn against you is an experience you shall never forget.” He hadn’t meant to disrupt anything, he hadn’t intended to lose his job, he certainly hadn’t planned on losing his friendships and being run out of town. It just happened. “It was just like getting into a canoe in the Colorado River,” he remarked, “once you’re committed to the rapids, there’s nothing you can do but ride them out.”⁶⁵

⁶² Ralph McGill, “The Devil Outscores Jesus,” *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, September 25, 1965.

⁶³ Letter from Anonymous, Athens, GA to First United Methodist Church, August 16, 1965, FUMC Box, 138. Though we cannot be entirely sure, this Athens man was likely white, as he was a member of the largely segregated Methodist denomination.

⁶⁴ Fortson had an interesting career following his time in Americus. He lived in Atlanta, briefly did civil rights law in Mississippi and eventually returned to Georgia where he practiced law and even took cases for the Atlanta City schools.

⁶⁵ “Racial Attorney Leaves Americus,” *Ellensburg Daily Record*, September 16, 1965 (AP Press). In some ways, Fortson was on those rapids the rest of his life. Having been kicked out of Americus for his racial stance, Fortson embraced racial activism, working briefly as a civil rights attorney in Mississippi and then taking up the cause in Atlanta. He worked tirelessly with the Atlanta School Board and Dr. Benjamin Mays, making many friends in the civil rights circles in Atlanta, where he still lives.

Warren Fortson was not the first person to be ostracized for daring to question the Southern racial hierarchy. Before him, Clarence Jordan had faced comparable treatment, with similar threats to his life and the lives of his children. After him, Lloyd Moll, the progressive president of the local college, Georgia Southwestern, encountered social isolation on account of his moderate racial views. While southern segregationists sought to control the legal and political systems, they also sought to control the less formal, but no less significant, realm of social relationships. These social relationships included the church. Ostracizing dissenters comprised a subtle and strong part of the opposition to the civil rights movement and to racial change, as these southern dissenters were treated as heretics and expelled from the fellowship of believers.

‘God and the Devil on an equal plane’: School Desegregation, Private Education and *Engel vs. Vitale*

In August of 1964, four black students integrated the previously all-white Americus High School. When they arrived on the first day, escorted by state troopers, angry mobs awaited them. People stood “as far as you could see,” one of the students recalled, “I’d never seen so many white people in all my days.” As they pulled close to the school’s entrance, “bricks started hitting the car.” One student remembered, “I prayed, ‘Lord...’ then boom!”⁶⁶ Once inside the building, the students were predictably harassed and harangued, both by their classmates and occasionally by their teachers. Scenes like this of confrontational resistance to school integration were replayed in hundreds of southern schools during the 1960s. And while resistance was certainly part of the story of white opposition to the civil rights movement in Americus, it was not the whole story, nor even the most significant part. Instead of engaging in a prolonged campaign of massive resistance to school integration, whites in Americus largely abandoned integrated public schools for private schools of their own. While the impetus for the flight from public schools was

⁶⁶ Robertiena Freeman Interview.

almost certainly racial, the move involved both racial and religious logic. Since the early 1960s, many conservatives had been suspicious of government intervention in public education for theological reasons.⁶⁷ The reality of integration following the 1964 Civil Rights Act only served to deepen their resentment. Thus, citing theological and racial justifications, many Southern whites, including many in Americus, fled integrated public schools for all-white private Christian academies. Racial anger merged with theological mandate.

When Ernest Vandiver ran for Governor of Georgia in 1958, he ran under the campaign motto “no, not one!”⁶⁸ Not one black child would enter a Georgia school on his watch, he thundered, a promise that got him elected but that would prove difficult to keep. In 1959, U.S. District Judge Frank Hooper ruled in the case of *Calhoun vs. Latimer* that Atlanta’s segregated school system was unconstitutional, giving the state one year to either implement the *Brown* decision and integrate the schools or face penalties levied by the federal government. Governor Vandiver had a crisis on his hands. He could defy the court, which would halt funding to Atlanta’s schools and effectively shut down the public school system in the state--fulfilling his campaign promise. Or, he could comply with the federal ruling and allow for the integration of

⁶⁷ For more on the long history of conflict over education for religious reasons, see: Michael F. Peko, "Religious Schooling In America: An Historiographic Reflection," *History of Education Quarterly* 2000 40(3): 320-338; James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, ed. *Religious Schooling in America* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1984); Susan D. Rose, *Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan: Evangelical Schooling in America* (New York: Routledge), 1988; Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Edith L. Blumhofer, ed., *Religion, Education, and the American Experience: Reflections on Religion and American Public Life* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Lloyd P. Jorgenson, *The State and the Non-Public School, 1825-1925* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1987); Steven L. Jones, *Religious Schooling in America: Private Education and Public Life* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 2008); Alan Peshkin, *God’s Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, eds., *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion after Divided by Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶⁸ His stump speech concluded, “We will not bow our heads in submission to naked force. We have no thought of surrender. We will not knuckle under. We will not capitulate. I make this solemn pledge... When I am your governor, neither my three children, nor any child of yours, will ever attend a racially mixed school in the state of Georgia. No, not one.” (Press release of speech, 9 August 1958, box 13, Vandiver Papers, as quoted in Jeff Roche, *Restructured Resistance: The Sibley Commission and the Politics of Desegregation in Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998, 73.)

Atlanta's schools, preserving public education but incurring the sure ire of his white electorate. In Atlanta, the tension was palpable, with organizations such as Help Our Public Education (HOPE) rallying for integration of the city schools, while organizations such as the Metropolitan Association for Segregated Education (MASE) and Georgians Unwilling to Surrender (GUTS) countered.⁶⁹ The Governor was torn.

After convening with some political leaders in the state, Vandiver established the General Assembly Committee on Schools, better known as the Sibley Commission, named after its chair, Atlanta attorney John Sibley.⁷⁰ The brainchild Vandiver's chief of staff Griffin Bell, the Sibley Commission set out to gauge the "sentiment" in Georgia over school desegregation and make a recommendation to the state General Assembly about what to do before *Calhoun's* deadline. In Georgia, the vast majority of those who advocated compliance *and* those who advocated resistance were segregationists. That segregation was preferable was never really in question. As Atlanta journalist Ralph McGill explained, it "was never a question of being for integration or against it. It was, and is, a question of public schools or no schools."⁷¹ Ten meetings were held across the state to listen to residents, and, as Bell stated, to elect "whether to close the schools or integrate them."⁷² The first meeting was held on March 3, 1960 in Bell's hometown-- Americus, GA.

⁶⁹ HOPE and MASE exchanged a series of heated exchanges, including a notable bumper sticker war for the hearts and fenders of Peachtree Street. When HOPE declared "We want Public Education," MASE responded, "Me too, But Segregated." Though not exactly clever, these slogans indicate of how conflicted the city, and thus Governor Vandiver, was in the years following *Calhoun*. (Jeff Roche, 60-63); Paul E. Mertz, "'Mind Changing Time all over Georgia': HOPE, Inc. and School Desegregation, 1958-1961, *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No.1 (Spring 1993), 41-61. It also bear mentioning that GUTS was lead and supported by Lester Maddox, the rabid segregationist, frequent Americus visitor, and later governor of the state.

⁷⁰ John Sibley was an attorney at King & Spalding, a businessman, and prominent University of Georgia alum. See: John Sibley Papers, Emory University, Atlanta GA.

⁷¹ Ralph McGill, "The Slow Mills of Law," in *A Church, A School*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959), 92.

⁷² Judge Griffin Bell, Georgia's Political Heritage Program Oral History Interviews, September 24, 1997, Annie Belle Weaver Special Collections, Irvine Sullivan Ingram Library, University of West Georgia.

On an unusually icy day, the first meeting of the Sibley Commission rang into order.⁷³ People filed into the Americus County Courthouse, some clad in coveralls and others in suits, many with prepared notes and speeches tucked into their pockets. The group assembled in Americus represented the twenty counties of the Georgia's Third District, an area popularly known as the Black Belt. As predicted, these counties proved the most dedicated to complete segregation in schools, since all but six of them had a majority of black student enrollment. After John Sibley presented Georgia's options, he called witnesses, including W.C. Mundy, the superintendent of Americus schools, Charles Crisp, a prominent local businessman, Louise Hines of the Manhattan Shirt Company, George L. Mathews, chairman of the County Commissioners, and Marvin McNeill, a businessman and farmer. These individuals all insisted that the best tactic for the state was "segregation now, segregation forever, by any means necessary, and at all costs," as did forty-two of the additional fifty-one people who testified at the hearing.⁷⁴

As the Commission continued its meetings throughout the state, from the Appalachian lakes in Rabun County to the Spanish moss covered oaks of the lowcountry, the message was largely the same as it had been in Americus. Georgians listened to hearings on the radio and read reports in the morning news, many joking that they were keeping score.⁷⁵ Sibley himself, though a segregationist, was surprised by the consistent willingness of most Georgians to sacrifice the

⁷³ The weather was unseasonably cold in Americus, immortalized in a poem written to commemorate the Commission: "There's mud on the backroads,/ there's slush in the lane, /There's ice on the high roads, /From the freezing rain,/ But, wait, Mister Weatherman, /Didn't you know /The Sibley Commission is on the go?/ How about it, men/ Of the Study Commission/ Is the ice going to stop/ Your fact finding mission?/ No, says John Sibley./ Never, says Greer./ You can quote me, says Rankin--/'We'll let nothing interfere.'/ So bring on your witnesses,/ Call out the press./ We're going to get/ To the bottom of this mess." (Al Kueltnie, *Sibley Papers*, as quoted in Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 96.)

⁷⁴ The Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered. See also: Transcript, Georgia General Assembly Committee on Schools, Hearing, 3 March 1960, (Americus hearing transcript), Sibley Papers, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. This included the testimony of black residents. Black delegations from Sumter, Stewart and Chattahoochee counties all testified that they favored "continued segregation." (Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 105). Of course, though there was some validity to the position that the black community would lose autonomous schools and that black teachers may be fired if schools were integrated, this testimony was also not entirely free, as black witnesses were coerced and threatened.

⁷⁵ Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 107. Many Georgians joked that they were tallying up the score.

public school systems rather than allow for even token integration. Altogether, an estimated sixty percent of Georgia residents reported that they favored closing the schools to integrating them.⁷⁶ The Sibley Commission, searching for some way to stay on the right side of the law and placate the people, recommended complying with Judge Hooper's desegregation ruling nominally, while coming up with alternative measures to keep schools practically segregated. It was a compromise. Georgia's leaders certainly wanted to maintain white supremacy, but they also desperately sought to avoid the disgraceful racist spectacles produced by the states surrounding them.⁷⁷ In the months following the Commission hearings, Sibley, Bell and others traversed the state seeking to foster support for their plan before the Georgia General Assembly's slated vote in January of 1961. But before the day of reckoning arrived, a crisis occurred that forced Governor Vandiver, unilaterally, to choose between integrating Georgia's schools or closing them.⁷⁸

In January of 1961, Federal Judge W.A. Bootle ruled that the University of Georgia must admit two black students, Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter.⁷⁹ In a move that would

⁷⁶ In some ways this number is lower than expected. Most likely, this is due to geographical splits. In addition to the outlier of Atlanta in the state, many of Georgia's northern districts voted for compliance. These areas, while still mostly segregationist, were not demographically threatened by integration. Though they may have preferred segregated education, they did not want to see the schools shut down when the decision to integrate would have little local effect. In places like Americus, as we've seen, the percentage of those in favor of massive resistance was much higher.

⁷⁷ Jeff Roche describes the story of the Sibley Commission as one of "how massive resistance ultimately failed in Georgia and why the Sibley Commission's restructured resistance succeeded." In avoiding dramatic displays of resistance, Georgia, under the direction of business and political elites like John Sibley and Griffin Bell, was able to attract commerce and stave off humiliation. They were also able to quietly preserve the racial status quo, and leave a legacy of inequality in education. Roche notes that the Commission created a "new form of segregation," one that he says "resembles the North's" and which was a "deliberate new form of defiance—a restructured resistance—rooted in contemporary practicality and corporate pragmatism." (Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, xv-xvii).

⁷⁸ See: Jeff Roche, *Restructured Resistance: The Sibley Commission and the Politics of Desegregation in Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Huff, Christopher A. "Sibley Commission." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 11 November 2013. Web. 15 April 2014.

⁷⁹ These were the same students for whom Clarence Jordan had signed a recommendation letter. The University of Georgia Business School required the endorsement of alumni and Jordan, as a UGA alum, offered his support for the black students, earning him the ire of state and local officials. See Chapter 3. Judge Bootle's ruling over Hunter and Holmes' entrance to the University of Georgia was not the first time he had intervened in issues of who could attend public educational institutions. In 1960, Bootle overruled a city board decision banning three white students

define his tenure, Vandiver decided that he would not defy the court. Rare amongst southern governors and controversial within his own party, his compliance with federal regulations in matters of desegregation became Georgia's position. Because of Judge Bootle's rulings, the Sibley Commission's better judgment, and Governor Vandiver's prudence, Georgia, unlike its neighbors, did not undertake a campaign of massive resistance. In time, schools throughout the state integrated, while resistant Georgians were forced to find other ways to subvert federal rulings and preserve segregation in education.

In Americus, school desegregation came in response to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁸⁰ Part of the landmark 1964 legislation, Title VI, provided the federal government the authority to withhold funding from any institution, school, or organization that it deemed to be racially discriminatory. Then, with the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress sweetened the deal by adding 590 million to southern states for the 1966 fiscal year.⁸¹ Ten years after *Brown*, the federal government was putting its money where its mouth was, and it seemed like an offer public education in South could hardly refuse. While a paltry one percent of black schoolchildren enrolled in previously all-white public schools in the ten years following the initial *Brown* ruling, that number spiked to a respectable forty-six percent in the second decade after *Brown*.⁸² In order to comply with the *Brown* decision and the Civil Rights Act and receive federal funding, many southern school districts implemented "freedom of choice" plans, which,

from Americus High School, declaring that Will Wittkamper, Jan Jordan, and Lora Ruth Browne be admitted immediately. For this, Judge Bootle was burned in effigy in front of the courthouse.

⁸⁰ The integration of Americus High in 1964 is consistent with national trends regarding school integration. David Nevin and Robert E. Bills, *The Schools that Fear Built: Segregationist Academies in the South* (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1976).

⁸¹ See Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 176; *United States vs. Jefferson County Board of Education*, 372 F.2d836 (1966), 856. Whether or not schools or institutions were on compliance with the Civil Rights Act was determined by the Department of Education, Health and Welfare.

⁸² Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense League, David Nevin and Robert E. Bills, *The Schools that Fear Built: Segregationist Academies in the South* (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1976), 9.

ostensibly, gave schoolchildren the ability to decide which school they wanted to attend.⁸³ Under these freedom of choice plans, any child in a given school district could decide to attend any school in that district, with the provision that they could be rejected due to “overcrowding or some other extraordinary circumstance.”⁸⁴ The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights noted that freedom of choice plans were “favored overwhelmingly” by the 1787 southern school districts that had chosen to desegregate voluntarily, including eighty-three percent of such districts in Georgia.⁸⁵ By giving families a decision over where their children would go to school, southern schools could comply with the Civil Rights Act, receive federal funding and yet, by “choice,” remain largely segregated. In some “mystifying” logic, Southern lawmakers, educators, and courts concluded that while *Brown* outlawed segregation, it did not require integration.⁸⁶ As Joe Crespino put it, freedom of choice plans, despite the moniker, “had little do to with freedom or choice.”⁸⁷

The Americus school board decided to implement a freedom of choice policy for the 1964-1965 school year. Though the integration effort was more symbolic than substantive, the adoption of a freedom of choice plan nevertheless indicated a sharp turn from the sentiment

⁸³ In order to receive federal funding, local school districts could submit a voluntary plan of desegregation--either a plan for designating school attendance by geographical area or by ‘freedom of choice,’ the choice of most southern school districts. These plans had to be approved by the Attorney General and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

⁸⁴ Revised Statement of Policies for School Desegregation Plans under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 45.CRR, 181 (1966).

⁸⁵ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Southern School Desegregation, 1966-1967*, 45-46 (1967). Of school districts desegregating non-voluntarily (under court order), freedom of choice plans were also favored, with 129 of the 160 southern districts in this category implementing them.

⁸⁶ There was great debate throughout the courts and public about what exactly was constitutionally mandated by *Brown*. Was the state required to “take affirmative action to remedy the inequality by mixing the races” or simply “precluded from requiring segregation but not forced to act affirmatively to achieve a certain degree of integration”? (Richard W. Brown, “Freedom of Choice in the South: A Constitutional Perspective,” *Louisiana Law Review*, Vol. 28, No. 3, April 1968; <http://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/larev/vol28/iss3/21>.) The story of federal funding and school desegregation is very complicated. See *Brown vs Board of Education* (1954), *Brown II*(1955), *Briggs vs. Elliot* (1955), *Goss vs. Board* (1963), *Bell vs. School Board, City of Gary* (1963), *US vs. Jefferson County* (1966), *US vs. Jefferson County II* (1967). See also: Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* 177-179.

⁸⁷ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* ,177.

expressed during and since the 1960 Sibley Commission hearings.⁸⁸ In September of 1962, for instance, the “citizens of Americus, GA” sent a telegram of support to Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett and Lieutenant Governor Johnson in their effort to stave off integration at Ole Miss. “We stand four square behind you in your magnificent handling of the integration efforts at the University of Mississippi,” the Americus citizens wrote, “would that all state officials and citizens everywhere have the courage, as you have shown, to fight against this despicable movement which can only result in the downfall of the white race. God be with you.”⁸⁹ These citizens were not pleased when, only two years later, the “despicable movement” for school integration came to Americus High School. The decision to implement a freedom of choice plan produced such anger that some decided they would rather see the school reduced to ashes than integrated, setting it ablaze in January of 1964.⁹⁰

Despite hostility from the local white community, four black students--David Bell, Robertiena Freeman, Dobbs Wiggins and Minnie Wise--opted to attend the previously all-white Americus High School under the freedom of choice provision.⁹¹ “I wanted to go,” Freeman

⁸⁸ In May, the county Board of Education opted to forgo federal money rather than desegregate, a sum of 16, 596.76, 2.1 percent of their operating budget. But it seems the Board reconsidered. In July, the Board decided to comply with state requests, adopting guidelines to integrate the schools in the Fall and sending a plan to Washington for federal approval. “Sumter School Board Set to Submit Plan,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 1, 1965; “Sumter School Officials Changed their minds and decided to submit a desegregation plan.” There is a difference between Americus High School (city schools) and Sumter County schools (county schools), though information about desegregation is often the same. By 1965, then, four black children had intergrated Americus High School (Americus City System) but the county schools had not yet allowed black students. Sumter County was one of eight remaining counties that had not taken action to comply with the United States Office of Education’s requirement that every county submit a desegregation plan. Georgia superintendents complained that the majority of plans had been rejected by the state and that they were sincerely trying to create plans for approval and could not figure out what was wrong with their plans. (“50 Desegregation Plans Rejected from Georgia,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, June 8, 1965).

⁸⁹ Western Union Telegram Collection (MUM0472), University of Mississippi, 3.13.14. TD. 28 September 1962. 10:35 A.M. Citizens of Americus, GA to Ross Barnett and Lt. Gov. Johnson. Re: Support and praise.

⁹⁰ January 1961, Americus and Sumter County Timeline, 1915-1961, edited by Alan Anderson.

⁹¹ In an interesting historical symmetry, the four black students were accompanied that morning to school by Greg Wittkamper, the younger brother of Will Wittkamper, who had previously been denied admittance to Americus High, but later went. Greg, because of his religious beliefs and fraternization with the black students, was treated as badly as they were. He later reflected that it was a “baptism of spit.” See Greg Wittkamper, “Baptized in Spit” Clarence Jordan symposium, September 2012; <http://americamagazine.org/issue/609/many-things/many-things>.

recalled, “I thought white kids will be my friends...I thought it was going to be wonderful...one big, rosy happy thing. I told Daddy, ‘I want to go.’” The reality must have shocked the young student. Tensions were so high that the school’s principal arranged for the black students to enter each classroom five minutes before or after the other students to avoid a hallway confrontation, and had them released from school an hour early. Though these details were ostensibly arranged for safety, they also served to keep the four black students separate from the other students. In keeping with Georgia’s acquiescence in state desegregation, any integration would be token integration. Technically the students were enrolled, but they were not included in school life in any meaningful way.

Even these precautionary measures were not enough to protect the students from ridicule and harassment. “I got pushed up against the wall, just slammed, people just spit on you,” Freeman said, shrugging, “what are you going to do? I was 96 pounds at the time.” Dobbs Wiggins, another one of the black students who elected to integrate Americus High School, recalled similar incidents of harassment. On one occasion, “three coke bottles hit me simultaneously,” he stated.⁹² Jewel Wise described how the students were “met with all kinds of atrocities, met with rocks,” remarking, simply, “we went into the school and we tried to survive.”⁹³ Only one of these students, Robertiena Freeman, made it through the entire school year.⁹⁴ Integration would not come easily in Americus.⁹⁵

But school hall skirmishes were not the primary obstacle to integrated education in Americus. Realizing that integration of public schools was becoming inevitable, white

⁹² Dobbs Wiggins in “The City Without Pity.”

⁹³ Jewel Wise Alaman Interview.

⁹⁴ For this courage, Robertiena became a target, precipitating the fornication charges discussed earlier in the chapter.

⁹⁵ Schools in Americus were not meaningfully integrated until 1970. On August 31, 1970, the school truly mixed racially, with an enrollment of 1,136 whites and 1,725 blacks.

See Alan Anderson, Sumter County History, Schools; <http://www.sumtercountyhistory.com/history/AmSchHx.htm>

segregationists throughout the South began to focus their energies on the establishment of separate schools, dubbed by many “segregation academies.”⁹⁶ Like other civil rights conflicts, the battle over school integration had theological as well as social, cultural, and political elements. As white Southern conservatives fled the public schools, they did so with both racial and religious justifications, evident in the fact that many of these new schools were not only privately funded but explicitly Christian.⁹⁷ These schools, like Americus’s Southland Academy, resisted integration rulings and promoted a particular theological vision for education.

Almost immediately following the 1964 integration of Americus High School, white citizens in Americus began to research and discuss options for private education.

In May 1966, these individuals held a public meeting to announce the establishment of a new, private school in Sumter County and to rally support. ‘If you are interested enough,’ one founder announced to the hundred people gathered in the Americus County Courthouse, “we are prepared to start the school.”⁹⁸ The private school, to be called Southland Academy, would be organized as a nonprofit.⁹⁹ Its stated mission and purpose was: “to offer an education equal to, and preferably superior to [,] that offered in public schools... composed of local individuals with the belief that we are better qualified to know what is best for our own children than anyone else.”¹⁰⁰

Organizers of the school emphasized its religious component. Southland Academy, the initial mission statement declared, “will be influenced by belief in God and that daily worship is

⁹⁶ The Lamar Society study estimates that as of the mid 1970s, 750,000 Southern students were being educated in such schools and that 3,000-4,000 of these institutions existed in the 13 southern states. (Nevin and Bills, *The Schools that Fear Built*, 9).

⁹⁷ The period from 1964-1973 marked not only an era of real integration efforts, but also of a sharp increase in the number of these private Christian schools.

⁹⁸ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Private School Applications Set” (July 22, 1966).

⁹⁹ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Academy to Open in the Fall” (August 9, 1966)

Interestingly, no one can account for where the name came from. There is no Southland family, no area of town with that moniker, no Southland who acted as a beneficiary or inspiring figure. When I asked the current headmaster of Southland Academy where the school got its name, he looked at me quizzically and said he didn’t know, as though it had never crossed his mind. There was a moment of silence. “Okay,” I began, smiling, to which he exclaimed, “Oh, SOUTH-LAND. I see what you did there!” (Ty Kinslow, interview by author, March 6, 2014, Americus, GA).

¹⁰⁰ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Private School for Americus Proposed,” May 1966.

desirable in the lives of our children.”¹⁰¹ Headmaster McManus likewise noted that “commitment to the Christian faith” was an objective of the school, elaborating that Southland’s founders began the school out of a desire to “provide a Christian environment.”¹⁰²

Private schools, like Southland Academy, were usually labeled as either segregationist or Christian.¹⁰³ But, race and religion cannot be so easily untangled; the schools were segregationist *and* Christian. The theological element is often dismissed as outright subterfuge. But this is a mistake. One commentator has cautioned that to “reduce” the impetus behind Christian private schools to sheer racism is “to ignore two decades of social and cultural upheaval.”¹⁰⁴ “It is too simple to blame this movement entirely on racism and fear of integration,” one historian claimed, “at a deeper level, it is evidence of a profound division beneath the surface of American society.”¹⁰⁵ This division was, in large part, theological. Many private schools, even those without official religious affiliations, possessed a values system rooted in Protestant Christianity and Christian theology. These underlying theological tenets included, according to a 1970 study, a “strict and literal reading of the Bible” as well as “aggressive preaching of the gospel...exhorting the young student to come forward and be saved by accepting Christ.”¹⁰⁶ For its part, Southland Academy not only promoted its identity as a Christian school but required “daily...Scripture and prayer” with “special programs at Christmas and Easter.”¹⁰⁷

Oversimplifying the rise of private Christian schools as merely segregationist academies

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Speaks to Rotary Club: McManus Outlines Plans for Southland Academy,” August 16, 1967.

¹⁰³ See Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, Princeton University Press), 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Skerry, *Public Interest*, as quoted in Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 249.

¹⁰⁵ Nevin and Bills, *The Schools that Fear Built*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Nevin and Bills, *The Schools that Fear Built*, 37, 22-23. Readers will note that these traits identified but the Ford Foundation study are the very same traits associated with segregationist theology in Chapter 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Speaks to Rotary Club: McManus Outlines Plans for Southland Academy,” August 16, 1967.

obscures the deeper conflict over religion, intermingled so perplexingly with the more obvious racial politics.

Whether for racial or religious reasons, support for the school mounted in Americus, and in July of 1966, the Board of Trustees announced that it would begin accepting applications.¹⁰⁸ By July 1967, Southland Academy boasted an enrollment of 150 incoming students, a headmaster, seven teachers, and a newly purchased school building, formerly known as the Anthony School. It was all set to open its doors the next month.¹⁰⁹ But there was a problem. Southland had not yet received its nonprofit status. School officials alleged that the U.S. Internal Revenue Service had “apparently engaged in a massive scheme to thwart the efforts of the local school group and other private school groups in the South” in their efforts to have private schools recognized as tax-exempt nonprofits.¹¹⁰ Southland Board Chairman Harry Entrekin claimed that the school made its initial application for the nonprofit status through the Atlanta IRS office on Aug. 26, 1966 and had still not received “what should have been routine approval.”¹¹¹ Southland’s leaders were initially concerned when they had still failed to receive a ruling by the spring of 1967, over six months after the submitted application. “Various correspondence and

¹⁰⁸ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Private School Meeting Friday” (July 20, 1966); *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Private School Applications Set” (July 22, 1966). The Board of Trustees included Sumter residents: Harry Entrekin (president), Tinley Anderson, Troy Morris, Henry Crisp, Pete Godwin, Ed Carson, Roger Pollock.

¹⁰⁹ *Americus Times-Recorder*, John Littlefield “Ready for Fall Opening: Many Improvements at Private School Site,” July 7, 1967.

¹¹⁰ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “On Tax Exempt Delay: Academy Officials Claim Discrimination,” July 28, 1967. This seemed to come as a surprise. A week earlier, Board member Charles Crisp had confidently asserted, “We feel certain that a contribution to Southland Academy will be deductible for income tax purposes and expect a letter of confirmation from Internal Revenue Department soon.” (*Americus Times-Recorder*, “Private School Applications Set” (July 22, 1966). Tax exempt status was “of great importance,” according to the Southland Board, “due to the fact that donations to the corporation would be deductible from the donors’ income in computing his income tax. In addition, it would enable the corporation to furnish its teachers with tax-sheltered retirement programs.” (*Americus Times-Recorder*, “On Tax Exempt Delay: Academy Officials Claim Discrimination,” July 28, 1967). The difficulties faced by Southland in 1967 emerged as hurdles that would face many private schools in the South in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. While the federal government sought to block the funding of private, segregated schools from re-inscribing separate and unequal educational systems in America, these schools countered that they were not primarily racial, but religious—a strong, historically unassailable argument. (See *Green vs. Connally* (1971), *Bob Jones University vs. United States* (1982); Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

¹¹¹ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “On Tax Exempt Delay: Academy Officials Claim Discrimination,” July 28, 1967.

telephone conversations,” they claimed, “have led to the conclusion that the IRS, in cooperation with the Justice Dept., has willfully declined to make a ruling on this tax exemption application for the purpose of harassing the local group and bringing about an embarrassing financial situation.” The school contacted Georgia Senators Richard B. Russell and Herman Talmadge, along with Third District Rep. Jack Brinkley. They made inquiries of “personnel in the offices of our elected representatives in Washington” and confirmed that “high-placed officials in the IRS and the Justice Dept. have declared their intention to do everything possible to prevent the granting of the exemption.” The Georgia officials went on to say they could find nothing wrong with the application and predicted that the IRS would “have to grant the exemption eventually.”¹¹² Finally, on August 4, 1967, Southland received its tax exemption.¹¹³

After getting the news, Southland officials released a statement explaining what they saw as the reason for the delay in tax-exempt status, a statement which offers insight into the vexing relationship between race and religion in the formation of private education. The granting of tax-exempt status should have been simple; “the laws are specific,” they claimed, “either you qualify, or you don’t.” What should have been a “routine” approval, however, the government made arduous. But, why? According to Harry Entrekin and the Board of Southland Academy, the government’s interest in undercutting white religious schools in the South stemmed from “a desire on the part of the Justice Department and the Internal Revenue Service to impose their desires...rather than to administer the law as it is written.” “Since they could not legally refuse our exemption,” the statement alleged, “they chose, simply, to ignore our request.” This was “arbitrary government at its worst.” In concluding their statement, the representatives of

¹¹² Ibid. Senator Talmadge even requested a hearing before the Senate Finance Committee in which Sheldon Cohen, Commissioner of Internal Revenue Service, “will be called to appear and show cause for the delay in making a ruling in this case.” The Southland board noted that private schools in South Carolina had been similarly afflicted but that, with the help of Strom Thurmond, they had all received their exemptions.

¹¹³ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Tax-Exempt Status Granted Southland Here”, August 4, 1967.

Southland Academy expressed their “concern over the loss of local control over public schools, over the Supreme Court decision concerning prayer in schools, and over the use of schools as tools to bring about social revolution, rather than the purpose for which they were created-- education.” Thus, Southland would be a private school: out of the reach of the encroaching federal government, explicitly religious, and safe from the American civil rights revolution.¹¹⁴

When Harry and Ann Entrekin decided to send their sons to Southland Academy, Americus’ new private school, they unsurprisingly cited a recent Supreme Court decision as justification. But it wasn’t *Brown v. Board*. It was *Engel v. Vitale*, or as it’s more commonly known, the “school prayer decision.” According to one legal scholar, the *Engel* decision was “greeted with more shock and criticism than *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, affected more school districts than *Brown v. Board of Education*, and brought together conservative Roman Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants in a common cause a decade before *Roe v. Wade*.”¹¹⁵ The *Engel* case is usually linked historiographically and even in the American popular imagination with *Roe vs. Wade* and the culture wars rather than the discussions of civil rights and school desegregation. But that is a somewhat anachronistic designation, and one that obscures the significant link between racial prejudice and religious liberty in the construction of white religious private schools.

In 1962, five families from Nassau County, New York challenged the constitutionality of the brief, voluntary, nondenominational recitation of prayer in their children’s school before the Supreme Court.¹¹⁶ The Court ruled in their favor 6-1 on the basis of the establishment clause of

¹¹⁴ *Americus Times-Recorder*, “On Tax Exempt Delay: Academy Officials Claim Discrimination” (July 28, 1967); *Americus Times-Recorder*, “Tax-Exempt Status Granted Southland Here,” August 4, 1967.

¹¹⁵ Bruce J. Dierenfield, *The Battle over School Prayer: How Engel v. Vitale Changed America* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007), vii.

¹¹⁶ The prayer was: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our Country.” Legal Information Institute, “Engel v. Vitale,” Cornell Law School, Ithaca, NY; <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/370/421>.

the First Amendment, with two justices abstaining. The morning prayer, the ruling stated, “officially establishes... religious beliefs,” and was thus in violation of the Establishment clause prohibiting the government from sanctioning any state religion. “It is neither sacrilegious nor anti-religious,” Justice Hugo Black wrote, “to say that each separate government in this country should stay out of the business of writing or sanctioning official prayers and leave that purely religious function to the people themselves.”¹¹⁷

The reaction to the decision was vehement and immediate.¹¹⁸ Schools that had been founded to instruct citizens in Christianity were now expressly barred from doing so. To many Americans, including many in Americus, this seemed to portend utter disaster for students, teachers, communities, and the nation. Georgia Senator Herman Talmadge lambasted the decision as “outrageous,” commenting that it would “do incalculable damage to the fundamental faith in Almighty God which is the foundation upon which our civilization, our freedom and our form of government rest.”¹¹⁹ Another Georgian, gubernatorial candidate (and later Governor) Carl Sanders, felt so strongly about the ruling that he pronounced that he would “not only go to jail but give up [his] life” to protect the right of Georgia students to pray in school.¹²⁰ Of course, arguments about the constitutionality of prayer are not only political disputes but theological ones. And with the *Engel* decision, the Supreme Court, many Southern Christians believed, found itself again on the side of heresy. “The Court,” Talmadge continued, “put God and the Devil on an equal plane.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Justice Hugo Black, *Engel v. Vitale* (1962).

¹¹⁸ A Gallup poll indicated that a whopping 85 percent of Americans disagreed with the ruling. (Dierenfield, *The Battle Over School Prayer*, 138).

¹¹⁹ *Congressional Record*, June 26, 1962, p 11675.

¹²⁰ *Newsweek*, Vol. 60, 1962, 44.

¹²¹ Talmadge as quoted in Dierenfield *The Battle over School Prayer*, 148.

When the federal government would, only two years later, begin to enforce the *Brown* decision in public schools, segregationists felt they had ample grounds to object: not only had the overreaching federal government forcefully integrated schools, it had banned Christianity.¹²² As Alabama Congressman George Andrews succinctly stated: “they put the Negroes in the schools; now they put God out of the schools.”¹²³ It amounted to, in the words of Mississippi Governor James Eastland, “judicial tyranny.” Many Southerners felt they were left with no option but to start their own schools. And rather than having to do so solely on the basis of race, they could do so on the basis of religion. “We weren’t so upset about integration,” Harry Entrekin, the first board chairman of Southland, declared, “it was the government running schools and having no prayer.”¹²⁴ No doubt it was both. But Entrekin was articulating something powerful that was stirring in America. Soon, this line of thinking would be harnessed by a new generation of leaders who, like segregationists of the 1960s, submerged racial preference under appeals to religious freedom. Trent Lott put it bluntly: the establishment of tax-exempt private schools was “not a racial question, but a religious question.”¹²⁵ Jerry Falwell himself started a school which, according to his wife, was not founded “in response to desegregation” but “because God and prayer had been kicked out of the public school.”¹²⁶ In founding private Christian schools, white conservatives not only resisted integration but found theological justifications for doing so, ensuring that the conflict over race would continue be also one over religion.

¹²² Anthony Lewis of the New York Times harshly criticized Southerners for conflating the two issues. He wrote that crafty politicians were using the Engel decision disingenuously, to “suggest[ing] that the prayer ruling only showed how equally wrong the Court had been to outlaw segregation.” (Lewis, *New York Times*, in Dierenfield 149).

¹²³ 1963 TV Interview; Dierenfield *The Battle over School Prayer*, 147.

¹²⁴ Mr. and Mrs. Harry Entrekin interview.. The Schools that Fear Built study likewise asserted that “Startling” percentages of those whose children attend private schools, “will say quite independent of one each other that public school problems really began when the Supreme Court outlawed prayer and Bible reading there.” (David Nevin and Robert E. Bills, *The Schools that Fear Built: Segregationist Academies in the South* (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1976.)

¹²⁵ Trent Lott, *Southern Partisan* (Fall 1984), 47 as quoted in Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 171.

¹²⁶ Macel Falwell, *Jerry Falwell: His Life and Legacy*, (New York: Howard Books, 2008), 99.

By the mid-1960s, many white Southern Protestants had reclaimed their theological footing. They recaptured the old tenets--biblical literalism, evangelism, congregational autonomy--and refitted them. Instead of German higher criticism and the National Council of Churches, these conservatives attacked the civil rights movement and the federal government. The theology of these white Southern Protestants not only offered a critique of the civil rights movement of the 1960s but also laid the foundation for the powerful political and theological coalition that emerged in the 1980s as the Religious Right.

Old Theology, New Conservatism

On March 21, 1965, a man whose name would eventually become synonymous with the Religious Right delivered a sermon that captured the theological position of many Southern Christians regarding the civil rights movement. In “Ministers and Marches,” Rev. Jerry Falwell offered what he saw as a Christian response to the demonstrations taking place throughout the country. Avoiding the issue of “constitutional rights,” Falwell claimed he did not want to “discuss the subject of integration or segregation.” Rather, he sought that morning “to open the Bible, and from God’s Word, answer the question—‘Does the ‘CHURCH’ have any command from God to involve itself in marches, demonstrations, or any other actions, such as many ministers and church leaders are so doing today in the name of civil rights reforms?’”¹²⁷ His short answer was no.

Falwell’s sermon was largely what one would expect from a conservative Southern Baptist in this time, proclaiming traditional theological tenets and using them to denigrate the civil rights

¹²⁷ Rev. Jerry Falwell, “Ministers and Marches,” sermon preached at Thomas Road Baptist Church, March 21, 1965 in Matthew Avery Sutton ed. *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012).

See: Michael Sean Winters. *God’s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right*. New York: HarperOne, 2012; Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

movement, particularly its Christian leaders. First, Falwell argued, the civil rights movement was unbiblical. When civil rights activists invoked the story of the Exodus and “try to prove that Christians today are supposed to lead people out of bondage in situations where they are being discriminated against,” Falwell claimed they were not reading the Scripture properly. Rather, he said, they were “lift[ing]” passages to suit their own ends. “Any Bible student,” Rev. Falwell preached, “would know first of all that the Jews spent 400 years in Egypt because of their own rebellion... any Bible scholar would also know that the Jews were and are God’s chosen people.” The exodus of the Jews could not rightly be applied to the struggle for black equality. Not only so, but, Falwell continued, the civil rights movement had misappropriated the story, substituting the temporal for the spiritual. The “400 years of Egyptian bondage” he exegeted, represented the slavery “sinners experience before... conver[sion],” not earthly oppression. In the same way, the Promised Land was not the redeemed United States flowing with the milk and honey of freedom and equality, but “a parallel to the victorious Christian life” or maybe “our eventual Heaven.” “To force any other meaning” from the Exodus account, Falwell declared, “is simply making the Bible say what you want it to say.”¹²⁸ He claimed to have the true orthodox interpretation.

In addition to misinterpreting the Bible, Falwell criticized the civil rights movement for having becoming entrenched in politics and, therefore, having forsaken traditional Christianity. He asserted that Christians should “pay our taxes, cast our votes as a responsibility of citizenship, obey the laws of the land,” but also maintain distance, since, “we are cognizant that our only purpose on this earth is to know Christ and to make him known.” Applying this theology to race relations, Falwell declared that though Christians “detest discrimination... we can never stop it through any other means than that weapon which was given the church 2,000

¹²⁸ Christians, he said, should not “lift out of the Old Testament” particular notions that may be “convenient for proving our contentions.” Falwell would certainly not take his own advice about lifting passages of Scripture that fit one’s own worldview or preferences.

years ago—the preaching of the gospel of Christ.” Change would not come through voting or marching or legislation, but simply through a changed heart. “Believing the Bible as I do,” Falwell said, it would be “impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ and begin doing anything else—including fighting communism, or participating in civil rights reforms.” “As a God-called preacher,” he concluded, “I find there is no time left after I give the proper time and attention to winning people to Christ. Preachers are not called to be politicians, but soul winners.”¹²⁹

The real problem in the American Church, in American society, for Falwell and other conservatives was not racism, it was not inequality, it was not irrelevance; it was the loss of orthodox Christian principles. In this way, Falwell’s critique of the civil rights movement sounds much like the Fundamentalist of the early twentieth century. Instead of holding the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, American Christians had twisted it to meet their own political ends, if they consulted it at all. Instead of preaching salvation through Christ, people were preaching civil rights and voting. Falwell lamented that “a liberal gospel has come in [to the Church.]...the Bible is being rejected as the verbally inspired Word of God.” He simply reiterated the old theological tenets of fundamentalism and applied them to the issues of mid-1960s America. In the estimation of Falwell and other white Protestant conservatives, the civil rights movement had misinterpreted the Bible and rejected spiritual tenets for worldly ones. It was not Christian, but

¹²⁹ Not only was this soul-winning biblical, it was, in fact, the key to reform. “If the many thousands of churches and pastors of America would suddenly begin preaching the old-fashioned gospel of Jesus Christ and the power that is in his atoning blood, a revival would grip our land such as we have never known before. If as much effort could be put into winning people to Jesus Christ across the land as is being exerted in the present civil rights movement, America would be turned upside-down for God. Hate and prejudice would certainly be in a great measure overcome. Churches would be filled with sincere souls seeking God. Good relations between the races would soon be evidenced.” In a complete repudiation of the Social Gospel, Falwell says the entire relationship of the church to the world can be summed with “the three words which Paul gave to Timothy—‘preach the Word.’” This relationship is solely based on the church’s mission to evangelize and redeem a sinful society, to bring a message “to go right to the heart of man and there meet his deep spiritual need.” Social ills and systemic injustice are beyond the church’s scope, Falwell argued, saying succinctly, “Our ministry is not reformation but transformation. The gospel does not clean up the outside but rather regenerate the inside.”

heretical.

In crafting a conservative theological response to the civil rights movement, white Southern Protestants ensured that the theological conflicts of the civil rights era would endure and that America would remain bitterly divided over issues of religion and of race. Rather than hearing the prophetic calls of the civil rights movement or the reasoned appeals of moderates, conservative evangelicals refused to listen, retreating into familiar, albeit powerful, arguments. These arguments--about the Bible and gospel, about religious freedom and racial justice--would continue to be theologically and politically meaningful in the years following the civil rights movement. Old time religion, as it had before, would find new causes and new conflicts.

While civil rights activists vociferously and audibly invoked God's sanction in their quest for freedom, the opposition to civil rights tended to be quieter. Most white citizens of America were not marching down Lee Street. They weren't making signs and picketing at the supermarket. They weren't singing, that's for sure. Instead, they ignored questions of racial justice. They asked for the preservation of law and order. They stayed home. They discussed amongst themselves what should be done. They started their own schools. But this was a response, and it would prove a theological one with ramifications for race and religion throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. In the criticism of the nonviolent civil rights movement, the ostracization of white dissenters, and the formation of private Christian schools, the conservative response to the civil rights movement coalesced, not only as a political reaction but also as a theological statement.

In March of 1965 when Jerry Falwell preached "Ministers and Marches," he mostly exhorted his hearers to stay home, read their Bibles, pray, go to church, and avoid the civil rights

movement. But the movement was approaching the church. And as it did, white southern Christians faced a theological reckoning.

CHAPTER 6

Kneeling-In: The Theological Civil Rights Movement Comes to Church

“I am told that you must live in the South to understand the race question and it is true to a degree. But must I live in the South to understand the love of Jesus Christ?”¹

“This distortion of the faith aids and abets the sinfulness of man and society. This is the theological key to our dilemma. The really tragic thing about the un-Christian Christian is that he has really convinced himself that he is right in his sin and heresy.”²

“I would tremble for the Christian cause if 50 Negroes were to enter an average local church in this country on a Sunday morning and ask to become members. Fundamentally, we are afraid...to practice the Christian religion.”³

As soon as he opened the side door, the hot air hit Kellete Heys in the face. The nice shirt he had to wear on Sundays (that he could not seem to keep tucked in despite his mother’s protestations) instantly felt damp. His heart was beating fast now, but after one last quick look back to the church hall, he stepped outside. Kellete had known something unusual was going on from the nervous whispers and panicked glances exchanged between his Sunday School teachers, but, when he asked, the adults kept shushing him and ordering him to stay inside. Not to be deterred, Kellete and his friends decided to sneak out and find out for themselves what was happening. They slid, suppressing laughter, around the Greek-style church building, concealing themselves behind the massive columns gracing the front of the church. Kellete closed his eyes. He could hear the thumping of his heart, indeterminate shouting, the murmur of women whispering, the click of cameras, a mosquito chorus. He drew a breath and then peered around the column.

¹ Letter from Helen Thoburn McCafferty, Glendale, PA to First Methodist Church Americus, August 7, 1965, FUMC Box.

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Unchristian Christian,” *Ebony*, Vol. 20, No. 10. August 1965, 78.

³ Benjamin E. Mays, *Time Magazine* as quoted in Randal Maurice Jelks, *Benjamin E. Mays: Schoolmaster of the Movement*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2012, p165.

He could see the deacons of the church standing a few feet in front of him on the church steps, clad in dark suits and aviator sunglasses, their arms crossed. Even from the back of their heads, he recognized them as men he knew. Below the formidable line of deacons, a large crowd had gathered. People stood around on the church lawn, watching and waiting and whispering. Among them, Kellete was especially impressed to see reporters, wielding big news cameras and holding microphones. In the middle of it all, a huddled group of young people, some black and some white, knelt on the ground below the steps, almost at the deacons' feet. It looked to young Kellete Heys like they were praying—something, he thought to himself, people usually did *inside* the church.⁴

The last weeks of July 1965 in Americus had been contentious. Boycotts, marches, rallies, press conferences, visits by national figures, and even a murder filled these long days of summer. The civil rights movement had come to Americus. And on Sunday, it went to church. The scene on the steps of the First United Methodist Church was not the product of a random desire on the part of civil rights activists to attend a white church, nor was it merely an opportunistic ploy by activists for sympathetic media attention. Rather, kneel-ins were an important facet of the larger civil rights movement, deliberate demonstrations intended to reveal the hypocrisy of segregation and frame the movement in moral and theological terms.

In the same way, the scene that morning was not an isolated instance of irrational hatred, a rogue group refusing people fellowship due to their individual prejudices. In 1963, the church board had expressly voted to bar blacks from attending—to “close the doors,” as many Southern Protestant churches did in the 1950s and 1960s. In the resolution that followed this decision, the church leadership stated, “It is the feeling...that this desire for maintaining segregation is a

⁴ Kellete Heys interview.

sincere Christian viewpoint arrived at after much prayerful thought and deliberation.”⁵

That morning represented years of struggle—over race, over the church, over the very meaning of true Christian orthodoxy. How should Christians approach the race question? Who could come to church? Did they owe their allegiance to the laws of their state, their denomination, or to God? And what did God want of them? Were they on God’s side? Was he on theirs? Exploring the broad kneel-in movement and its theological opposition, as well as the specific 1965 kneel-in in Americus and the reaction it provoked, reveals a compelling story of theological conflict.

The Kneel-in Movement

As religious scholar Steve Haynes defines them, kneel-ins constituted “attempts by blacks or integrated groups to occupy segregated ecclesiastical space.”⁶ These groups, men and women, often black and white, would seek entrance to churches. If admitted they would go in to worship; if denied they would kneel in prayer as protest. The kneelers were largely silent, respecting the solemnity of Sunday worship. Indeed, no signs, slogans, or chants were necessary, as the presence of these visitors to the churches was statement enough. In the charged atmosphere of the 1960s, as one historian put it, even “the ordinarily unremarkable act of going to church acquired new meaning.”⁷ Kneel-ins occurred, some estimate, hundreds of times in the 1960s, in small towns and major cities, at churches affiliated with every major Christian denomination.⁸ They often appeared largely the same. One Southern journalist described them this way: “a dozen or so funereal-faced deacons standing shoulder to shoulder...mouths clamped

⁵ First Baptist Church records; Alan Anderson, *Journey of Grace*; See Chapter 1.

⁶ Stephen O. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 3.)

⁷ Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 156.

⁸ See Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour* 3.

tightly shut, arms unanimously folded...their black gazes fixed just an inch or two over the heads of a small delegation ... clustered on the sidewalk below them.”⁹ Kneel-ins were, in his estimation, “one of the more curious spectacles produced by *the most profound* domestic moral crisis of our time.”¹⁰ Kneel-ins indeed acted as moral spectacles, producing stark spiritual confrontations in the most separate of southern spaces. The kneel-in movement was an instance of compelling theological drama, an un-ignorable portrait of the difficulty of reconciling Christianity and Jim Crow in the South.

Despite its importance, the kneel-in movement has been largely forgotten in the history of the civil rights movement. While sit-ins are as familiar to schoolchildren as they are to scholars, the mention of a kneel-in usually draws raised eyebrows and quizzical shrugs. The movement was in and for the streets and lunch counters, the shrugs imply, not for church pews. As Stephen Haynes states, “church desegregation campaigns have received very short shrift in the historiography of the American civil rights movement.”¹¹ They have “fallen through the sifting bowl of history” and have been, in his estimation, “all but ignored.”¹² Forgetting kneel-ins not only limits the scope and intention of much of the civil rights movement, it also obscures the more theological elements of the struggle. Civil rights activists in the 1960s knew this, if historians have forgotten. Indeed, there exists a “striking discrepancy” between the ways in

⁹ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 3; Marshall Frady, “God and Man in the South,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1967, 37-42.

¹⁰ Marshall Frady, “God and Man in the South,” 37-42.

¹¹ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour* 3.

¹² Ibid. In addition to Haynes’ comprehensive study of the kneel-in movement and vivid description of church desegregation campaigns in Memphis, a few other scholars have addressed the kneel-in movement or individual kneel-ins, including Joseph Kip Kosek, “Just a Bunch of Agitators”: Kneel-Ins and the Desegregation of Southern Churches, *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer 2013), pp. 232-261; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rac.2013.23.2.232>; W.J. Cunningham, *Agony at Galloway: One Church’s Struggle with Social Change* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1980); Kevin Kruse, “White Flight: Resistance to Desegregation of Neighborhoods, Schools and Businesses in Atlanta, 1946-1966” (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2000, 414-421).

which early civil rights activists envisaged church desegregation campaigns and the way those efforts are treated in historical accounts.¹³

Civil rights activists began to conduct kneel-ins at almost the very inception of the student movement. A few months after SNCC's initial convening and the beginnings of the student sit-in movement, a group decided again to test segregation-- this time not in public facilities but in religious spaces.¹⁴ Demonstrations at white churches thus began "as a variation on the sit-in theme," like the wade-ins, lie-ins, or stand-ins, but soon became a different sort of protest, with a different effect.

In 1960, *The Student Voice* dubbed the kneel-in "one of the next important phases of the student movement." Sociologist and activist James Laue reported likewise that whenever he was asked about the direction of the movement his response was, "invariably...kneel-ins."¹⁵ SNCC secretary Jane Stembridge agreed, calling kneel-ins "the start of a new movement in the South."¹⁶ Moreover, activists considered kneel-ins essential to the moral thrust of the movement. "Throughout the years," SNCC students asserted, "the white Southerner has failed to realize the moral wrongness of segregation" due to the fact that the racial struggle "had not been presented...as a moral problem." By August of 1960 though, with the kneel-in movement, the students felt "that the time [had] come to awaken the dozing consciences of white

¹³ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 4.

¹⁴ Even though these coordinated kneel-ins as part of direct action protests were unprecedented, black or interracial visitors to white churches were not. In fact, Martin King, Sr. apparently sought entrance at First Baptist Church in Atlanta in the 1950s. Intrigued by the pastor Roy McLain, named by *Newsweek* as one of ten of the "Greatest American Preachers," King decided to go down Peachtree Street and hear him preach. Though King and his fellow visitors were greeted "very cordially" they were soon asked to move downstairs and, when they refused, were insulted, pushed and made to leave. (Benjamin Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography*, 1971, 244-247.)

¹⁵ *The Student Voice*, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Vol. I, No. II, August 1960, 2; Jim Laue was an unofficial member of the sit-in group but was "touring the South" the summer of 1960 in order to "study the race problem—and the church's position in it—at firsthand." ("Negroes Attend 6 Churches, *Atlanta Constitution*, 1960); See Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/sv/sv6008.pdf>.

¹⁶ *The Student Voice*, Vol. I, No. II, August 1960, 3-4; "The New Phase: 'Kneel-Ins: 4 Atlanta White Churches Admit Colored Students, *The Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA) August 13, 1960.

Southerners.”¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed the students, proclaiming, “our students will stand-in, sit-in, and kneel-in until they awaken the conscience of the white man in the South.”¹⁸

They would do this by “carrying the problem of segregation to the church...the best place for reconciling moral problems.” SNCC students developed the notion of a kneel-in out of the need to not only to demonstrate that “segregation is morally wrong,” but also “because the church is the house of God, to be attended by all people, regardless of race, who wish to worship there.”¹⁹ “The stigma of racial segregation,” a 1960 article in *Christian Century* stated, “will not be removed until it disappears from white Christian churches, where it began.”²⁰ “The sit-ins and the wade-ins [may] succeed,” the author declares, “but the will of Christ for the races will not be accomplished until the Negro Christians and white Christians break bread together on their knees.”²¹ Token integration, or “merely juxtaposing whites and Negroes in the same church,” the article claims, “may be enough to satisfy the elemental demands of justice [but]...it is not enough to meet Christ’s claim that his disciples are one.” In other words, “bread served at a lunch counter is one thing; bread shared in church is another.”²² For many Christians, both black and white, sharing the sacrament in church and true fellowship was the ultimate hope of the civil rights movement, and the true test of brotherhood, justice and love. It was a moral, ecclesiastical and theological stance. Perhaps more than any other form of civil disobedience, the kneel-ins, SNCC, King, and others believed, would illustrate the elements inherent in the contest between

¹⁷ *The Student Voice*, Vol. 1, No. II, August 1960, 3-4. See also Lonnie King in “Negro Leader Hails Churches For Courtesy During Visits,” *The Atlanta Journal*, August 8, 1960.

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Negro and the American Dream,” Excerpt from Address at the Annual Freedom Mass Meeting of the North Carolina State Conference of Branches of the NAACP,” in Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Vol. V: Threshold of a New Decade*, January 1959-December 1960 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 510.

¹⁹ *The Student Voice*, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Vol. I, No. II, August 1960, 2. Furthermore, the early voices in the student movement averred, “the attitude of the students kneeling in is not one of protest but a feeling that only when all are united under God can there be true brotherhood. They are trying to dramatize that the church, the house of all people, fosters segregation more than any other institution.”

²⁰ “Let us kneel in together!” *Christian Century*, August 24, 1960, 963-964.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

segregation and true Christian community.²³

Though the notion of a kneel-in in civil rights history began in the summer of 1960, the idea of integrated worship as a means to confront whites Southern Christians was much older.²⁴ Black religious intellectuals began developing the philosophies and tactics that would support the kneel-ins a generation before the student movement began. Benjamin Mays believed that since “the church is the only institution in America that claims a Heavenly origin,” it had a responsibility above secular institutions. “It must be exceedingly embarrassing to Southern ministers,” Mays wrote, “whose congregations deny fellowship to members of the Negro race while they preach about the Righteous and Holy God who is the Father of mankind.”²⁵ White and black Christians’ shared theological heritage in Christ offered possibilities for inclusion and redemption unique to spiritual institutions. Sadly, those opportunities were often forsaken. As Edler Hawkins, a black Presbyterian minister, asserted, the church must employ “its own distinctive language to stress...the moral dimension of this issue.”²⁶ Martin Luther King, who famously identified himself as “fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher,” also asserted the unique opportunity for the church in the struggle for integration. Writing that “no one can deal with the ideational roots of racism and prejudice as the church can,” he called for religious leaders of both races to preach “the truth of the biblical teaching on the brotherhood of man with

²³ It is worth noting that not all black Americans supported the kneel-ins. J.H. Jackson, the president of the NBC deplored them as condescending, noting “when you ‘kneel-in’ you kneel in judgment of a segregated church.” (“Dr. Jackson Talks on Integration Battle,” *Chicago Defender*, November 5, 1960, 1.)

²⁴ The existence and struggle of Koinonia Farm certainly represents an early confrontation between Christian ideals and a sanctified Jim Crow, See Chapter 2.

²⁵ Benjamin E. Mays, “Kneel-Ins: My View,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 10, 1960. For this reason Mays called the kneel-in movement “ridiculous” and “ironical” which is not to say he was not in favor of it. Mays believed however that there should have been no need to “stage a demonstration in order to worship at a church that calls itself the House of God.”

²⁶ *Minutes*, Commission on Religion and Race, NCC, June 28, 1963, p2, Folder 2; Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 76.

courage and conviction.”²⁷ Yet, King acknowledged that “Sunday morning segregation is the biggest obstacle to the fulfillment of the goal...of the redemptive Christian community.”²⁸ The church could be the most significant agent for change or a major source of opposition to the real hope of the movement, the pursuit not of mere token integration but true interracial communion. For this reason, civil rights activists felt they had to confront the church. As Ruby Doris Smith claimed, “segregation is basically a moral problem and for this reason I feel that Church is the one institution where the problem can be ‘thrashed out.’” “The kneel-in movement,” she continued, “is an appeal to the consciences of Christians.”²⁹ Kneel-ins were not ancillary, but essential, to the theological civil rights movement.

With these theological foundations and spiritual hopes, the formal kneel-in movement began. In March of 1960, young black students in Atlanta met to discuss the possibilities for a church-based direct-action movement.³⁰ They drafted a document, “An Appeal for Human Rights,” which stated: “Our churches, which are ordained by God and claim to be the houses of all people, foster segregation to the point of making Sunday the most segregated day of the week.”³¹ A few months later, the students met again to plan their confrontation of this social and ecclesiastical evil. “For the greater part of this year,” one student leader described, “we have been concerned with the refusal of human dignity in the political, economic, and social spheres. During this summer,” he continued, “most of us in the Atlanta student movement have increasingly felt the need to place this problem squarely on the hearts and the moral consciences of the white Christians in our community...feeling that every church, if it is truly Christian, by

²⁷ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Unchristian Christian,” *Ebony*, Vol. 20, No. 10. August 1965.

²⁸ “The New Phase: ‘Kneel-Ins: 4 Atlanta White Churches Admit Colored Students,” *The Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA), August 13, 1960.

²⁹ Ruby Doris Smith, “Why we Began the Kneel-Ins,” *Atlanta Inquirer*, August 14, 1960.

³⁰ The students, organized as the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR) were part of the Atlanta University Center and aided by Julian Bond and Lonnie King in their efforts.

³¹ “An Appeal for Human Rights,” March 9, 1960, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center, http://www.atlantastudentmovement.org/An_Appeal_for_Human_Rights_detail.html.

its very presence extends in the Savior's name the unspoken invitation: 'whoever will, let him come.'³² They decided to test the "truly Christian" nature of several of Atlanta's churches and the kneel-in movement began.

"I approached Grace Methodist Church," one of the students claimed, "not as a demonstrator, but as a believer in an eternal, common Cause."³³ Bettye J. Williamson, another Atlanta student protestor, likewise explained, "I participated in the 'kneel-in because I was taught that I should love my neighbor as myself. In my opinion, the first step towards such a good would be to worship God with my neighbor whom we both say to love."³⁴ John Gibson also offered insight into the motivation behind the kneel-ins. "As I grew up here in Atlanta," Gibson wrote, "I heard constantly in Sunday School at Wheat Street Baptist Church and later at the Catholic schools I attended of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Unfortunately," he continued, "I saw little of this as a reality in the relationships between white Christians and Negro Christians. And, like many of my fellow students, I was forced to agree with the truth of the statement that the most segregated hour in America was eleven o'clock on Sunday morning."³⁵ It was that hour, that bastion of separation and Christian hypocrisy, that Gibson and other activists sought to challenge through kneel-ins. Student activists dressed in their Sunday finery would gather together, pray, and then approach white churches. Usually, they would calmly request admittance and would prepare to worship as any other parishioner. If rebuffed by greeters or ushers, students would often request an audience with the pastor.

³² John Gibson, "Why we Began the Kneel-Ins," *Atlanta Inquirer*, August 14, 1960.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Bettye J. Williamson, "Why we Began the Kneel-Ins," *Atlanta Inquirer*, August 14, 1960.

³⁵ John Gibson, "Why we Began the Kneel-Ins," *Atlanta Inquirer*, August 14, 1960.

Sometimes they were allowed in the sanctuary, other times they were shuffled to a back room or basement, sometimes they were turned away completely.³⁶

Trained and determined, on August 7, 1960, a group of over twenty Atlanta students, black and white, decided to test segregation in religious spaces.³⁷ Dividing into smaller groups, these students visited six Atlanta churches.³⁸ For the most part, they were admitted and seated, though sometimes in another area of the sanctuary.³⁹ To many, this seemed a rousing success.⁴⁰

Dr. Harry A. Fifield, minister at First Presbyterian, told his wife that he was “so proud of my

³⁶ It is interesting to note that activists were careful to look and act respect when going to white churches. Though certainly part of emphasizing their sincerity and desire to worship, scholars have also pointed out that, as with the sit-ins, black protestors were not rebelling against but striving for acceptance in white society. “On both sides,” as one historian states, “racial conflicts were fought in the language of respectability and religious authenticity.” See Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “The Politics of Respectability” in *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁷ Even though these coordinated kneel-ins as part of direct action protests were unprecedented, black or interracial visitors to white churches were not. In fact, Martin King, Sr. apparently sought entrance at First Baptist Church in Atlanta in the 1950s. Intrigued by the pastor Roy McLain, named by Newsweek as one of ten of the “Greatest American Preachers,” King decided to go down Peachtree Street and hear him preach. Though King and his fellow visitors were greeted “very cordially” they were soon asked to move downstairs and, when they refused, were insulted, pushed and made to leave. (Benjamin Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography*, 1971, 244-247.)

³⁸ Not all of the students were from Atlanta, but many were or were in school in the Atlanta system. Some of them include: Bonnie Kilstein, Frank James, Clarence Mitchell, R. Kenneth Davis, Jim Laue, Marion Barry, Ruby Doris Smith, Mary Anne Smith, Gwendolyn Harris and Henry Thomas. The Atlanta churches visited that morning include: First Baptist, Druid Hills Baptist, Grace Methodist, St. Mark Methodist, First Presbyterian, and the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip.

³⁹ Only at First Baptist and Druid Hills Baptist were the students denied seating outright. “Negro Students Attend 6 White Churches Here,” Jim Bentley, *Atlanta Constitution*, August 8, 1960. Some students described their experiences in detail. John Gibson wrote: “seven students who went to Grace Methodist were greeted at the entrance of the vestibule by a very polite usher who welcomed us to the church. Since we were five or ten minutes late, the church was already crowded so we stood at the rear of the church until we were directed to a classroom which was being used to house the overflow crowd. However, as we were standing in the church, two ushers had a debate as to whether or not we belonged there. One of the ushers said, ‘They have just as much right as any of us...’ We were ushered to a classroom where we heard the sermon along with white worshippers. We were not seated together or given any special places to sit; therefore, we dispersed ourselves throughout the congregation. ...After the service we were greeted very warmly and with what seemed to be heartfelt sincerity. Three of us went...to the front of the church to meet Reverend Allen and were cordially welcomed by him. He expressed his gratitude that we had come and hoped that when we returned we might be early enough to sit in the main body of the church.” (“Why we Began the Kneel-Ins,” *Atlanta Inquirer*, August 14, 1960.)

⁴⁰ Lonnie King, a leader in the student movement, did remark: “It is unfortunate that we were rejected in two congregations... The church is supposed to be the house of all people. Those churches that rejected us are not living up to the basic principles of that institution.” “Negro Leader Hails Churches For Courtesy During Visits,” *Atlanta Journal*, August 8, 1960.

people” he didn’t “even know what to do.”⁴¹ Black leaders, too, initially expressed hope, even of the tepid sort, regarding the kneel-ins’ success, reiterated by an Atlanta headline the day following the kneel-in: “Negro Leader Hails Churches for Courtesy During Visits.”⁴² The students were even more enthusiastic. Gwendolyn Harris, who sought entry to St. Mark’s Methodist, called the kneel-in attempt a “rewarding experience,” saying she was “deeply inspired” and even declaring she was carried “far beyond the realm of mere physical integration and I found myself experiencing true spiritual integration.” John Gibson jubilantly echoed this hope, writing, “This experience showed me that once people of seemingly different backgrounds, and ancestral origin find a common denominator, they can live in loving peace as men and women and not merely representatives of various races.” Even when rebuffed, the temper was optimistic. “Even if we were not admitted to worship, as was true in my case,” Ruby Doris Smith said, “I think that the attempt in itself was a success, because the minds and hearts of those who turned us away were undoubtedly stirred. I’m quite sure they had to do quite some ‘soul-searching’ when they realized that they had turned Christians away from the House of God.” To almost everyone, the initial Atlanta kneel-in seemed to indicate a hopeful future for the theologically framed civil rights movement.⁴³

Soon, optimism waned, as opposition by the white churches to kneel-ins increased. On August 14, for instance, half of the ten churches visited denied kneelers entrance, including Grace Methodist, in an about face from its decision to admit black worshippers the week before. The following Sunday, August 21, the students were barred from all three churches they

⁴¹ “Negro Students Attend 6 White Churches Here,” Jim Bentley, *Atlanta Constitution*, August 8, 1960

⁴² *Atlanta Journal*, August 8, 1960.

⁴³ “Why we Began the Kneel-Ins,” *Atlanta Inquirer*, August 14, 1960.; See also: Harry G. Lefever, *Undaunted by the Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement, 1957-1967* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 56-58.

attempted to integrate.⁴⁴ Despite (or maybe even because of) these signs of mounting resistance, the kneel-in movement had established itself as a theologically viable, morally confrontational part of direct action protest in the South. From Atlanta, kneel-ins fanned out across the region, occurring at churches in Rock Hill, Augusta, Tallahassee, Durham, Savannah, Memphis, Jackson, Birmingham, Albany, and many other smaller towns, including, eventually, Americus.⁴⁵

In October of 1960, several young women from Spelman College decided to venture into the crisp fall air and seek entry to several West End Atlanta churches. In their estimation, they simply “left the campus to go to worship the God of ALL mankind.” Rebuffed from several white churches, the women reported interesting dialogues with these church leaders. At one, they were stopped in the driveway of the church by a deacon who told them he “hoped they hadn’t anticipated worshipping there.” When one of the Spelman women responded that they “had come only to worship God,” the deacon directed them over to Wheat Street Baptist, a black church nearby. The women then sought entry at another white church, finding the doors locked and guarded by several waiting men. They began speaking with one, an elderly gentleman, assuring him that “they had not come to cause a disturbance, only to worship God.” When he insisted that his church was not integrated and did not have “provisions for Negroes,” one Spelman woman exclaimed they “did not need any special provisions to worship God!” Another chimed in, asking, “what power do [you] have to hold the doors of the church closed to anyone[?]” When the elderly man replied that, “this had nothing to do with the matter,” another young woman spoke, asking him, “if he would be holding the doors of the Kingdom of God.” Flummoxed and exasperated, the man curtly responded, “Yes, I’ll be there and a host of others,

⁴⁴ These churches were Grace Methodist, Westminster Presbyterian, and First Christian.

⁴⁵ For a good summary of the kneel-in movements in these various Southern cities in the early 1960s, see Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 24-51.

and you won't get in there either." The women left, "with tears falling silently from their eyes."⁴⁶

There were however, even in these "spectacles of exclusion," signs of change.⁴⁷ At one of the churches, a young white man had told the group of Spelman women, "I welcome you, and I hope they won't always be this way." Though the prevailing attitude in many congregations in 1960 was one of segregation, the church was beginning to fragment on the issue. As one of the deacons admitted when turning away the women, there was "trouble enough holding the congregation together without Negroes coming to Church."

For their part, the women reflected on their experience theologically. "What better place for men to integrate," Angela Owens insisted, "than in the House of God where the doctrines of brotherly love are taught?" "We are ALL children of God!" she continued, "What mortal has the right to 'bar' the doors of God's kingdom? We believe in the same God, read the same Bible, and the same God is watching over all of us and listening to all our prayers." After declaring this spiritual unity, the Spelman women concluded, "any race of people should be able to sit together to worship the One God who made them all."⁴⁸ In Albany, kneelers called upon Christians to "recognize the fact that they are members of Christ's Church and, as such, are called to a ministry of reconciliation, breaking down the wall of hostility that separate man from his brother and from God." The protesters understood their mission as one not only for freedom but for redemption. "Never have we been recognized," they declared, for who they truly were, "as Christians seeking the salvation of our Lord and the fellowship of our white brothers."⁴⁹ A leaflet distributed in Georgia reiterated the kneelers' theological foundations: "Only in open fellowship

⁴⁶ Angela G. Owen, "Kneel-ins," *Spelman Spotlight*, 16 December 1960; http://www.gpb.org/georgiastories/docs/the_beat_of_civil_rights-12.

⁴⁷ The term "spectacles of exclusion" from Stephen Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 15, 16, 45, 51, 189.

⁴⁸ Angela G. Owen, "Kneel-ins," *Spelman Spotlight*, 16 December 1960; http://www.gpb.org/georgiastories/docs/the_beat_of_civil_rights-12.

⁴⁹ "Albany Police Arrest 3 During 'Kneel-In' Try," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 21, 1962.

and love can the real presence of God, the Lord and Father of us all, be shared. As believers in the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, we humbly seek to worship with you in fulfillment of Christ's commandment that his children may be one in him, even as he is one in God."⁵⁰ Theological orthodoxy--the belief in the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the truth of Christ's teaching-- for those who participated in kneel-ins, led them directly to integrated worship. Theological orthodoxy meant radical social equality. Those who turned them away thought and felt differently.

The very nature of kneel-ins, then, recapitulated racial justice as a distinctly religious issue and forced theological entanglements.⁵¹ As historian Charles Marsh stated, kneel-ins were "exercises in civil disobedience informed by a... theological vision."⁵² Of course, this theological vision was not accepted as an orthodox one by many white Southern Christians.⁵³ So the kneel-ins, in addition to appealing to moral elements in American society, also exposed hypocritical strains in the American church. As historian Kip Kosek writes, "the visits revealed that many churches, even those whose evangelical theology seemed to demand that they welcome anyone who appeared at their doors, actually prohibited African Americans from their membership rolls and even from their sanctuaries."⁵⁴ This came as no surprise in the South. "A

⁵⁰ "Negro Leader Hails Churches For Courtesy During Visits," *Atlanta Journal*, August 8, 1960.

⁵¹ For more on the orthodoxy of the black church, see Chapter 3.

⁵² Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 129, 134.

⁵³ King himself acknowledged the theological elements inherent in the white church's failure to integrate, writing, "How can Christians be so blind? How can they not see that the very word of God has called for the 'Oneness of the Church,' and that in Christi there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,' but all are one. Like many other human institutions," he continues, "the Church exists in two forms: the powerful, prophetic, dynamic Spiritual form, which has appeared in many great movements in history, and the staid, conservative, institutional form, which is characterized by our buildings and denominational structures." While King notes that "Sunday morning at eleven o'clock is the most segregated hour in our nation's life," he is quick to remind that "Christians are responsible for much of the power of the present revolution." King, "The Unchristian Christian," *Ebony*, Vol. 20, No. 10. August 1965, 77-80.

⁵⁴ Joseph Kip Kosek, "'Just a Bunch of Agitators': Kneel-Ins and the Desegregation of Southern Churches," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 23, Issue 2, (Summer 2013) pp. 232-261. Kosek argues that the kneel-ins have been understudied in the civil rights literature, passed over by historians who focus on

tense situation exists within the heart and soul of our people,” one Georgia minister explained, “as the white Southerner within us tangles with the Christian within us.” The result of this theological entanglement, he claimed, “is of much more ultimate importance than any of the pushings and shovings at Woolworth’s lunch counter.”⁵⁵

Many Southern segregationists, though, refused to engage with the theological issue being presented to them. To them, as historian Carolyn Dupont writes, kneel-ins simply, “confirmed the crass opportunism of the freedom struggle and the apostate character of their denominations.”⁵⁶ In dismissing kneel-ins in this way, “the moral theater played out on these church steps worked no conversion on [most white southerners’] racial attitudes.”⁵⁷ Contrarily, it set up kneel-ins as showdowns not only between the integrationist civil rights movement and the segregationist church, but as a theological conflict over the meaning of Christian community and worship. Herein lies the central tension of the story: For some the kneel-ins comprised the most stark, embodied confrontation between the Christianity of Christ and the segregated church of religious hypocrisy; for others, the kneel-ins represented the defilement of sacred space and the exploitation of pure religion for politically and theologically suspect ends.

Kneel-ins constituted an effective tool for engaging religious sensibilities and promoting the civil rights struggle as a moral and spiritual conflict. They not only provoked conflict between the old church guard and the new activists of the movement, but within established ecclesiastical bodies. “During the kneel-ins,” one historian concludes, “churches themselves became the actual arenas of conflict.”⁵⁸ These conversations and conflicts did not begin with the

“exegetical efforts” to keep the races separate, and those who view “faith communities as providing organizational or emotional resources for achieving largely secular ends.” (233)

⁵⁵ “Ga. Pastor Asks Open Door Policy,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, September 6, 1960; Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 14.

⁵⁶ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 156.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Kosek, “Just a Bunch of Agitators,” 233.

kneel-ins of the 1960s; the kneel-ins, in many ways, represented their culmination.

Since the Civil War, the national Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches had been divided between North and South over the issue of slavery.⁵⁹ These splits endured through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, resulting not only in divergent views on race, but also in different theological viewpoints.⁶⁰ Southern Protestants adopted a system of strict segregation, positioning themselves as defenders of conservative religion, while Northern Protestants tended to advocate policies of racial inclusion, which earned them designation as liberals.⁶¹ Following the 1954 *Brown* decision, tensions within Protestant denominations spiked. The Southern Baptist Convention, the Council of Methodist Bishops, and the Southern Presbyterian General Assembly immediately came out in favor of the *Brown* ruling, much to the chagrin of their local southern congregations.⁶² Most southern Protestant congregations, including those in Americus, simply defied these denominational pronouncements on race,

⁵⁹ These groups are the Baptist Convention (SBC), the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (until the Methodist reunified in 1936), and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.), often referred to simply as the Southern Presbyterian Church.

⁶⁰ Historian Paul Harvey accounts for these divisions by identifying a distinction between ‘elite’ and ‘folk’ theologians. Elite theologians debated issues in seminaries and governed ecclesiastical bodies while folk theologians invoked tradition and dictated religious practice in local communities. (Paul Harvey, “God and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation”: Racism, Racial Interchange, and Interracialism in *Southern Religious History in Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* edited by Beth Barton Schweiger, 2004).

⁶¹ One Southern Presbyterian revealed the disdain conservatives had for their liberal counterparts, joking, “liberal was the ecclesiastical equivalent of S.O.B.” Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 48. Of course, the divide between segregationists and integrationists, between liberals and conservatives, was not solely geographical. Many Southern progressives, such as Clarence Jordan, Will Campbell, T.B. Maston, and Foy Valentine, to name a few, called for a re-examination of the church’s racial stance, though their voices were mostly ignored.

⁶² See: James F. Findlay, Jr., *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Robert Watson Sledge, *Hands on the Ark: The Struggle for Change in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914-1939* (Lake Junaluska, NC: Commission on Archives and History, United Methodist Church,) 1975; Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930-1975* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Mark Newman, “The Georgia Baptist Convention and Desegregation, 1945-1980,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXXIII, No. 4, Winter 1999, pp 683-711, 684; Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001); Alan Scot Willis, *All According to God’s Plan: Southern Baptist Missions and Race, 1945-1970* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005); *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Davis Houck and David Dixon, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006); Numan W. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the 1950s*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1997).

asserting their congregational autonomy and preserving their sense of theological and racial orthodoxy.⁶³ Deep theological and ecclesiastical rifts had long existed within white Protestantism, rifts exacerbated by *Brown* and exposed by the kneel-in movement of the 1960s.

“To hell with Christian Principles, we’ve got to save this Church!”

In a 1960 editorial to the *Atlanta Constitution*, journalist Ralph McGill made the comment that “to bar the doors of churches may not be explained away as anything but an affront to Christian principles.”⁶⁴ A few hundred miles west on I-20, an Alabama segregationist responded, “to hell with Christian principles, we’ve got to save this church!”⁶⁵ The kneel-in movement generated furious and religious opposition.

In the fall of 1960, only weeks after the first Atlanta kneel-in, a lawsuit was brought to the DeKalb County court against Dr. King for his “direction and orders” in organizing a kneel-in. The prosecution accused King of disturbing “the worshipping of God according to the tenets of the congregation.”⁶⁶ The charges were eventually dropped, but the case against kneel-ins would endure. Accusations usually fell along two lines: one, that what protestors were doing was theologically wrong, and two, that it was ecclesiastically inappropriate. Often, both of these lines of argument were invoked simultaneously. Some historians have missed the complexity of the religious opposition to civil rights, concluding that segregationists were “unwilling, or unable, to mount a robust theological defense of Jim Crow Christianity.”⁶⁷ Yet, a robust theological defense was mounted in opposition to the kneel-in movement, one based upon notions of

⁶³ See Chapter 2. “Lee St. Methodist Warns Against Mass Withdrawals in Church’s New Policies,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, February 23, 1957, MS 756; Letter from Frank L. Butler, Sr. Americus, GA, FUMC Box The vast majority of Southern congregations remained strictly segregated, with one 1963 survey postulating that 90 percent of Baptist churches officially excluded blacks from attending. (Newman, *Getting Right With God* 154.)

⁶⁴ Ralph McGill, “Christianity on Trial,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 20, 1960.

⁶⁵ S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 86.

⁶⁶ John Britton, “Candidate’s Suit Aimed at Demonstrations Tossed Out,” *Atlanta Daily World* (September 14, 1960), 1; Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 252.

⁶⁷ Kosek, “Just a Bunch of Agitators,” 234; Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*.

orthodoxy and the sanctity of the church--quite resilient arguments that remained powerful throughout the twentieth century.⁶⁸

Familiar arguments about congregational autonomy persisted in the theological conflict over kneel-ins.⁶⁹ An Atlanta Judge, Durwood Pye, succinctly stated this view in response to a kneel-in case in 1963. Churchgoers, he ruled, could “worship a segregated God in a segregated church if they please,” adding, “men have died on a thousand fields of battle for that precious right.”⁷⁰ While some segregationists may not have thought of enforcing congregational policy as necessarily theological, the closed doors themselves represented a considered theological stance developed over time.⁷¹ Opponents of the kneel-in movement, however, not only asserted their right to refuse admission by claiming a theological position regarding the *autonomy* of the church, they also claimed a theological position regarding the *holiness* of the church.

“Jesus had run money-changers out of the Temple, just as we had good reasons to keep those [civil rights] agitators out of our Church,” one Americus woman proclaimed. By invoking the New Testament story of Jesus’s righteous outrage at the temple being defamed by commerce, many segregationists identified a biblical justification for turning visitors away.⁷² If God was holy, they believed, then His house was to be as well. The church was no place for politics. As the Americus woman declared in the conclusion of her letter to the Bishop: “Those people were

⁶⁸ For more on the theological foundations of segregationists, see Chapter 1.

⁶⁹ Churches, many parishioners believed, had a right to self-governance and the freedom to choose their fellow worshippers. This thinking was especially pervasive in more individualistic traditions, like Methodist and Baptist. For more on the theology of congregational autonomy, see Chapter 1.

⁷⁰ One could imagine the Judge was thinking of religious battles such as the Thirty Years’ War, as well as the American Revolution, and, of course, the Civil War. Brown Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 234-251; John Gillies, “Justice Southern Style,” *Christian Century*, Jan 22, 1964, 112-114.

⁷¹ See Chapter 1.

⁷² Grace Greene Pace (wife of Stephen Pace), to John Owen Smith Sept 7, 1965, John Owen Smith Papers, Emory University, Box 5; See also *Charleston Post-Courier* (Dec 8, 1955), “Petitions by Local Churches against Integration” General Board of Church and Society, Records in General Commission on Archives and History, United Methodist Church, Drew University, Patterson, N.J.; Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 243.

at our church for a far worse purpose than money changing.”⁷³ Even worse than the ancient capitalists who defiled God’s temple with business, civil rights activists, many reasoned, were sullyng sacred space with political posturing. As Stephen Haynes explained, “visits by unwelcome visitors represented an invasion of sacred, familial space for profane purposes.”⁷⁴ Though some white Southern Christians in the 1960s felt increasingly uncomfortable defending racial segregation biblically, they refocused their arguments to emphasize ecclesiastical propriety, a no less theological position of exclusion. Since kneel-ins represented, in the words of one historian, “a sacrilegious incursion of politics into a pristine space of worship,” Southern Christians could justifiably bar activists.⁷⁵ They were simply defending the church’s purity. This theology of ecclesiastical holiness extended from the external church building to the more internal realms of the heart..⁷⁶

In locating an argument for ecclesiastical propriety, white opponents to kneel-ins usually turned to what Stephen Haynes calls the “question of motives.”⁷⁷ By charging them with “unholy motives,” segregationist Southern Christians “discovered that the Bible could indeed inform a Christian response to interlopers.”⁷⁸ Kneeling activists were not truly seeking entry for worship;

⁷³ Smith Papers, Box 5.

⁷⁴ Haynes *The Last Segregated Hour*, 18.

⁷⁵ Kosek, “Just a Bunch of Agitators,” 238.

⁷⁶ Questions of who can come to church and why are always theological questions, if more “practical” ones. Joseph Kip Kosek mentions this notion of a “practical theology of racial separation.” While I would argue that most all theology has practical application, preferring the term ‘lived theology,’ his assertion that the act of keeping people out was practical and theological is helpful. (Kosek. “Just a Bunch of Agitators,” 245). Even when defenders of segregated congregations claimed their “decision to exclude visitors was understood not as a theological statement but as a simple reflection of congregational policy or social custom,” this distancing mechanism was not as effective as its defendants may have imagined. (Haynes 17.) For example, when one Southerner claimed, that he “never heard a theological argument” for not seating the black visitors, he may have been speaking honestly. But this man undoubtedly had heard theological arguments about racial separation, the separation of church and state, and the sanctity of the church during his years as a parishioner-- all theological in some respects, and all used implicitly to bar African Americans from worship. (Brenda Nave, Rod Nave, Sue Woolf, Warren Woolf, Bill Woolf, interview by Kosek July 10, 2009; Kosek 245).

⁷⁷ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 18.

⁷⁸ Haynes *The Last Segregated Hour*, 19; See MS 756 5:6, MS756 6:9.

rather, they were mounting “political stunts” that mocked sincere devotion to God.⁷⁹ Kneelers were, in the oft-repeated adage, “agitators,” a label often modified by “outside” or even “Communist.” In Americus, some alleged that those kneeling in represented “insincerity and manipulation of civil rights.”⁸⁰ In short, defenders of segregated churches “turned racial equality into a question of religious sincerity.”⁸¹ Even at the first kneel-in in Atlanta in 1960, the accusation of insincerity was leveled against the students. “They were just a bunch of agitators,” an usher at First Baptist reported, while some at Grace Methodist characterized the students as “agitators not interested in truly worshipping as Christians.”⁸² This pattern continued as the kneel-ins expanded throughout the South. In fact, the charge that activist groups had not gathered sincerely to worship “in spirit and truth” was invoked so often as to become the standard response for segregationists. If the kneelers could be characterized as mere agitators, then the church’s refusal to admit them shed its problematic moral and theological ramifications. If their prayer huddles could be reframed as window dressing for pernicious politics, or, even more, the mockery of God’s holy church, then the moral, Scriptural, theological basis for their actions could be, in good conscience, dismissed.⁸³

⁷⁹ It did not matter that many kneelers were actually motivated by religious sincerity. As Kip Kosek wrote, “critics of kneel-ins refused to acknowledge that the actions had a religious dimension at all.” (Kosek, “Just a Bunch of Agitators,” 239). In many ways, this was the same tactic that the Americus residents had used in the 1950s in regard to Koinonia: If segregationists could convince the world (but most importantly themselves) that the Koinonians were Communists, then their integrationist theology was nullified. The same held true for the student kneelers.

⁸⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Entrekin Interview.

⁸¹ Kosek, “Just a Bunch of Agitators,” 233. Hoping “to avoid conflict and avoid disciplinary action” from their denominations, many opponents of the kneel-ins opted to “ignore segregation’s theological or moral status and focus on impugning visitors’ motives.” (Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 19.)

⁸² The usher was identified as F. Joe Vining. “Negroes Attend 6 Churches,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 8, 1960; Three Atlanta Churches Refuse Negroes Admission,” 4, “3 Atlanta Churches Halt Kneel-in Demonstrations, *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (September 3, 1960):10; Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 23; As so many other churches would mimic, “First Baptist’s supporters,” Kip Kosek says, “tended to argue not that churches should be firmly segregated on principle but that the motives of the black visitors were tainted by civil rights politics.”

⁸³ For others, the issue of motives was too complex and subterranean to qualify one for church entry. One Georgia minister, whose church became an early kneel-in site, encouraged his congregation to “welcome anyone seeking admittance” and in so doing “put the worship of God, above all other considerations.” Though the minister acknowledged “NAACP backed” contingents and allowed that there was “no question as to motives of the colored people,” he added, “If I had to stand at the door each Sunday and check the motives of each of our people seeking

But even if the kneel-ins could be disregarded as political ploys in the minds of southern segregationists, they nevertheless caused a very external confrontation, one framed in distinctly theological terms. As one Georgian put it, “Whatever the motives of the kneel-ins, they have placed the Southern Christian Church in a position of choosing.”⁸⁴ In Americus, Georgia, they had made their choice.

Kneeling down on Lee Street

On the morning of August 1, 1965, a group of civil rights demonstrators determined that they would expose the hypocrisy of Christian segregation by conducting a kneel-in at two Americus churches, First Baptist Church and First United Methodist Church.⁸⁵ The plan was relatively simple: neatly dressed and quiet, the group would seek entrance at the churches, and, when predictably rebuffed, would kneel down in front and pray together.⁸⁶ That morning, Carolyn DeLoatch, Lena Turner, David Bell, John Lewis, and others met early at the Barnum

entrance...I'd have to turn a hefty percentage away.” Georgia journalist Ralph McGill agreed. He wrote in 1960 that, “Unless a church wishes, as it may, to become a private club with a private membership list, it cannot continue in the preposterous posture of having a committee at the doors which will pass judgment on who is sincere and who isn't.” While accusing kneelers of impure motives provided a defense for closed church doors, the doors, it seems, could swing both ways. (“GA. Pastor asks Open Door Policy,” *Baltimore African American*, September 10, 1960. Ralph McGill, “World Christianity is on Trial,” *The Miami News*, August 19, 1960).

⁸⁴ Ralph McGill, “World Christianity is on Trial,” *The Miami News*, August 19, 1960.

⁸⁵ Though the students did not attempt a kneel-in at First Presbyterian Church in Americus, it is worth noting that that congregation had planned a course of action in the event of a kneel-in. In a tense meeting, the session of First Presbyterian in Americus decided that the Church's minister would compose a written statement to be presented to and signed by any visitors. This statement offered a ‘sincere welcome’ to those who came to worship, “in spirit and in truth, ‘The One and Only Living God.’” but politely and firmly rebuffed any activists. The final statement drafted by Reverend Rightmyer read: “We realize and affirm that the church of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ offers a place of Worship and haven of refuge, to all who would enter the LORD'S house with a humble heart and Confession of Sin. Therefore we welcome all who come in this spirit of reverence. We are aware also of the present trend on the part of some to use the church for other purposes than those which the Lord has intended. We therefore as His undershepherd and servants ask that you affirm that your purpose in coming to this house of worship, and this service of worship, today, is that of seeking the true spirit of worship and that you have no other motive in coming. The signing of this card will so confirm this truth to us.” (William B. Burnett, “First Presbyterian Church of Americus, Georgia: Historical Summary: 1842-2008,” (2009)).

⁸⁶ Carolyn DeLoatch remembered that she wore a “pink dress, a black hat and patent leather pumps.” She was, after all, heading to church. (Interview with Carolyn DeLoatch, January 31, 2014).

Funeral Home.⁸⁷ They prayed and determinedly filed into a car that dropped them off at the intersection of the downtown district and Lee Street.⁸⁸ The protestors first approached the Baptist Church, First Baptist of Americus.⁸⁹ But before reaching the entrance, twelve or so ushers, including Americus Fire Chief H.K. Henderson, met them in front of the stately brick edifice. Marion Hicks, a member of the “welcoming committee” for the five hundred-member church, recalled that he “met [the integrated group] on the sidewalk,” and told them that “the church agreed not to accept black people.”⁹⁰ Though the Baptist ushers prohibited the group from entering the church, they did permit them to kneel and pray where they were out on the sidewalk.⁹¹ Hicks described the episode as rather peaceful, noting, “I’m a lover, not a fighter.”⁹² But the threat of violent confrontation lingered like the humidity on that stifling morning. One report claimed that Fire Chief Henderson made the threat explicit, telling the kneelers, “I can tell you seriously, if you come down here looking for violence, you’re going to get it; if you come down here for bloodshed, you’re going to get it.”⁹³ As one of these men later boasted, “We had what it took to keep them out.”⁹⁴ An Americus resident snickered to the press: “I bet it was mighty uncomfortable, coming inside after they got those niggers to leave and having to sit down in the pews with those hard [guns] in their hip pockets—and having to go down real slow so

⁸⁷ Though its unclear exactly who else participated, some say the group may have included Willie Bolden, Benjamin Van Clarke, and Penny Patch.

⁸⁸ Interview with Carolyn DeLoatch; Interview with David Bell, February 14, 2014.

⁸⁹ Some accounts report that the students split up, with half going to First Baptist and the other half going to First Methodist while others contend the group stayed together. Because oral histories side with the second version, that will be the narrative in this chapter. (For a counter-perspective on this, see “Two Churches Bar Civil Rights Groups in Americus Drive.” *New York Times* 2 August 1965).

⁹⁰ Interview with Marion Hicks and Kelso Gooden, July 2012.

⁹¹ Interview with David Bell, February 14, 2014.

⁹² Interview with Marion Hicks and Kelso Gooden, July 2012. “It was my first time on national news,” Hicks said, making light of a situation that was anything but.

⁹³ *Des Moines Register*, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box; *The Plain Dealer*—Cleveland, “Americus Churches Bar Rights Units,” August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

⁹⁴ As quoted in Frady, “God and Man in the South.”

there wouldn't be a clunk.”⁹⁵ It is clear from the swagger of the statement that keeping demonstrators out of white congregations was a duty of which many were proud. What had occurred in more liberal congregations in Atlanta was not going to happen in Americus, if local churchgoers had anything to say about it, which, of course, as Baptists, they did. Ironically, inside the church, the minister, Harold Collins, was purportedly preaching a sermon on grace and “the need ‘for God’s love to come into the hearts of all men.’”⁹⁶

After leaving First Baptist, the undeterred group walked across the street to the First Methodist Church where they found a crowd already gathering on the lawn. Unlike the more quiet integration attempt at First Baptist, the kneel-in at First Methodist was causing quite a stir. Methodist church members, including Mayor T. Walker Griffin, onlookers, and even members of the national press who had come to Americus during the previous week of protests, were all milling about, waiting and watching. “It was one of the few times I concerned about my

⁹⁵ Ibid. Others also recalled wondering how people sat in wooden pews with weapons in their pockets, a bizarrely and tellingly common joke in Americus. Russell Thomas, later the mayor of Americus, also recalled the usher at First Baptist bragging that he had “had what it takes to keep them out.” Quizzically, Thomas asked him, “You had a gun at church?? Wasn’t it uncomfortable sitting in the pew?” (Interview with Russell Thomas, August 3, 2012, Americus, GA.)

⁹⁶ Frady, “God and Man in the South.” The August morning when the integrated worshippers were turned away was not the first time First Baptist had shunned potential brethren because of race. Five years earlier, in December of 1960, Collins McGee, a young black man involved with Koinonia, had tried to worship at First Baptist and had been forcibly removed. One of the young women living at Koinonia, Carol Henry, found out that her father, a Baptist minister, would be coming to Americus for a speaking engagement at the First Baptist Church. Understandably, Carol wanted to hear her father speak and asked her friends from Koinonia to come along. Thus, on an evening in December, a carload of people from Koinonia, including Carol, Clarence Jordan and Collins McGee, drove the eight or so miles into town for the event. Jordan described what followed: “As we entered the massive First Baptist church, a fellow standing at the door was handing each person a card. He handed cards to a couple of us without looking up. Suddenly, he realized he has handed a card to a black hand. As soon as he had recovered his voice, he rasped, ‘who...who’s that?’ As Collins made his way to a seat, another of our fellows volunteered cheerfully, ‘Why, that’s Collins McGee!’ We quickly took seats near the back of the sanctuary. First thing we knew, an usher appeared and leaned over the pew directly in front of Collins. He informed him in no uncertain terms that he couldn’t stay. One of us leaned over and asked to speak to the pastor of the church, but the usher said the pastor couldn’t see us. None of us made any motion to leave. Then the usher reached over the pew and grabbed hold of Collins to drag him out. At this point we figured it was time for us all to leave, so we quietly moved to the outside of the church.” When some of the students sought to deter the usher, he informed them: “This church has authorized me to use whatever means necessary to keep niggers out of our services.” The case of Collins McGee reveals that displays of ecclesiastical exclusion based on racial or religious beliefs were not solely a product of the civil rights movement. (Esther Mohler Ho, “Koinonia Farm,” *The Christian Advocate*, February 1967, 5-7, 11, National Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, TN.)

welfare,” civil rights movement veteran and kneeler David Bell remembered, “I had never seen that many people.” They were “standing shoulder to shoulder” on the tall stone steps of the church, Bell described, it was “a lot of people.”⁹⁷ It was, he continued, “like a militia in suit and tie...they were going to do whatever they needed to do to keep us out.”⁹⁸ On the step closest to the lawn were twelve church leaders and behind them several lines of sneering and curious teenagers and other young men.⁹⁹ Though certainly afraid, the spokesman for the kneel-in group addressed the line of suited gatekeepers. “We just want to worship,” he asserted. That was not to be. “We don’t have room for you,” an unidentified Methodist usher responded.¹⁰⁰ “But I’m a Methodist,” the spokesman began, quickly interrupted by a booming voice, “I don’t care what your religion is.”¹⁰¹

Thus refused, the small group knelt in prayer in front of the church, still and silent. Heads bowed in a display of both reverence and humility, the group comprised a shocking contrast to the stern faces, clenched jaws and crossed arms of the white anti-apostles blocking the church doors.¹⁰² After the group had prayed, police chief Ross Chambliss arrived on the scene and arrested the kneelers for disturbing the peace, sometimes also noted as “disturbing divine worship.” They were taken to the Sumter County prison, where Charlie Lee Hopkins and Willie

⁹⁷ David Bell, interview by author, February 14, 2014, by phone.

⁹⁸ Ibid. Bell said, “I knew that these people, even though you’re standing in front of a church, I knew these people were prepared at any cost to keep us from coming to church.” They told us, he continued, “you will not set your foot on church property.”

⁹⁹ *New York Post*, August 3, 1965, p 24.

¹⁰⁰ It did not go unnoticed in later commentary that these words, “ironically and tragically” echoed the “words an innkeeper addressed to a weary traveler many centuries ago.” To many reading of this spectacle in their morning newspapers, the scene seemed eerily reminiscent of Christ, though yet unborn, being refused refuge. (*Portland Evening Express*, “There Was No Room,” August 3, 1965, Portland, MN.

¹⁰¹ “Americus Unrest,” unidentified article in FUMC Box.

¹⁰² Actually, if you look closely at the photographs, David Bell does not bow his head when the others do. “They give me a hard time about that,” Bell laughed, “I was the only one looking up!” In response to why, the humorous moment is sharply placed back into context, as Bell simply stated, “we were surrounded by the enemy...I did know what they would do.” (David Bell interview.)

Lamar, under arrest for the previous day's murder of Andy Whatley, were also being held.¹⁰³ One of the later ministers of the church, Rev. Bill Dupree, described the intensity with which segregationists at First Methodist approached ecclesiastical integration. "They felt like it was their church," he said, "and they had the authority to decide who was going to attend and who wasn't. If they didn't want blacks to go they had the right to tell them they couldn't attend."¹⁰⁴ "They literally looked on blacks as being inferior," he concluded, "It's just a fact of life."¹⁰⁵

As was the case at First Baptist, the pastor of the First Methodist church, Vernard Robertson, was notably absent from the kneel-in. Presumably, he was inside, preparing for the morning's service. Born in 1914 in Guyton, Georgia, Robertson attended Young Harris College, Emory University and the Candler School of Theology, pastoring several other Georgia congregations before eventually making his way to Americus.¹⁰⁶ Robertson arrived at the First Methodist Church in 1962.¹⁰⁷ Judging from his time at Candler, he may have possessed more moderate racial views than the majority of his parishioners. As one woman in the church summarized, he "rode the rail," was "caught in the middle."¹⁰⁸ The congregation exerted tremendous pressure on him to remain silent and let them have their way. It seems Robertson decided that was the best path as well. "You have to say that Vernard tried to keep peace in the church and do the right thing at the same time," a subsequent minister of the church explained, "which was a real difficult position to be in." "You might have said he should have taken a stronger stand," he acceded, claiming, however, "what he tried to do was keep peace through a

¹⁰³ The group was released on bond on August 2, as news of the kneel-in was gracing the breakfast tables of people around the nation.

¹⁰⁴ The minister then offered his own opinion, saying that that position "theologically, is totally wrong. It's not our church its God's church. We're not the ones who decide who can attend." (Interview with Rev. Bill Dupree, First United Methodist).

¹⁰⁵ Rev. Bill Dupree, interview with author, July 30, 2012, Americus, GA.

¹⁰⁶ Obituary, "Vernard Robertson," *Miscellaneous Clarke County Georgia Obituaries*, 1998.

¹⁰⁷ "Preachers of First Methodist Church Americus," compiled by Alan Anderson, *Sumter County History*.

¹⁰⁸ Martha Wood, interview by author, August 8, 2012, Americus, GA.

difficult season.”¹⁰⁹ Robertson knew he would almost certainly lose his job if he spoke out for Christian inclusion, and so he remained largely silent. Keeping the peace would come at a cost though, as the pastor found himself the subject of reams of critical responses in the press and from letter writers.

In the midst of that chaotic morning at First Methodist and First Baptist, a reporter took a photograph that would become emblematic of the kneel-in movement.¹¹⁰ The flash of the bulb captured civil rights activists kneeling on the concrete in prayer, while, towering above them on the church steps, the church’s defenders stood scowling with arms crossed in defiance. This photo came to represent for many the hypocrisy of Southern Christianity and race relations, for others, a courageous stand against a “heretical culture,” and for us, the theological stakes of the civil rights struggle.

‘A Picture to the World’: Responses to the Kneel-in

In the days following the kneel-in, the photograph taken that morning was exported around the country and around the world. **[See Figure I]**. Accompanying both Associated Press and United Press articles, the picture found its way to the front page of morning newspapers in Portland, Spokane, and Seattle, in Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia and, even more remarkably, in Vancouver, ChristChurch, Edinborough, and La Paz.¹¹¹ **[See Figure II]** The kneel-in in Americus was also reported on the NBC Nightly news, in a visually captivating

¹⁰⁹ Rev. Bill Dupree interview; Rev. Billy and Sunshine Key, interview with author, August 7, 2012, Americus, GA.

¹¹⁰ The previous week in Americus had been extremely contentious with marching and coverage of the murder of a white youth. A press corps had descended on the small city, with reporters from CBS-TV, ABC-TV, The New York Times, the Associated Press, United Press International, and multiple Georgia news outlets. “Mayor Issues Statement; Press Headquarters Set Up, *Americus Times-Recorder*, July 30, 1965.

¹¹¹ FUMC Box; MS 756 29:2. The accompanying articles usually included a basic description of the event: ‘Two Negro couples and a white couple, all neatly dressed, were set by a solid line of adult males when the group attempted to integrate the First Baptist Church. Then they went to the First Methodist Church where they were met on the steps by a large group of church members and told they could not enter.’(Associated Press, multiple articles, August 2, 1965).

scene, akin to the fire hoses of Birmingham and charred buses of Anniston.¹¹² The bent knees and bowed heads, the set jaws and folded arms: the kneel-in was on display not only for the people of Americus but now for all of America. With this breadth of circulation, over 300 letters of response poured into the First Methodist Church in Americus. Some praised the Americus church, others chastised, some offered sympathy, and some just commented on the newspaper clippings with emotional or comical asides. Some sent scathing political cartoons that appeared in various newspapers, while one man sent one he had hand-drawn. [See **Figure III, IV**].

Postmarked from around the nation, places such as East Longmeadow, MA, Port Angeles, WA, St. Paul MN, Fort Collins, CO, and Elizabethtown, TN, the responses provide a riveting portrait of the national temper regarding religion and civil rights.¹¹³ Retired veterans, hopeful college students, concerned housewives, and members of the clergy all made their voices heard, mailing their opinions and questions to Americus. These letters, some typed, but most handwritten, were preserved at First Methodist, perhaps more in a banishment of shame than an awareness of posterity, but nevertheless to the historian's benefit.

The majority of the letters chastised the church. The incident amounted to “a shame,” “a travesty,” a “disgrace”; it was “regrettable,” “upsetting,” and “deeply disturbing” to many.¹¹⁴ Many berated the congregants in Americus for not being Christians at all. Of the letters received, around two-thirds criticized the church's actions.

Many writers were concerned Methodists who condemned the church either for its outright denominational rebellion or for forsaking the mission of the church universal. “I

¹¹² Frank Blair reported for NBC in New York while a young Tom Brokaw for the Atlanta affiliate. Letter to Vernard Robertson from Rev. Thomas M. Lee, August 9, 1965, First United Methodist Church, 1965 Box (hereafter referred to as FUMC Box).

¹¹³ Some letters even came from overseas, including some from Dover, England, Edinburgh, Scotland, Germany, Christ Church, New Zealand, Melbourne, Australia, Wofgaugsee, Austria

¹¹⁴ Various letters, FUMC Box.

respectfully call your attention to Paragraph 1820 of the 1964 *Discipline* of the Methodist Church which you, as a minister, took a vow to uphold and enforce,” Mr. Elmer Hill of Sherman Oaks, California wrote, thundering, “your action and those of members of your church is in violation of the church discipline and is a disgrace.” He then noted that he would be contacting the Bishop regarding the matter to “take whatever action may be necessary.”¹¹⁵ Another concerned Methodist also confronted the congregation about its position in respect to national denominational edicts. From Christchurch, New Zealand, Mr. Armstrong wrote, “I understand that every official pronouncement of the American Methodist Church is against segregation” noting, too, “that the Negro ‘central jurisdiction,’ or segregated organization of Negro Methodist churches, has been abolished.” He claimed, “there is no vestige of support for segregation in any ecumenical body.”¹¹⁶ One Methodist minister, outraged at the church’s flaunting of the national guidelines, wrote that First Methodist of Americus should “Please, please, please do Methodism a favor and lead your people out of the Methodist Church!” “Since there is obviously no intention of following the Discipline either in letter or in spirit,” he concluded, “this is surely the most honest thing to do.”¹¹⁷ From San Diego, a self-identified “appalled Methodist” requested that the church “either change your policies or please discontinue your relationship with the Methodist church as you fail to live up to the Spirit which formed our church or even to the ideas of Christ.”¹¹⁸

Another line of argument was that the church was not only in violation of denominational rule, but that it had forsaken its core identity as a church at all. “The building which houses those

¹¹⁵ Letter from Elmer Hill, Sherman Oaks, CA, August 4, 1965, FUMC Box (# 38).

¹¹⁶ Letter from the Armstrongs, The Methodist Church of New Zealand, Christchurch, New Zealand, August 17, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹¹⁷ Letter from Donald E. Walden, Minister Frist Methodist Church of Chicago Lawn, Chicago, IL, August 8, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹¹⁸ Anonymous letter from San Diego, CA, FUMC Box.

of the First Methodist Church, Americus, Georgia,” a Massachusetts man proclaimed, “should no longer be referred to as a house of worship, but a house or a club.”¹¹⁹ From Longview, Washington, a Mrs. Pritchard remarked, “I am shocked that you publicly denied these brethren entrance to you building declaring it to be private property. May I ask to what extent is a house dedicated to the worship of God considered private?”¹²⁰ For her, the church was the house of God, open to all His children of whatever race. The same proved true for Mrs. Upshaw who added, “Even if these people are not sincere, which I doubt, is it not your duty to permit them to enter? This church of yours is not an earthly possession, but the house of God. He must be heartily displeased.” Succinctly, one California woman intoned, “A church of God? Don’t you realize that a church is “God’s House,” not yours?”¹²¹ Even a “Methodist teenager” understood this. From St. Paul, Minnesota, he wrote, “a place belonging to God shall be for all people, no matter what kind, they are still his creation.”¹²² Mr. Louri also challenged First Methodist’s actions based on his view of the church. Commenting from Lake Placid, New York, he conceded that “we cannot force anyone to be friends with us or accept us into their homes or clubs or social groups,” but then reminded his readers that, “the Church is not a social club, is it?” The church, if it was to be the Church, had to be different. These letters claim that the First Methodist Church in Americus defied both denominational guidelines and its very ecclesiastical identity.

Other responses fixated less on church issues and more on explicitly theological ones. Many quoted Scripture.¹²³ “I can’t help but wonder,” one Indiana man mused, “what doctrine

¹¹⁹ He added, “I write this letter with the authority of Galatians 5:1-10.” Charles O. Howard, Everett, MA, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹²⁰ Letter from Mrs. W.E. Pritchard, Longview Washington, August 4, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹²¹ Letter from Mrs. H.B. Galaspere, Palos Verdes Peninsula, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹²² Letter from A Methodist Teenager, St. Paul, MN, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹²³ Popular verses include: Whosoever will, let him come.; “Come to me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...” “My house shall be a house of prayer for all people.” “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members of another.” “Having done it to the least of these you have done it to me.” “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”, Colossians 3: 24-25. Some even included printed sermons, lest the

your church is built upon. Surely not the doctrine of brotherhood and love as taught by Jesus Christ—Saviour of all mankind!” Segregationist doctrine, for many outraged and befuddled observers, seemed incompatible with the message of Jesus and the meaning of the Scriptures. From Los Angeles, one man exclaimed, “Shame on all ministers who follow the patterns of segregation which [is] unchristian and unbiblical.”¹²⁴ As one perplexed woman wrote, “Why don’t you people down there read your Bible? And why don’t you learn your Commandments? Is that what your Bible teaches you? I’m glad mine doesn’t.”¹²⁵ The Bible itself offered evidence for racial inclusion, many asserted. After listing half a dozen bible verses from the New Testament, Robert Morris, himself a pastor from Endicott, New York, claimed that the Bible “seem[s] to speak to us so clearly that we are all saved only by the grace of God through faith and that we are all brethren in His Spirit.” The church’s actions, though, led him to believe that his fellow Methodists in Americus “differ[ed] in [their] interpretations.”¹²⁶ Some declared outright that the white Southern interpretation was heretical. “Baptists and Methodists of the South,” one California man warned, “better...cease giving a false interpretation of the Bible.” In his estimation, “the Bible [did] not teach segregation anywhere regardless what text you may parrot;” to insist on segregation was to practice “a decadent and false Protestantism.”¹²⁷

Mr. Dennis, of Tucson, Arizona, centered his critique on the spiritual nature of God and his creative authority. He wrote, “Have you forgotten that all peoples, all colors, from all lands are products of God’s hand or did you ever consider this fact?...God made man in his own image,

wrongful stance derive from exegetical ignorance. Sermon delivered on Race Relations Sunday February 10, 1963 First Congregational Church Stratford, Connecticut “God Speed the Day of Brotherhood” Colossians 3: 1-11 included by Mrs. Thomas J. Matt August 3, 1965, FUMC Box; This I believe” by Haywood N. Hill, M.D. (lesson at adult Sunday School at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA on January 1, 1961), submitted by Donald W. Lawson—Kingston, N.C., August 10, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹²⁴ Letter to V.R. from Joseph F. Margolo, August 9, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹²⁵ Letter from Ms. Penny H. Jenkins, Los Angeles, CA, FUMC Box.

¹²⁶ Letter from Robert H. Morris, First Methodist Church, Endicott, New York, FUMC Box.

¹²⁷ Letter to V.R. from Joseph F. Margolo, August 9, 1965, FUMC Box.

if we are to believe the bible, and I hope you do. Then, by your actions Sunday, do you consider yourself an image of God? Would He have done the same?”¹²⁸ “I raise my voice in protest,” one Missouri Methodist wrote, “that any church bearing the name Methodist would refuse admittance to anyone (sic) of God’s children.” He explained his position theologically, averring, “The price was paid nearly 2,000 years ago to break down the wall of partition that separated God’s people. Let’s not hold that account open any longer.”¹²⁹ If God, in Christ, had demolished the divisions between people, he believed, a church in Christ’s name should not reconstruct it. “It hurts me,” one such letter opined, “that although Paul found that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, so many of us have created false barriers of race or creed between the children of God.”¹³⁰

Many of the theological opinions voiced centered upon the person and work of Jesus. Eugene Tomlin, the Chairman for the Commission for Social Concerns at the First Methodist Church in Champaign, Illinois, wrote, “One can only think ‘What would Jesus have done?’” Mr. Tomlin continued, saying, “[Jesus] accepted all people as they were, and caused them to want to change their lives through exposure to his presence. He was sorely tried, many times, yet he preached and practiced forgiveness, not once, but ‘seventy time seven’ if necessary. Can we call ourselves Christians and do less?”¹³¹ “I hope,” another man wrote, that you have “meditated long and deeply on what Jesus would have done when confronted with this situation.” He continued, “would He who sought the outcast, taught love and forgiveness, asked us to pray for our enemies and those who wrongly use us, have turned anyone aside?”¹³² A letter from Mexico, New York,

¹²⁸ Letter from H. A. Dennis- Tucson, AZ, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹²⁹ Letter from Melvin B. West, Missouri Methodist Areas Church and Community Office, August 16, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹³⁰ Letter from Clyde R. Vaughn, Jr., Farmington Community Methodist Church, August 9, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹³¹ Letter from Eugene B. Tomlin, Chairman of Commission for Social Concerns, First Methodist Church- Champaign, IL, September 13, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹³² Letter from Donald A. Eagle, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

declared, “In the days of Jesus’ ministry, all people were allowed to come to Him for healing, not only physical ills but spiritual ills as well. He did not say only a few can come in My temple ...He said all must come, be baptized in faith and accept Me as their Savior and Redeemer.”¹³³ Mrs. King of Los Angeles put it even more bluntly. She prodded, “Sincerely—and reverently—do those look like the real CHRISTian faces on the top step? Are they acting like Jesus?” After quoting some of Christ’s words from the New Testament, Mrs. King asked the congregants to “Search your HEARTS...compare these faces to the face of your Master, Jesus.”¹³⁴ The comparison certainly would not reflect well on the church’s actions. One fellow minister illustrated this, asking, “Can you imagine Christ standing with his arms folded, denying the comfort and challenge of the Gospel, saying ‘I don’t care what your religion is?’”¹³⁵ The answer, of course, was no. The First Methodist Church had sacrificed the teachings and identity of Jesus on the altar of their own racial views, these responses insisted.

Many replies implicitly incorporated a critique of Divine whiteness. Dripping with disdain and sarcasm, one letter declared: “perhaps your bible gives an account concerning the color of God’s skin. Unfortunately mine does not.” “May God have mercy on your soul,” the author continued, “should, on that Great Day, you find your Judge does not have the same color skin as you.”¹³⁶ A Lutheran man from McLean, Virginia, echoed this criticism. He wrote, “Do these members think that God is white?” Such a claim, he purported, would deny “the very foundation of our Judaic-Christian religion which is the universal brotherhood of all mankind under the Fatherhood of God.” For emphasis, he added, “it is very possible that Christ Himself

¹³³ Anonymous letter from Mexico, NY, August 12, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹³⁴ Letter from Mrs. Ethel King, Los Angeles, CA, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box, emphasis hers.

¹³⁵ Letter from Rev. Ross M. Haverfield, Parish Minister Center Presbyterian Church, Canonsburg, PA, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹³⁶ Letter from H. A. Dennis- Tucson, AZ, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

would not qualify for this Lily-White League.”¹³⁷ Not only did the Bible not identify God as white, these citizens pointed out, but when, in Christian belief, God became man, he chose to inhabit non-white flesh. As Bessie Wilson, of Des Moines, simply but bitingly inquired: “Just what proof do you or any of us have that Jesus had white skin?”¹³⁸ One Georgia woman explained, “when I visited the Holy Land in 1960, most of the People who walked in the streets of Jerusalem were very dark skinned.” “Is it possible,” she prodded, that “Jesus and his parents were also?”¹³⁹ A Clayton, New Jersey resident provided an answer, writing, “Christ, too, was colored, a Sumerian of Africa, also a Jew.”¹⁴⁰ The irony of a segregated Church existing in this Jesus’s name was not lost on the letter-writers. A Plymouth, Massachusetts, woman observed that if Jesus should “come again to earth as a Hebrew or with colored skin, the chances are that He would not be recognized or allowed in many of our churches.”¹⁴¹ Or, as Ms. Fairchild mused: “the thought keeps returning to me—what would they have done had Jesus, if His skin was a different color, walked up just then seeking a place to worship?”¹⁴² The theological question loomed large for many observers: How could segregated congregations claim to worship one who they likely would deny entry?

Numerous responses opposing First Methodists’ actions employed theological arguments for racial inclusion that invoked views of ecclesiastical orthodoxy and biblical Christology in the same letter. For instance, Alfred Achert of Yeadon, Pennsylvania, “a white Methodist laymen[sic]” wrote that he was “distressed” over the kneel in. “As a member of a church that has been integrated for about fifteen years,” Achert explained, “I know that white and Negro

¹³⁷ Letter from Lloyd C. Halverson, McLean, VA, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹³⁸ Letter from Bessie Wilson, Des Moines Iowa, August 1965, FUMC Box.

¹³⁹ Letter from Julia White, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁴⁰ Anonymous letter from Clayton, NJ, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁴¹ Letter from Estelle D. Clifton, Plymouth, MA, August 30, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁴² Letter from Susie Fairchild, Freeport, TX, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

Methodists can effectively work together in the same local church to serve the Kingdom of God.” He then urged the Americus congregation to seek the same integrationist spirit, employing first theological and then ecclesiastical arguments. He pressed the church “to accept and support the teachings and example of Christ concerning brotherhood.” As he reasoned, Jesus’s “association with the Samaritan people and His parables concerning them,” revealed “that Christ believed these despised people to be acceptable to God and therefore to Him and all men.” Jesus’s involvement with the Samaritans led Achtert to believe that Christians likewise should associate with the outcasts in society, in this case, their black neighbors. After establishing this biblical line of argument, Achtert turned to an ecclesiastical one, writing: “The General Conference has made it clear that all men should be permitted to attend any Methodist Church.” Thus, Rev. Robertson should have been able to, he declared, “bring about compliance with the requirement of church law.”¹⁴³ Others, too, combined the theological and ecclesiastical. Richard Hurley of Mamasqua, New Jersey wrote not only to remind the Americus Methodists of “Paragraph 106.1, *The Discipline*,” but also “that Christ said ‘Inasmuch as ye did it to one of the least of these, ye did it to me.’”¹⁴⁴ For many, what the First Methodist Church of Americus had done was wrong both for its violation of church law and of Christ’s law.

While most critiques were circumspect and reasoned, some were less inclined toward gentle theological prodding and more towards enraged exposition. “You UnAmerican Vultures,” one began, “you have about as much of Christ’s love in your heart as had Adolph Hitler, a fanged rattlesnake or a head hunter! ... To think that human beings, in the name of Jesus, could stand on their church steps and deny entrance to any other human on earth is unbelievable! I hold you to be criminals of the lowest type as does [sic] most Americans know you to be, low,

¹⁴³ Letter to V.R. from Alfred Achtert, Jr. of Yeadon, PA, August 12, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁴⁴ Letter to V.R from Richard I. Hurley, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

ignorant, prejudiced and as unholy as serpents.” The writer benedicted, “May an Omnipotent Power dawn upon you and offer you Light,” but confessed his doubt that “there be any sort of intelligence or love within you to receive such Light.”¹⁴⁵ Similarly, a fellow Methodist railed: “You people call yourselves Christian? You are the rottenest hypocrites this side of hell, and way down deep in your heart you must know it.” He added, “I’ll bet you and the boys are real heroes to the rest of the Klan for the splendid stand you made against ‘them niggers.’ . . . As you put on your pointed hood and sheet and burn your next cross on somebody’s lawn, you might think about whether that would be Christ’s way!” He concluded his condemnation with a chilling malediction: “May God have mercy on your filthy souls! I certainly wouldn’t.”¹⁴⁶ A news reporter from Milwaukee voiced his opinion that “even the Almighty must be disgusted with your ignorance and prejudice and your hate filled actions against your fellow man.” “How can you dare even open your church doors,” he wanted to know, “when you are such narrow-minded hypocrites????” He concluded, searingly, that, “God must be disgusted with you people.”¹⁴⁷ Another letter writer claimed: “You have retreated into the devil’s midst,” clarifying further, “You do NOT have God’s approval.”¹⁴⁸ Mrs. Ruby D of Massachusetts likewise excoriated the church, calling their actions “sickening,” and expressing her hope for poetic justice, that “some day God will turn white skin into brown.”¹⁴⁹

A few concerned citizens, usually from regions far-flung from the South, asked simply for clarification as to how something like this could occur. John Soltman, from Tacoma, Washington, for example, wrote, “I need your help in understanding why the visitors were turned

¹⁴⁵ Letter from Arthur L. McKenney, *The Labor Magazine*, Joplin, MO, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Phillip Carroll, LaVerne, CA, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁴⁷ Letter from S. Rindner, Feature Writer and News Reporter, *Star Newspaper*, Milwaukee, MN, August 9, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Mrs. Dean Upshaw, Condon, OR, FUMC Box.

¹⁴⁹ Letter to FUMC from Mrs. Ruby D (unreadable) Wenham, MA, August 15, 1965, FUMC Box.

away. As you realize we are too far away to know—or even imagine—the true dynamics of the situation there.” He continued that, as a fellow Methodist, “the refusal is difficult to understand in relation to the Methodist *Discipline*.” For those unfamiliar with the folk theology and custom of the South, the refusal of Southern congregations to comply with the national denominational edicts was truly baffling.¹⁵⁰ Mr. Eagle asked, “with all due sympathy for the extreme difficulty of changing the customs of your city entrenched there many years,” why the church maintained a policy of racial segregation. “Would it not be better strategy,” he offered, “to admit those seeking to worship so long as they enter quietly and conduct themselves with decorum?”¹⁵¹ A Methodist from South Bend, Indiana wrote in a “sincere desire to learn another’s understanding of one of the problems of our time.” He expressed his belief that “Your people love the same God and with as much sincerity as we do,” and simply asked that they explain to him why they acted in such a manner.¹⁵² The most haunting of these inquisitive notes came from Worthington, Minnesota. Mrs. D.M. Johnson asked, “How do you explain to your youth the action you recently took in turning away colored people from your church? My husband, I, and our four boys would like to know. The boys have colored friends they play with and cannot understand why.”¹⁵³

While the majority of the letters received criticized the church in anger or disbelief, some responses praised the minister and deacons of the church, commending their stand for their Christian righteousness. One Americus resident penned a letter to the minister of his own congregation in the wake of the incidents, sending a copy as well to the Georgia Bishop, John Owen Smith. “I joined the Methodist Episcopal Church-South in 1903,” he wrote, “I have been a Methodist for over 62 years, and I can state without fear of truthful contradiction that the rank

¹⁵⁰ Letter to V.R. from John C. Soltman, Tacoma, WA, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁵¹ Letter from Donald A. Eagle, The National Conference of Christians & Jews, Inc. August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁵² Robert E. Cook, South Bend, IN August 9, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁵³ Letter to V.R. from Mrs. D.M. Johnson, Worthington, MN, FUMC Box.

and file of Methodists in Georgia are opposed to mixed congregations at worship services.” He claimed that the kneelers were “paid troublemakers,” “the scum of the earth,” and that their integration attempt was designed simply “to drive a wedge between our people.” The church, he insisted, had “rightly” turned them away.¹⁵⁴ Other sympathetic responses came from outside of Americus. A man from Columbia, South Carolina, wrote, “to congratulate your members for standing up and defending their rights.”¹⁵⁵ While, “it seems that we have reached the point that whatever we do is wrong,” wrote a Waycross, Georgia man, “I feel that God is still on his throne and a day of judgment will come to those who desecrate the Sabbath and certainly to those who disturb the worship of Almighty God.”¹⁵⁶ A North Carolina individual also affirmed segregation in the church. “I believe the same way you fellow Christins (sic) believe about the mixing of the races,” he said, “God’s approval is [not] upon it.” This man then stated: “we as you believe there is a dividing point in races; had it not been, all of us would have been the same color, and I do not believe ‘God’ made a mistake when he made all races and all colors.” He concluded, “may God bless you all, and when you have done all ‘Stand,’ and stand fast, and ‘God himself shall take care of the rest.”¹⁵⁷

Laudatory notes came from outside of the South as well. From Rockford, Illinois, Mable wrote: “Dear Pastor, Hooray for you. I don’t believe demonstrators should force themselves in. We are getting so tired of reading of civil rights.”¹⁵⁸ A Tallahassee man expressed his bafflement at the civil rights movement, demanding to know “why some Washington officials condone or overlook the offense of sending our boys to risk their lives fighting COMMUNISTS in the

¹⁵⁴ Letter to Vernard Robertson and J.O. Smith from Frank L. Butler, Sr. Americus, GA, August 19, 1965.

¹⁵⁵ Letter from Sam B. Doughton, Columbia, SC, August 4, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁵⁶ Letter to V.R. from J.B. Hutchinson of Waycross, GA, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁵⁷ Letter to V.R. and the FUMC Church Board from Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Mills, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box; some grammatical alterations were made in these quotations to improve clarity when necessary.

¹⁵⁸ Letter to V.R. from Mable, Rockford, Illinois, August 4, 1965, FUMC Box.

hellish jungles of Viet Nam, while at the same time some Washington officials seem to support or neglect completely evidenced COMMUNIST-inspired gimmicks in Selma, Alabama; Americus, Georgia; Bogalusa, Louisiana; Chicago, Illinois; Newark, New Jersey; St. Augustine, Florida; and other places in the good ole U.S.A.”¹⁵⁹ From Washington state, one man ridiculed the kneelers as looking more like they were “shooting dice” than praying. “Our sympathies are surely with the South in this phony and communistic ‘Civil Rights’ deal,” he declared.¹⁶⁰ An Ohioan wrote: “As a fifty-four year old person, who has been a Methodist all of his life, I cannot compliment your church and its members highly enough.” Though a life-long Northerner, he described himself as “more and more a Southern sympathizer,” whose “heart goes out to the white people and the good colored people of your city.”¹⁶¹ An important figure in the Los Angeles Citizen’s Council declared what “a wonderful feeling [it is] to know that there are other people in America that are standing up for the rights of the white race and the right to gather without being mixed with the Savages of Africa.” Calling integration a force of the “AntiChrist,” he bestowed this benediction: “God Bless all of you people down there.” He signed his letter, “For God, Country, and Freedom of choice.”¹⁶² A Pennsylvania Baptist declared that segregation was “God’s command.” “We believe in segregation here at my church, but many churches here do not,” he stated, promising, “We shall be praying for you.”¹⁶³

Many moderate responses simply offered sympathy to Vernard Robertson, acknowledging the “trying times” and urging patience and prayer. “Brother Robertson,” one

¹⁵⁹ Letter from Carl Liddle, Tallahassee, FL

¹⁶⁰ Letter from C.C. James, Sequim, WA, August 15, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁶¹ Letter from W.B. Dickson, Cincinnati, OH, August 2, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁶² Letter from H. Myers, Alhambra, CA FUMC Box. Much of the pro-segregationist literature Myers sent is suffused with political and anti-Communist sentiment as well as religious ideals. For example, one pamphlet quoted Woodrow Wilson, declaring: “The sum of the matter is this our civilization cannot survive materially unless it is redeemed spiritually.” For many supporters of the Americus church, the “struggle to save our white race and our liberty” was both a material and a spiritual mission.

¹⁶³ Letter from Rev. M. William Trott, Calvary Baptist Church, Ephart, PA, FUMC Box.

fellow Methodist wrote, “I know that you are a man of deep convictions. I know you want the spirit of Christ to prevail regardless of the conditions.”¹⁶⁴ Other ministers especially expressed sympathy, like the Macon preacher who claimed: “My heart goes out to you and your members in this very trying time...I am praying for you each day.”¹⁶⁵ Rev. Thomas M. Lee wanted to let the Reverend know that, “I am thinking of you and the ugly situation in Americus...I know there is hate on the part of many of our white Methodists toward negroes and I assume there is also bitterness on the part of many colored people toward us white folk. But if ever we needed the spirit of the Christ to be manifested fully it is in critical situations such as you are facing.”¹⁶⁶ A Savannah minister reiterated this sentiment, noting that “at times like these the Christian minister finds himself too much alone.” Ministering “to all people is not an easy thing,” he wrote, assuring his brother that, “you and all the people of Americus have our prayers in these days.”¹⁶⁷

This cache of letters--at turns arresting and alarming, heartwarming and heinous--provides extraordinary insight into the impact of the kneel-in movement on the church and illustrates the variegated ways in which Americans processed issues of race theologically. And, of course, it reveals that Christian Americans *did* interpret issues of race theologically.

Repercussions in the Denomination and in Americus

Two weeks after the incident, John O. Smith, the Bishop of the Methodist Church, sent a letter from his office at Candler Seminary in Atlanta to Rev. Robertson in Americus.¹⁶⁸ The

¹⁶⁴ Letter to V.R. from Sarah LaVaughn, Lynmore Methodist Church, Macon, GA, August 3, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁶⁵ Letter to Vernard Robertson from James D. Reese, Macon, GA, FUMC Box.

¹⁶⁶ Letter to Vernard Robertson from Rev. Thomas M. Lee, August 9, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁶⁷ Letter to Vernard Robertson from Rev. Carlton Anderson, Savannah, GA, August 9, 1965, FUMC Box.

¹⁶⁸ Smith says he called several times over the previous weeks, but it seemed the minister, certainly under duress, had elected to go on vacation. Bishop Smith is an interesting figure in the struggle over civil rights in the Methodist Church. Born in South Carolina, Smith grew up less than ten miles from the infamous U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, who was a contemporary. Yet, Thurmond and Smith diverged sharply over the race question. A racial moderate who spoke for inclusion as early as 1960 at a conference at Lake Junaluska, Smith could be disliked by Methodists on both sides of the racial aisle. Some accused him of moving too slow in regards to integration, while others accused the Bishop of trying “to ram church integration down our throats.” Unlike his predecessor, Bishop

Bishop's office, he noted, had been "deluged" with correspondence. He reported that though some of it was "as foolish as the signs of the times," other parts of it represented "intelligent, concerned, long-suffering people," asking "if something can't be done to protect the image of the Church of Christ." The event, he agreed, had been very bad publicity for the church. As many Methodist laypeople had, Smith cited the *Discipline's* stance on the matter. He was not "pulling the *Discipline* on the congregation," he insisted, but simply hoped to "remind" them of the church's official position. Qualifying that he was "not an outsider pushing in" and had "no desire to apply pressure from the Bishop's office," Smith nevertheless suggested that Robertson's "good" church "decide to seat all well-behaved people who come their way at the time of worship" and avoid anything that could "be considered un-Christian." Noting his service in both South Carolina and Georgia, the Bishop claimed he was "as well versed in the problems we face as any person who wears shoes." He was familiar with "all the arguments against seating people" and conceded that in many cases protestors did possess insincere motives. Still, Bishop Smith responded to the concern that demonstrators were coming to church "for publicity rather than the purpose of worship," by invoking a theological argument. It would "be unfortunate for us if God judged our motivations every time we turned to Him for guidance and help," Smith claimed, urging the congregation to reflect Jesus in his statement, "whosoever will, let him come."¹⁶⁹

Smith also felt compelled to issue a formal statement on the Americus kneel-in.¹⁷⁰ This

Arthur Moore, Smith endured years of harsh criticism. Smith, despite his reputation, was a thoughtful, reasoned man, who also kept good records of his correspondence. Smith even had plans to release a book about the struggle he faced as Bishop during the civil rights movement, but the work was never released due to his death in 1978. In 2009, though, Herschel Sheets, an acquaintance of Smith, edited and published the manuscript entitled, *Letters Written in Turbulent Times*. See John O. Smith, *Letters Written in Turbulent Times*, edited and self-published by Herschel H. Sheets, 2009; South Georgia Methodist Archive, Epwoth by the Sea, St. Simons Island, GA.

¹⁶⁹ Letter from J. Owen Smith to Vernard Robertson, August 16, 1965, John O. Smith Papers, Emory University, Atlanta GA. MSS 424, Box 7, Folder 0812-31; FUMC Box.

¹⁷⁰ It seems the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Catholic churches in Americus did the same, making statements "on radio and by publication concerning the Americus situation." Letter from Smith to Rev. W. Harry Moore, August 25, 1965, MSS 242, Box 17, 0812-31.

statement, “A Reminder Concerning the Open Door Policy of the Methodist Church,” declared that it had “always” been the Methodist stance to welcome “all who come in a sober and dignified manner, regardless of race, color, or creed.” Claiming that any “departure” from this policy was the result of “sectional custom” not “rule or principle,” the Bishop sought to distance official Methodism from unofficial Methodist segregationism.¹⁷¹ In his “Bishop’s Column” in the *Wesleyan Advocate*, Smith articulated this position even more forcefully: “Dear friends of Georgia Methodism, I earnestly implore, as I have repeatedly done before, all of our Churches to admit those who come to worship You can’t afford to do otherwise. You will regret not having done so. We do not question motives for coming to the Father’s house.”¹⁷² Smith’s statement was printed in publications around the country, including the *Americus Times-Recorder*.¹⁷³

White Americus residents responded to “A Reminder Concerning the Open Door Policy of the Methodist Church” with a mix of dismissiveness and defensiveness. While their congregations were undoubtedly acting out of “sectional custom,” they were also, many believed, acting in accordance with “rule or principle,” since they possessed official closed door policies. As previously noted, for many Methodists, congregational authority was equal to, even superior to, denominational authority. They had been ignoring the national denomination’s racial position for years. Moreover, many reasoned, a Bishop in Atlanta could not possibly understand the local situation in Americus.

“First of all let me say that you have a perfect right to your opinion,” Harry Moore wrote to Bishop Smith, “and you have the right to issue any statements you may desire to issue.” But, Moore continued, “the issuing of this statement at this time has not helped our situation here in

¹⁷¹ Smith, “A Reminder Concerning the Open Door Policy of the Methodist Church,” August 14, 1965, MSS 242, Box 17, 0812-31.

¹⁷² J.O. Smith, The Bishops Column, *Wesleyan Christian Advocate*, 1965, South Georgia Methodist Archive, St. Simons Island, GA.

¹⁷³ *Americus Times-Recorder*, August 14, 1965.

Americus but rather it has tended to alienate a vast host of Methodists.” Methodists in Americus, Moore claimed, already felt misrepresented by the “biased press” and exploited by “a vast community of outsiders...who came to Americus to make trouble.” These outsiders, “beatniks, prostitutes, [and] derelicts, all of whom were paid to come to Americus,” were lead by known civil rights agitators who, Moore charged, had “made the statement that ‘they would take Americus apart and that when they went to the churches they would break them up.’”¹⁷⁴ They “are not welcomed in our community,” he wrote, “nor will they be welcomed in any of the churches of Americus.” The kneel-ins were staged “for only one purpose,” Moore informed the Bishop, “to disrupt public worship.” “If you had known the real facts,” one letter declared, “the statement would have been tempered with some understanding and concern for the vast numbers who are loyal members of the Methodist Church and who love the Church.”¹⁷⁵ Another letter writer, a “member of the Methodist Church since 1921, a steward since 1936, and a Associate Lay Leader of the Atlanta-Emory district for the past several years,” harshly criticized the Bishop’s stance. He wrote: “you have disturbed the membership of the Methodist Church... you have disturbed the peace of mind of many of its members... you are lending aid and comfort to the paid agitators and law violating paid demonstrators... you are inciting more difficulties for the days that lie ahead to the utter disgust of loyal and faithful members of the Methodist Church.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Moore’s description of the young activists provides insight into how they were viewed by Americus’ white residents. He says, “These boys and girls, white cohabitated with negro men and women and the obscenity which was present on the streets of Americus was nauseating. The presence of social disease among these people was almost 100% and the doctors offices in Americus were crowded with people seeking treatment for venera(sic) disease.” For many like Moore, civil rights workers supposed personal immorality rendered their clamoring for public morality void.

¹⁷⁵ Letter to Bishop J.O. Smith from Wm. Harry Moore, Executive Secretary, Magnolia Manor, Americus, GA, FUMC Box.

¹⁷⁶ Letter from Bernard Smith, August 8, 1965, MSS 242, 7, 09, 1-7.

Despite the public pronouncements that so enraged the Methodists of Americus, privately, Bishop Smith was more ambivalent on the issue than his formal statements suggest. He was, in fact, quite sympathetic to the First Methodist Church in Americus. In his personal correspondence, Smith claimed he had been “involved in that problem about as deeply as the citizens of the town itself.”¹⁷⁷ In another letter to a friend in San Jose, Bishop Smith described “the extreme emotional setting that [had] prevailed in Americus,” the “terrific demonstrations of all sorts.” He even referenced the shooting of Andy Whatley.¹⁷⁸ Smith was also cynical about the nature of kneel-ins themselves. Though he had publicly pronounced that that church could not “question motives for coming to the Father’s house,” the Bishop himself suspected that kneel-ins were exploitative and insincere. He wrote to a friend that he possessed an “inherent tendency against” the demonstrations, against “large groups of outsiders who come from a distance to settle all local affairs.” “The expert camera man with telecast facilities for publicity purposes,” Smith opined, did not belong at church, and furthermore “impresses a group of ushers rather unfavorably.” The Bishop questioned “if there is any relationship between [kneel ins] and worship,” and pinpointed insincere kneel-ins, not religiously sanctioned racism, as “basically the problem.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Letter from Smith to Rev. W. Harry Moore, August 25, 1965, MSS 242, Box 17, 0812-31.

¹⁷⁸ Letter from Bishop J. Owen Smith to Mr. Carl A. Metzger, August 30, 1965, MSS 242, Box 17, 0812-31. In this letter he also stated, “Frankly, I am not at all sure that the problems of the South are any worse than those now depicted in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, etc.” Interestingly, the Bishop took a different tone when he penned his “bishop’s column” in the *Wesleyan Christian Advocate*. In this address, he wrote, “Pictures that were made on the front steps of one of our Georgia Methodist churches recently were within a few hours on the front pages of newspapers in Boston, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, and Paris. The chaplain is quite right when he writes, ‘What a paradox! We are here in Vietnam to die if need be for Freedom and Democracy and out people back home seem rather careless with these values when the time comes, even in the Church of Christ.’ ... Dear friends of Georgia Methodism, I earnestly implore, as I have repeatedly done before, all of our Churches to admit those who come to worship You can’t afford to do otherwise. You will regret not having done so. We do not question motives for coming to the Father’s house.” (J.O. Smith, “The Bishops Column,” *Wesleyan Christian Advocate*, 1965, South Georgia Methodist Archive, St. Simons Island, GA).

¹⁷⁹ Letter from Bishop J. Owen Smith to Mr. Carl A. Metzger, August 30, 1965, MSS 242, Box 17, 0812-31. In this letter he also stated, “Frankly, I am not at all sure that the problems of the South are any worse than those now depicted in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, etc.” Interestingly, the Bishop took a different tone when he penned

Therefore, while he officially sanctioned open churches, unofficially, Smith took a more pragmatic approach to church integration. Writing to Rev. Robertson in Americus, Bishop Smith suggested that if the church would acquiesce and let a few people integrate for symbolic value, it could escape from negative attention and soon return to its normal operation. Black Christians did not actually want to attend white churches, he noted. The kneel-ins were merely publicity stunts. If the church treated them accordingly, Smith advised, it would find a way to be left alone and to continue to worship in segregated churches. “Negro representatives will stalk your shadow,” until they are allowed in, Smith told Robertson, but also assured him that “once they are seated, they do not return.”¹⁸⁰ In a lost opportunity for theological correction or pastoral propheticism, Smith joined in the denigration of kneel-ins and took a cynical approach to church integration. While symbolic integration may have temporarily solved the public crisis within Southern Protestant Christianity, it did nothing to address serious theological issues, much less to allow the church to speak boldly on issues of race. The lukewarm position of the Bishop, and of the national Methodist Church, did not mollify division, but intensified it.

The kneel-in movement caused a crisis over and within the church by forcing Southern Christians to confront issues of race they had long avoided. As Stephen Haynes put it, the church experienced “institutional trauma.”¹⁸¹ As a result, in the years following the kneel-in movement,

his “bishop’s column” in the *Wesleyan Christian Advocate*. In this address, he wrote, “Pictures that were made on the front steps of one of our Georgia Methodist churches recently were within a few hours on the front pages of newspapers in Boston, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, and Paris. The chaplain is quite right when he writes, ‘What a paradox! We are here in Vietnam to die if need be for Freedom and Democracy and out people back home seem rather careless with these values when the time comes, even in the Church of Christ.’ . . . Dear friends of Georgia Methodism, I earnestly implore, as I have repeatedly done before, all of our Churches to admit those who come to worship You can’t afford to do otherwise. You will regret not having done so. We do not question motives for coming to the Father’s house.” (J.O. Smith, “The Bishops Column,” *Wesleyan Christian Advocate*, 1965, South Georgia Methodist Archive, St. Simons Island, GA).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 5. Haynes makes a compelling case that churches, unlike businesses, schools, and other public spaces, were forced to account for their racial attitudes, as “institutions that claim a moral identity.” Most other organizations “are rarely compelled,” he says, to justify themselves in the same way and are not usually as thoroughly condemned for their historical racism. Simply put, a formerly segregated park is not criticized as

many Protestant congregations (and at least one denomination) split over issues of race and orthodoxy. In Americus, The First Methodist Church ruptured, with a faction forming a new, more racially progressive congregation. Despite the tension and bad publicity, the leadership of First Methodist still voted for closed doors several times after the 1965 kneel-in. Vernard Robertson left the congregation in 1968, replaced by Rev. Billy Key, a man who, though sensitive to his congregants, took a more rigid stance than had his predecessor on the need for racial inclusion. Nevertheless, the First United Methodist Church did not officially adopt an “open door” policy until the late 1970s. Like First Methodist, the Americus First Baptist Church also split in the wake of the 1965 kneel-in. On March 16, 1972, the Board of Deacons recommended that the “door of our church be opened without regard to race.” The minister, Harold Collins, added that on this point he was “NOT neutral,” that he felt strongly “that Christ would not have us bar anyone from our fellowship.” Nevertheless, just as it had been nine years earlier, the motion to open the church doors was defeated, by a vote of 130-270. Finally fed up, some of these 130 more progressive members left First Baptist and formed a new congregation, Fellowship Baptist Church.¹⁸² The same pressure divided Presbyterians in Americus, even though they had avoided direct action protest during the years of the kneel-in movement. In the shadow of a national denominational schism in 1973, First Presbyterian Church also split, some choosing to remain at the downtown First Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) and others fleeing to the newly formed St. Andrew’s Presbyterian (PCA). Americus residents remembered this era

thoroughly as a formerly segregated church. Institutions that claim moral authority must act morally, or be judged harshly.

¹⁸² In the end, forty-six members of First Baptist left to found Fellowship Baptist. (Alan Anderson, *A Journey of Grace, A History of the First Baptist Church in Americus, GA*, 148-149.) The church did, finally, integrate and open its doors, quietly and without fanfare, in 1977, when Jimmy Carter was President.

with bitterness and sadness, if they let it creep into their memories at all. “They say time heals,” one Americus man mused, “but it was an unpleasant time in the church, and in the city.”¹⁸³

Local church schisms represented not only racial drama but also theological drama. Most congregations blamed church fractures on theological differences. Those defending racial separation maintained that they also defended biblical orthodoxy and theological conservatism. “This assertion,” Haynes declared, “though accurate in the broadest sense, veils the church’s racist origins in the myth of a noble quest to defend Christian orthodoxy.”¹⁸⁴ Certainly, justifications subsumed under the orthodox apologetic often contained racial elements. But, religion and race are not so easily untangled. These would be issues that would continue to split congregations and denominations throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

The struggle over kneel-ins was really a struggle over orthodoxy, over correct interpretation of the Christian faith, over no less than God’s favor. What was at stake for civil rights protestors was not just participation in American democracy but in the kingdom of God, not just electoral victories, but the victory of God’s rightful way. Their opponents, too, fancied themselves defenders of the Divine. For many white Southern Protestants, kneel-ins threatened not only their segregationist sensibilities but their beliefs about religious liberty and the sanctity of the church. And, since the kneel ins were so public, these theological contestations extended from the church steps into all Americans’ homes. Everyone who opened the morning newspaper had to confront the theological drama.

The kneel-in movement, as envisioned by the Atlanta students, produced a theological confrontation, one that forced Americans to reckon with the bewitching relationship between

¹⁸³ Interview with Marion Hicks and Kelso Gooden. Sumter County’s most notable church split, in fact, came in the later part of that decade, when Jimmy Carter’s home church of Plains First Baptist was ripped apart by racial strife and humiliating publicity, with some forming the more capacious Maranatha Baptist Church. (Clennon King, Ashton Jones, Wayne King, *New York Times*).

¹⁸⁴ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 5.

race and religion, between color and the church. Many segregationist white Southerners, though they may have begun the decade with vigorous defenses of their way of life, ended it with a quiet acquiescence that times had changed. Sometimes their own hearts had. In the hidden recesses of their minds, often as the result of the spiritual trauma of the kneel-ins, many underwent a deep and often “painful” revision of their “Christian” justifications for racial inequality. Though, as evidenced by church splits, “some hardliners maintained their views throughout the 1970s,” most were forced to accede that the Bible did not in fact support racial segregation, that it was, in fact, “unchristian.”¹⁸⁵ In this sense, the kneel-in movement of the 1960s was successful. Yet, in other ways it failed. Churches largely remained segregation in practice, if not in theory. Even ministers, like Vernard Robertson and Bishop John Smith, were unable to bridge the theological chasm as the rifts between Christians--black and white, liberal and conservative--widened. With kneel-ins, civil rights activists had hoped to ignite a movement within the church for Christian love and brotherhood. But “it was,” one Southern-born civil rights worker said, “like trying to strike a match on a wet windowpane.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 22. That is not to say that things actually changed much in many small Southern towns. Newman writes, “In effect, many Southern Baptists joined an increasingly conservative, white American mainstream in the late 1960s and early 1970s, opposed to legal racial discrimination and segregation, but unwilling to make sacrifices to achieve integration.”

¹⁸⁶ Marshall Frady, “God and Man in the South,” *The Atlantic*, 1966.

CONCLUSION

“On Our Side, Today”

Bee Jenkins “wasn’t afraid” to participate in the civil rights movement. She was not afraid, even in the presence of highway patrolmen with dogs and guns, because, as she said, “I kn[e]w I had somebody there who was on my side.” That somebody, Jenkins explained, “was Jesus...he was able to take care of me.”¹ While for Jenkins, the civil rights movement possessed divine sanction and protection, for opponents it represented “the devil shaking the very foundations of our land.”² Segregationists “not only believe[d] that God [was] on [their] side,” but also “that [they were] on God’s side.” Both the civil rights movement and the opposition to it frequently and emphatically asserted God’s favor. To take seriously these voices on both sides transforms the conflict over civil rights into a distinctly theological one. As Southerners agitated and resisted, they often invoked their Christian faith, claiming that their theological beliefs provided the foundation for their racial positions.

Employing the lens of lived theology, this dissertation has uncovered forgotten undercurrents of the civil rights struggle in the South. Connecting hermeneutics and harassments, philosophy and pickets, ideology and individuals, it claims that belief and action cannot be neatly separated. In the postwar South, both theological and racial beliefs animated the conflict over civil rights. The struggle over civil rights was also a struggle over Christian theology. The intermingling of race and religion not only deepened the theological struggle over civil rights, but promised that it would endure past the civil rights era.

¹ Frederick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African American Political Activism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 78.

² *The Citizens’ Council*, May 1956, 2 as quoted in Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizen’s Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 174.

The theological conflict over civil rights flourished in the rich soil of Americus, Georgia. Like much of the South, Americus was highly churched; most citizens overwhelmingly professed Protestant Christianity. But while neighbors in Americus may have proclaimed the “Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man” and may have agreed that “Jesus was Lord,” those statements had different meanings for different groups. While Christians shared, in Eddie Glaude’s phrase, “the common grammar of belief,” they often spoke in vastly different theological languages.³ This dissertation listens to these theological languages, exploring how, in all of the shouting and singing of the civil rights movement, no one could seem to hear each other.

Koinonia Farm, the interracial experiment in radical orthodoxy, spoke the language of incarnation and reconciliation. Founded in 1942 by Clarence Jordan as a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God,” Koinonia Farm was an explicit embodiment of theology. Koinonia organized its communal life around the theological principles of redemptive agriculture, Christian community, and racial reconciliation. These theological tenets found their basis in biblical Christianity as Jordan and the other members understood it. The Farm was an expression of lived theology, and, in Jordan’s view, a demonstration of radical orthodoxy. It drew derision and then persecution: accusations of Communism, expulsion from Rehoboth Baptist Church, and nighttime bombings. Because Koinonia was established so explicitly upon theological principles, attacks on the Farm comprised attacks on those principles. The opposition possessed a counter-theology.

The established white Protestant churches of Lee Street--the First Baptist, First Methodist, and First Presbyterian churches, principally--considered themselves inheritors and protectors of orthodox Christian belief. They spoke in the language of tradition. Heirs to generations of Fundamentalism, white Southern Protestants feared secular incursions in

³ As quoted by Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 331.

American society and liberal incursions in theology. With a high regard for the Bible and for the church as an institution, the Lee Street congregations acted as protectors of order and stability, both religiously and racially. Theological commitments to biblical literalism, evangelism and a particular Christology allowed white Southern Protestants to sanctify segregation as God's way and see its defense as holy business. This theology led them not only to oppose Koinonia, but to oppose the civil rights movement.

While white Protestants on Lee Street clung to a traditional orthodoxy, across town, black Protestant churches possessed a theology of their own. They spoke in the language of equality, freedom, and redemption. The black church had long been a refuge for African Americans in the United States, a place of autonomy and community. The church also fostered a powerful counter-theology to segregationist Christianity, one that grasped the subversive possibilities of the gospel. Clinging to the belief that they were made in the image of God, that segregation was sinful, that the God of the Exodus would deliver them, and that Jesus identified with them in suffering, many black Christians in the South rebuffed segregationism and asserted their equality. Christian principles provided the black freedom struggle with the language of theology and the power of faith.

When the civil rights movement exploded in South Georgia in the early 1960s, it possessed theological foundations and, often, theological expressions. With help from SNCC and the Southwest Georgia Freedom Project, students in Americus began to conduct mass meetings and to agitate nonviolently for their rights, as they had seen done in nearby Albany. With help from leaders like Charles Sherrod, ministers J.R. Campbell and R.L. Freeman, and a host of students and activists, the Americus and Sumter County Movement conducted direct action protests, registered people to vote, and marched down the streets. The Americus Movement also

held mass meetings at local churches, sang gospel songs, and prayed. Social protest was theological performance. In enduring beatings and imprisonment, many found comfort in faith and imagined themselves as the characters they had learned about in church. In marching down the streets, many felt they were like the Israelites, marching to freedom and the Promised Land. During the long, hot summers of 1963, 1964 and 1965, the movement in Americus, though beleaguered and harassed, challenged Jim Crow politically and theologically.

Initially, segregationists struggled to find a strong theological counter to the civil rights movement, though they hampered it with threats and mass arrests. But, when a young white man was murdered in the summer of 1965, white segregationists found a moment of opportunity and seized it. They reacted strongly and swiftly. Authorities cancelled marches and called in state troopers; those opposed to the civil rights movement condemned it as immoral and inherently violent. In addition to questioning the morality of the civil rights movement, opponents to civil rights also snuffed out all dissent within the white community. White sympathizers, especially those who advocated change, like Americus's Warren Fortson, were ostracized as Southern heretics. Lastly, when opponents to civil rights could not prevent the integration of public schools, they found theological justifications for beginning their own. Following the push towards school desegregation in the 1960s, many segregationists founded private Christian schools, such as Americus's Southland Academy. Insisting that they were founded for religious reasons, namely, the right to pray in school, these institutions avoided issues of race (while shirking integration requirements). The civil rights movement may have prevailed in the streets, but as the conflict moved into the courtrooms, living rooms, and classrooms of the South, the opposition gained strength, finding new theological justifications for old racial politics.

Throughout the 1960s, the church was the center of struggle. With kneel-ins, the civil rights movement directly challenged ecclesiastical segregation by publicly confronting churchgoers. Kneel-in activists sought entry to white churches and invoked theological arguments in the attempt, causing conflict within denominations and even within individual congregations. While many white churchgoers were convinced that God required Christians of whatever color to worship together, others painted the kneel-in movement as insincere, provocative, and ecclesiastically inappropriate. In Americus, civil rights activists conducted a kneel-in at First Baptist Church and First Methodist Church during the summer of 1965. Integrated groups of men and women approached the churches, were denied entry, and prayed on the church steps as protest. The event caused a media maelstrom and theological tumult. Letters of both support and opposition poured in. As a result of the kneel-in and ensuing crisis, several Americus churches split. When the civil rights movement arrived at the white Southern church, it created and exposed theological conflicts.

The story of the civil rights movement is, at least in part, the story of theological opportunity squandered. Prophetic cries for peace and brotherhood, like Koinonia Farm's, were unheard or squelched. For a brief moment in the early 1960s, theological and political transcendence seemed possible. Black Christians were addressing their white co-religionists with the language of theological orthodoxy and with active love. Maybe white Southern evangelicals could lay aside Jim Crow for Jesus Christ. Maybe the beloved community, the Kingdom of God, could emerge in the American South. It was not to be. When civil rights proponents spoke of equality, white Christian segregationists heard an abandonment of biblical literalism; when they spoke of change, they heard attacks on conservative religion. Moderate white ministers and

religious leaders failed to interpret. The moment of possibility passed in the theological drama of religion and race in America.

At the decade's end, white and black Protestants remained bitterly divided, politically and theologically. The civil rights conflict ended not in peaceful compromise or understanding, but in continuing struggle. While blacks in the South sorted through their gains and losses in the civil rights era, Southern evangelicals rallied to new causes, though old issues of race endured. Theology failed to bridge the racial chasm in the United States. As a result, theology itself also lost. Dennis Dickerson has defined theology as "listening to God to know him and to know how to live."⁴ In the years following the civil rights movement, Americans simply were not listening. For the most part, they were too busy screaming at one another as the culture wars raged. The Religious Right, though quick to invoke the Bible and boast God's favor, used theology primarily in service to political arguments, while many in the black church abandoned their more subversive theological tenets and embraced the easier prosperity gospel.⁵

During the civil rights movement, activists often sang a well-known freedom song, "We Shall Overcome." "*We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome... someday,*" they valiantly proclaimed in a chorus of triumph. But the familiar song has another stanza: "*God is on our side, God is on our side, God is on our side... today.*" The assertion of God's favor is both constant and ever changing in American life and politics, extremely potent but elusive. The civil rights activists of the 1960s believed that God was on their side. So, too, did their opponents. As the theological conflicts over race and religious orthodoxy continued throughout the twentieth

⁴ Dennis Dickerson, Vanderbilt Americanist Seminar, 2013.

⁵ See: James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *Amazing Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012); Jonathan Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethic and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

century, Americans often insisted that God was on their side, on their side “today,” trying to claim divine favor, even if just for a moment.

EPILOGUE

*“Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed:
Yet saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, “How long?”
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song!”¹*

Several years before Clarence Jordan died, a young couple came to Koinonia. Millard and Linda Fuller were driving through from Montgomery, Alabama, and intended to stay at the Farm only an hour. They stayed a month. Millard Fuller, only thirty years old, had built a small fortune for himself in business, but his personal life was in shambles.² Linda had threatened to leave him, and he was desperately trying to salvage his marriage and find meaning in his life.³ Koinonia was the perfect place. Millard reported that he was “captivated” by Clarence and the Farm’s “theology” and application for “practical Christian discipleship. After their month at Koinonia, the Fullers felt restored. In 1968, they joined Clarence and Florence at Koinonia indefinitely and became full members of the Farm. Millard spent hours harvesting pecans and milking cows with the aging Jordan as the two men discussed issues of faith and service. He “taught me about obedience to Christ and authentic participation in God’s work in the world,” Fuller would later recall.⁴ The Fullers’ presence also revitalized Koinonia, which had dwindled to only a few people in the late 1960s. Millard and Linda brought energy and fresh ideas; Millard also contributed his business acumen. As Clarence and Millard walked through the groves of

¹ “The Church’s One Foundation,” Samuel John Stone (1860)

² Fuller was a self-made millionaire at the age of 29.

³ Millard Fuller, *Theology of the Hammer* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishers, 1994); Millard Fuller, *Love in the Mortar Joints: The Story of Habitat for Humanity* (El Monte, CA: New Win Publishing, 1990); Bettie B. Youngs, *The House that Love Built* (Newburyport, MA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2007).

⁴ Fuller, *Theology of the Hammer*, 4.

Koinonia, discussing how to live theology, they began to imagine a new project for Koinonia, one focused on addressing housing inequality.

This new venture, Koinonia Partners, began in 1968 as Koinonia began accepting donations and building houses for their neighbors in Sumter County.⁵ It was, in Millard Fuller's words, "the theology of the hammer." This "theology of the hammer," Fuller explained, held that "faith must be incarnated; that is to say, it must become more than a verbal proclamation or an intellectual assent. True faith must be acted out." The theology of the hammer was just theology, lived. It was the same vision that had animated Clarence Jordan and Martin England when they founded Koinonia twenty-five years before. The first house Koinonia Partners built was with and for Bo and Emma Johnson, long-time friends and neighbors of Koinonia. "The day they moved in," their daughter Queenie remembered, "was a day full of the purest joy." "My mama, daddy, brother and sister were running all over the house talking about who wanted which bedroom, who was going to be where," she said, adding, "it was so happy."⁶

Just before the Johnson's house was completed, Clarence Jordan died, on October 29, 1969. Following his death, Millard Fuller took over the operation of Koinonia Partners and continued Koinonia's vision for "partnership housing." After four years, Millard and Linda decided to go to Zaire and test Koinonia's housing model overseas. It worked. When the Fullers returned from Africa to Americus in 1976, they expanded the housing program of Koinonia and renamed it: Habitat for Humanity. Habitat for Humanity became a wildly successful humanitarian program, operating around the world to offer housing for those in need. The lived theology of Koinonia Farm--the theology of the hammer--had gone global, and the world would never be the same.

⁵ In all Koinonia Partners built 194 homes in Sumter County from 1969-1992; Koinonia Archive.

⁶ Bren Dubay, "Queen E. White Remembers the Beginning," Koinonia Partners.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw changes not only for Koinonia but in the city of Americus as well. Schools and public facilities had been legally integrated. Two black officers, J.W. “Sport” Jones and Henry L. “Spann” Williams served on the Americus police force, while black teachers taught in the public schools and served in public offices. In 1966, Teresa Mansfield became the first black student to attend Americus’s local college, Georgia Southwestern University.⁷ In 1968, the Americus School Board, once a bastion of segregationism, welcomed two black members, Thomas Blount and Eddie J. McGrady. Four years later, Willie Paschal became the first black principal of a formerly all-white school when he took the helm at Furlow Grammar School. By 1975, Lewis Lowe was elected to the Americus City Council, the first black resident to serve in such a capacity.⁸ Up in Atlanta, Warren Fortson must have shaken his head in disbelief.

Marshall Frady, a journalist who had covered the civil rights movement and segregationist resistance in the 1960s, returned to Americus in 1971 and discovered this change with great surprise. Frady reported a “general suspicion” that “something ironic and seismic [was] happening in the South.” In the very places where hatred had been the most entrenched, he found that a hopeful cooperation had begun. Frady suggested, if warily, that “it may be in the South after all where the nation’s general malaise of racial alienation first finds resolution.” Americus High School, for instance, the site of threats and epithets only a few years later, transformed into a place where black and white students sat together in the stands to cheer on their winning football team. Frady called the integration “startlingly serene,” even labeling the progress “giddy.” Though racial inequality and dissention persisted, much had changed in Americus.⁹

⁷ Teresa Mansfield interview.

⁸ Americus Times-Recorder, Alan Anderson, “Sumter County History Timeline;” <http://www.sumtercountyhistory.com/history/BlackHx.htm>.

⁹ Today, Americus is still a place marked by religious commitment and racial inequality. Whites and blacks bank

As one Southerner bluntly put it: “whites in the South have come a long damn way.”¹⁰

One Sumter County resident had particularly come a long damn way. The same year Frady visited Americus, one of its native sons occupied the Georgia’s Governor’s mansion. Jimmy Carter, born in Plains, Georgia, seven miles outside of Americus, had been elected to the Governorship in 1970. Six years later, with the help of his “peanut brigade” in Americus, he would become President of the United States.¹¹

Famously “born again,” Carter’s election in 1976 prompted *Newsweek* to label it the “Year of the Evangelical.”¹² His candidacy mobilized a grassroots movement of religious voters, reminding America of their enduring electoral power. Some have even claimed that Carter’s election marked the beginning of the Religious Right as a political force.¹³ Indeed, Carter was devoutly religious, and many speculate that it was his faith that put him in the Oval Office, particularly following the moral disgrace of the Nixon Administration. But underneath the old time religion lurked the reality of racial inequality.

Carter’s home church, Plains Baptist, had adopted an official closed-door policy like most

together, eat together, and even build Habitat for Humanity houses together. But there are stark divisions. The city is largely segregated residentially. It is also divided socially, economically, and, for the most part, religiously. Recent disagreements and scandals have wracked the Americus School Board, much of the rhetoric racially charged. A black newspaper *The Sumter Observer*, chronicles these events often leveling charges of racism at individuals in Americus. The city remains divided, and never so much as on Sunday mornings. First Baptist, First United Methodist, and First Presbyterian still welcome the white Americus elite, while across town Bethesda Baptist and Campbell Chapel are central in the black community. While new congregations have formed, and nondenominational churches boast integrated congregations, the old churches of Americus are still racially divided. For all its progress, certain conflicts linger in Americus, promising that though the issues may have altered, the struggle over racial equality and theological orthodoxy will endure.

¹⁰ Marshall Frady, “Small Victories in Americus: Discovering One Another in a Georgia Town,” *Life*, February 12, 1971, 46B-52; Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 3.

¹¹ The Sumter County residents who campaigned for Carter, both in 1970 and in 1975-1976 called themselves the “peanut brigade” after the Carter Family’s peanut farm.

¹² *Newsweek*, October 25, 1976

¹³ See: J. Brooks Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, The Politics of the Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Randall Balmer, *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Robet Zwier, *Born Again Politics: The New Christian Right in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982); James and Marti Hefley, *The Church that Produced a President: The Remarkable Spiritual Roots of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Wyden Books, 1977); Niels Christian Nielson, *The Religion of President Carter* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1977).

Protestant churches in Sumter County. In 1965, the church formally barred blacks and “civil rights agitators” from attending, likely a resolution passed in the wake of the Lee Street kneel-ins. Though Carter himself opposed the measure, he nevertheless continued in his position as Deacon at the church. In 1976, when Carter was campaigning for President, the policy still stood. It attracted the attention of the national media when Rev. Clennon King, a black minister from Albany, and three friends tried to integrate the church a mere three days before the general election.¹⁴ Though Carter came out strongly for integration and King’s motives were widely questioned, the theological controversy of his hometown followed Jimmy Carter into office.¹⁵

In some ways, Jimmy Carter’s life and career encapsulated his home county, the changes and progressions, the old time religion, the lingering racial issues and enduring theological conflicts. He was a Southern Democrat often derided by conservatives as liberal, he was a country boy whose Presidency turned on the politics of Iran and El Salvador, and perhaps most strikingly, he was a dedicated Southern Baptist who was ousted from office in part by Southern Baptists. Just as many liberals balked at a born again Southern Democrat in the Presidency, Carter soon lost conservatives as well, many of whom criticized him for not taking a “Christian” stance while in office or being too lenient on racial issues. Even those in Sumter County who had campaigned for him in 1976, in 1980 leaned toward Reagan.¹⁶ The Right was rising, and Jimmy Carter was getting left behind. He returned to Plains, to Sumter County, to Maranatha Baptist Church.

¹⁴ For his part, Rev. Clennon King said, when asked about the timing of his church visit, “There’s no timing at all, but God times things. I don’t know why God timed it this way.” (Wayne King, “Carter’s Church Upholds its Policy,” *New York Times*, November 1, 1976).

¹⁵ In February of 1977, the church split, as many of the more open members, and the ousted pastor, founded a new congregation: Maranatha Baptist. The Carter’s transferred their membership to this new body. Wayne King, “Carter’s Church Upholds its Policy,” *New York Times*, November 1, 1976; Wayne King, “Plains Church Again Bars Pastor After 15 Minutes in Sunday School,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1976; Wayne King, “Carter’s Church to Admit Blacks and Keep Minister,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1976; “Church Formed by Split Welcomes Carter Family,” *New York Times*, January 25, 1981.

¹⁶ Various Interviews, Election data.

In his inaugural address, Carter opened with a quote from his Plains High School teacher. “We must adjust to changing times and still hold to our unchanging principles,” Carter told America, channeling Ms. Coleman’s wisdom. The problem for Carter, for Americus, and for the nation, was that no one was quite sure when to adjust to changing times and when to hold to unchanging principles. The struggle over theological orthodoxy continued; the theological conflicts of the civil rights movement endured. The times had changed but many of the principles had not.

IMAGES:

Chapter 1 Images

Image 1:



(Clarence at work on the Farm, date unknown, Photo by Harry Atkinson, Koinonia website)

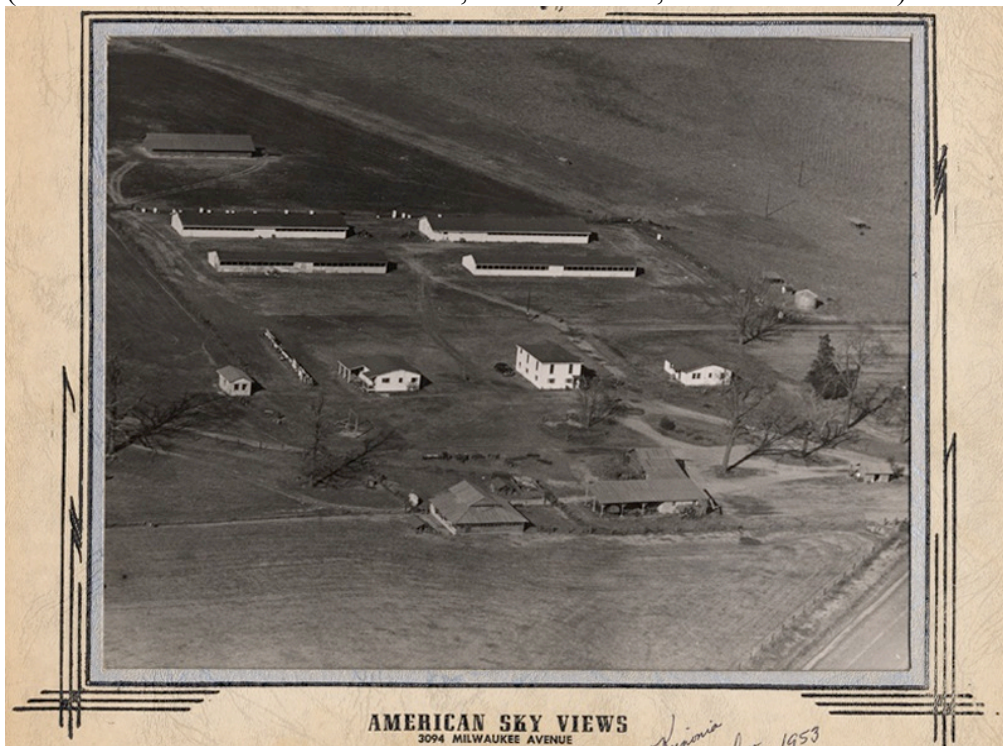


(Jordan Family, date unknown, Koinonia website)

Image II:



(Clarence and children on the Farm, date unknown, Koinonia website)



(Aerial view of Koinonia, 1953, Koinonia website)

Image III:



(Activists on retreat at Koinonia, 1960s)



(Clarence teaching bible study to young people on the Farm, 1960s, Koinonia website)

Image IV:



(Clarence writing, late 1960s, Koinonia website)

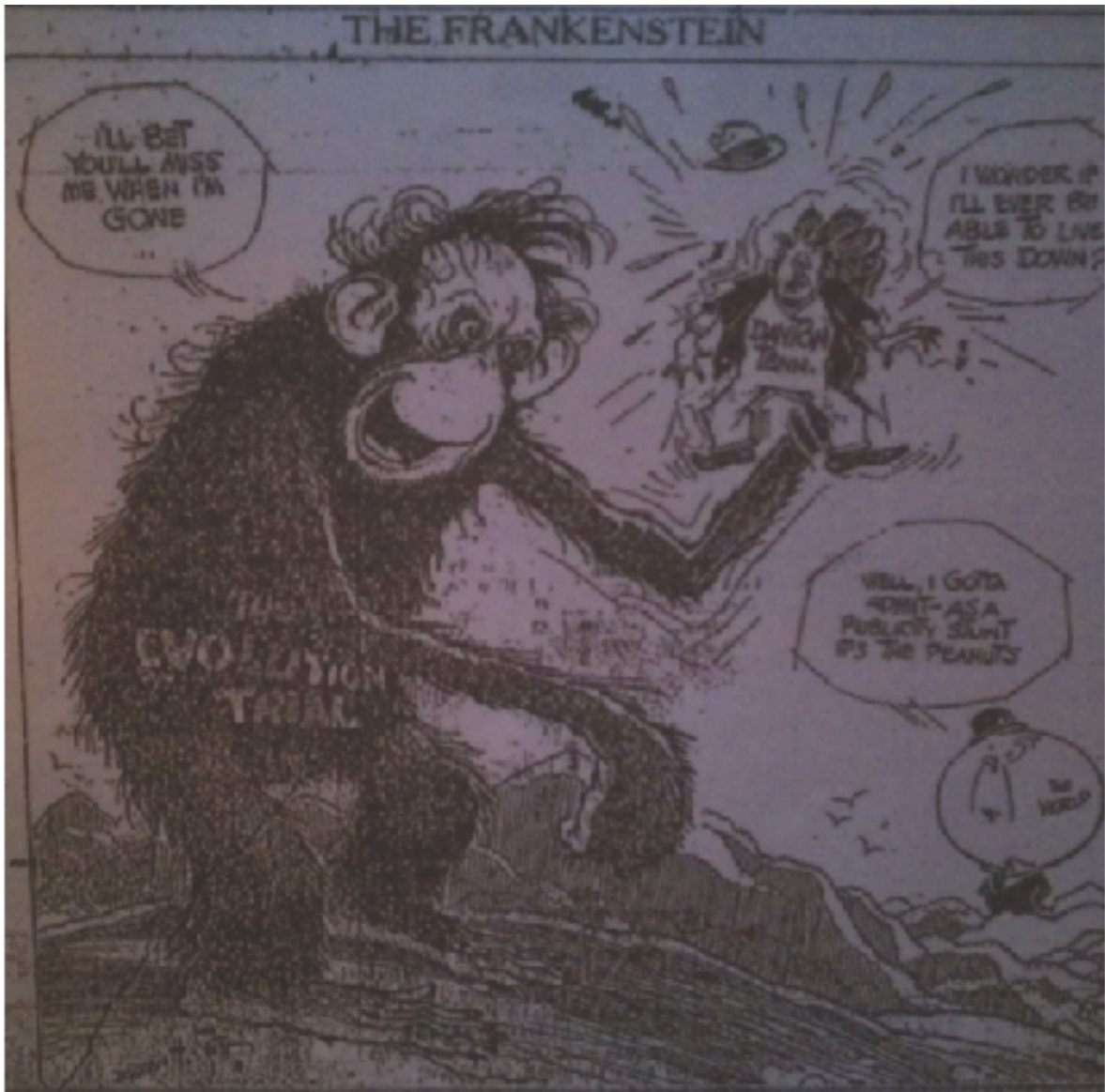
Chapter 2 Images

Image I:



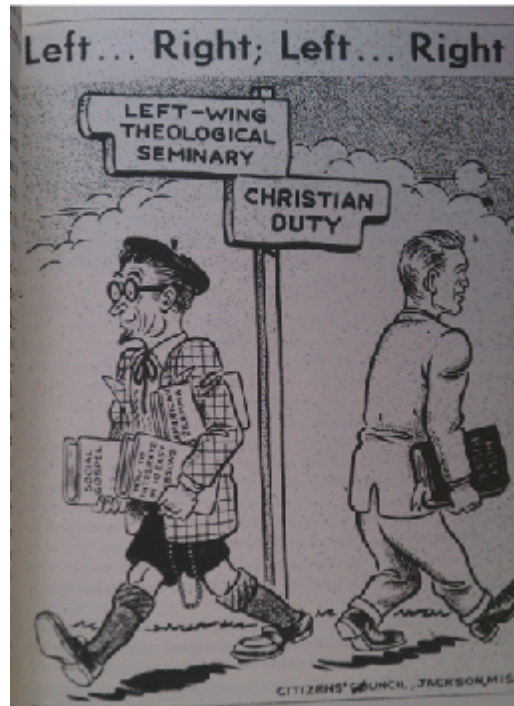
William Jennings Bryan, *Seven Questions in Dispute* (New York, 1924)

Image II:



Americus Times Recorder, July 13, 1925

Image III:



(Bob Howie, *Citizens' Council* (1957))

Image IV:

EVANGELIST
JIMMY O'QUINN

PRAY! VISIT! ATTEND!

OVERFLOW CROWDS HAVE ATTENDED THE CAMPAIGNS IN 16 STATES!

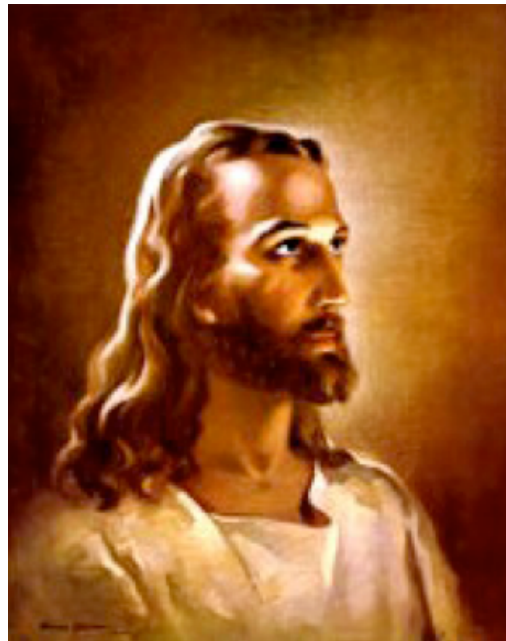
OUTSTANDING SUCCESS IN REACHING THE LOST

FOR A REVIVAL IN OUR CHURCH

1. Let us search our heart for every sin that has grieved the Holy Spirit.
"But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear."
—Isaiah 59:2
2. Let us confess and forsake our sins at once.
"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
—1 John 1:9
3. Let us make things right with our neighbor. We cannot be right with God unless we are right with our neighbor.
"And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father . . . may forgive your iniquities."
—Mark 11:25
4. Let us persevere in prayer until the victory comes.
". . . what things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them."
—Mark 11:24

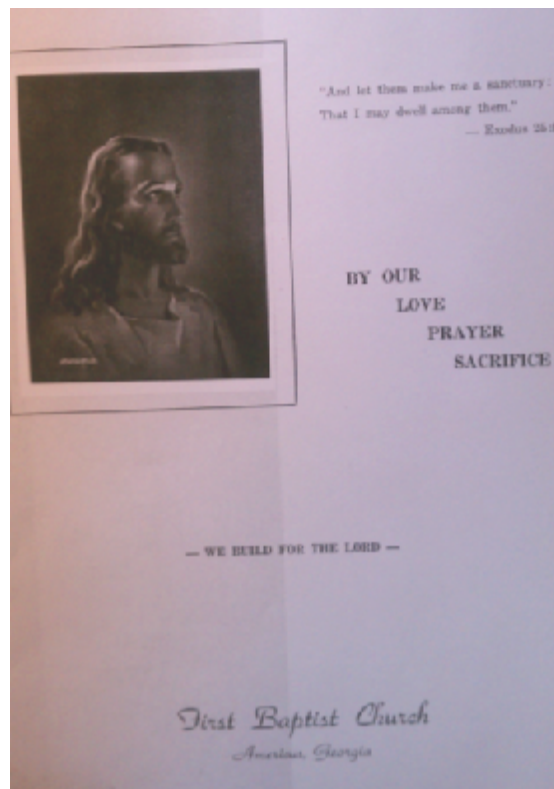
(Evangelism at First Baptist, First Baptist of Americus Archives)

Image V:



(Warner Sallman, *Head of Christ* (1941), The Warner Sallman Collection, Anderson University, Anderson, Indiana.)

Image VI:



(Sallman's Christ, First Baptist bulletin, First Baptist Americus Archive)

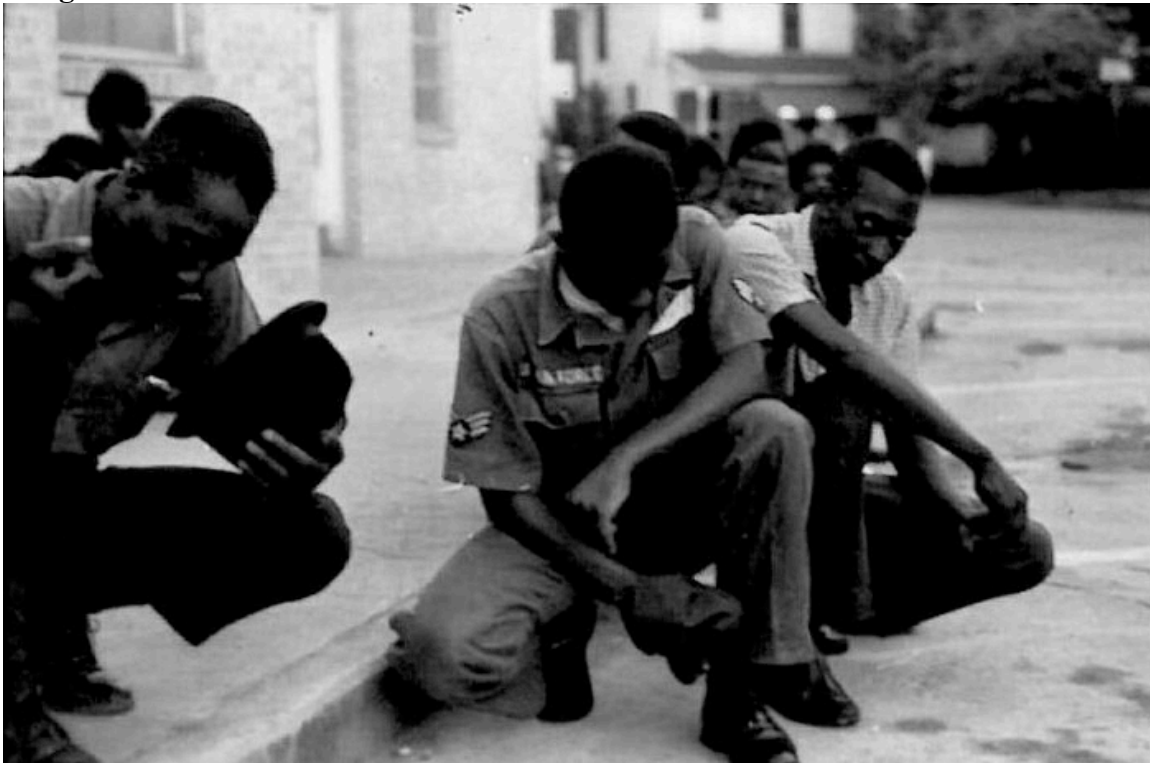
Chapter 4 Images

Image I:



(A mass meeting in Sumter County; Photo courtesy of Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered.)

Image II:



(Volunteers in Americus praying as protest.)

Image III:



(Danny Lyon, Self Portrait, *The Guardian*)



(Leesburg Stockade, photo by Danny Lyon, courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement)



(Photo by Danny Lyon, 1963)



(Danny Lyon, Magnum Photos)

Image VI:



(Rallying at the Sumter County Courthouse, Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered.)



(Marching down the Streets of AMericus; Americus and Sumter County Movement Remembered)



Freedom songs in front of the Sumter Courthouse; ASCMR)

(Singing



(Marching through the neighborhoods, ASCMR)

Image VII:



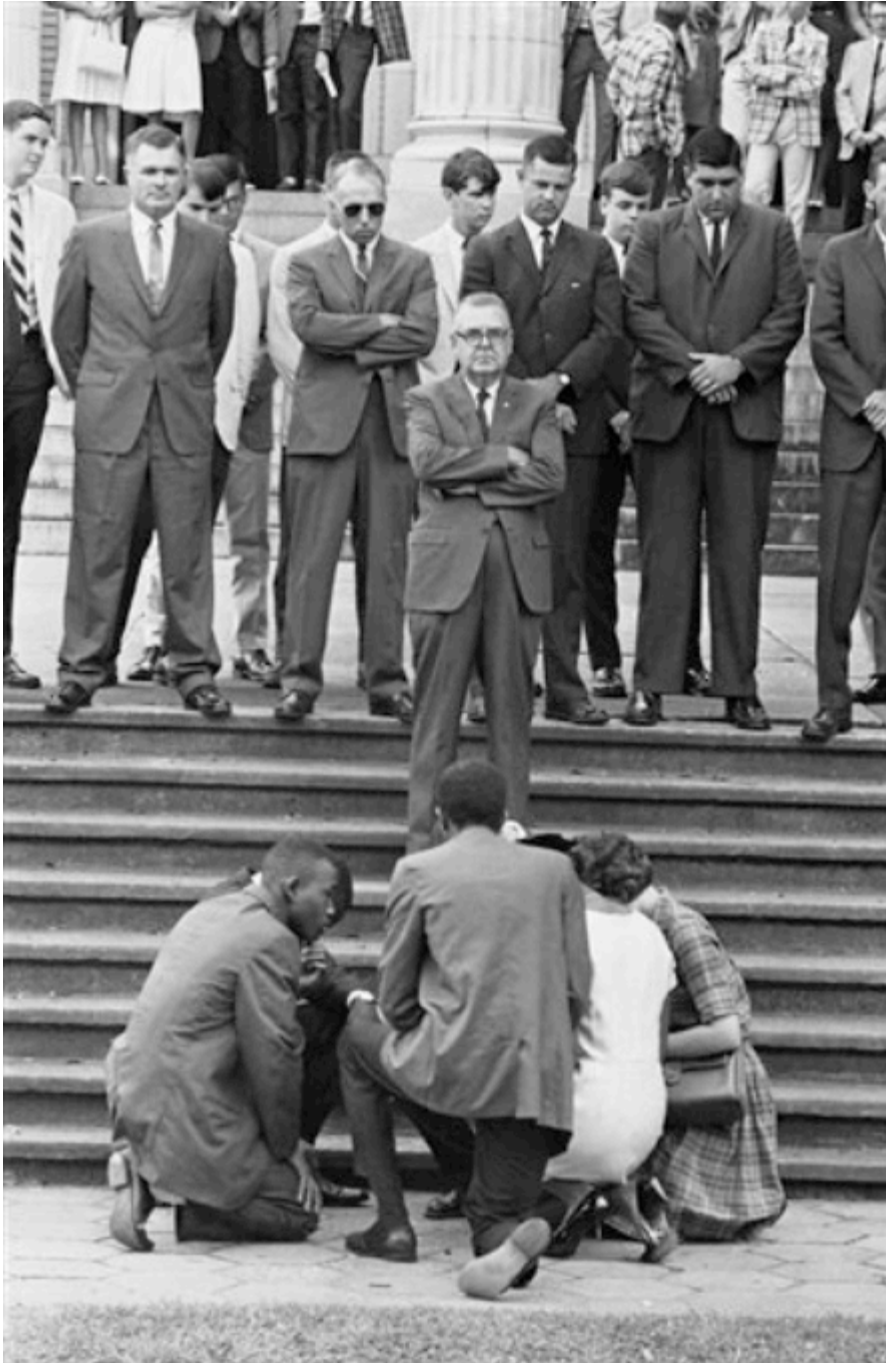
(John Lewis in Americus, ASCMR)

Chapter 6 Images

Chapter 6 Images

Image I:

Kneel-in at First United Methodist Church, Americus, GA



(AP Photo, Aug 1965)

Image II: The photo and articles circulated around the world. Shown here, from Green Bay, WI and Germany.

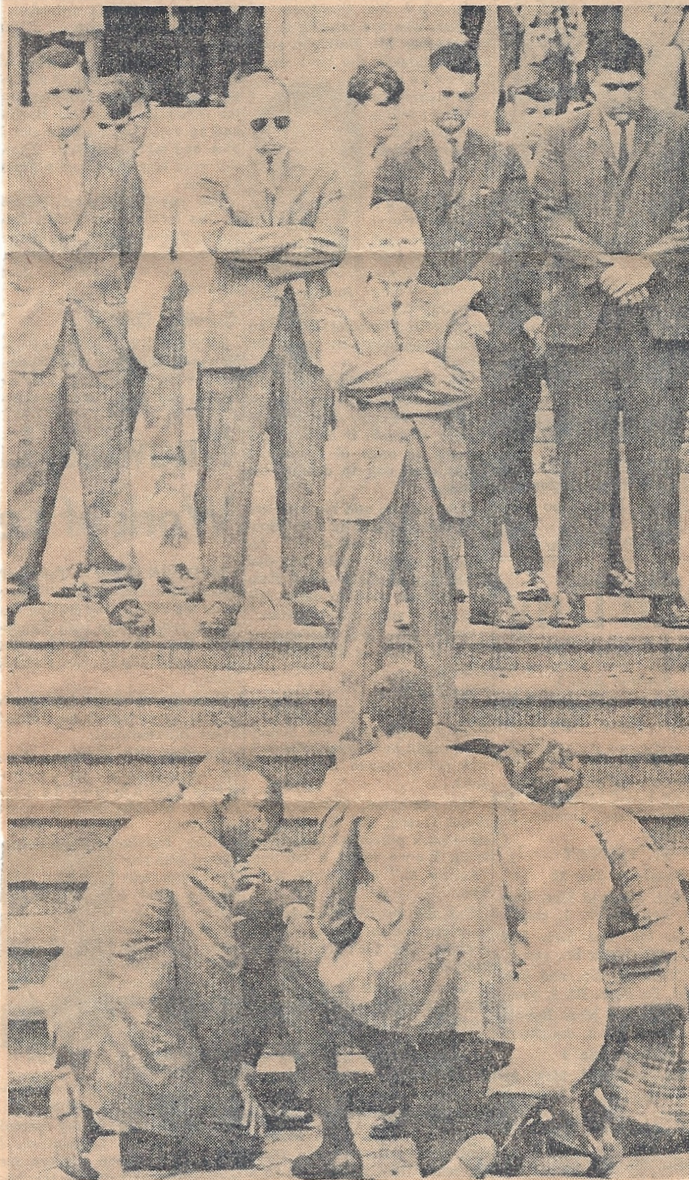
What do the southern ministers preach from their pulpits on Sunday mornings?

GREEN BAY

26 PAGES

ASSOCIATED PRESS
UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

GREEN BAY, WIS.



Unwanted at Churches — A small group of integrationists kneel in prayer at steps of First Methodist Church in Americus, Ga., Sunday.

They were turned away by church officials when they tried to attend services. They also were refused entrance to the First Baptist Church.

—AP Wire

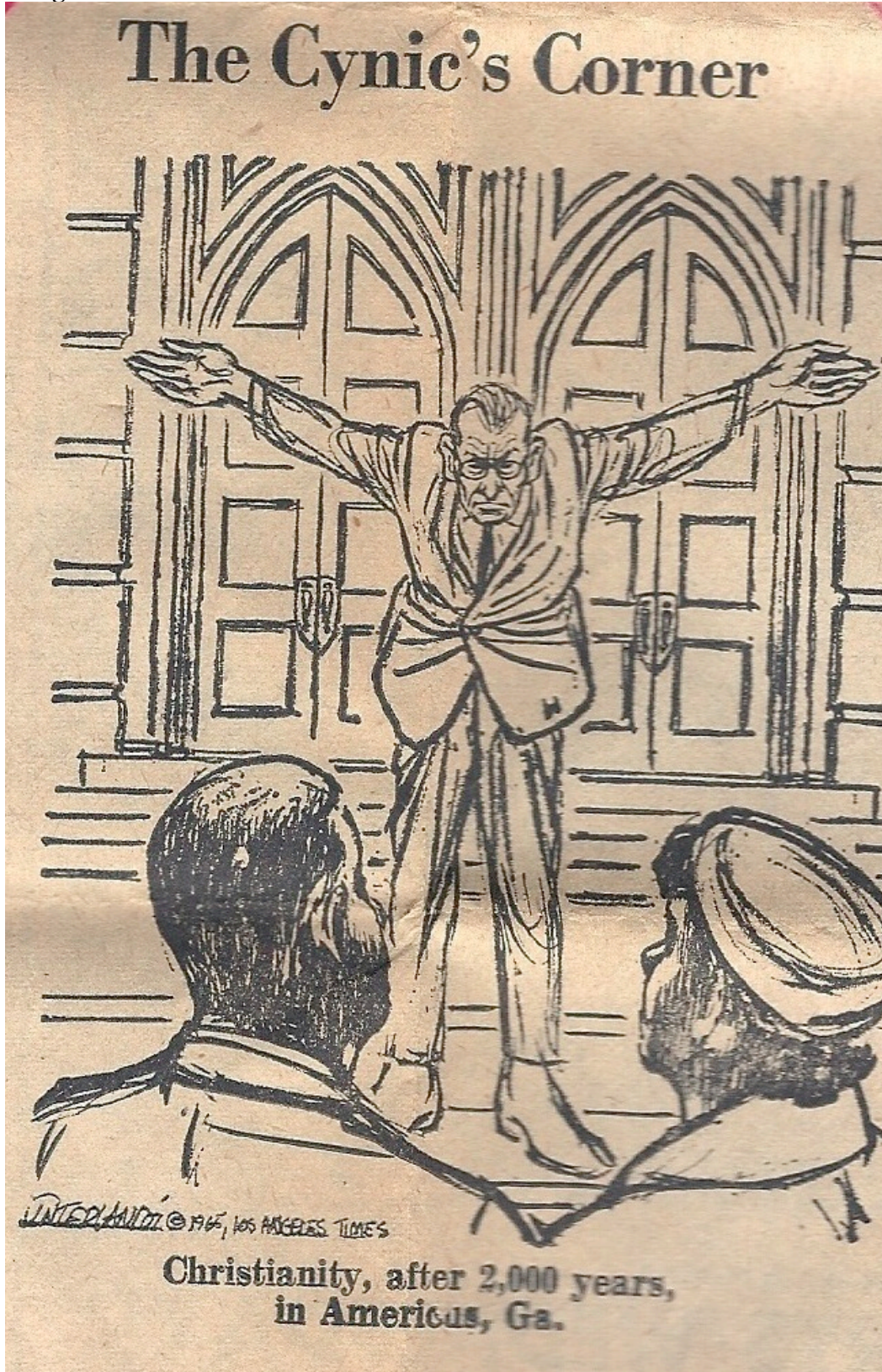


Neger mußten draußen beten

Weißer Bürger der Stadt Americus im Süden der USA verweigern Farbigen den Zutritt zur Kirche. Die Farbigen beten vor der Kirche im Straßenstaub. Vor hundert Jahren befreite Präsident Lincoln die Sklaven in Amerika. Vor wenigen Wochen sicherte Präsident Johnson das Wahlrecht der Neger

in den USA. Die schwarzen Rassen fallen. Da machen die Kirche zur Festung in Ihre Vorfahren kamen ein um Farbige zu bekehren. Die Methodistenkirche von Amerika für die weißen Gläubigen

Image III: Cartoons:

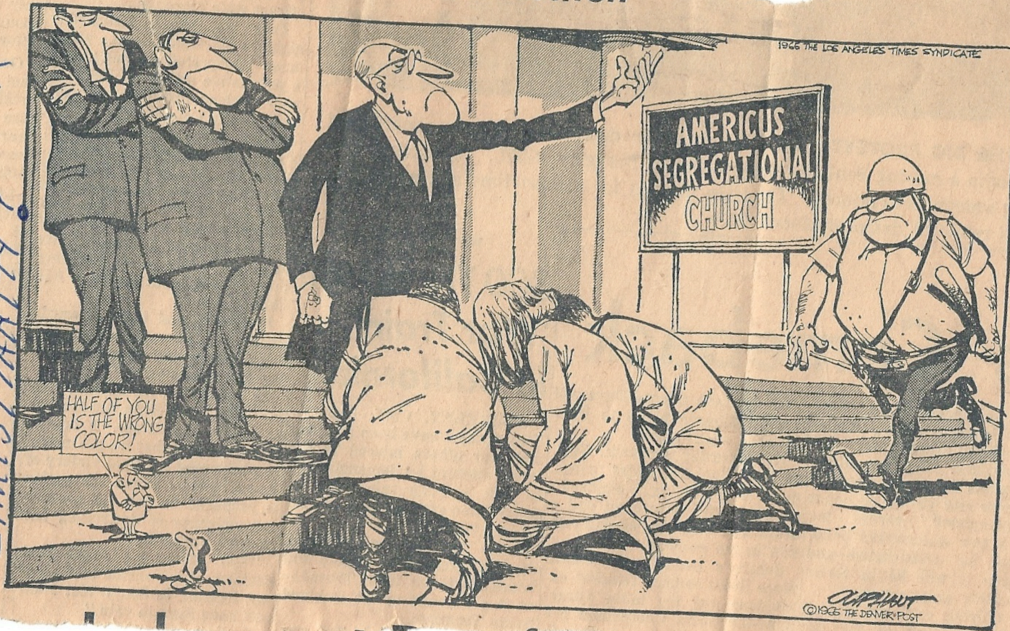


'IF THEY WERE GOOD CHRISTIANS THEY WOULDN'T
STIR UP TROUBLE LIKE THIS ON THE SABBATH!'



Benediction

NICE PUBLICITY FOR CHRISTIANITY?



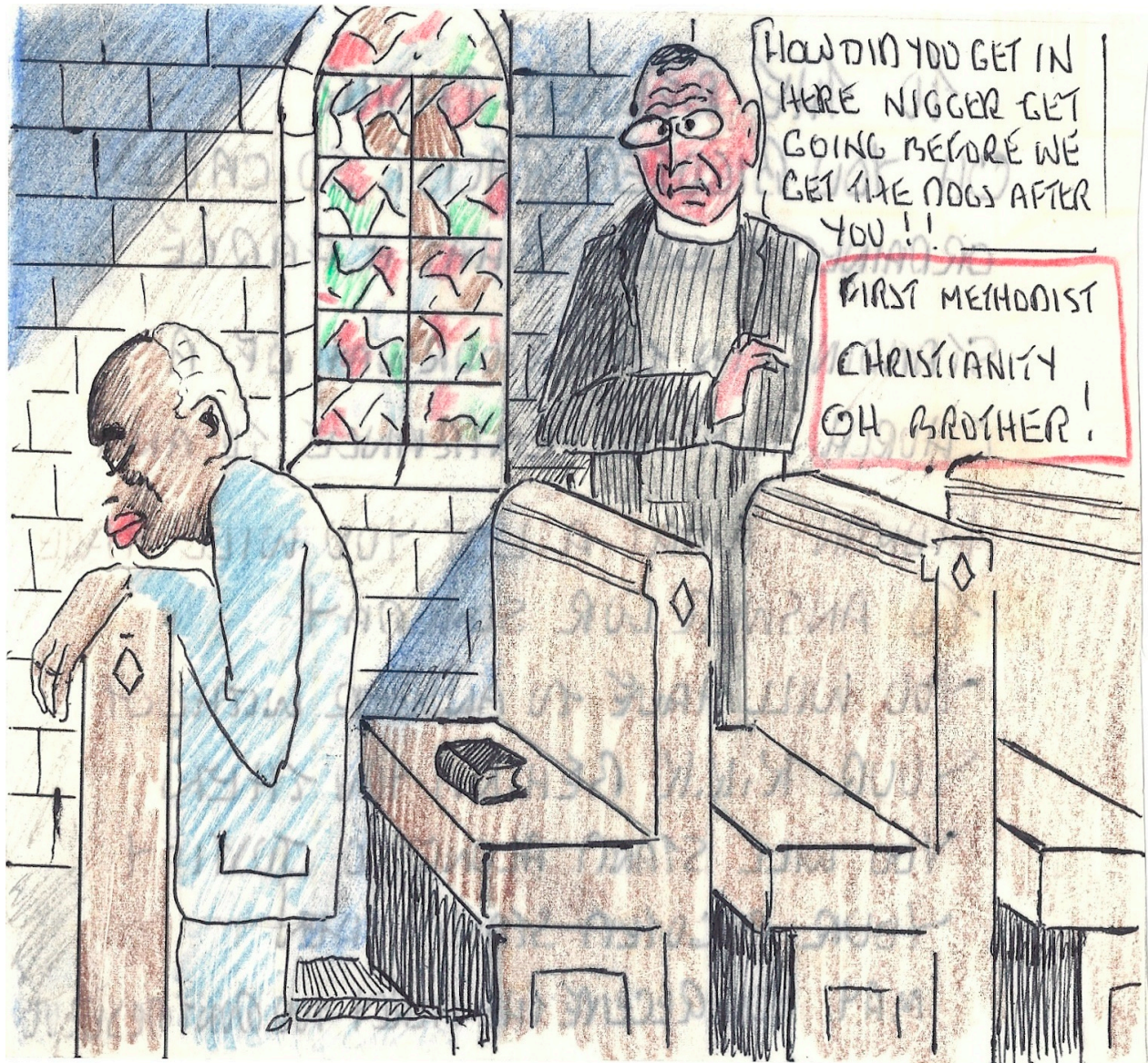
"Having done it to the least of these you have done it to me."

How long are we to continue to crucify Christ?



C.A. Nipper 1520 Spruce So Pasadena Calif

Image IV:
Hand drawn cartoon



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Clarence Jordan Collection, AR 39

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James Forman

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James M. Lawson, Jr.
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Kelly Miller Smith
Tougaloo College Students
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