

Baptists and Race in the American South¹

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The essay explores the attitude of Baptists in the American South towards race, indicating that the issue is long lasting. It includes a survey of racism in the early nineteenth century, culminating in the civil war, but extending to the Jim Crow era and the more recent expressions of white supremacy. Special attention is paid to the formation and development of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the 'repentance' of the Convention at the 1995 Southern Baptist Convention with respect to its origins in 1845 over the issue of slavery. The article also examines the way in which integration at Samford University, a Baptist school in Alabama, illustrates the struggle for equality between the races.

Keywords

Race; slavery; Jim Crow era; white supremacy; racial reconciliation

Introduction

Baptist life in the American South has a long and troubled history, marked by remarkable growth and yet facing various issues of discerning the will of God, especially in regard to race.

Up until the Revolutionary War in 1776, significant westward expansion had been halted at the Appalachian Mountains. Following the Revolution there was a sense of national identity, optimism, and hope. The economy was strong and the population was growing. The Louisiana purchase of 1803 would double the size of the country, as over 900,000 square miles were purchased for fifteen million dollars. The territory was carved into thirteen states, or parts of states, and put the United States in a position to become a world power. New railroads enabled the nation to expand westward. From 1795 to 1810 a broad rekindling of Christianity took place throughout the emerging country.

During this period of time, Alabama became a significant centre of Baptist life. By the middle of the nineteenth century Marion, Alabama was the headquarters of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, along with Howard College, preparing men for ministry and Judson College, educating women.

The first Baptist congregation in Alabama was constituted in October 1808, the first of many small congregations which emerged in the frontier.

¹ This material was first presented as the biennial Hughey Lecture at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam in January 2018.

Wayne Flynt speaks of the ‘blossoming of evangelical religion on the Alabama frontier’, which he describes as being as prolific as corn and cotton.² By 1812 there were nearly 200,000 Baptists in America, half of them in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky. By 1850 the number was about 1.6 million. While the population of America increased from 7.2 million in 1810 to 23.2 million in 1850, the number of church members increased even faster. By the middle of the century an estimated one-third of the population affiliated to some form of organised religion, twice the percentage of 1776.

The Baptist congregations which emerged in Alabama defined themselves, both individually and also within Baptist Associations,³ in various statements of principles or abstracts of faith, to clarify their understanding of their faith. By 1823, the one hundred and twenty congregations which had been established belonged to seven geographic associations. By 1839 there were ‘thirty associations with 500 churches, 300 ministers, and 25,000 members’. The majority of these congregations were Calvinistic in their theology. The Flint River Association, formed in 1814, declared their faith in ‘the doctrine of election; and that God chose his people in Christ before the foundation of the world’.⁴ In 1818, the Salem-Troy Association amplified its statement on election to include ‘detrimental (i.e. reprobation) and particular election’.⁵ A minority view was expressed by the United Baptist Churches of Jesus Christ in 1843, when they expressed their belief in ‘the doctrine of free salvation and a general atonement’.⁶ These early Baptists took their theology seriously.

Despite the fact that most of the ministers were bi-vocational farmers and preachers, they maintained a high view of ordained ministry, arguing that ‘no ministers have a right to the administration of the ordinances, only such as are regularly baptized, called and come under the imposition of hands by the presbytery’.⁷ Ordination was ‘by the imposition of hands by a presbytery of ministers gathered to evaluate the applicant’s character, mental

² Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (University of Alabama Press, 1998), p. 4. The state of Alabama was constituted in 1819.

³ Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, pp. 7, 11.

⁴ Larry Hale, *Flint River Baptist Association Minutes and Historical Articles 1814-2004* (No Publisher, 2005), p. 8. The Cahawba Association, formed in 1818, adopted an identical *Abstract of Principles*.⁵ Harold D. Wicks, *Salem-Troy Baptist Association: Past and Present* (Troy, 1990), p. 22. See also Glenda Brack, *County Line Baptist Church* (No Publisher, 2005), p. 1.

⁵ Harold D. Wicks, *Salem-Troy Baptist Association: Past and Present* (Troy, 1990), p. 22. See also Glenda Brack, *County Line Baptist Church* (No Publisher, 2005), p. 1.

⁶ They adopted the name of North River United Baptist Association. In their fifth article they stated: ‘We believe that Jesus Christ, the son of God, did make atonement for all men in general, but the benefits of the atonement specially are only received by the true believer.’

⁷ Hale, *Flint River*, p. 8.

qualifications, and doctrinal soundness'.⁸ So, in 1849, *The Alabama Baptist*, the State Baptist Newspaper, asked 'whether in our whole connection, a church can be named, in which a member would not be promptly *excluded*, who would venture to administer *baptism* or the *Lord's Supper*, in the absence of regular ordination as a Minister'.⁹ This led to communion services being celebrated on a quarterly or semi-annual basis, as many congregations only met on a monthly basis for public worship, their pastors being shared with surrounding congregations.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Baptists united around missions. In May 1814, thirty-three delegates met at the First Baptist Church in Philadelphia to form the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions. This is often referred to as the Triennial Convention, because it would meet every three years. Although the majority of delegates came from the North, they chose a President, Richard Furnam, from Charleston, South Carolina.

In 1817, at its second meeting, the Convention extended its work to Home Missions. In 1824 the Baptist General Tract Society was formed and in 1832 the Triennial Convention split their responsibilities into two, with the American Baptist Home Mission Society being formed to promote the preaching of the gospel in North America. By 1844 Baptists had seventy-nine overseas missionaries and thirty-two in America.

As the century progressed, one issue began to undermine the unity which Baptists had known on mission – chattel slavery. There had been anti-slavery societies in Kentucky by 1808, in Tennessee by 1815, and in North Carolina by 1816. Indeed, by 1826, there were forty-five societies in the South. However, from the 1820s to the 1840s, anti-slavery sentiment among Baptists and other evangelicals in the South disappeared and an elaborate economic, political, and biblical defence of slavery emerged. While Baptists in the North agitated for abolition, believing that slavery was an awful sin before God, Baptists in the South followed the arguments of Richard Furman concerning the biblical basis of slavery.

Richard Furman published his *Treatise on Slavery* in 1822, arguing for the 'lawfulness of holding slaves – the subject being considered in a moral and religious point of view'.¹⁰ Furman argued that in the Old Testament 'the Israelites were directed to purchase their bond-men and bond-maids of the Heathen nations' and in the New Testament, when those who had slaves were converted, the relationship between 'masters and slaves

⁸ Hosea Holcombe, *History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Alabama* (Philadelphia, 1840), pp. 311-322.

⁹ See 'Communications', *The Alabama Baptist*, 16 May 1849, p. 3 (italics original).

¹⁰ Richard Furman, *Treatise on Slavery* (1822), pp. 82-86.

were not dissolved'. For Furman, the 'Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions'. While arguing against cruelty, 'servitude may be consistent with such degrees of happiness as men usually attain in this imperfect state of things'. Indeed, he maintained that the 'manner of obtaining slaves from Africa is just....[it had been] the means of saving life....even piety has been originally brought into operation in the purchase of slaves' and transporting them from Africa 'has been the means of their mental and religious improvement, and so of obtaining salvation'. Slaves, in the providential purposes of God would then be able to take the message back to their home continent. Rather than seeking their release, 'slavery, when tempered with humanity and justice, is a state of tolerable happiness' and 'a master has a scriptural right to govern his slaves so as to keep them in subjection, to demand and receive from them a reasonable service and to correct them for neglect of duty'.¹¹ Paul Harvey speaks of how 'Sermons in defense of slavery became a religious ritual in the antebellum South.'¹²

Both Baptist agencies, the Home Mission Society and the Triennial Convention, attempted to be neutral on the issue. Two events in 1844 thwarted this and led to schism between the North and the South. First of all, Georgia Baptists nominated a slave-holder for appointment by the Home Mission Society to test the waters. The Board simply restated its neutrality and refused to act on the appointment. Then the Baptist State Convention of Alabama wrote to enquire from the Board of the Triennial Convention as to whether churches or the Board should appoint missionaries and whether, hypothetically, a slave-holder could be appointed to mission work. The Baptist Board, based in Boston, responded by saying that it was the body responsible for appointments and added, 'one thing is certain; we can never be a party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery'.¹³

Some Southern Baptist newspapers advocated immediate withdrawal from the Triennial Convention, while others wanted to wait. In 1845 Virginia Baptists called a meeting in Augusta, Georgia and they voted to form the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). William Johnston of South Carolina had arrived with a constitution already written. Both home and foreign mission boards, along with other agencies, would come under the auspices of one organisation, the convention model. With the formation of the SBC, Baptists in the South became Southern Baptists.

One of the most profound influences with the SBC in its early days was their first president – William Bullein Johnson. Johnson's experience of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Paul Harvey, *Christianity and Race in the American South, A History* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 77.

¹³ See <<http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/johnsons-address.pdf>> p. 3 [accessed 12 January 2019]

Baptist life at association, state, and national level led those Southern leaders who met at Augusta in 1845 to follow his lead in preparing a constitution for the newly fledged body.¹⁴ Johnson's leadership at the Convention was recognised, not only when he was appointed President of the Convention, but as he preached the first sermon on 7 May and led the morning devotions the following morning.¹⁵ Johnson was also given the responsibility of issuing an *Address* to the churches on behalf of the Convention.

In the *Address to the Public*, issued at the first meeting of the SBC in 1845, Southern Baptists said, 'We have constructed for our basis no new creed; acting in this matter upon a Baptist aversion for all creeds but the Bible.' Johnson was thoroughly anti-confessional and anti-creedal. He was ardently Christ-centred, in his hermeneutical approach to scripture and experience. Unity in Baptist life, he contended, came not from confessions of faith or imposed doctrinal statements, but from allegiance to Christ. Johnson's aversion to all creeds and confessions of faith did not adequately reflect variations within the Baptist constituency, although Lumpkin reminds us that 'no confession has ever permanently bound individuals, churches, associations, conventions or unions among Baptists'.¹⁶ For Johnson 'it was a new feature In Baptist Theology to talk of Confessions of Faith as tests of orthodoxy'.¹⁷

Johnson expressed a concern that the adoption of confessions of faith tended to undermine the authority of Christ as Lord of the conscience, and that because 'the churches are independent bodies, subject only to Christ, their Head – that His word is the only standard of faith and practice'.¹⁸ He also maintained that confessions of faith were unnecessary encumbrances because the church already possessed the scriptures, a 'perfect and full standard' of God's will. Why then, turn to the human interpretation which was 'imperfect and limited'?¹⁹

Writing in the *Southern Baptist* in January 1856, Johnson stated that 'it is difficult to see how among us Baptists, who hold to the sufficiency of the Scriptures, and their paramount authority, it should be considered necessary' to adopt a 'written declaration of the principles of the doctrine of Christ which she believes' as the '*standard of her faith and practices*'. This he contended is 'inadmissible' because 'the Bible alone is that standard, and

¹⁴ Johnson actually came to Augusta with a previously prepared constitution to present to the committee formed for this purpose. James M. Morton Jr, 'Leadership of W. B. Johnson in the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention', *Baptist History and Heritage*, 5:1 (January 1970), p. 10.

¹⁵ Robert G. Gardner, *A Decade of Debate and Division: Georgia Baptists and the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), p. 36.

¹⁶ W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 17.

¹⁷ William B. Johnson, 'To the Baptists of South Carolina', *Southern Baptist*, 18 October 1848.

¹⁸ William Johnson, 'Baptist Usage', *Southern Baptist*, 7 November 1855.

¹⁹ William B. Johnson, *The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* (Richmond, 1846), pp. 194, 201.

no human compilations or abstracts of principles from the Bible can supplant *that perfect standard*'.²⁰ To Johnson, it was strange that an Association of Baptist Churches 'that have so strenuously contended for the supremacy and authority of the scriptures' should adopt 'any other religious standard than these holy writings'.²¹ The responsibility of churches is, in 'humble and fervent prayer' to seek 'the Spirit's aid in all our searching of the oracles of God for knowledge of His will'.²² Sadly, Johnson's commitment to scripture led him to argue that opponents of slavery have acted upon a sentiment they have failed to provide – that slavery is, in all circumstances, sinful.²³ It was clearly a difference in hermeneutics which led to Baptists in the South supporting slavery and leading to racist attitudes which would be perpetuated through more than one hundred years of their history.

By 1861, the Southern Baptist Convention supported the formation of the Confederacy and the Civil War. In May 1861, the second of ten resolutions approved by the convention declared: 'That we most cordially approve of the formation of the Government of the Confederate States of America, and admire and applaud the noble course of that Government up to this present time.'²⁴

The support of the Christians in the South, including Baptists, for the Confederate Cause continued long after the Civil War came to an end in 1865, and during the following era of Reconstruction. In May 1926, L. L. Gwaltney, editor of *The Alabama Baptist*, wrote an editorial on the 'Confederate Veterans Reunion' in Birmingham. He noted that the reunion drew 3300 veterans and 10,000 visitors for its thirty-sixth annual meeting, and described them as 'gallant soldiers...who still feel that their cause was just...no one among them will admit defeat in battle...'²⁵ There are many people in the South who still feel the same about the 'war of Northern Aggression', as it was explained to me by a few students in 2002, the first year I taught Baptist History at Samford.

You do not have to look far in Alabama for trucks which fly the Confederate flag with pride. Indeed, Confederate battle flag sales rocketed in the US since the violence at the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, held to oppose the removal of confederate statues to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. At Alabama Flag and Banner, one of the few remaining US makers of the Confederate flag, sales reached 150 in a single day near the end of August 2017, a quarter of the number of average annual sales.

²⁰ *Southern Baptist*, 30 January 1856 (italics original).

²¹ *Southern Baptist*, 10 June 1856.

²² *Southern Baptist*, 10 June 1856.

²³ Cited in B. Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope* (Eerdmans, 1990), p. 19.

²⁴ W. W. Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-1953* (Nashville: Broadman, 1954), p. 44, citing *Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1861*, pp. 63-64.

²⁵ *The Alabama Baptist*, 27 May 1926, p. 1.

African-American Baptists after the Civil War

In the South, in the years after the Civil War, some four million ex-slaves were free to organise and worship as they saw fit. In a massive effort, northern black churches established missions to their southern counterparts, resulting in the dynamic growth of independent black churches in the southern states between 1865 and 1900. Predominantly white denominations, such as the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Episcopal churches, also sponsored missions, opened schools for freed slaves, and aided the general welfare of southern blacks, but the majority of African Americans chose to join the independent black churches founded in the northern states nearly a century earlier.

In 1865 the Alabama State Convention examined the issue of the presence of blacks in white churches. Many whites feared that, where they were in the majority, the blacks would take over. In 1868, fifty independent Black Baptist Churches had been established in Alabama. They formed the Colored Baptist Missionary Convention in 1868, twenty-six delegates, most from the Black Belt, with two Associations predating the state convention (Eufaula – 1867 and Bethlehem – a few months earlier in 1868) and more associations being formed as time went on. In 1868, one correspondent to *The Alabama Baptist* stated that, though Negroes had rational and moral faculties, they were in fact subhuman. Although Wayne Flynt thinks that this was a minority viewpoint, and some Baptists worked tirelessly for the advancement of African Americans, not all Alabama Baptists shared their enthusiasm. One example of the paternalism which existed was in a North Alabama Baptist Association where blacks were allowed to choose their own pastor, as long as he was white. By 1874, however, the process of separation was complete, the year of the end of reconstruction in Alabama, when a desire for independence and self-determination led to blacks establishing more and more of their own churches.

Alabama Constitution and the Beginning of the Jim Crow Era

The last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a hardening of racial discrimination in Alabama. The 1901 Alabama Constitution achieved the goal of the disenfranchisement of black males. Linked to the political process was the racial violence of the period, which saw racial lynchings, usually defined as unprosecuted murders that occurred at the hands of mobs or unidentified people. They began in 1877 in Alabama and ended in 1943. Three hundred and forty victims are known at this time in Alabama's history.

Baptists argued that the fifteenth amendment to the United States Constitution, which gave African Americans the right to vote, 'flew in the

face of nature'. This was the viewpoint of the editor of *The Alabama Baptist* newspaper on 11 June 1891. The Constitution also ensured the establishment of an entirely segregated school system and prevented the legislature from ever allowing interracial marriages. The document introduced the Jim Crow era, restricting African-American political rights, social movement, and economic development.

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded in 1865 by a group of Confederate veterans and grew from a secret social fraternity opposing the federal government's reconstruction policies in the South, especially as they elevated the rights of the African-American population. It was a White supremacist group which had been banned in 1871, although the US Supreme Court reversed this policy in 1882, when the KKK had faded away. The twentieth century saw two revivals of the KKK: one was a response to the immigration of Catholics in the 1910s and the 1920s, and another in response to the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. L. L. Gwaltney, who was opposed to the immigration of Roman Catholics from Eastern Europe, rejected the view that the KKK had been formed to 'intimate and keep down the negro'.²⁶ He argued that the Klan's main purpose was to oppose Catholicism. In the previous year he naively argued that 'should the Ku Klux or any other order inhibit the rights of the Negro citizen, it would be opposed by the best people of the South'.²⁷ As the years progressed, and the influence of the Klan developed, Gwaltney took up the issue of intermarriage between the races and stated his viewpoint that 'no hybrid race has ever served a noble purpose, amalgamation would defeat the highest and noble humanity as well as Christianity'.²⁸ In 1943, Gwaltney returned to the question of race and the issue of integration, predicting that whites would not yield on this point. While agreeing that 'God was no respecter of persons', this did not obliterate 'national characteristics, biological facts, and the deeply rooted consciousness of kind'.²⁹

In the 1950s great disquiet was expressed among many Alabama Baptist churches at the way in which the agencies of both the Alabama State Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention were publishing articles promoting the integration of the race or the promotion of integration ideas in any form. On 9 February 1958, Greensboro Baptist Church in Alabama protested against these articles, arguing that the Convention had been formed 'on the principle that slaveholding was not unchristian' and that its growth

²⁶ *The Alabama Baptist*, 11 January 1922, p. 1.

²⁷ *The Alabama Baptist*, 5 May 1921, p. 1.

²⁸ *The Alabama Baptist*, 22 January 1931, p. 1.

²⁹ Hal D. Bennett, *An Inquiry into the Life and Works of Editor Leslie L. Gwaltney of Alabama*, Doctor of Theology Thesis (New Orleans Seminary, March 1954), p. 118.

indicated God's approval of such attitudes, and thus is 'today one of the greatest and strongest Denominations in the United States'.³⁰

Bryan Stevenson – Harvard Law School graduate, founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama – commenting on 'Charleston and our Real Problem with Race', said: 'I don't believe slavery ended in 1865, I believe it just evolved.'³¹ He gave an interview at the time of the mass shooting in which Dylan Roof, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist, murdered nine African Americans (including the senior pastor) during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, on the evening of 17 June 2015. He stated:

the South is a region where the narrative of racial difference still haunts us, and infects our economic, social and political structures, because we have in the South done something worse than silence, we've actually created a counter-narrative and invited people to take pride in their southern heritage. We've basically minimized the hardships of slavery and extolled its virtues... We've ignored the lynchings and the struggles and the violence and terror that kept people of color from having any opportunities for fairness and equality, and we haven't really addressed all of the pain and injury that was created by decades of segregation.³²

SBC and Race

In the twentieth century the Southern Baptist Convention, like the majority of southern institutions, reflected the racism of the region as a whole. Several agencies in the Southern Baptist Convention, including the Christian Life Commission and the Foreign and Home Mission Board, supported the US Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) that encouraged the integration of public schools 'with all due speed'. Although certain segments of Convention leadership supported integration, the majority of churches, pastors, and congregations worked against its implementation. Extreme statements, later regretted by the speakers, were often made. W. E. Criswell, in 1956, called Americans who favoured desegregation 'infidels, dying from the neck up'.³³ In 1970 he repudiated the statement but, when it was made, it was a real sentiment.

Supporters of integration included two prominent ethicists: T. B. Maston, who taught at Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, and published

³⁰ Copy of Church minutes in Gwaltney papers lodged in Samford University archives.

³¹ <<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/06/24/bryan-stevenson-on-charleston-and-our-real-problem-with-race>> [accessed 29 November 2018]

³² Ibid.

³³ Cited by Curtis W. Freeman, "'Never Had I Been So Blind": W. A. Criswell's "Change" on Racial Segregation', *Journal of Southern Religion*, Vol. X (2007), p. 1.

The Bible and Race in 1959, and Henlee Barnette, father of one of my colleagues at Samford. Barnette invited Martin Luther King Jr to speak in his class at Southern Seminary, an event that caused many financial supporters to threaten to withdraw their money, and he also marched with King to protest against housing in Louisville, Kentucky.

During the civil rights era of the 1960s, most of the leaders who opposed desegregation were Southern Baptists. Their views reflected the work of southern legislators, many of whom were Southern Baptists, as the region resisted the Civil Rights movement and even at times defied the decisions of the Supreme Court.

In Alabama the president of the national black Baptist convention meeting in Birmingham told his audience not to expect 'segregationists to meekly surrender'. Alabama Baptists developed strong views on the subject, especially since the modern civil rights movement was born in Alabama, as were protagonists on both sides of the divide such as Martin Luther King Jr and George C. Wallace. Many of the movement's leaders were Baptist ministers. Alabama became the focus of the attention of the world. Both sides, as in the nineteenth century, claimed scripture as the foundation of their thinking.

In 1965 Billy Graham scheduled his racially integrated campaign in Montgomery to coincide with the civil rights unrest, and it was groundbreaking in that Graham refused to have segregated seating. Many Alabama Baptists resented his timing and growing support of integration, and Flynt suggests that this 'did little to enhance his reputation among Alabama Baptists'.³⁴ The editor of the state newspaper believed that God wanted the races to be separated and advised his twenty-year-old son not to attend the rallies.³⁵

Two congregations in Birmingham that took a positive step towards integration were Mountain Brook and Vestavia Hills. Mountain Brook's pastor, Dotson M. Nelson Jr, advocated that every person must be treated as a person, not an object, and that every person should be treated as a brother or sister; every person was entitled to life, freedom, and constitutional rights. The church's Women's Missionary Union began a joint vacation Bible School with several Black Baptist churches. In the 1970s, Vestavia Hills Baptist church admitted its first black members when a Samford University couple brought a Pharmacy student and his wife who came from Nigeria to church. He had become a Christian through the witness of Southern Baptist missionaries, and, although they had attended several African-American congregations in the vicinity, they did not feel comfortable with their style

³⁴ Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, p. 462.

³⁵ *The Alabama Baptist*, 24 June 1965.

of worship. Pastor Otis Brooks led the deacons and the church to open its membership to anyone who confessed faith in Jesus Christ and wanted to join the church. Two deacons disagreed with the decision, but anxiety of some members that the church would be overwhelmed with black members did not materialise.

One church which split over the issue was First Baptist, and as a result of deep disagreement and ‘anger’, the pastor, J. Herbert Gilmore Jr, left with a sizeable number of members to form the Church of the Covenant, with the express purpose of opening its membership to anyone who confessed Jesus Christ. In the midst of the controversy, Otis Brooks, pastor of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, wrote to a local newspaper to support the actions of Gilmore and the congregation.

It took until 1989 before my own church, Southside Baptist, eventually welcomed its first non-white member. Earlier, during the 1950s, the church refused to seat blacks, many of whom were students at the nearby University. Eric Quarshie was a student at the University of Alabama in Birmingham from Ghana and he joined the church on profession of faith. One year later, the first African American, Yvette Greene, was baptised in the church. However, my colleague told me that, when the baptism was due to take place, the church discovered that the water heater had malfunctioned, and the water was piping hot and could not be used for the baptism, which took place the following Sunday. One of our current deacons, Marilyn Shepard, joined the church in March 1991. She and her husband James were the first bi-racial couple to join the congregation and they were followed by their three sons in the years that followed. Currently we have two African-American deacons, and about ten percent of the church consists of African-American members, along with people from Korea and India.

In 1990, Birmingham’s largest and wealthiest black Church, Sixth Avenue, became a member of the Birmingham Baptist Association. It was dually aligned with the National Baptist Convention, USA. The pastor, John Porter, had been an assistant to Martin Luther King Jr at Dexter Avenue in 1954-1955 during the first stages of the Montgomery bus boycott and arrested with King during the 1963 Birmingham demonstrations. He later served as a Samford trustee.

Integration at Samford

Integration at Samford was stimulated by students who had been raised in mission contexts, where they had become accustomed to integration, and were appalled at the lack of the integration in churches in Birmingham and also on campus. One of those students, David Graves, spoke to the then

president, Leslie Wright, who ‘was sympathetic’, but the College’s biggest benefactor (and also the chair of the deacons at Southside Baptist Church), Frank Samford, was insistent that the College remain all-white. Frank Samford chaired the Board of Trustees, and his pastor at Southside Baptist Church served as vice chairman, and thus the centre of power was quite beyond the reach of those arguing for integration. The College did integrate in 1968, but only because the Cumberland School of Law, which Samford had purchased from Tennessee, was at risk of losing its accreditation and admitted its first black student. Money speaks. The first year of integration was worth \$750,000 in federal funds. Technically, Samford University integrated its student body, and yet over the fifty-year period since integration, it has graduated only 2,000 African-American students.

Since 1948, Samford has celebrated a unique partnership with Baptist associations within the Alabama Baptist Convention. Nearly every Sunday during the fall and spring semesters, a different association invites ministerial students to preach in some of their churches. About ten years ago, one of our African-American students, a ministerial candidate within the Black Primitive Baptist Tradition, was dropped off at one church, and as he approached the door he was asked by a deacon what he was doing there. When he replied that he had come from Samford to preach, he was told that was not happening. He had no transport, was in the middle of rural Alabama, and so he decided to stay for the morning service, sit in a pew, and endure the humiliation of segregation.

In May 2016, the Alpha Delta Pi sorority at Samford University printed a T-shirt, which included imagery of an African-American man eating a watermelon and a slave picking cotton. Student university officials had rejected the design, but it was still printed. In an email to students and staff, Samford President Andrew Westmoreland said he was “repulsed” when he saw the shirt. This all happened on the weekend of graduation, and I vividly remember the distress which the president genuinely felt and was shared by faculty.³⁶ However, I have to say students still tell me that it is not unusual to hear racist comments by fellow students on campus. We do live, after all, in the South.

The Southern Baptist Convention 1995 Resolution on Racial Reconciliation

1995 was the occasion of the denomination’s 150th anniversary and many SBC leaders, such as Richard Land, believed that it ‘would be unseemly and

³⁶ See <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/samford-university-apologizes-over-sorority-s-t-shirt-racist-imagery-n574131>> [accessed on 29 November 2018]

terribly wrong to celebrate our sesquicentennial without addressing forthrightly the more unsavory aspects of our past'. The SBC resolution was part of a wider trend among many groups to apologise for the past – such as German Christians expressing sorrow for their complicity in the holocaust; New Zealanders for their sins against the Maoris; and American Christians because of the slaughter of Native American Indians.

In an article on the 1995 resolution, William M. Tillman Jr says that 'in reality, most of the SBC's numeric growth in the previous decade and in the years immediately following came from additions of African-American and other ethnic communities'.³⁷ Of the 15.6 million members in 1995, there were about half a million African Americans in 1,200 churches. By 2005, the SBC had 3,000 African-American churches among the 16.2 million members of the Convention. Baptists and the SBC resolution in part states: 'We apologize to all African Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime, and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously.'³⁸

Reactions

'On behalf of my black brothers and sisters, we accept your apology,' Gary Frost, SBC second vice president and a black pastor, said at the Georgia Dome convention. 'We pray that the genuineness of your repentance will be reflected in your attitudes and in your actions.'³⁹ In 1989, the SBC had approved a resolution against racism. But the 1995 resolution was the first ever to address blacks specifically in a way linked with the slavery issue. SBC president, James B. Henry, said passage of the measure was 'one of our finest moments in Southern Baptist life'. Henry said he views the apology as 'a huge statement to the African-American community of who we are and what we're about'.⁴⁰

The president of the nation's second-largest African-American Baptist denomination has rejected the SBC's apology for racism, saying more action is needed. E. Edward Jones told some 4,000 delegates attending the annual convention of the National Baptist Convention of America, which concluded recently in Dallas, that the apology offered by the primarily white SBC was belated and needed to be more than words. 'The civil rights struggle is still

³⁷ William M. Tillman Jr, 'Baptists and the Turn toward Racial Inclusion: 1955', in *Turning Points in Baptist History*, ed. by Michael E. Williams and Walter B. Shurden (Mercer, 2008), p. 269.

³⁸ Cited in <<http://www.sbts.edu/southern-project/>> [accessed 13 January 2019]

³⁹ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/06/21/an-apology-for-racism/25ce442e-8733-47de-85b1-0dd7c7fd62ec/?utm_term=.90ab1fac9888> [accessed 13 January 2019]

⁴⁰ See <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1995/august1/5t9053.html>> [accessed 13 January 2019]

going on and we need more than an apology,' Jones declared. Southern Baptist voices were silent during the racist atrocities of the past, Jones said. He questioned whether the apology would have come if Southern Baptists didn't see a need to increase their numbers by targeting the fast-growing black middle class. 'You may say an apology is better late than never,' said the convention president. 'True. But is the apology valid?'⁴¹

Caesar A. W. Clark, president of the Baptist Missionary and Education Convention of Texas, observed, 'Southern Baptists have been working overtime to win black National Baptists.'⁴² Clark is pastor of Good Street Baptist Church in Dallas, affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA, and a predominantly African-American denomination. He said there is a widespread perception among some black Christians that the SBC is wooing existing black congregations into the SBC fold.

Richard Land, president of the SBC's Christian Life Commission and a leader in the apology effort, said his denomination is sincere in wanting to be more racially inclusive. 'We are not trying to steal sheep from the National Baptists,' Land said.

It's never too late to do the right thing. If Reverend Jones had been in the meetings where this resolution was hammered out and been in the convention hall and seen the spirit of reconciliation and healing that swept through the messengers, he would have a different conclusion about this.'

Jones, noting that African-American churches are the fastest-growing segment in the SBC, said he 'sensed a scheme' that the apology would not have been offered if the black middle class had not been seen as an attractive marketing area for church growth. 'I have no hatred,' Jones said. 'I just have a terrible habit of thinking.'

Yet many others, including evangelist Billy Graham, who spoke at the convention, hailed the historic effort. Graham told Southern Baptists, 'Only when we individually and as a corporate group renounce racism in all of its forms and repent of all transgression will God choose to use us in the future to reach all people throughout the world.'⁴³

Willie T. McPherson, director of the Black Church Extension Division, said racism in America remains alive and well. 'Today racism is subtle,' McPherson said. 'It's corporate, and it's very difficult to see it unless you are African-American. I see it now in our convention in a lot of ways.' McPherson, while optimistic overall on race relations, admitted that the

⁴¹ Clyde McQueen, *Black Churches in Texas: A Guide to Historic Congregations* (Texas: A&M University Press), p.22.

⁴² See <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1995/august1/5t9053.html>> [accessed 17 October 2019]

⁴³ Ibid.

resolution was ‘just the beginning’. He said, ‘We already know that God will not operate where there is sin. And racism is sin.’⁴⁴

In the fall of 2018, the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville released a stark report seeking to address its ties to institutionalised racism. The year-long study found that all four founding faculty members owned slaves and ‘were deeply complicit in the defense of slavery’. The report noted that the seminary’s most important donor and chairman of its Board of Trustees in the late 1800s, Joseph E. Brown, ‘earned much of his fortune by the exploitation of mostly black convict lease laborers’, employing in his coal mines and iron furnaces ‘the same brutal punishments and tortures formerly employed by slave drivers’. Al Mohler, the current president, commented that many of the founding faculty members ‘throughout the period of Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century, advocated segregation, the inferiority of African Americans, and openly embraced the ideology of the Lost Cause of southern slavery’, that recast the South as an idyllic place for both slaves and masters and the Civil War as a battle fought over southern honour, not slavery.

Not all Southern Faculty were unconscious of the importance of race religions. Henlee Barnette served as professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Seminary from 1951-77. He is perhaps best known for his work on behalf of social and civil rights causes. In 1961, Barnette hosted civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr on the campus of Southern Seminary and later marched with King in Frankfort, Ky. At the time the seminary came under attack from segregationists who threatened to withhold donations.

Reactions to the report have been mixed. Few educational institutions founded in the pre-civil war era can have escaped the charge of benefitting from slavery. Evangelicals in the eighteenth-century revival such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield supported the institution. Bill Leonard, who taught at Southern from 1975-1992, suggests that 2019, the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first slave-ship in Virginia, is a ‘terrible, teachable’ moment and concludes that, ‘I can’t repent of the racism of my Baptist ancestors if I won’t repent of racism in myself and my own segment of American culture right now.’⁴⁵

One African American refers to the report as one which ‘deliberately omits mention of the most recent instances of racism, white supremacy and white religious nationalism practiced and perpetrated at and by SBTS’.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Bill Leonard, ‘American Racism, 1619-2019: Exorcism of this Demon is Needed – Now’, *Christian Ethics Today*, Vol. 28, Number 1 (Winter 2019), pp. 20-22 (p. 22).

⁴⁶ Wendel Griffin: <<https://baptistnews.com/article/white-baptists-and-racial-reconciliation-theres-a-difference-between-lament-and-repentance/#.XDd7nM17k2y>> [accessed 13 January 2019]

The current context of America and of White Evangelicalism would suggest that racism is alive and well. Even today, few Baptist churches are truly integrated. As I wrote these words, a run-off senate election was taking place in Mississippi, where two nooses had been found hanging from trees,⁴⁷ and the issue of immigration, which brought about the resurgence in the KKK in the 1920s, was on the top of the agenda of our current President. Baptists in the South have a long hard road ahead, to begin to make reparations for past sinfulness and to seek forgiveness and reconciliation through genuine repentance.

I conclude this article with the words of T. B. Maston, who in 1959 ended his book on *The Bible and Race* with these words:

Surely the God who created humanity in his own image, who made of one, all people, who is no respecter of persons, who loved all people enough to give his Son for their salvation, and who taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves, did not and does not intend that any person or any segment of humankind should be kept in permanent subserviency or should be treated as innately inferior, as second-class citizens in a first-class society.⁴⁸

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⁴⁷ See <<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/nooses-found-hanging-mississippi-capitol-n940176>> [accessed 13 January 2019]

⁴⁸ T. B. Maston, *The Bible and Race* (Broadman Press, 1959), p. 117.