Race and the Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America, no. 1

In my forthcoming book, For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America, which will be published later this year by P&R, I devote a lot of space to southern Presbyterian conservatives and race. However, I have offered shorter summaries of that material in many open forums, from the University of Arkansas-Little Rock and the University of Southern Mississippi to the PCA General Assembly. One such shorter summary, done this past summer at a pre-GA conference sponsored by the PCA Historical Center, was called, "Race, Civil Rights, and the Southern (Presbyterian) Way of Life."

From the time the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* was founded in 1942, it had stood steadily for several key commitments shared widely by southern Presbyterian conservatives. Best articulated by long-time contributor J. E. Flow, these commitments included the "old school" interpretation of Scripture and the Westminster Standards; the Presbyterian form of church government; the grassroots principle of church oversight, symbolized in the role of diaconal care; the spiritual mission of the church; and "the purity and integrity of the White man of North America upon whose shoulders are laid the burdens of the world."[1] Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the magazine had run scores of articles and editorials that had defended racial solidarity and segregation as part of a larger conservative religious and political worldview, which linked together anti-integration, anti-communism, and anti-centralization. Racial conservatism was a factor in the defeat of reunion with the northern Presbyterian church in 1954 and it continued to be an issue that divided the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) in the years that followed.[2]

However, new winds were blowing in the church as well as the culture at large. In 1952, in Jackson, Mississippi, southern Presbyterian favorite and Nelson Bell son-in-law Billy Graham announced that he would integrate his crusades, a promise he kept the following year at Birmingham, Alabama. Southern Presbyterian conservative Bill Hill continued to pursue an integrated ministry in his churches in Hopewell, Virginia. And a younger generation of conservative ministers was beginning to realize that racial segregation was a betrayal of the Gospel and served to undercut missions at home and abroad. That did not mean that the conservative worldview that had marked southern Presbyterians would change quickly; it did mean, however, that the future trajectory was toward racial inclusion and interracial exchange and away from racial solidarity. Sadly, the change has come slowly and has been betrayed at countless points along the way.

No one better embodied some of the contradictions and possibilities of this era than G. Aiken Taylor, who became editor of the *Journal* in 1959. Born in 1920 to missionary parents in Brazil, Taylor returned to the United States when he was fifteen to complete his education. He graduated from Presbyterian College in South Carolina in 1940 and spent the war years in the Army as a captain and company commander in the 142nd infantry. After the war, he graduated from Columbia Theological Seminary and then Duke University with a Ph.D. degree with a focus on John Calvin and religious education. When he was at Columbia, Taylor had served a church in Smyrna, Georgia, and while he was at Duke, he served the Northside Presbyterian Church, Burlington, North Carolina. After his graduation from Duke, he would go to serve the Presbyterian church in Alexandria, Louisiana, for five years before he was approached to take on the editorship of the *Journal*.

One of the questions that he had in taking on this role was whether he would have to agree with and promote the *Journal's* aggressive position on racial segregation. Growing up on the mission field caused Taylor to have a different attitude about segregation than most southerners. He told Nelson Bell, "I don't like agitation on the social question from either side. I am not an integrationist, neither am I a segregationist. My position on this issue is that a view point of whatever kind should not be made the criterion for determining the place or the worth of a man...or a church paper." In reply, Bell assured him that there was a range of opinions on segregation among the board of directors for the magazine and that he would not be required to hold to a particular party line. That said, the older man also counseled him not to push his more moderate racial views either: "I feel you would be utterly foolish to come to the Journal as editor and make race an issue--certainly at this juncture. There are so many more important things which need to be faced." As it would happen, Taylor's position on race, as evidenced in his writing and editorial practice, would largely harmonize with Bell's own racial views: downplaying forced segregation, dismayed by outside agitators who stirred up the racial issue, and concerned not to let racial politics divert attention from the largely doctrinal and social issues of the day.[3]

The first notice of race relations after Taylor became editor of the *Journal* actually came from Nelson Bell. Once again, he worried about the effects of "interracial marriage" and "mulattos," issues that he had raised many times over the past fifteen years. But there was a new note as well: "We believe that we who live in the South must come to terms with changes which, while having taken place gradually, are now actualities. To those who have made educational and economic progress to the place where they need public services, these should be granted, not grudgingly but as a matter of course." In addition,

Christians needed to view blacks as those who have souls "as precious in God's sight as that of any other person." Evangelism was being hindered by the racial agitation; justice needed to be done.[4]

At the same time, conservatives needed to make sure that such racial moderation would not divide the church. Taylor urged the church to vote down to overtures coming to the 1960 General Assembly, seeking to reopen reunion conversations with the northern church. Among his reasons were pronouncements by the northern church on race issues: "Some of the pronouncements, such as those on race relations, have been sufficiently explosive to produce a wide-open split in a Church such as ours." Racial moderation did not necessarily mean advocacy for integration nor did it commit individuals to agitate the church on the issue.[5]

[1] J. E. Flow, "Positive or Negative?" *Southern Presbyterian Journal* (29 September 1954): 8-9 (hereafter *SPJ*). Strikingly, these issues, including segregation, were cited in a recent essay by a participant in these struggles: see Morton H. Smith, "The Southern Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America," in *Interpreting and Teaching the Word of Hope*, ed. Robert L. Penny (Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005), 206-12.

[2] On this see, Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg: P&R, forthcoming), chapters four and five.

[3] Paul Hastings to G. Aiken Taylor, 17 March 1954, G. Aiken Taylor Papers, Box 114, folder 22, PCA Historical Center, St. Louis, MO; G. Aiken Taylor to L. Nelson Bell, 29 May 1959; L. Nelson Bell to G. Aiken Taylor, 15 June 1959, L. Nelson Bell Papers, Box 75, folder 16, Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton IL.

[4] L. Nelson Bell, "One Southerner Speaks," *Presbyterian Journal (*hereafter *PJ)* (13 April 1960): 9, 18.

[5] G. Aiken Taylor, "Church Union an Issue," *PJ* (20 April 1960): 11.

Race and the Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America, no. 2

[For an explanation of this series and the first post, see here.]

Even with Taylor and Bell's moderation on racial issues, there were those in conservative ranks who were determined to maintain racial integrity. W. A. Gamble, stated clerk of Central Mississippi Presbytery and sometime contributor to the *Journal*, was incensed by the recent softening on racial separation in the magazine since Taylor became editor. Board member John R. Richardson tried to calm Gamble down by writing, "We realize there has been some dissatisfaction. I am grateful, however, to tell you that I feel that in basic convictions all connected with the Journal have not changed nor will change in the future" on segregation. As a way of backing that reassurance, the *Journal* board issued a statement were they insisted "that the integrity of each race should be a matter of paramount importance and grave concern that much today which purports to be 'Christian race relations' has nothing to do with Biblical Christianity but works toward the destroying of racial integrity as it has developed in the Providence of God." As a result, the board reaffirmed "voluntary segregation in churches, schools, and other social relationships," which was all for the "highest interests of the races." In fact, "forced interracial social relationships, rather than being the ideal to which the church should work, are actually compounding the problems they seek to solve. Racial integrity is something to be preserved, not broken down."

Even while defending racial integrity, southern Presbyterian conservatives valued social order even more. Violence, whether defending segregation or promoting integration, was unacceptable. In 1961, East Alabama Presbytery declared itself against the mob violence that engulfed the Freedom Riders in Birmingham and Montgomery: "We express our deep regret and emphatic disapproval of mob violence for whatever cause." Likewise, Nelson Bell was appalled by the lawlessness on the part of both sides in Birmingham in 1963. "One of our chief concerns is the effect these demonstrations are having on young people, both Negro and white," he declared. "Many white boys and girls, encouraged no doubt by their parents, have participated in counter demonstrations involving insults and violence. At the same time many Negro young people are being led into a psychological blind-alley--following the idea that 'rights' can be secured by mob action." Not mob violence, but adherence to the law was the way forward: "where laws perpetuate injustices, they must be changed."[2]

On the other side, the pursuit of racial justice did not legitimate law-breaking either. When the 1965 PCUS General Assembly endorsed a range of Civil Rights activities,

including peaceful demonstrations and sit-ins, over sixty commissioners filed a dissent. Nelson Bell presented it to the assembly, arguing that "some of the methods sanctioned in the document are 'contrary to or go beyond the jurisdiction of the Church.'" Even if the church desired to support "worthy goals" like racial justice, Aiken Taylor noted, that did not mean that it could do so through "radical measures" or "extremism or vindictiveness." Later in 1965, Bell worried again that peaceful demonstrations were a small step from civil disobedience and "the step from civil disobedience to riots and violence is even shorter." Willfully breaking laws, even for a worthy goal, is wrong: "No nation should permit injustice and discrimination to be a part of its accepted way of life. But no nation can survive which placidly allows people to make of themselves prosecutors, jurors, and executioners--and this applies to *all* citizens." Means do not justify the end: breaking the law, whether to support segregation or integration, was never right.[3]

Sometimes defending racial integrity, or at least defending the South's approach to racial issues, required an active engagement of those who disagreed. In 1963-64, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was a key center for voter registration efforts in which northern Presbyterian ministers worked. The three Hattiesburg Presbyterian ministers--William J. Stanway, Newton Cox, and Ed Jussely--sought to engage their Yankee counterparts, both in the local press and by their willingness to debate the issue on their home turf. As a result, these three ministers along with two ruling elders went to Charleston, Illinois, to speak to Presbyterians there about the racial situation throughout the Deep South. Even more, they communicated their commitment to the spiritual mission of the church: "The church as an organization has no business taking part in political and sociological affairs." That was not to say that the Gospel did not have social implications; it most assuredly did. However, Hattiesburg Presbyterians pointed to Scripture to show that it did not justify civil disobedience nor did it countenance northern Presbyterians' "invasion" of Hattiesburg to promote racial justice. If northern Presbyterians desired to help blacks, they should preach the Gospel to them, which would in turn promote their social and economic wellbeing.

[1] John R. Richardson to W. A. Gamble, 12 August 1960 and 15 August 1960, both in L. Nelson Bell Papers, Box 69, folder 13, Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton IL; "Journal Day Attracts Throng of Supporters," PJ (31 August 1960): 5.

[2] "Presbytery Expresses Regret Over Incidents," *PJ* (14 June 1961): 22; L. Nelson Bell, "A Plea for Communication," *PJ* (26 June 1963): 8. On the Freedom Rides, see Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). It is note-worthy that the moderator of the PCUS distanced

himself from the March on Washington in August 1963 for fear that "mass demonstrations...often generated race hatred and served mostly to gratify radical extremists" ("Churches' Part in March a Mistake Says McCorkle," *PJ* (11 September 1963): 19.

[3] "Assembly Endorses 'Civil Rights' Action," *PJ* (12 May 1965): 7; G. Aiken Taylor, "Evaluating the 105th Assembly," *PJ* (12 May 1965): 14; L. Nelson Bell, "Danger Signals," *PJ* (29 September 1965): 15; Bell, "The Road to Lawlessness," *PJ* (24 August 1966): 15; Brice T. Dickson, "What About Civil Disobedience?" *PJ* (14 June 1967): 12; Samuel T. Harris, Jr., "The Problem of Civil Disobedience," *PJ* (6 December 1967): 8-10.

[4] G. Aiken Taylor, "The Heart of the Matter," *PJ* (11 March 1964): 10; [Leonard Lowrey,] "The Church and Its Purpose," *Hattiesburg American* (22 February 1964). For more on this historic debate, see Robert Patrick Rayner, "On Theological Grounds: Hattiesburg Presbyterians and the Civil Rights Movement," (M.A. thesis: University of Southern Mississippi, 2009), 55-67. An account of the 1963-64 Hattiesburg voter registration movement can be found in Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 46-67.

Posted February 10, 2015 @ 8:18 PM by Sean Lucas

TOPICS:

Race and the Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America, no. 3

[For an explanation of the series and the first post, see here; for the second post, see here]

Other churches were not as interested in dialogue. Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee, drew national attention for its refusal to admit mixed-race groups to corporate worship services. One of several Memphis churches targeted in early 1964 by the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for its "kneel-ins," Second Church reacted the most negatively. The groups were refused admittance and church officers patrolled the narthex and the front of the church looking for those who would seek to "integrate" the services. The Second Church kneel-ins drew media attention not only because of their racial component, but also because the congregation was scheduled to host the PCUS General Assembly in 1965. As a result, several presbyteries and synods, along with the liberal *Presbyterian Outlook*, protested allowing the Memphis church to host the assembly; by February 1965, the assembly's moderator, Felix Gear, a former pastor of Second Church, made the decision to move the coming meeting to the denomination's assembly grounds in Montreat.[1]

Conservatives felt that the situation at Second Church, Memphis, was profoundly unjust. At one point, Aiken Taylor claimed that the reason that this church was receiving such negative attention was merely "to embarrass the pastor's brother, Senator Richard Russell," a noted segregationist who fought Civil Rights legislation. Later, Taylor observed that Second Church was being singled out because it was "a great evangelical congregation with a tremendous...evangelistic and missionary testimony." As a result, young liberals in the PCUS were trying to "alienate and divide, to punish and to destroy" the reputation of this church. It did not help, of course, that the key Second Church ruling elder that opposed the kneel-ins, Horace Hull, was a long-time leader on the *Presbyterian Journal* board of directors. Others tried to defend Hull and his position. Nelson Bell claimed that Hull was really a racial moderate; his position was that "the question of seating Negroes in the congregation should not be forced." However, Hull's actions were decisive not only in preventing Second Church from admitting members, but also in splitting the church and creating a new congregation, Independent Presbyterian Church. [2]

It was from this sense of being under siege by northern liberals that led Conservative Presbyterians to protest the National Council of Churches' "Delta Project" that started in 1964 and continued through 1967. The Delta Ministry dealt with poverty and racial

injustice in the Mississippi Delta; it also focused on voter registration in south Mississippi towns like Hattiesburg and McComb. As conservatives, they disliked the "outside agitators" coming into their areas to stir up the racial situation; as Presbyterians, they did not care for the fact that their own tithes and offerings were being used to support outsiders (through the National Council of Churches) coming into the South to work for racial justice. As the program progressed, the *Journal* wagged its head at every potential association the Delta Ministry had with Communists and unionizers, signaling the leftward political and racial purposes of the program. When the Delta project leaders encouraged African Americans to stage a "live in" at the deactivated Greenville, Mississippi, Air Force base, it was another sign of the lawless aims of the program.[3]

This fear of liberalization, both socially and theologically, motivated conservative Presbyterians' a deep distrust of Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. When the PCUS Board of Christian Education's Division of Christian Relations invited King to speak to its August 1965 conference at Montreat, racial conservatives sought to rescind the invitation on the floor of the General Assembly. And the *Presbyterian Journal* gave full coverage to his appearance, highlighting his responses to questions about his involvement with Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which conservatives had connected to Communism, and about whether the Civil Rights movement had Communist connections. For the next three years, whenever King was mentioned, it was always in connection with his supposed Communist-leanings, making in a more subtle fashion the same connections between integration and Communism that were so effective in the previous decade. When King was killed in 1968, Aiken Taylor admitted frankly, "Martin Luther King was not a man we admired" because of his alleged Communist connections as "documented" by the FBI. His death was the result of the principles of civil disobedience that he defended: "Those who have advocated (or excused) civil disobedience share the blame for the death of Dr. King." Justice will not come through injustice, no matter how effective or eloquent the messenger.[4]

And especially when the messenger was unworthy or threatening, church and society should withstand the message. That was Taylor's take on James Forman's "Black Manifesto," first presented at Riverside Church in New York City in May 1969. Throughout the summer of 1969, the manifesto was presented in several congregations; the manner of presentation--with the interruption of services especially in congregations that had television broadcasts--caused churches to take precautions in case black militants should arrive. Meanwhile, the PCUS Council on Church and Society urged the church to take seriously the reparation demands of the black militants and to understand the context from which these demands came. However, Taylor and other southern Presbyterian

conservatives saw the manifesto and the PCUS response as largely Marxist--focused on the redistribution of wealth--and unworthy of serious attention. The messenger and the message were too radical to be heard.

[1] A full account of the Memphis kneel-ins can be found in Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2] G. Aiken Taylor, "'Young Turks' In Action," *PJ* (24 June 1964): 12; Taylor, "An Emergency?" *PJ* (10 February 1965): 12; L. Nelson Bell to J. McDowell Richards, 14 November 1964, J. McDowell Richards Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA; Haynes, *Last Segregated Hour*, 108-9, 113, 190.

[3] G. Aiken Taylor, "World Missions and the 'Delta,'" *PJ* (10 February 1965): 12-13; "NCC Names Delta Ministry 'Evaluators,'" *PJ* (9 February 1966): 4-5; "Delta Project Leader Suggest More US Aid," *PJ* (23 February 1966): 5; G. Aiken Taylor, "Incident in Mississippi," *PJ* (9 March 1966): 12-13; "Panel Urges Support of Delta Ministry," PJ (8 February 1967): 4-5. For a telling of the "Delta Ministry," 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), and Newman, *Divine Agitators*.

[4] "Attempt to Block King Defeated by Assembly," *PJ* (5 May 1965): 8; L. Nelson Bell, "One Commissioner's Reactions," *PJ* (19 May 1965): 13, 18; "2 Speakers Headline 'Historic' Weekend," *PJ* (1 September 1965): 4-5; "M. L. King Suggests Red in UN, Cease Fire," *PJ* (22 September 1965): 5-6; G. Aiken Taylor, "This is the Not the Way to 'Justice,'" *PJ* (17 April 1968): 12.

[5] "More Services Interrupted by Militants," *PJ* (28 May 1969): 6; "Church Offices Given Up To 'Manifesto' Militants," *PJ* (28 May 1969): 6; "Presbyterian US Unit Pronounces on Manifest," *PJ* (9 July 1969): 7-8; G. Aiken Taylor, "Shall We Capitulate?" *PJ* (9 July 1969): 12.

Race and the Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America, no. 4

[For the explanation of this series and the first post, see here; see here for installments two and three. There will be a final application post tomorrow.]

Even as the 1960s came toward a close, Nelson Bell continued to advocate what he took to be racial moderation. "*Forced* segregation was wrong, *forced* integration is equally wrong," he reiterated. However, behind his continued commitment to the idea that "Christian race relations proceed from love, not force," he actually had travelled a long way from the late 1940s and early 1950s. He recognized that the Supreme Court had no choice to void Virginia's statute against interracial marriage; he observed that churches had no business enforcing "closed door" policies, banning blacks from corporate worship, a practice that was "un-Christian." He also admitted that society needed to provide "the right of equal opportunity" to all of its citizens, a commitment that could only be the result of Christian morality shaping social policies. All of these positions were far beyond what he could have imagined twenty years prior. And yet, he continued to believe to the end of his days that the civil disobedience practiced by Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King worsted the cause of race relations. Bell could not see that if it was not for the willingness of King and others to disobey Jim Crow laws in order to gain racial justice, then racial moderates like Bell would have never come to defend equal opportunity regardless of race or color.[1]

No doubt, Bell traveled toward greater racial moderation because of the force of the cultural moment. However, the effect of his son-in-law's example of integrated crusades undoubtedly played a part as well. When Graham declared in Jackson, Mississippi, that "there is no segregation at the altar" and that there should be none in the church either, he began to shift the ground upon which Bell, as well as other younger southern Presbyterians, would stand. When these younger southern Presbyterian conservatives met to form the Presbyterian Churchmen United (PCU) in 1969, they included in their seven-point "Declaration of Commitment" a statement that emphasized a spirit of "love, concern, and neighborliness toward all races of men without partiality and without prejudice." D. James Kennedy stressed that theme at the PCU rally in December 1969 when he "made it plain and simple that the continuing church movement was about faithfulness to the Scriptures, to evangelism, and to world missions and not about preserving a segregated way of life." When these younger leaders began working to form a Continuing Presbyterian Church, many of them were determined that the new church would be racially inclusive. When the Continuing Church steering committee met in 1971, Ben Wilkinson stressed, "We are not a racist group seeking to build a racial church." While

recognizing differences of opinion, Wilkinson wanted to know "black pastors and elders who might be interested in the Continuing Church." Wilkinson was typical of these younger leaders: to a man, they desired a break with the southern way of life and a church that reflected the Gospel itself.[2]

To be sure, there were other prominent leaders in the Continuing Church movement who would continue to defend segregation. Increasingly, they were viewed as a liability, both for the new church, but more importantly for the advancement of the Gospel itself. And yet, it is safe to say that over the past forty years since its founding, the Presbyterian Church in America has not done enough to address this more recent past. The 1960s are not dead; they are not even past--they continue to shape our conversations and to impact what kind of church God is calling us to be.

[1] L. Nelson Bell, "Fruits of Mistakes," PJ (9 August 1967): 13, 20; Bell, "Civil Disobedience," PJ (22 May 1968): 9. On this point, I agree with David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[2] Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 27; Declaration of Commitment," *Presbyterian Outlook* (6 October 1969); Smartt, *I Am Reminded*, 54.

Race and the Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America, no. 5

As I mentioned in the first post under this title (the other posts: no. 2; no. 3; no. 4), this series was a way of breaking up a paper that I gave at a pre-General Assembly conference sponsored by the PCA Historical Center. The paper was entitled, "Race, Civil Rights, and the Southern (Presbyterian) Way of Life," it draws on materials from my forthcoming book, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*.

While I am a pastor, I am also a historian--I so what I tried to do in these first four posts (as well as a post at Justin Taylor's blog) was to speak to these issues out of my vocation as a historian and to tell the story. Of course, every historian will tell a story from a particular perspective; we now realize there is no such thing as "objective history." Out of our particular social and cultural location, we tell stories which are limited and fallible. That's because we are human: historians can't find or know everything and we make mistakes. And that means our tellings can be and should be contested. All that said, as a historian, I welcome others who will follow and who will correct, nuance, or balance my telling.

In this final post, though, I want to put on my pastor hat, and especially my PCA teaching elder hat, and reflect on how we might respond to the historical story that I've just told.

1. Confess and repent.

In Daniel 9, there is a stunning scene. It occurs during Darius' reign. Daniel is pondering the nature of the exile and especially Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the 70 years of exile. And as he ponders, Daniel is moved to confession.

But his confession is strange--because he doesn't confess his own private sins, but the sins of Israel and Judah that led to the judgment of the exile: "We have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listed to your servants the prophets, who spoke in you r name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but us open shame" (Dan 9:5-7).

This wasn't simply lip synching or going through the motions. Rather, Daniel recognized his own covenantal complicity in what his fathers and forefathers had done and in bringing about the exile. And he confessed those sins and repented: "We have sinned, we have done wickedly" (Dan 9:15).

I believe that it should be obvious in reading my account of "race and the roots of the

Presbyterian Church in America" that our fathers and forefathers sinned. But they didn't sin alone--*we have sinned, we have done wickedly*. We handled God's Word deceitfully to justify the racial status quo and to perpetuate injustice. We are involved by means of the covenant in these things. And we repent.

Some might say, "Hasn't the PCA already done this?" After all, in 2002, the PCA General Assembly confessed its covenantal complicity in chattel slavery; and in 2004, the PCA General Assembly approved a pastoral letter on racism (this version is the one recommended to GA, which approved it as part of MNA's report). Didn't we do enough?

No, we did not. Because as this historical work shows, our sins were much more recent and much more part of the history of our own denomination. We needed to confess our failures to work for racial justice in the context of the PCUS and as individuals and churches in the American society.

And perhaps this year, during the 50th anniversary of the Voter Rights Act, the most important part of Civil Rights legislation, our denomination should take the opportunity to confess and repent as Daniel did: we have sinned, we have done wickedly, and we repent.

2. Recognize the problematic aspects of the "spirituality of the church" doctrine.

While our system of doctrine and our polity commits us to believe and teach that the church's mission is spiritual, we also have to recognize that extending this teaching towards what we've commonly talked about as "the spirituality of the church" or the "non-secular nature of the church" is problematic on at least two counts.

First, it's problematic because we often pick and choose what public issues we want to address. That is one of the things that I try to show in *For a Continuing Church*. The same conservative leaders who reprobated the PCUS speaking on racial matters had no difficulty when the church spoke about the use of beverage alcohol or Communism. And even today, we will address abortion or homosexual marriage--which are huge public issues--but ignore poverty, drug addiction or single-parent families--which arguably impact our local communities even more.

Second, it was especially problematic during the middle decades of the twentieth century (as it was in the nineteenth) because it was used to justify silence on racial injustice within and outside the church. Racial reconciliation is, of course, a biblical issue--Ephesians 2; Galatians 2-3; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Romans 9-11 all deal with the dividing walls between Jew and Gentile within the context of the church. When we preach those texts--along with the slavery texts in Eph 6 and Col 4--we have to make application to the need for

reconciliation within the church between whites and blacks, Asians and Hispanics, and others. And we have to hold out the vision of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic church that is pictured in Rev 7.

And yet, because our fathers and forefathers held on to the "spiritual mission of the church," they chose to ignore the clear applicatory imperative of those texts. That was wrong--and we have to be aware that "the spirituality of the church" ideal can lend itself to defending the status quo in an unbiblical fashion. Surely if there was any time to address the magistrate about an extraordinary matter it was during the Civil Rights era (cf. WCF 31:4). But we failed to do so because we were hemmed in by our "spirituality" doctrine.

3. Work within and outside the structures of the church toward reconciliation and justice.

I think one response to this historical story is a renewed determination to work towards reconciliation and justice, both inside the PCA, but also in the larger structures of our towns and cities. We have to realize that these are systemic issues and that, because of white majority status, we are blind to the way the system works to a disadvantage to our African American brothers and sisters.

And that's why we have to get the story straight. Both with my work on Robert Lewis Dabney as with this work about the roots of the PCA, my desire has been to get the story straight so that we can see more clearly our cultural blind spots and so that we can correct them. We have to listen to the ugly, painful, sinful story told as well as possible in order to move forward.

But we also have to listen to our African American brothers and sisters tell us how they perceive even our well-meaning efforts. Sometimes we hurt while we are helping and we don't realize it. For me, that has been one of the valuable aspects of Mission Mississippi: to be able to listen to other brothers in Christ and to reflect on their experience within our shared commitment to Christ. The "theology of friendship" behind that movement (as historian Peter Slade describes it) helps me listen better.

We can't just listen, though. We have to work to change structures. At our seminaries, we have to work to develop African American faculty members and administrators; at our agencies and committees, we need to include African American voices at the highest levels. My friends, PCA teaching elders Wy Plummer and Carl Ellis, have worked toward these things for years; their faithfulness in a difficult situation is an inspiration. But we need to do more and we need all of us to use our creativity and determination to move

forward toward just structures within our churches and our local communities.

Much more could be and should be said. But hopefully this points us toward a larger conversation not simply about the roots of the PCA, but toward the future of our church. My hope and prayer is that a future historian will tell of the significant change over time that occurred in our generation as we demonstrate a greater fidelity to the biblical mandates of oneness in Christ.

Posted February 12, 2015 @ 11:26 AM by Sean Lucas

TOPICS: